

ANALYSIS

"The Petrified Woman" (1947)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"In 'The Petrified Woman' Sally Maury is again employed by Miss Gordon as the central intelligence through whose observations we perceive the disquieting reverberations of a large family reunion that takes place somewhere in the modern South. But, in contrast to 'One Against Thebes' and 'Summer Dust,' here it is the girl's experience itself rather than her reaction to it which is the proper focus of the story. The action is filtered through the young girl's consciousness only to give it the added weight and significance of felt experience. We may suppose that what she says has some effect on her, as is indicated by the manner in which certain images of the story are juxtaposed and retained by the girl as a quite formally composed and frozen moment of time preserving a significant and painful memory.

The girl has been affected by what she has viewed. But though the narrative frame is not irrelevant to the impact of the story, nor casually or mechanically employed, the story is not primarily concerned with the narrator's initiation into the complications of adult marital friction. It is concerned rather with the tensions underlying an unsuccessful marriage and with the cold indifference that such tensions can ultimately generate in the marriage partners.

In literature the reunion of an entire family is generally a motif within the order of comedy. Such an occasion can provide one of those rare instances when the ordinary discords of the social condition are overcome for a time by the harmony that common blood and a remembered common past can evoke. But the key to the comedic transformation is, as every good dramatist and writer of fiction has recognized, the harmonious marriage. The good marriage--the union of man and woman which seems 'right by nature'--is most often in literature the social catalyst that creates the buoyancy and freedom of joyful comic resolutions. The discordant marriage makes for more discord around it and produces, more often than not, the unnaturally repellent divisiveness and ludicrous disjunctions of dark comedy.

In 'The Petrified Woman' the abrasive character of the married life of Cousin Tom and Eleanor suggest this darker comic mode, and the reunion simply serves as a further irritant which occasions a final wound, rather than as a balm to cement their tenuous relationship. Even discounting the inhibiting influence of Tom and Eleanor's presence, the reunion as a festive performance leaves something to be desired. A self-displaced kinsman who has moved to St. Louis and has become rich has chartered a site for the gathering and donated the lion's share of barbecue and whiskey, possibly as a belated bribe against his fate as one who has hitherto neglected place and kin for private pursuits. Sally's father, Aleck Maury, refers contemptuously to the event as an excuse of his relations for 'getting together to congratulate themselves on their mediocrity.' During the ceremonies a family spokesman attempts to impose an inflated tone of grandeur upon the proceedings by tracing the familial ancestry through the grandfather of George Washington to Edward the Confessor and Philip the Fair of France, but the note rings false and his pretensions are immediately exposed.

Nevertheless, it does not seem Miss Gordon's intent to make a satirical comment on the Southern cult of the family. The family has its failings, and it exhibits them in the rather vulnerable circumstances afforded by the homogeneous gathering where common defects are accentuated by duplication and where family pride is allowed to dilate a bit. But these general shortcomings are simply part of the imperfect fabric of the race--to take them very seriously implies a mind overly preoccupied with assumptions of its own dignity and insufficiently appreciative of the bonds connecting flawed human creatures. In this instance, at any rate, the satirical view is explicitly reserved for expression by Cousin Tom's newly-acquired wife.

The first indication of the threatening rift within their marriage occurs with Eleanor's caustic remark on the circumstances of their visit: 'And in August the Fayerlees repair to Arthur's Cave... Five hundred people

repairing en masse to the womb--what a sight it must be.' Eleanor's initial comment reflects on the asperity of her feelings about her new connections, or, possibly, on her negative view of family *per se*. She also hates her husband's drinking habits, and these in turn are connected with the family. For, as one of her kinswomen says, 'She better get used to it... All the Fayerlees men drink'.... Tom demonstrates his lack of sovereignty in the way that he replies to his wife's indecorous display of contempt for his family. After Eleanor has delivered her flippant commentary on what she supposes to be the Freudian purpose of the reunion, her husband mildly remonstrates, 'Do they look any worse than other folks, taking them by and large?' The situation calls for more authority than is provided by Tom's half-apologetic gesture. And by demonstrating his weakness he earns only the further rudeness of her reply, 'I'd rather not take them by and large.' Later, at the barbecue, after his drunkenness causes him to make some conspicuously awkward movements, Tom is brought up short by the cold, resentful stare of his wife and again seems to fail in assertiveness and composure.

