

## ANALYSIS

"The Presence" (1948)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"The Presence' finds Maury in a mood of deep concern for others. Jim Mowbray is the best dog trainer and Jenny, Jim's wife, the best cook and kindest woman Maury has ever known. The loss is catastrophic to Aleck when Jim is unfaithful to Jenny; his friends have been more than friends, they have become symbols for him of a harmony rarely found among human beings. At seventy-five Maury finds that his stable world is about to dissolve and that he will again be homeless. He thinks of his orthodox Aunt Vic on her deathbed and his murmuring of the Angelic Salutation as a boy; he knows that he also needs the Holy Mary to pray for him at this moment which represents for him a spiritual death."

Frederick P. W. McDowell  
*Caroline Gordon*  
(U Minnesota 1966) 13

"When we next encounter Aleck Maury in...'The Presence'...he has been living for twelve years at the Mowbray house as a boarder. Jim Mowbray's wife, Miss Jenny, whom he admires and loves, has made Maury renounce fishing after he almost drowned getting out of his boat. His overweight now is a decided disadvantage to him; yet he cannot give up his relish for fine food. Miss Jenny is a talented cook, herself a Junoesque woman, and she loves humoring the Doctor, as she calls Mr. Maury. Consequently, as he puts it to himself, he has not been engaged for some time in any high enterprise that calls for the favor of the gods; he has had no epic adventure. The domestic has apparently conquered the heroic quest.

Mr. Maury is now seventy-five, frankly obese, cantankerous, and solitary. His capacity for interesting life is keener however than it was in his youth. He is more aware than ever before of the symbolic patterns embedded in ordinary experience: Nothing in the other boarders' life and manners evades his keen scrutiny. Miss Gilbert, a fellow boarder, is abstractly pure and angelic, and Mr. Maury loathes her. She dresses constantly in white, tilts her aquiline nose into her drinking cup, and tries continually to interest him in spiritualist readings. In direct opposition to her is another boarder, Riva Gaines, a divorcee with a child, who represents the abstraction of flesh from spirit as Miss Gilbert exhibits the contrary.

Miss Gaines is a predatory woman, using her sex as a means to personal happiness, seeking to snare and seduce men. In contrast to both of these is Miss Jenny (Mrs. Mowbray), who manages the boarding house and gives it her tender concern. She is warmly feminine and maternal, proffering Mr. Maury neither moral advice nor the mere shadow formula of coquetry, but biscuits swimming in melted butter, chicken and dumplings, and quince preserves. He has connected her with Juno, the goddess of the hearth, the Queen of Heaven. As she is his ideal of womanhood, her husband is the kind of man he most admires: a huntsman and an accomplished dog-trainer, who can continue the quest in field and stream that Aleck has had to renounce. Though Aleck is no more reconciled to death now than he was when he was younger, he can endure to go on indefinitely in this manner, with the two Mowbrays satisfying vicariously his intense desire for life.

At the beginning of the story, Miss Jenny is away visiting her sick father. The household is awry; Mr. Maury is uncomfortable without her presiding presence. Nothing is as it should be; Mrs. Gaines neglects her child, the food is not up to par, Miss Gilbert preys upon Mr. Maury as a potential convert to her spiritualism. When Jenny Mowbray returns, Mr. Maury relaxes into the warm aura of love that her presence provides. At dinner, 'She wore a camellia in her brown hair; her face, flushed from the ardors of the kitchen, was almost as pink as the petals of the flower'.... When she speaks of her ill and aging father, however, Mr. Maury thinks of his pursuing enemy death.... Mr. Maury turns to Jenny. 'My kidneys trouble me a great deal,' he says. She listens to him sympathetically.

The warmth of this domestic haven is shattered when the discovery is made that Miss Jenny's husband is courting the young widow and that the Mowbrays will seek a divorce. Aleck is left with no one to turn toward for shelter; more, he is left with a knowledge of the impossibility of earthly happiness, the insufficiency, once more, of the natural world to sustain the human spirit....

