

ANALYSIS

"The Long Day" (1945)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"The Long Day' is subtle and therefore open to misinterpretation, even by critics of some stature. One of several accounts in *The Forest of the South* which deal with Negroes, the narrative inevitably evokes reprisals from the ranks of twentieth-century secular Puritans.... Not only in 'The Long Day' but in each of the other stories involving Negroes, Miss Gordon often invests her black characters with the same dignity and stature as does William Faulkner, though, like Faulkner, she presents them as credible human beings with the capacity for moral failure that one finds in her white characters. Her Negroes are individuals, each different from the other....

Miss Gordon's better blacks, like her better whites, behave with a formal civility which derives from the ontology informing a traditional society. In such a world, manners serve not only as the necessary catalyst for social intercourse between members of disparate social orders, but also as a distinct mode of self-definition, as symbols for the *daimon*. The former function, I suspect, is universally acknowledged, though by some with pronounced distaste; the latter function, however, needs clarification...

In examining manners which are not obviously performed to bridge social gaps, the first thing one notes is how often they relate to the most primal impulses in man, what Plato has characterized as 'desires and ambitions.' Manners serve both to formalize such urges and to dramatize the presence of the *daimon* as their primary sovereign. Thus such seemingly artificial modes of behavior as waiting for the hostess to begin the meal of, in America, changing the fork from left hand to right after cutting meat symbolize, among other things, man's domination over his own appetite; and the elaborate conventions surrounding traditional courtship are symbols of the couple's ability to control sexuality until such time as it can be made *endaimon* through the formal ritual of marriage.

Less clearly defined but nonetheless important are those manners which surround and contain the desires and ambitions of the will, particularly the drive to survive and prevail, whatever the cost to others. Without the self-control which mitigates and formalizes such natural assertiveness, man is no more than beast and there can be no human society in the fullest sense of the word.

'The Long Day' is concerned with manners and their capacity to dignify and in some measure to redeem, though ostensibly the story is a particularly gruesome 'initiation'--the exposure for the first time of a small boy name Henry to the shocking world of primitive passion and violence. And yet we cannot know the true nature of the boy's 'epiphany' because the story ends abruptly with a vision of horror, and its impact on Henry is never rendered. What the vision essentially means, however, is obvious to the reader; and so one must conclude that the overall significance of the story is something more complex than simply what happens to the boy.

In order to understand more fully that significance it is first necessary to consider the nature of the central action. On the surface this action is concerned with Henry's attempt to cajole the Negro sharecropper Joe into taking him fishing: Joe's artful stalling and diversionary tactics, his mumbled apology and abrupt flight, and a final revelation to the boy that Joe's wife has died of razor wounds during the course of the day's seemingly trivial events. So we can see that two series of incidents compose the single action of the narrative: one series defines the apparent action, and the other series the hidden action. Thus one has only to juxtapose the two to understand the thematic implications of Miss Gordon's subtle story, implications which tell the reader a great deal about the nature and function of manners in society. For manners both *control* and *hide* the violence that perennially lies at the heart of the human community, and for this reason such modes of conduct are exercises in heroism.

In this story the hero, however imperfect, is the Negro Joe who, like many of the white people in Miss Gordon's other stories, behaves according to a very rigid code. In his case this code enables him to live in society with some ease and dignity despite his caste, which prevents him from fully understanding or participating in the legal order. Initially Miss Gordon beguiles the unsuspecting reader by depicting in her opening scene an attitude of genteel condescension as the adult members of Henry's family speak patronizingly, though with good humor, about Joe's troubles with his wife, Sarah, and the new razor slash on his cheek, the result of a particularly violent domestic squabble. As the story develops, however, it becomes increasingly apparent that Joe is deserving of more respect than the whites are willing to grant him; for what to them is a moment of high comedy is to him a personal ordeal of tragic proportions.