Thus, the failure in love of this story is shown to rest, at least in part, with the masculine figure. But even though the husband's drinking proceeds partially from weakness and is not simply a natural expression of manhood, Eleanor still exhibits the same kind of deficiency as is implied with respect to the overly-demanding woman of 'Tom Rivers.' In the same way that she cannot accept with tolerant equanimity the imperfections of the family celebration and its attendant cult, she also cannot bring herself to respect her husband because she abhors so intensely his predilection for whiskey. Eleanor seems to be characterized as a woman who stands in need of something more of the comic spirit in order to succeed in loving an imperfect man in an imperfect world. But she has little of the inner largesse and resiliency of temper which make up the comic spirit. Instead she plays the churl, and she does so with such fierce conviction and formidable capacity that one's sympathies are almost shifted in favor of the weak but more human qualities of the husband.

The epiphanal climax of the story catches up the significance of the title and exposes the nature of the wife's failures in love. A number of the kinfolk, having returned to the home of Tom and Eleanor, with the host still feeling the effects of his drinking, are gathered again at table. This concluding scene of the story repeats the anti-comic motif of the disrupted family feast which has been earlier established in connection with the clan reunion. And Eleanor is here again shown to be the...outsider who willfully refuses to accommodate the festive spirit. From remarks she makes to a cousin while dressing for dinner (from a white and flowing gown she changes to a severe black sheath-like dress, suggestive of her baleful, resentful mood) Eleanor reveals her pronounced dissatisfaction, not to say contempt, for the family she has married into and for her husband. But it is in connection with the central operative symbol of the story that Miss Gordon makes her final comment on the character of Eleanor.

The 'petrified woman' of the title refers on the literal level to a young girl in a traveling carnival whom Cousin Tom, Sally, and some companions pay to see during the barbecue. Tom has been interested enough in the girl to return alone to see her after the others have rejoined the family gathering. The description of this incident suggests that his return may have been sexually motivated, but one cannot say for certain that Tom has been guilty of infidelity. It is clear however that his encounter with the carnival performer constitutes for him a sort of recognition whereby even in his drunken condition he comes to a lucid understanding of the sterility of his marriage. During the final meal the childish banter of Sally and another little girl intrudes on the strained and desultory conversation of the adults, and when they refer to the refrain of the carnival barker advertising the petrified woman Tom is momentarily jolted out of his alcoholic torpor. His comment makes explicit the significance of his earlier recognition: 'I saw a woman today who has real charm... Some women are just petrified in spots... She was petrified all over.'

Tom's weakness and his own responsibility for the failure of his marriage are stressed again in this scene where he demonstrates his lack of manhood and self-sovereignty by an egregious desecration of his role of husband and host. He embarrasses his guests and disrupts the social occasion by making public what is properly a private matter. His failure is shown to be elemental and deplorable enough in its effect. But that of his wife, given the present circumstances, is even more startling in its unnaturalness. Its effects are registered on the impressionable sensibility of Sally, the narrator....

Eleanor is, of course, the real petrified woman whose coldness causes her to respond only to the resentment in her husband's remark and not to its latent, desperate appeal--an appeal implicit also in his later exclamation, 'I'm in love... I'm in love with a petrified woman.' When her husband presently passes out on the floor she apparently remains aloof, refusing to help him (at least this appears to be the gist of Sally's...retrospective comment, though it combines images separated in time). In any case, we are told that the rupture of that evening becomes permanent with the couple's subsequent divorce, and it is rumored that Tom later sets fire to the house while roaming about it at night with a lighted lamp in his hand. His love for his wife appears to be genuine, at least in the order of desire. But as Miss Gordon seems to say in this and other stories, sincerity alone is not sufficient to make a lasting bond.