Oddly enough, however, when Mr. Maury is left alone on the dark veranda of the house, with his world destroyed, it is in bitter thoughts of women that he occupies himself rather than in grief over the betrayal of his cherished Miss Jenny. 'Women!' he has exclaimed to Miss Gilbert a bit earlier. 'I've been watching them. They'll rock the world if they don't look out!' Reflecting on his situation, he thinks to himself, 'There were no women in his life now, and yet he seemed to have been in servitude to them all his life.'

In this state of darkness and despair, he recalls the death of his Aunt Victoria, who thought of her as Hera, Queen of Heaven, and had confused her with that lady to whom she made him pray when he said his rosary: 'Hail, hold Queen, Mother of Mercy, hail our life, our sweetness, and our hope.' He recalls that, when she died, she had seemed to see something beyond him, something to which she responded with expectancy and recognition. The story ends with this recollection. Aleck Maury has reached his goal, found his grail, has confronted directly the 'meaning' of life in his memory of his aunt's faith. What he will do with this epiphany is not indicated, though he ends his reverie with a prayer: 'pray for us sinners, now and at the *hour*...of our death.'

Thus ends the epic journey of Aleck Maury, a man who, for all his gentleness and apparent traditionalism, is a romantic and a modern--a 'superfluous man,' as Turgenev characterized the figure. He turns away from society to the hunt, not for any shared ritual--for his is a solitary pursuit--but for a romantic quest to seek in nature what Wordsworth called the 'visionary gleam.' Like Rousseau's 'solitary walker,' he finds in society the chains that would bind him to routine, the forces that would corrupt his delight. He savors the Rousseauistic 'sweet sentiment of his own existence' in field or stream; and his relationship to nature itself is not sacramental and submissive, but calculating and eventually cunning. It is his own mind that nature gives him: 'My mind to me a kingdom is'--he once cites this line from Sir Thomas Dyer. Maury's delight is, like that of the Renaissance poet, in knowing. But as Thomas Aquinas has pointed out, loving is superior to knowing; for whereas in knowing, everything enters into one's self, in loving one is drawn out of oneself to something higher--to the beloved...

He is a modern Cartesian man: split between mind and body and desperately seeking wholeness. He is a modern pantheist, repelled by the womanishness of religion, having to seek the sacred far apart from society and, as long as he has a pond or a stream, not needing a God."

Louise Cowan

"Aleck Maury, Epic Hero and Pilgrim"

*The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon: A Critical Symposium*

ed. Thomas H. Landess (U Dallas 1972) 24-27

"'The Presence' is a new story about Aleck Maury, a Maury who is now seen and judged from the standpoint of Christian faith. In this story Maury is old and has had to give up sport entirely, but he has taken refuge in a boarding house run by a couple who stand between Maury and a death-in-life emptiness. Maury is very fond of his landlady, Jenny Mowbray, a plump, good-natured woman who runs her kitchen with skill and enthusiasm and who takes a personal interest in the lives of her boarders.

As the story opens, Maury is verbally crossing swords on the veranda with another boarder, a pale, washed-out spinster who sustains herself with health foods and transcendentalism. Their conflict is interrupted by the arrival of Jenny's husband, Jim, a handsome sunburned man who shares Maury's enthusiasm for sport. Jim Mowbray, who has been hunting, is very pleased with the performance of his setter. Through Jim, Maury relives his hunting days. He takes over the feeding of the dog and almost feels in the process that it is he 'making his way home, at day's end, by the slanting rays of the sun, his game bag heavy on his shoulder....

Maury is happy living with the Mowbrays. He still eats with his old relish and enjoys making innocently flirtatious conversation with a pretty but too-thin blonde divorcee named Riva Gaines. That night at supper,

Maury also admires Jenny Mowbray who has just returned from a visit to her sick father. But talk of illness chills Maury, particularly Jenny's remark about her father losing his faculties: 'A terrible thing to lose your faculties... What a terrible thing it would be if he lost his mind that to him such a kingdom was!'

