

ANALYSIS

"Tom Rivers" (1933)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"Tom Rivers' girl makes an impossible demand on him. She makes the literal error of asking him to promise never to drink again. She is asking him to surrender his sovereignty, which the Wife of Bath says is what woman wants of man. But her demand shows Tom she is unworthy of this surrender...His instinct for self-preservation, and by this much is the dispossessed aristocrat reduced, takes him away from her into a masculine world of horses and whores. His intercourse is diminished, and he will be a wanderer, but his integrity will remain."

Andrew Nelson Lytle
"The Forest of the South"
Critique I (Winter 1956) 8-9

"Tom Rivers' is an account of two Kentucky cousins who meet in the western frontier town of Cisco, Texas, experience danger together, and then part forever. Although Tom Rivers, the older of the two, is clearly the heroic sacrificial figure, the full meaning of this heroism is apparent only after a careful examination of the story's structural elements....

Tom's masculine integrity, though by no means irrelevant to the story, is not its true subject. His refusal to submit to his demanding fiancée; his confrontation with a gun-wielding, frontier card-shark; his routing of a band of night riders: these dramatic gestures alone do not define the full measure of his *daimon* or explain the ultimate meaning of the narrative, a meaning which both contains the image of Tom's assertive manhood and effectively transcends it.

The action is presented in the form of a first-person reminiscence; and the narrator, Lew Allard, admits in his opening words that he does not understand the significance of his own recollections. The story he subsequently relates is long and anecdotal, but the key to its meaning lies in the second sentence of the narrative: 'Still, in a large family connection such as ours every member, no matter how remotely related or unimportant, has his place and a sort of record in memory.' Ostensibly Allard is here justifying to the reader (or listener) the resurrection of this old story, arguing for its dramatic appropriateness; but unconsciously he is foreshadowing the revelation of Tom Rivers' familial piety, a piety to which he himself pays lip service without consciously recognizing its operation in the actions of his lost cousin.

That Miss Gordon is primarily concerned with the proper attitude toward family seems evident from the way in which she continues to develop her story. For the first two pages are devoted to the summer reunions enjoyed by Lew Allard and those cousins who have remained within the family circle. At such times they talk of bygone days, absent kinfolk; and the specific case histories that the narrator recites are instructive: all involve cousins and hence people whose times in a society which did not emphasize blood relationships would be, at the very most, tenuous. And several of the incidents mentioned treat the familial obligation and its necessary consequence: 'Cousin Ella, who was forced to play cards all her younger days to entertain the old folks, and so bore three sons who were gamblers; Cousin Henry Hord, who was deafened by cannonading in the Civil War and lost all his property by ill-advised investments and had to live with any of the kin who would put up with him.'

There is also talk of those personal tragedies which compose a portion of every family history: of Robert Allard, who took morphine, and of Maggie McClear, who turned down a formidable suitor for a man of lesser stature. Each of these incidents subtly anticipates the story of Tom Rivers, who is rejected by a foolish woman, defeated in his efforts to find a home. Yet even in Texas, far removed from the bosom of the family, he still remembers his familiar obligations in his relationship with Lew Allard.

At this point Miss Gordon pauses to introduce a traditional symbol which gathers in the larger meaning of her narrative: the old spreading beech which, generation after generation, stands in the yard of the family place, filtering the light 'always in the same pattern.' This image, that of the family tree itself, emphasizes the permanence of the collective memory which binds families together, those dead or absent as well as those living and present. And the author, by an extensive wording of this archetypal image, develops its symbolic implication at some length in order to emphasize its relevance to the account which follows.

Then, after some random recollections of Tom, which ease the reader into the narrative proper, Lew Allard begins to tell of his first meeting with his cousin and of their subsequent adventures in far-off Texas, where traditional values have not yet caught up with the westering frontier. Indeed the town of Cisco is almost primitive in the absence of any social order; and Lew, who is consciously fleeing from cousins and all they represent, immediately, almost instinctively commits himself to Tom's protection, in his youth and ignorance failing to understand fully the nature of the sacrifices his older kinsman ultimately makes in his behalf.

The reader sees Tom Rivers only through the eyes of Lew Allard, who acknowledges in retrospect the heroic measure of his long-absent cousin, the purity of manhood he exemplifies: 'You knew when you first laid eyes on Tom Rivers that there was some quality about him that set him apart from other men. He was fearless. Not many men are.' Lew's impression is immediately underscored by an old-fashioned Western confrontation in which Tom takes a gun away from a dishonest gambler in a saloon. This incident, which subtly equates Tom with the mythic heroes of the Old West, indicates the brutal quality of a human community without those refining elements of civilization which come with women and family, elements which both Tom and Lew, for different reasons, have renounced. In such an outpost as Cisco, raw courage and masculine prowess are constantly tested in dangerous persona encounters which even the agents of the law have little power to restrict.