Tom's ineffectualness in the performance of his masculine duties certainly contributes to the aggravation of his wife's estrangement, if it does not actually cause the wife's failure. However, in view of her total lack of the most rudimentary of the feminine qualities, simple warmth or sympathy, Eleanor's emotional petrification is a more radical perversion of the natural sexual order. Whatever the extent of her husband's responsibility for her condition, Eleanor seems to reject the duties of her role from willfulness rather than, as is the case with Tom, out of weakness. In this respect she appears to be represented as a peculiarly aberrant distortion of natural ordinances, an anomaly of the spiritual world more shocking than the merely physical anomaly represented by the petrified girl of the freak show. As such Eleanor could be considered as an instructive negative exemplum for the narrator, Sally, who demonstrates the germ of similar propensities in the earlier stories which deal with her disinclination to accept womanhood.

However, there is no indication in the present story that Sally realizes the salutary lesson which is there to be learned. She retains the memory of Eleanor's cold violet gaze, but we do not know whether she has been changed by it or whether her own feelings still betoken a cool, unyielding resistance to the exigencies of her sexual station. 'The Petrified Woman' is further illustrative of Miss Gordon's persistent concern with the theme of natural sexual manners and it bears out her emphasis on certain elemental norms of conduct--those primal and basic standards available to the instinct which are implied in her symbol of the forest."

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) 93-98

"The Petrified Woman'...is told in the first person by a narrator looking back on a childhood experience. The narrator does not judge or evaluate; she simply reports what she saw and felt when she was a child. The occasion for this recollection is a family reunion 'held at a place called Arthur's cave' one memorable year when Hilda, the narrator's cousin, had a new stepmother, a Cousin Eleanor from Birmingham. What made the reunion memorable for the child was, ostensibly, the beauty of the stepmother who dressed in a long, white gown and wore diamonds in her ears and on her breast in the shape of a cross. But what really made the narrator remember this occasion so vividly, the reader sees, was the suppressed conflict between Cousin Eleanor and her husband Tom.

Cousin Tom drinks too much; and, for a time, there is some doubt about whether Eleanor's coldness to him is the cause or the result of his drinking. Gradually, the reader realizes that Tom's misbehaving is in large part caused by his wife's lack of feeling. This insight is dramatized by an incident involving a 'petrified woman' in a traveling carnival that stops near the cave where the reunion is in progress. The narrator and Cousin Hilda go to see the carnival freak who is called Stella, 'the petrified woman.' Cousin Tom, who accompanies them, is struck by the fact that Stella is beautiful and also petrified. At dinner that night he announces to the assembled guests that he is in love with the petrified woman. When his wife asks for her name, Tom replies, 'Stell-a. The One and Only Stella-a!' The reader, of course, knows that the real petrified woman is Cousin Eleanor.

'The Petrified Woman' deals with a motif encountered before in Miss Gordon's fiction. Cousin Eleanor resembles women like the wife of Nicholas Llewellyn in *Penhally*, Elsie Manigault in *Women on the Porch*, Isabel Reardon of *Strange Children*, and Cynthia Vail of *The Malefactors*--women who hate what is natural and who attempt to dominate their men. The conclusion of the story--in which the narrator

remembers exactly how Cousin Eleanor looked in her long white dress, walking over to the window where the water glints on the rocks and 'Cousin Tom is still lying there on the floor' with his head cut by a wine glass--nicely catches the point of the story: Eleanor's deadness and Tom's degradation."

William J. Stuckey
Caroline Gordon
(Twayne 1972) 132-33

"The Petrified Woman' described the Fayerlee family reunion 'at Arthur's Cave.' It was a description, too, of the annual Meriwether reunion at Dunbar Cave, where Meriwethers 'of the name and of the blood' came back to the Old Neighborhood to breathe the sacred air. The narrator, a little girl named Sally, mentions a pet squirrel she used to have named Adji-Daumo, the same name Caroline had given her own pet squirrel. The story is about people full of suppressed fury with one another, genteel people who drink too much, a husband who accuses his wife of unspecified offenses, of being petrified. It ends, inevitably, in violence."