Maury is cheered by Jenny's maternal interest in him. She has had Dr. Weathers write a prescription out for him; and, by the time Jim Mowbray comes to the supper table, Maury has forgotten about his physical deterioration and is joking with the blond divorcee about marriage. Before the evening is over, Jenny discovers that her husband has been having an affair with Riva Gaines and that he wants to marry her. When Jenny announces to Maury that she is going to sell the boardinghouse and return to Kentucky, Maury is dejected--his pleasant, comfortable world has crashed. That night Maury has another quarrel with Miss Gilbert, and he cries out passionately, '*Women...* I've been watching them. They'll rock the world if they don't look out.'

It is not women, however, who are at the root of the trouble but the men who have allowed women to take over the world. Maury muses: 'There were no women in his life now, and yet he seemed to have been in servitude to them all his life.' This conclusion is exaggerated, of course, but it contains a general truth. Instead of dominating their women as they were meant to do, men allow women to dominate them. Jim Mowbray will be divorced and remarried 'before he knew what had happened to him.' But then Jim 'was not a man to stand up to women.' Paradoxically, however, women--or at least the right woman--can help save a man's immortal soul.

Maury thinks of his Aunt Vic who, when he was orphaned at four, took him to live with her, not to teach him Latin and mathematics as she pretended, but to save his soul. Aunt Vic was a devout Catholic and she made Maury and his cousin Julian kneel and pray at command, the way a bird dog is taught to charge and point. But on her deathbed, beside which the young Maury sat, Aunt Vic saw a presence that he could not see and when she died, he ran out to tell the others, weeping and wondering 'What it was he could not see.' It is Miss Gilbert, ignorant of the true meaning of her words, who correctly diagnoses the situation. 'There's no faith in men.'

It is faith, Miss Gordon suggests, that Maury has always lacked. For Maury, like Stephen Lewis of *The Strange Children*, is outside the Church, feels his alienation but is not able to cross the chasm of doubt. In a sense, 'The Presence' is a rewriting of Aleck Maury's old dilemma, bringing it into line with Miss Gordon's Catholicism. In the earlier stories, Aleck Maury was frequently depressed by the prospect of death, but he always managed to find some way to cheer himself up, usually through sport. In 'The Presence,' Maury is made to face the issue and is not permitted any earthly consolation. Indeed, he is faced with a meaningful death but is denied the power to unlock the meaning."

William J. Stuckey  
*Caroline Gordon*  
(Twayne 1972) 130-32

"In 'The Presence,' Maury is made to face the issue [of death] and is not permitted any earthly consolation. Indeed, he is faced with a meaningful death but is denied the power to unlock the meaning.' Even without Caroline Gordon's later clarification of his spiritual condition, it is evident that, for all his imagination, Aleck Maury finally does not have the resources to remove himself out of time, though the story he tells more successfully controls time than his own efforts as sportsman. Poetic knowledge is akin to the perception of religious insights, according to [Jacques] Maritain, and for Caroline Gordon, too, Maury's inability to intuit spiritual truths becomes an artistic failure as well."

Rose Ann C. Fraistat  
*Caroline Gordon as Novelist and Woman of Letters*  
(Louisiana State 1984) 83

"Gordon was...successful in merging her religious message with her fiction in...'The Presence' (1948). In this story, Gordon returns again to Aleck Maury, who is now too enfeebled for any type of sport. He spends his days at the boarding house of two friends, Jim and Jenny Mowbray, living the adventures of the hunt vicariously through Jim's exploits. As he frequently did in the earlier works about him, here too Maury ponders his approaching death. Maury's fears of the problems of old age intensify when Jenny discovers

that Jim wants to desert her for one of the young female boarders; if Jenny carries through with her threats to divorce Him and sell the boarding house and move away, Maury's everyday stability will be destroyed.