And Lew, who has already found a job and lodging through Tom's efforts, enjoys a security almost unique among Cisco frontiersmen, since he is the cousin of Tom Rivers and hence under a special dispensation, something he himself only vaguely comprehends. As a result of his confusion, he becomes involved in a dangerous enterprise which tests Tom's familial piety to the utmost. The White Caps, a group of night riders, have made it known that they do not want cotton picked on the farm of a man named Rainey; and Lew, in a moment of barroom bravado, boasts that he would be man enough to take on the job. When his bluff is called by Reynolds, a cold-blooded government agent interested in collecting taxes on the yield, Tom immediately announces that he will accompany his cousin. When Lew asks him why, he replies: 'Aw...that Reynolds always did make me tired.'

This conversation suggests both Lew's naivete regarding his cousin's sacrifices and Tom's delicacy in failing to define explicitly his true motive for joining the venture. In the course of several conversations with Lew, Tom obliquely reveals the overwhelming sense of loss he feels in his isolation from home and kinsmen; and this loss is further emphasized by several seemingly irrelevant details which Miss Gordon skillfully introduces into her narrative. For example, when Tom meets Rainey he immediately recognizes in the man's features a kinship to the Bye family back in Kentucky. This recognition (which is less than complimentary to Rainey) indicates Tom's automatic definition of a man in terms of family and indicates as well his profound knowledge of the region he has left behind, a peculiar lore which remains vital despite his decision to sever his ties with home and kin. Lew and his cousins, who sit years later under the beech tree and talk of such characters as Tom Rivers, have only in their maturity learned the satisfaction and value of such wisdom.

But there is something more than mere lore in Tom's reminiscences about Todd County--the food, the hunting and fishing, the girl named Barbara. There is nostalgia, the longing for an irretrievable past, for a sense of place and permanence. Only at this point does the reader begin to take the true measure of Tom Rivers and to understand why he is risking his life for this kinsman whom he hardly knows; Lew is the living embodiment of a social order Tom has publicly abandoned and yet privately continues to cherish, one youthfully awkward member who represents the very ideal of family. For this reason Tom is willing to stand by his cousin in the latter's fight with the White Caps and in so doing to accept the dangers of involvement in a political conflict from which he can hope to gain nothing of material consequence. When

the White Caps attack, the two kinsmen, in a daring ploy devised by Tom, drive off the raiders, thus establishing a peaceful climate in which to pick the Rainey cotton. So it is Tom's presence on the farm which makes the venture a successful one, and only Lew fails to realize the extent of his own indebtedness.

But Tom is to suffer as a result of his familial devotion. One of the White Caps is wounded, important citizens are angered, and the Sheriff must order Tom to leave town or to face imprisonment. Here we see, with some significant modifications, the same choice Tom Rivers has faced earlier. In the first instance to remain in Kentucky with his family would have been to surrender to an untoward girl or else to accept the public humiliation of a jilting. And so for the sake of personal honor he leaves family behind and rides westward. In this later instance, however, the way of personal honor lies in remaining against the Sheriff's orders and in defiance of the community, composed of lesser men whose courage is no match for his. The decision to stay, though not without peril, is also the more practical and convenient choice, since Tom is established in Cisco and has his local supporters.

But the frontier lawman, who understands what motivates his adversary, says the one thing which renders Tom's decision inevitable: 'I deputize Lew Allard and Billy Riggins to arrest you.' Thus in order to remain Tom would have to confront his own kinsman and those values he most respects. His decision, which has been amply prepared for by all of the apparently random details which compose the narrative thus far, is short in coming....Thus even pride in his own manhood gives way to the vision of a higher order of being, the *daimon* which manifests itself in concern for the welfare of a distant cousin who has foolishly brought Tom Rivers to this tragic moment. And as a final touch, which underscores the sense of loss Tom feels in his growing isolation, the narrator reveals that the name of his cousin's mare is 'Barbara,' after the proud girl whose memory Rivers has ostensibly tossed aside in an unbridled desire for masculine freedom.

In his earlier renunciation of Barbara, then, he chooses personal honor, the integrity of manhood which is more important to him than his desire for a woman. In his later departure from Cisco he is willing to sacrifice the glory of that manhood and the status and security it has brought him to reaffirm an ultimate commitment to family, the irrational ties of blood which symbolize the larger community of mankind. Thus a clear hierarchy emerges: the integrity of self belongs to a higher order than being than romantic love, but the submission of self to the welfare of family and all it represents is, in this story at least, existence on the highest level."