When Henry arrives at the cabin he sees no blood on Joe, only a strip of cornplaster on his cheek and a round patch on his forehead. This image is one of two that provide a key for the action which follows. The other is contained in a brief description of the day as 'the kind you get in August sometimes when the drought breaks, cool, but without any wind stirring, and the sun shining steadily in a bright sky.' It is summer, the weather is good, and on the surface there is nothing to worry about. Even the razor slash is properly covered so that Henry cannot see the ugly reality which lies beneath the benign appearance of things.

When the boy suggests a fishing excursion Joe demurs because his wife is 'feeling po'ly,' and later Henry notices the Negro man looks sick and wonders if he has lost too much blood, but Joe, who behaves with admirable equanimity, suggests that Henry feed a caged possum and the boy is diverted. This image of the animal in the cage, of wildness contained by artifice, is one more indication of the thematic significance of the action, not only in this scene but in the entire story.

Then Henry hears Sarah's moan, but he is still too wrapped up in his own desires to worry about the domestic troubles surrounding him. He takes out his packaged lunch and offers to share it with Joe. Here the Negro's propriety is tested to the uttermost, for the scene inside the cabin is not conducive to a hearty appetite. Yet to refuse the boy's invitation would be both an obvious example of bad manners and a hint that something is terribly wrong, a fact Joe wishes to conceal from Henry. Thus as the action continues the reader is increasingly aware that the Negro behaves as he does for the boy's sake as well as his own, since Joe realizes the role of special trust with which the family has vested him.

Even when he sends Henry to the big house to pilfer coffee and some clean rags--an indication that Sarah's condition is worsening--Joe controls the situation in order to protect the boy, casually inserting his request for rags after first mentioning the coffee. Later when the boy returns, the Negro is sitting with his eyes closed; and Henry believing him asleep, gives a shrill whistle. Joe, who is waiting tensely for the boy's return, is startled and therefore momentarily angry; but his words of reproof sound like no more than the standard remonstrance of an older Negro to a young white who has forgotten his manners.

Then Henry's mother, who has heard that Sarah is ill (and perhaps suspects she has been injured) comes to investigate. When she indicates a desire to enter the cabin, Joe tells her that Sarah has vomited on the floor and that he has not yet cleaned up the mess. Out of his delicate instinct for propriety he has contrived a lie designed to appeal to the white woman's sense of privacy; for he is aware that no woman of her class and generation would embarrass another woman, black or white, by invading a disorderly household. Thus his manners continue to protect him and the white people as well from the shock of exposure.

But even Joe has his human limitations, and when it is apparent to him that Sarah is dying, perhaps dead, he begins to talk of the incident as much to himself as to the white boy, who is the accidental and inadequate representative of the white social order he both respects and fears: 'I never cut that woman,' he says. 'Before God I never cut that woman!' Then, after maintaining a rigid self-control for almost the entirety of 'the long day,' he finally surrenders to his humanity, his natural impulse for self-survival, and takes off, but not before he has performed with propriety in a ritualistic drama, the full meaning of which only he has understood.

Thus it is the character of Joe that bears the dramatic burden of both actions; the overt and the hidden; and his conduct, while perhaps not perfect, reveals him to be a highly civilized individual who does not

without a struggle surrender to 'the violence of life and the lust of man.' I suppose one could argue that he is motivated merely by the will to survive, that his motive in maintaining such remarkable equanimity is solely his desire to conceal what would appear to the community as a crime of passion; but such an interpretation ignores alternative explanations and leaves too many questions unanswered. Why does he receive Henry and treat him with such courtesy? Why not quietly dismiss him with any number of credible excuses? Why does he not bolt earlier without attempting to protect the boy or to minister to Sarah?

One cannot ignore the obvious: he chooses to remain because the dictates of conscience and propriety demand it, and in doing so he gains significant stature in the eyes of the reader. Like Tom Rivers, he is a man who lives by a code which demands great personal sacrifice in a crucial situation where life and death hang in the balance. As such he is more admirable...more *endaimon* than enslaved to desires and ambitions."