Pondering the whole disturbing situation, he retreats to his room, where he has a moment of religious enlightenment. He thinks of a time in his childhood when he had sat in the room of his dying Aunt Vic, a Roman Catholic who had raised Maury after his mother had died. As Maury was reciting the Angelic Salutation (Aunt Vic had taught him Catholic liturgy), his aunt had witnessed a vision which the boy could not see, and then had died. Thinking of this long-past experience, Maury is once again driven to his knees to pray to the Virgin: 'Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the *hour*...of our death.'

Several things make this story a good deal more powerful than *The Strange Children* and *The Malefactors*. One is that Gordon does not deal as contemptuously with Maury as she did with the protagonists in the two novels. In those longer works, Gordon emphasized the trivial and indeed evil nature of man's efforts to achieve a private order; not heroism but vanity and destructive pride lie at the heart of these attempts. In the novels, her characters, such as Stephen Lewis and Tom Claiborne, are for the most part unlikable and uninspiring... In 'The Presence,' however, Gordon writes about her beloved Aleck Maury, image of her father and man of passion and zest. Maury is certainly faulted in the story (he focuses his concern for Jenny and Jim, for instance, not on the problems now facing his friends, but on his losing a place to stay); nonetheless, he still possesses a dignity and stature that Stephen Lewis and Tom Claiborne lack. Indeed, there is so much feeling in this story for Maury that one almost feels that Gordon wrote it because she wanted him to become a Catholic and achieve salvation. Such intensity of feeling adds a depth...

The ending of 'The Presence,' which, like those of the two novels, is built on a stunning reversal, is also much more successful, partly because Gordon does not overplay her hand. Certainly Maury's appeal to the Virgin is shocking, coming from him, but given the circumstances--a man near death, whose world has suddenly begun crumbling about him--his reaching out for religious faith is certainly believable. With this conclusion, Gordon successfully underscores the limitations of Maury's life while at the same time showing how a crisis may open up an individual to the divine. 'It is at a time like this,' says Miss Gilbert to Maury, explaining why she chose to read litanies to comfort the distraught Jenny, 'when the hard core of the personality is shattered, that the real self has a chance to emerge.' Maury himself experiences such an emergence at the end of the story, and Gordon implicitly challenges the reader to do the same."

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.  
*Three Catholic Writers of the Modern South*  
(U Mississippi 1985) 110-12

"Immediately her conversion affected her fiction. She wrote a short story, 'The Presence.' 'It's the last Aleck Maury story and shows him being converted,' she wrote Fannie Cheney."

Ann Waldron  
*Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance*  
(Putnam's 1987) 261

"The effects of her conversion were immediately evident in... 'The Presence'... The seventy-five-year-old Aleck Maury is now too infirm to hunt or fish and believes 'my life's hardly worth living.' He identifies with and envies Jim Mowbray, the husband of his boardinghouse keeper, who has just returned from a successful quail hunt. Aleck Maury, however, depends on Jenny Mowbray to nurse him and keep him interested in life, so his loyalties are divided when he learns that Jim Mowbray is leaving Jenny for a young divorcee. Significantly, he compares the grieving Jenny to 'a shot bird.'

As in 'The Petrified Woman,' [?] Gordon again emphasizes the damaging effects of masculine roving on the man. Jim Mowbray appears to get off scot free, but Aleck Maury, who spent his life following his pleasure, sport, is now frightened because he can no longer roam and he is losing his refuge since Jenny will close the boardinghouse. Unlike Tom in 'The Petrified Woman,' however, Aleck Maury is not a figure of despair at the end of the story. He remembers the woman who raised him, his devoutly Catholic Aunt Vic, because, like Jenny Mowbray, her figure was Junoesque.' At the moment of her death, Aunt Vic had

seemed to see a presence that was invisible to young Aleck and 'he had wondered what it was he could not see.' *Caroline does not suggest that Aleck Maury is converted but merely raises the possibility* as he confronts his mortality in the last lines of the story, 'Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the *hour...of our death.*' [Italics added.]