Thomas H. Landess
"Caroline Gordon's Ontological Stories"
The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon: A Critical Symposium
ed. Landess (U Dallas 1972) 57-61

"In...Tom Rivers' Miss Gordon writes about a similar tension between the sexes as a result of which a man with similar inherited propensities gives up an intended marriage with a woman who makes her consent conditional upon his promise not to drink again. In that case the man's decision seems to be shown as admirable--it appears to involve a recognition and affirmation of a condition of his manhood the denial of which would entail the negation of his proper sexual role. The issue may not have quite the same coloring in the present story ["The Petrified Woman"] where the husband's drinking seems to be associated with a more fundamental failure on his part."

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) 95

"The protagonist of 'Tom Rivers,' like Rion Outlaw, Dragging Canoe, General Forrest and Rives Allard, is 'fearless, utterly fearless.' And like these and other of Miss Gordon's heroes, Tom Rivers cannot stop long in any one place because his fearlessness makes him an outlaw. He left Kentucky because he could not make himself over into the tame, sober person his fiancée wanted him to be. In Texas, Tom Rivers, who was only twenty-three, was generally feared and respected. He was not a quarrelsome man, however; in fact, he was slow to enter a fight, but 'when he did go into action, he had a peculiar short, excited laugh.' He tossed a man who had attacked him with a pitchfork over a watering trough, took a loaded gun from a gambler and returned it to him butt first, and drove off almost single-handed a thirty-man troop of 'Night

Riders.' The only way Rivers could be defeated was by being 'framed.' A man borrowed his gun and shot someone, and Rivers' cousin was deputized to arrest him. Rivers simply rode out of town and was never seen again."

William J. Stuckey
Caroline Gordon
(Twayne 1972) 117-18

"Tom Rivers' is framed in time-present, the 1930s, but the body of the story is a reminiscence of turn-of-the-century Texas....Robert Emmet Meriwether was Douglas and Carrie Meriwether's oldest child and only son. He was known as 'Wild Rob,' and his youthful adventures in Texas are the source of Caroline Gordon's short story, 'Tom Rivers.' His love of animals was proverbial, a passion Caroline Gordon shared. He could ride the wildest horses and gentle the most frightened beasts. He loved children too, and always found time to give them their heart's desire, whether a ride or a story....

Tom Rivers had left home for Texas to flee the restraints of a matriarchal family. The last straw had been his girlfriend's demand that he quit drinking. He is joined there by his younger cousin, Lew Allard, the narrator of the tale. Lew characterizes Tom as 'utterly fearless' and in constant motion, two characteristics that make him unsuited for domestic life. Lew returns to the family after the adventures with Tom that constitute the burden of the story. Although Tom has physically escaped the matriarchy, he remains enmeshed in the web of family memory when his deeds are discussed under the enveloping bulwark of the sugar tree, suggestive of the family tree. In 'Tom Rivers,' Caroline treats the conflict between freedom-loving males and the demands of the family, characterized as female, which she would develop at length in her next published novel, *Aleck Maury, Sportsman*."

Veronica A. Makowsky
Caroline Gordon: A Biography
(Oxford 1989) 21, 112-13, 172

"Uncle Rob told Caroline about Tom Rivers, a distant member of the connection whom he had met in Texas. Caroline listened to Rob's story, to all the old tales, and she watched as new family myths took shape. With the right glue, most of what she heard and saw would be transformed into fiction in the coming months and years, especially the story of Tom Rivers.

Rivers was a cowboy during the 1890s. According to Uncle Rob, Tom was 'utterly fearless, took people's guns out of their hands by the barrel and then handed them back butt first, like a lady handing somebody a tea spoon.' Uncle Rob said he had no idea what became of Tom, but Caroline decided he had probably been killed 'by one of those men whose guns he was always trifling with.' She immediately wrote out what Rob had told her: it would make a wonderful short story."

Nancylee Novell Jonza
The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon
(U Georgia 1995) 119

Tom Rivers is a pure hero. He is fearless, preserves his integrity, helps his cousin Lew, disarms the cheating gambler, defends the poor cotton farmer Rainey even though he does not respect him, and drives off thirty White Caps, or Ku Klux Klansmen. Even the Feminist critics leave Tom alone or allow him to escape their disapproval for leaving his "matriarchal family," a contradiction of their claims that families and society, especially southern society, were patriarchal and oppressive to women. In escaping patriarchy Tom has the same motivation as Aleck Maury in his novel written the next year, but the Feminists called amiable Aleck a "misogynist." Tom and Lew Allard are in the same family as Rives Allard, the Civil War hero in *None Shall Look Back*, written four years later. Although he is an exceptional man, Tom is one of thousands of men in the 19th century who abandoned their genteel families and went to the frontier West to escape the constraints of the matriarchal Victorian society of the East. Above all they sought freedom, the same goal that motivates both Rives and Rion Outlaw in *Green Centuries*.

Michael Hollister (2020)