Thomas H. Landess
"Caroline Gordon's Ontological Stories"
The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon: A Critical Symposium
Landess, ed. (U Dallas 1972) 61-65

"In 'The Long Day,' a chilling story that appeared in *Scribner's* in August 1930, Henry, a little boy, spends the day digging worms, eating sandwiches, and playing around the cabin of his family's black servant, Joe, *unaware that Joe has mortally wounded his wife* [debatable.] In a shocking ending, he catches a glimpse of her bloody corpse inside the cabin--and runs."

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

"Caroline returns to questions of racial and sexual roles in her second published story, 'The Long Day'... She explores these issues from the masculine point of view. A small white boy, Henry, wants to go fishing with his black mentor, Joe, but his mother is hesitant about granting permission. Henry's Uncle Fergus laughingly reassures her that Joe's wife, Sarah, 'won't be up to any more didoes today' since 'Joe gave her a good larruping before he came up to the house.' Henry's mother replies, 'I hope he beat her within an inch of her life.' Uncle Fergus refuses to take the situation seriously and comments, 'Joe likes his mammas hot.... Georgy was no sucking dove.' Henry's mother then asserts her world's standards of conduct. "Georgy behaved herself very well while she was on this place. At any rate she never attacked Joe with a razor. This razor business is too much.' Sarah is the victim of the sexual and racial double standards expressed by Henry's mother; Sarah's husband can have an affair, but *she can't retaliate with a razor*; wife-beating is an acceptable practice for blacks with their lower standards. [To this Feminist, an affair by a man justifies his murder. Italics added.]

The adults' conversation is incomprehensible to Henry who proceeds to Joe's cabin after repeated warnings from his mother about not entering the cabin. Joe keeps Henry busy outside the cabin all through the long day. At the end of the day, when the door is opened, Henry sees Sarah's bloody and self-mutilated body on the cabin floor. The story end with Henry running 'as fast as he could toward the house.' Henry is running toward the safe hypocrisies and condescensions of his mother and uncle. Caroline has gruesomely illustrated the education of the white Southern male into *racial and sexual prejudices* [Henry shows no prejudice against Joe or Sarah. Italics added.] similar to those of Sally's brothers and cousins in 'Summer Dust.' 'Sally,' of course is the diminutive of Sarah, and Gordon may be suggesting that a grown woman's *only power* over herself is the ability to complete her education in *self-annihilation*." [This is an hysterical Feminist projection. Italics added.]

Veronica A. Makowsky
Caroline Gordon: A Biography
(Oxford 1989) 90-91

"'The Long Day' was a horror story about a black man named Joe, his girlfriend, Sarah, and a young white boy named Henry. On the day in question, each character had to endure some waiting. Henry was eager to go fishing, but he had to wait for Joe, who was unwilling to leave the cabin. Joe said he had to take care of Sarah, who had just that morning fought violently with him, but actually Joe was waiting also,

expecting to be caught: inside the cabin Sarah was dead or dying--slashed by a razor that Joe insisted Sarah had turned on herself.

Caroline probably modeled the character of Henry on her father: she had heard more than enough stories about her father's childhood, and when she finished the story, she sent it to J. M. Gordon for his reaction. He thought the whole thing 'entirely true to life and setting.' 'You certainly have developed a "sure touch," he wrote to Caroline. "I could *see* it all: it is as clear cut as a cameo".'

Nancylee Novell Jonza
The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon
(U Georgia 1995) 73

"In 'The Long Day,' time seems to be stretched beyond endurance as readers are made to witness a prolonged tragedy that might be averted if Mamie, a white woman most often referred to as Henry's mother, felt free to act upon her convictions [Feminist perspective]. Outside a black tenant's cabin where his lover Sarah suffers from a 'good larruping' after having done an 'outrageous' thing: gone after her volatile lover with a razor. Henry's mother, whose family owns the land, knows of the unpredictable and tempestuous relationships with her tenant, Joe had had with women. She suspects trouble but, ever protective of herself and her family, particularly her son, and keenly aware of the politics of tenant/landlord relationships, *she subconsciously collaborates in Sarah's death* by refusing to investigate. Mamie not only allows Joe his privacy but also *guiltily* [?] defends his violence: 'I hope he beat her within an inch of her life. It's outrageous, really it is.' [Mamie does not know that Sarah has been cut and is in danger of dying, only that she has been beaten. Italics added.]