Ann Waldron
Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance
(Putnam's 1987) 256

"Caroline...tried to gain some perspective on her marital morass by once again exploring the relations between men and women in...'The Petrified Woman'... The setting is based on the Clarksville of Caroline's youth where two young cousins, Sally and Hilda, much like Caroline and her cousin Manny, watch the deterioration of Hilda's father and stepmother's marriage. Cousin Tom uses vulgarity and makes an exhibition of himself when drunk, much to the disgust of his fastidious wife Eleanor.

At a carnival, when he sees a woman who was supposedly petrified at the age of sixteen, Tom comments, 'I don't know when I've see a prettier woman...lies quiet, too.' Tom would like a woman to be frozen at the age of romantic idealism, before disillusionment and criticism emerge. For Eleanor it is too late since her cold, judgmental eyes 'would freeze' her husband. There is also a suggestion that young Sally is already petrified, too frightened by what she has witnessed to enter the sexual arena herself. Remembering her failure at dancing the previous year, she comments, 'I thought it better not to try than to fail.'

'The Petrified Woman' might seem to be just another version of one of Caroline's major themes: a man's selfishness petrifies or makes monstrous the women around him. What is different here is that the story actually emphasizes the pathetic effects of a man's conduct on himself, a shift that would continue in Caroline's future fiction. As drunken Tom attempts to rise from the dinner table, he gets his foot tangled in his Cousin Marie's dress and falls to the floor, knocking himself out and cutting himself on his broken wine glass. Although he might like to get away from women, he is inextricably 'tangled' with them.

At the end of the story we learn that after their divorce Eleanor remarried while Tom burned down his house one night while intoxicated. The picture Sally retains in her memory, the last lines of the story, drive home the message. 'Cousin Eleanor, in her long white dress, is walking over to the window, where, on moonlight nights, we used to sit to watch the water glint on the rocks.... But Cousin Tom is still lying there on the floor.' Eleanor is associated with the revivifying and cleansing properties of water, an increasingly prominent symbol in Caroline's fiction, while Tom is petrified in his self-destruction.

In autobiographical terms, a simplistic interpretation of 'The Petrified Woman' would emphasize the 'look-where-you'd-be-without-me' message that Caroline might be sending to Allen. While this element is present, she is also performing a deeper self-exploration. In her letters, she often blames her problems with Allen on a pattern of relations with women that he formed with his mother. In 'The Petrified Woman,' she is examining the effects of her parents' marital difficulties on herself. Like Sally, Caroline was frightened by what she saw and so demanded of Allen constant reassurances to assuage her insecurity.

Like Eleanor, Caroline was seeking a way of purifying and renewing her life, and she believed she had found it at Robber Rocks during that summer of 1947. On November 24, 1947, Caroline Gordon was baptized a Roman Catholic... Her decision could not have been sudden since she would have needed

religious instruction before she could be received into the Church. Her silence may simply indicate that she did not want her religious conversion known to her secular, and sometimes cynical, artist friends."

Veronica A. Makowsky
Caroline Gordon: A Biography
(Oxford 1989) 183-84

"When Caroline could finally admit that Allen might actually need psychiatric help, she began to recognize how she had mistakenly cast him, and other men in her life, in exalted positions. Yet she found it extremely difficult to break the patterns of dependence she had created in her life, to rely on her own strength and judgment. As if to compensate for her new understanding, she became more determined than ever to guard and champion Allen's reputation, no matter the cost.

Caroline's masquerade took place in fiction as well as life. Sometime between the euphoria of remarriage and the despair of a near second divorce, she wrote another story about marriage, called 'The Petrified Woman.' The story revealed her growing desire to conceal the true nature of any conflict, or perhaps her inability to see or admit that the problems that plagued any marriage relationship were not black and white--all his fault, or hers. In the story Caroline also demonstrated how willing she was to blame herself to protect the image of one she loved.