In this ending, Gordon writes the plot that will emerge in much of her future fiction: devout women attempt to lead recalcitrant men to salvation through their examples. The association of Jenny and Aunt Vic with Juno and the Virgin Mary is part of this pattern. Aleck Maury remembers that 'Zeus had wooed Io, too, and many another mortal. His wife, Juno...suffered from jealousy for all that she were Queen of Heaven. Catholics pray to Mary to intercede for them with Christ, and it is as intercessors, like Aunt Vic, that many of Caroline's future heroines appear. Juno herself would reappear with the Greek version of her name in Caroline's final novel, *The Glory of Hera* (1972)."

Veronica A. Makowsky  
*Caroline Gordon: A Biography*  
(Oxford 1989) 185-86

"One of the first things Caroline did after her conversion was to return to her favorite fictional world and write what would be the final story about Aleck Maury, 'The Presence.' In the story seventy-five-year-old Aleck was living in a boardinghouse run by Jenny and Jim Mowbray. Conscious only of his own needs and desires, Aleck did not realize Jim was having an affair with another boarder. Only after Jenny discovered her husband's infidelity and collapsed in agony did Aleck understand what had been happening. But at first all he thought about was how he would be left without a home if Jenny went through with her plans to divorce Jim and sell the boardinghouse.

Yet Aleck Maury was saved from selfishness by memory and faith, or rather, by the memory of faith. When another boarder, Miss Gilbert, began to spout pieties and platitudes, Aleck began to reflect on how women would 'rock the world.' His sour musings carried him back to his childhood and his favorite aunt, Victoria. Recalling Aunt Vic's desire 'to save his immortal soul,' Aleck remembered praying at her death bed. He had been 'mumbling the Angelic Salutation--'Hail, Mary, full of grace...'--when Aunt Vic cried out, rose as if she saw a vision, and then collapsed in death.

At that time 'he turned and saw nothing,' and 'he had wondered what it was that he could not see,' Gordon wrote. But at the end of 'The Presence,' Caroline suggested that Aleck had begun to understand his aunt's life of faith, and that the vision may have been of an angel, or of Mary herself, appearing at Vic's bedside, joining in Aleck's halfhearted prayer.

Although Caroline ended the story at the moment of Aleck's understanding, she knew most readers would think *he was on the verge of conversion to Catholicism*. It would shock some readers, undoubtedly, and yet, there was nothing in 'The Presence' that had not been foreshadowed in Caroline's earlier works. The character of Aunt Vic, the depth of her Catholic faith, and her commitment to converting Aleck, even Aleck's ultimate dependence on others: all had been referred to in *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* [1934]. Also, the idea of a woman bringing salvation to the misguided man had been developed in Caroline's last [previous] novel, *The Women on the Porch*. In these and so many other ways, 'The Presence' demonstrated how, in Caroline's own words, her work had 'progressed slowly and steadily in one direction'--toward the Catholic faith. [Italics added.]

But another thread of the story suggested that Caroline's faith would be eclectic and inclusive. Aleck identified his aunt with both Mary and the Greek 'Queen of Heaven,' Juno. 'In his childish mind pagan and Christian symbols had mingled,' Caroline wrote. When, as an adult, Aleck described Jenny Mowbray in both terms, as Junoesque and as the virtuous woman of the Old Testament, the readers of 'The Presence' would also find it hard to separate the pagan and Christian symbols. Jim and Jenny Mowbray were like Zeus and Juno, the philandering man and his jealous, raging wife. Yet in another of Caroline's inversions, Jenny, and not Jim, would be the victor in conflict, just as Mary, not Christ or God the Father, would lead Aleck to faith. 'It is at a time like this, when the hard core of the personality is shattered, that the real self has a chance to emerge,' Miss Gilbert told Aleck at the end of 'The Presence.'"