Affronted by the domestic disorder caused by Sarah's violence, Henry's mother excuses male violence because she believes it will restore order in the cabin, the patriarchal order that she depends upon in her own life. Although the strong words of this articulate and opinionated woman are heard at the outset, Gordon soon undercuts her authority and proves that *men rule*. [This is not an issue in the story. Gordon is not a Feminist. Italics added.] She frames Mamie's opening passage within one where her brother, Fergus, and her young son, Henry, convince her, against her judgment, to allow Henry to go on a fishing trip with Joe that had been planned before his altercation with Sarah. When Uncle Fergus assures Mamie that such a diversion would be good for Joe, *she allows Henry to go* [example of her authority] as long as he stays outside the cabin. As the mother's *lack of authority* is revealed [Italics added.], she fades out of the narrative focus, and the reader witnesses what happens to Joe and the child in the absence of what could be her judicious authority.

In the scenes that follow, Joe attempts to acquire mastery over two conflicting situations. The situations inside the cabin is critical: Sarah is bleeding to death. While Joe clearly does not want her to die, he also wants everything to appear normal outside the cabin. To save both his position and his dignity, Joe must not allow the white landowners to enter his private and violent world, but neither can he, as a black man, order the white boy to leave. Politely refusing Henry's invitation to fish, Joe spends the day around the cabin, talking and eating with the boy, while he secretly, but ineffectually, nurses Sarah and skillfully deflects the interference of Mamie who, rather hesitatingly, tries to visit Sarah.

In the terse dialogue between man and boy, Gordon subtly reveals Joe's denial of responsibility and his sense of despair and doom, and Henry's rationalizations and his youthful sense of self-confidence.... The young boy's initial justification of Joe's act and his willful diversion mirror his mother's behavior. Yet, axe or no axe [?], neither Henry nor Joe is capable of fixing the situation; all they can do is *secure their own prisons* [Joe runs away to *escape* prison]. As the story ends, Henry watches Joe emerge from the cabin and disappear into the tall goldenrod that separates the tenant's quarters from the main house. Catching sight of the gruesome and bloody body of Sarah through the open door, Henry runs in panic through *the same field*, to his house. [This implies that Joe also runs to the house, which he obviously would not. Italics added.]

Sarah is never given mature voice, but her name is Sarah--a name Gordon often reserved for assertive and imaginative females, like Sally Wood. In Gordon's texts, these women are often held captive by age and gender. Sarah is described as a 'hellcat' by Uncle Fergus, but we are also told her cries are 'not like a grown person, but a tiny low moaning, almost like a little baby's.' Gordon *objectifies her* [nonsense] by

presenting her body only in death, and then describing her as a horrid sight. Her dead body signifies, on one level, the consequences of unnatural and aggressive female passion. While it seems clear to Mamie that Sarah's lust and unfeminine wielding of a razor against Joe led to her own destruction, Gordon is purposefully ambiguous in her depiction of the causes of her death. Whether Sarah died at her own hands, as Joe claims, or whether he retaliated, *which seems more likely* [Joe swears "before God" that he "never cut that woman."] given both *the placement of the wounds* [She cut Joe's cheek with one swipe of the razor and if she tried a second swipe and Joe blocked it, then the razor could have cut her own throat--ironic and in its way just. Italics added.] and Joe's subsequent lies, is less relevant in Gordon's story than the ways the twin male protagonists respond to her still and bloody body.

