

## ANALYSIS

"To Thy Chamber Window, Sweet" (1934)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"In 'To Thy Chamber Window, Sweet,' Maury is forced to choose between courting a pretty widow and going fishing. What makes the choice difficult is that his fishing partner is to be Jim Yost, a genius who 'bridged the gap between bait-fishing and fly-casting.' There is never really much doubt about which interest will win, for Maury has little taste for the genteel life the widow lives."

William J. Stuckey  
Caroline Gordon  
(Twayne 1972) 114-15

"In 'To Thy Chamber Window, Sweet' [Aleck Maury] has been in flight for some time. He is a vagabond after the loss of his wife, as he had been essentially while she was living. Like Odysseus and the mad Lancelor, he is dependent upon the hospitality of various groups of people, particularly women; but he must be careful not to be captured by any of them. In 'To Thy Chamber Window, Sweet,' he barely escapes in time from the feminine lures of a Mrs. Carter.

In the manner of Aeneas sneaking away from Dido, Mr. Maury leaves without confronting the blue-eyed widow who has been charmed by his reading of poetry and hopes to ensnare him in the soft wiles of womanly concern. She has attempted to manage his diet, has compared him to her dead husband, has taken him on a romantic ride with her out to Rainbow Springs. Ahead of him the road, 'banked on either side with roses, seemed to disappear in a tunnel of live oak branches.' Mr. Maury shows at this point that he has already chosen the masculine companionship of Jim Yost, the fisherman, over the sweet dominion of Mrs. Carter. During the night, when Yost has decided to leave for the Suwanee [sic] River, Aleck Maury is suddenly seized with the inspiration--as from a god--to go with him. He sends word to Mrs. Carter by her Negro boy, takes off with Jim Yost, and murmurs to himself a line from *The Odyssey*: 'And snatch'd his rudder and shook out more sail...' Like Odysseus leaving Calypso, like Aeneas deserting Dido, Mr. Maury has escaped from feminine charms to pursue his epic quest."

Louise Cowan  
"Aleck Maury, Epic Hero and Pilgrim"  
*The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon: A Critical Symposium*  
ed. Thomas H. Landess (U Dallas 1972) 20-21

"Aleck found himself in a quandary a month before his seventieth birthday. Unable to reel in any of the fish he hooked because the lake was covered with eelgrass, he fell prey to his own vanity and began telling stories and quoting poetry to impress a beautiful widow staying at the same boarding house. Soon Aleck was in danger of being caught by a woman bent on reforming his eating habits and dressing him up for rides about the country. But Aleck would not relinquish his freedom. He escaped once again with a new fishing partner, in search of better waters. Just as she had in the first Aleck Maury story, Caroline used a third-person narrator, allowing the reader to appreciate both the 'Gordon' and the 'Meriwether' view of Aleck."

Nancylee Novell Jonza  
*The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon*  
(U Georgia 1995) 149

The humility of Aleck Maury is evident when he stops fishing and beaches his own boat to "sit at the feet" of the more successful fisherman Jim Yost and paddle him around: "I was proud to sit at his feet." On the other hand his pride leads him to quote poetry and use other effective lures to attract the widow Mrs. Carter, a social form of fishing that is prompted by "a pure spirit of mischief." He is attracted to her mainly because her Virginia accent makes him nostalgic. "All would have been well if he had let it go at that. It

was his vanity that had betrayed him that night on the porch." He indulges himself, just as he does with food, getting fat. "It was vanity, sheer vanity, that had led him to recite" from the romantic poet Shelley. When she takes him on a ride to Rainbow Springs, "the road, banked on either side with roses, seemed to disappear in a tunnel of live oak branches." Roses are a traditional symbol of romantic love, an emotion that quickly disappears in Aleck's tunnel vision of the life he prefers.

An analogy is implied between Yost catching fish easily and releasing them and Aleck attracting the widow easily and releasing her--and himself. Getting his line tangled in eelgrass is a metaphor of social entanglements he wants to avoid. His coming to this fishing place appears to have been a mistake, his meeting the widow an example of "the injustice of Providence," and perhaps it is for the widow. For Aleck, however, coming to this place allowed him to meet Jim Yost, learn a fishing lesson, and move on to a better place to fish, implicitly for him a significant experience of spiritual growth: "'The older I get,' he said reflectively, 'the more I believe in the working of a Divine Providence.'"

Aleck thinks "I came to the wrong place and all the time a revelation was being prepared for me." The revelation is Jim Yost's fishing pole, the "only combination rod ever made," part casting rod and part fly fishing rod. In fly fishing you go to the fish, in bait fishing you wait for the fish to come to you. Fly fishing, in which the fly lights on the surface of the water, is analogous to attracting the widow "with the top part of his mind," in contrast to bait fishing, in which the attraction is at some depth. Aleck's relationship with Mrs. Carter is similar. At least he has self-knowledge and is honest with himself. And though he is somewhat rude in his attire and his speech, at least he is a gentleman when he releases her, by not stringing her along like a fish on his line and by leaving her a letter saying goodbye.

Michael Hollister (2020)