Caroline dedicated the story to Eudora Welty, whom she had recently gotten to know. Eudora had written a story called 'The Petrified Man.' The tale was set in a beauty parlor of a small Mississippi town. In between perms and colorings, the women gossiped about everything, including a man one of them saw in a traveling freak show. He was supposedly turning to stone, but actually he was hiding from the law: he had raped four women in California. Eudora used the discovery of the petrified man to satirize the unnatural relationships between men and women. The man's crimes were monstrous, but the actions of the women in the beauty shop were less than admirable. In fact, Eudora suggested women might be responsible for turning men to stone.

Caroline's companion piece, 'The Petrified Woman,' was the story of the appearance of another freak-show character at a reunion of the 'Fayerlee' connection. According to Caroline's notes, the petrified woman named Hazel 'shot seven men in Alabama' but masqueraded in a carnival wagon as the virginal Stella, a petrified sixteen-year-old beauty. Caroline wrote two versions of the story, but she did not reveal Stella's misdeeds in either version. Rather, she concentrated on the effect Stella's appearance had on one marriage, that of Tom and Eleanor Fayerlee.

In several respects the story of the Fayerlees resembled one of Caroline's first tales, 'Funeral in Town.' Modeled on Uncle Rob, Tom Fayerlee was a genial drunk; Eleanor was his second wife, originally from Birmingham and an outsider to the ways of the connection. She could not tolerate Tom's behavior when he was drunk, and his family did not appreciate her. After seeing the 'petrified' Stella, Tom made a fool of himself at a family dinner party, declaring that he loved Stella to torment Eleanor. By the time Tom collapsed in a drunken stupor, his marriage was all but over.

Caroline told the story through the eyes of her fictive alter ego, Sally Maury, the young daughter of Professor Aleck Maury. Using the child's innocent eye allowed Caroline to explore the way point of view affected one's understanding: Sally worshipped Tom but she also admired Eleanor, and she did not fully understand what was happening around her or whom she should sympathize with. 'It's all in the way you look at it,' as Tom said early in the story.

In Caroline's first version of the story, a careful reader would undoubtedly sympathize with Eleanor, who clearly suffered from her husband's behavior and his family's narrow-mindedness. But Caroline did not publish that version. Instead she covered her tracks and revised the story, creating a much more enigmatic account, one in which she muted the criticism of Tom and greatly altered the character of his wife, suggesting Eleanor was the true petrified woman because of her cold heart and intolerance of the Fayerlees. Caroline also cut Tom's comment, 'It's all in the way you look at it,' and added the thread of a fairy tale. Just as in Caroline's first published story, 'Summer Dust,' Sally remembered snatches of a fairy

tale and began to see Tom and Eleanor as characters in such a tale. But in 'Summer Dust,' Sally's fondness for fairy tales was a creative fiction; in 'The Petrified Woman' her fondness had become an escape, a way for Sally to block out the unpleasant realities of life.

Caroline's two versions of 'The Petrified Woman' revealed a new split between her public image and her private self. Previously in her fiction, she had undermined conventional surface patterns with underground streams of meaning sympathetic to women's concerns. In 'The Petrified Woman,' however, Caroline ultimately *diverted or destroyed the underground stream of meaning* [?], perhaps because she began to realize that she was leaving 'tracks in the snow.' In the final version of the story...Caroline deliberately masked and *inverted her sympathies* [Italics added]. She did not destroy the original version, however, but saved it, one of the few manuscripts she preserved over the years."

Nancylee Novell Jonza

The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon
(U Georgia 1995) 268-70

This Feminist does not give Gordon credit for spiritual growth, claiming that Gordon was dishonest in her final version of "The Petrified Woman," that she "inverted" her true sympathies. The Feminist insists that "women's concerns" must always be paramount, wanting no sympathy for male characters and all virtue to reside in the females. This sexist bias, inherent in Feminism, insults the best women writers and falsifies their fiction. As a rule, Feminist critics are petrified women.

Michael Hollister (2020)