Throughout 'The Long Day,' Gordon refers to images of captivity. Thomas H. Landess asserts that she does this to emphasize how 'wildness [is] constrained by artifice,' how 'manners both control and hide the violence that perennially lies at the heart of the human community.' One wonders, however, if manners control and hide violence or if the conventional roles accepted by whites and blacks, men and women, trigger violence. [The Feminist/Marxist blames all evil on the structures of society rather than holding the minorities they privilege responsible for their actions.]

Gordon's text raises specific questions. Why does Joe respond to Sarah's passion with a razor? [He does not. She is the one with the razor.] Why do the white landowners condone his violence over her? [What evidence indicates that they "condone" it?] Why does Mamie allow her son to visit Joe? [Why not?] Why does she not help Sarah? [She does not know Sarah has been cut or how injured she is and she is reluctant to stick her nose into other people's domestic affairs, unlike Feminists.] Finally, why does Gordon protect Mamie while she objectifies and *murders Sarah*? [This is ridiculous. The author does not commit murder. There is no murder, it was an accident.] Gordon presents her readers with a 'conflicting story' of how interlocking power hierarchies of gender, class, and race *destroy the aggressive or black woman* [These are stupid questions if the black man is simply stronger physically than the black woman. Italics added.]; her narrative objectivity and unresolved conclusion do not provide unqualified and specific answers to the questions Gordon prompts her readers to raise. The story achieves power through questions left unanswered, through conflicts defined but not resolved.

It is true that the places of captivity are also seen as places of protection. Places of enclosure--the cabin, the possum cage, the barbed wire fence that should keep evil out of Henry's childhood world, and the broken seine, that Joe labors, belatedly, to mend--represent both security and the pervasive and intricate captivity in which her surviving characters are rather precariously enclosed. Like the unended seine, both the cabin and the possum's cage are in disrepair; by analogy, the society constructed to protect its people is built upon weak, fractured conventions. Gordon's characters are *trapped* by their own fears of the wilderness outside their prisons...[projection].

Through his manipulation of social decorum, Joe manages to cage the consequences of his passion for a long day as he keeps Sarah's critical condition *veiled* from Henry *and his mother*. [This contradicts the earlier accusation that Mamie "murders" Sarah.] His actions, however, insure not only Sarah's death but his own entrapment. As Joe flees the cabin and dives into the wild and obscuring goldenrod, he does not escape; he merely loses the limited protection of his fractured cage, constructed by the white society, that allowed him to exercise a limited degree of patriarchal authority over his women. In the wild landscape, he loses all protection; the white world must view him now as a violent criminal rather than as a legitimate avenger... Joe, at best, *sacrifices Sarah's life* and his protected space for a code of behavior that restricts his ability to consider independent and constructive action [What else could he do in the way of "independent and constructive action"?)

By emphasizing his ability to read and to control the behavior of the whites, while providing no direct portrayal of Sarah, Gordon traps many readers into accepting Joe as the central character, a vulnerable and tragic figure, rather than a liar, manipulator, and killer. Sarah, however, a woman whose independence, passion, and assertiveness lead not only to voicelessness but to a death that *objectifies her as a spectacle of horror*, may have been the character to whom Gordon's attention was drawn. Wood explained that Gordon names this woman, Sarah, as a signal of their friendship. Sarah, then, is certainly not meant to be seen as

evil and deserving of her fate; she is the assertive woman who tries to live outside of society's protection [wielding a razor].

Joe's association with the child Henry, shown in those scenes when both manipulate women (Mamie and the family's cook Ella), suggests that both are childlike or unprotected outsiders, who attempt to use their wits to elude *authority* [contradicts statement above that Mamie has no authority] and assert their own control. In the last lines, when Gordon skillfully centers attention on Henry and links his flight toward the house with Joe's flight into the field of goldenrod, we see both males coerced into a wild territory [the house?] where their youthful identities are lost. Their loss, however, does not herald rebirth, character reformation, or revitalization of the weakened society. Gordon likens Joe to an animal running from captivity in the human world...and Henry's position is no more auspicious. Readers are left to contemplate the future of this young boy, who, horrified by his vision of the mutilated body of the passionate black woman [wielding a razor], feels, *perhaps* [Feminist projection. Italics added.], complicit in her death [an innocent child?] and runs back to his hesitating mother for protection, comfort, and understanding....