Nancylee Novell Jonza

Aunt Vic raised Aleck to be a Catholic from the age of four, intent upon saving "his immortal soul." She trained him like a pointer and at the end of this story he is pointing toward God: "he had been kneeling at her bedside, praying, when she died." He was a practicing Catholic, as evident when he "slid to his knees and began mumbling the Angelic Salutation." After her death, however, he stop practicing his religion: "That had been a long time ago, when he was a boy of thirteen. He had not thought about such things often since that time...." He became a lapsed Catholic. Nature replaced God.

The story ends as he resumes thinking about such things again and reverts to practicing his religion, praying to "Holy Mary, Mother of God," just as he did at the deathbed of Aunt Vic. The story reinforces his revived faith by implying that there is indeed an afterlife. Aleck clearly believes that just before she died Aunt Vic saw a spirit, a ghost, an angel, or the Virgin Mary in response to his prayer. In the title the author calls it "The Presence" (1948). Gordon had converted to Catholicism the year before. Spirits also appear in her great short story "The Enemies" (1938), and in three of her novels, *The Women on the Porch* (1944), *The Strange Children* (1951), and *The Glory of Hera* (1972). Aleck lacks the spiritual development to see spirits or to commit fully to God. "He had wondered what it was that he could not see." In the largest context, his lifestyle has been an escape from his truest self: "It is at a time like this, when the hard core of the personality is shattered, that the real self has a chance to emerge." Now, homeless and unable to escape into Nature any longer as a hunter or fisherman, he returns to God. Immediately after confessing that he has not been thinking about God, he repents, by including himself as one of "us sinners."

In "To Thy Chamber Window, Sweet," the attractive Mrs. Carter told Aleck, "You have the heart of a little child." In "The Presence," we are told that "In his childish mind pagan and Christian symbols had mingled." The childlike heart of Aleck led him to escape society with its pressures and responsibilities and enjoy himself, arresting his development. While this may be considered a fault, his childlike nature also makes Aleck more prepared for salvation, since "Except as ye become as a little child, ye shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven." The end of the story disproves the allegation of Miss Gilbert, the cold spinster, when she condemns all men: "There's no faith in men." Her own salvation is in doubt, since she is an unforgiving proud woman and a transcendentalist rather than a Christian. Aleck "can't hardly stand Ralph Waldo Emerson," though he has lived his life like a pantheist such as Thoreau. His statement against Emerson is immediately followed by his reaction to a dog that seems to be Gordon's comment on Emerson and Gilbert: "'You rascal!'" he shouted. 'You come out of those bushes.'" A dog bursts out of the shrubbery and rushes up to him with "saliva drooling from her open jaws onto his knee."

It is ironic that Aleck should be provoked by Riva Gaines breaking up the Mowbrays' marriage and by the pretentious Miss Gilbert to blame "*Women!*" and to say, "There were no women in his life now, and yet he seemed to have been in servitude to them all his life." That is how he has felt, but in fact women have been in "servitude" to *him* all his life, since he was raised by Aunt Vic. His faults and misperceptions humanize amiable Aleck, who illustrates the male adage in reference to women, "Can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em." All the fictions about Aleck illustrate how much he depends upon women for food, lodging, comfort, entertainment, and insight. Contrary to Feminist critics, he is no misogynist: He loves Aunt Vic, his dead wife Molly, and Jenny Mowbray and he has affectionate feelings for other women, especially when they feed him well. Teasing playfully, he even pretends to be in love with the seductress Riva Gaines: "You'd better learn how to make preserves like this if you want me to marry you." Most ironic of all, facing death, for salvation he prays to a woman, the Mother of God. At the same time, he seems correct in standing up to women who oppress him: "Jim Mowbray was not a man to stand up to women." Aleck may be right that if Jim had been more like himself in standing up to women--or in running away from them--he would have resisted seduction by Riva Gaines.

Michael Hollister (2020)