Positioned to one side of the narrative, Henry's mother, Mamie, is the only character who *has the insight and power to save Sarah* (and, therefore, Joe and Henry). [She does not even know that Sarah has been cut. Feminists frequently blame innocent people.] Instead, she is finally revealed as one of the many 'petrified' white women in Gordon's fiction who, fearing the wilderness outside their cage, will not elude those conventions or social amenities that sanction violence. The mother's ability to vent her emotions in speech and her final compliance set her in opposition to Sarah, whose act of passion traps her in silence and death. However alienated from one another, both women are deeply related in their final acquiescence to, and victimization by, the stronger power of men. Mamie's fears and her inability to act make her both *criminal* and victim; she is the woman with whom Gordon identifies [Earlier this Feminist said that Sarah was the one for whom Gordon had "friendship"; Gordon does not identify with racism. This is one of the most atrocious examples of Feminist criticism. Italics added.]."

Anne M. Boyle

Strange and Lurid Bloom: A Study of the Fiction of Caroline Gordon
(Fairleigh Dickinson 2002) 69-73

An interpretation of this story is largely determined by how the reader understands the main event, the fight between Joe and his girlfriend Sarah. Evidently they are not married but she is violently possessive. She started the fight: Sarah is not an innocent victim, she attacked Joe with a razor, presumably because he has had an affair. This is excessive revenge. Sarah is contrasted to Joe's previous girlfriend Georgy, who was "no sucking dove" but at least "she never attacked Joe with a razor. This razor business is really too much, Fergus. If I were you I'd tell her to leave," says Mamie. The white characters do not know that Sarah has been cut, only that "She's feeling po'ly."

"Uncle Fergus said Sarah was the worst little hellcat he'd ever seen, but he didn't believe she meant to cut Joe. She thought a lot of Joe." When jealous Sarah came "jumping" at him with a razor and cut his face, apparently trying to slit his throat, Joe defended himself and then beat her. Afterwards, he did not run away, he takes care of her all the long day, keeping his head turned "listening for Sarah to call him." The further evidence of what happened is his insistence that "I never cut that woman... Before God, I never cut that woman!... She cut herself...tryin' to do me harm." If the author intended the reader to disbelieve this, she would have included some evidence to the contrary. As it is, we are left to imagine more precisely what happened. When she "jumped" at him with the razor, his natural reflex would have been to defend himself by grabbing her wrist. As a "hellcat," she must have held onto the razor and got cut herself during their ensuing struggle. After she dies he runs away because he knows he will be accused of killing her, just as the Feminist critics do. Interpreted this way, with sympathy for both victims, the story is tragic. Interpreted the Feminist way it is reduced to commonplace propaganda in their war against men.

The interpretation by Thomas Landess is valid. All the Feminist critics are inaccurate as usual: Ann Waldron does not notice that Sarah seems to be only a girlfriend and charges that Joe "has mortally wounded his wife." Jonza claims that Joe insists that Sarah "turned" the razor "on herself," committing suicide. He did not say that. But Jonza implies that he told this lie to cover up murder. Makowsky thinks a man who has an affair *deserves* to be murdered, complaining that "Sarah's husband can have an affair, but

she can't retaliate with a razor." Nobody in the story says it is okay to have an affair and nobody but criminals and Feminists think it okay to attack a man with a razor. On the whole, most Feminist criticism is conducted in the spirit of attacking men with a razor. Boyle is also self-contradictory and absurd. She even claims that Mamie "murders Sarah." If these white Feminists were on his jury, they would all vote to convict the innocent black man of murder.

Michael Hollister (2020)