

## ANALYSIS

"One More Time" (1935)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"'One More Time'...takes place in Florida where a friend of Maury's comes for one more fishing trip despite illness and an unsympathetic wife who little realizes that she has driven her husband to suicide." [It is cancer that has driven him to suicide, not his wife.]

Frederick P. W. McDowell  
*Caroline Gordon*  
(U Minnesota 1966) 12

"In 'One More Time' Aleck Maury is again the narrator, but he is not the central character. He provides sympathetic intelligence by means of which the main character, Bob Reynolds, is presented. As the story opens, Maury is arriving at a boardinghouse on the Elk River. Although we are not told so explicitly, we gather that Maury is in the habit of going there every year and that this is one of his favorite fishing spots. We also learn that he had not planned to go this year but has changed his mind suddenly. During a conversation at supper, Maury is delighted to learn that his old friend Bob Reynolds' wife is with him. His encounter with Bob Reynolds is even more disquieting. Reynolds is ill, and his wife has come along to make certain he doesn't overexert himself.

The seriousness of Reynolds' illness comes out in a conversation Maury has with the cook, Aunt Zilphy. She says 'Doctor says it is his liver. He ain't got but a piece of liver. Some little something been eatin' on it. Done et all of it but one little piece and when that's gone he'll be dead.' Though Maury dismisses Aunt Zilphy as a 'morbid old crow,' he ponders Reynolds' fate and wonders what he himself would do if he had only six months to live--'stay very quiet so you might live longer or...try to have as good a time as you could?' Since Maury is in good health, it does not occur to him that Reynolds has another choice: suicide. On the pretext of going fishing by himself, Reynolds rows out into the deepest part of 'the blue hole' and drowns himself. After his body is found, Reynolds's wife recalls that 'he had a queer look on his face when they first started talking about the trip--when he said he wanted to see the old place one more time.'

The link between 'One More Time' and 'The Last Day in the Field' is clear enough. The first mentioned story makes in a negative way rather the same point: Bob Reynolds is one of those rare individuals who enjoys life so passionately that a life of inaction and invalidism is intolerable to him. Simply being alive is not enough. If he cannot fish, if he cannot enjoy life, he will have none of it. This point is brought out early in the story when Aleck Maury contemplates a calendar picture in his room. There is an 'eye staring straight ahead, and under it a hand holding a bunch of pencils'--an enigmatic but, as the story develops, a clearly suggestive image of the kind of life Maury and Reynolds both reject--a life of retirement and careful invalidism.

For readers like the O. Henry judge who called Aleck Maury an 'old good-for-nothing,' Bob Reynolds will perhaps seem little better than a cowardly old man. But as Miss Gordon hints, through Aunt Zilphy's dark mutterings about Reynolds' liver being devoured, there is something almost Promethean in Reynolds' suffering and courage."

William J. Stuckey  
*Caroline Gordon*  
(Twayne 1972) 116-17

"Maury's inevitable defeat by time and death also lies at the center of 'One More Time.' Here, once again an old man, Maury has come to fish one of his favorite rivers, the Elk. He is staying at an inn nearby, where he runs into one of his old fishing buddies, Bob Reynolds, who is sick and can no longer fish, but nonetheless is visiting the beloved river. Reynolds is in fact a dying man, struck by cancer, though he will

not admit this to his long-time friend. One of the old ladies at the inn, Aunt Zilphy, breaks the news to Maury in simple words that nonetheless capture all the horror of cancer: 'Doctor says it's his liver. He ain't got but a piece of liver...'

Himself getting on in years, Maury is shaken by Aunt Zilphy's announcement; he retreats to his room where he wonders 'how it would be to know that there was something inside you that would give soon and that you could only live as long as it lasted, a year, six months, three.... Would you want to stay very quiet so you might live longer or would you tell yourself there was nothing the matter and try to have as good a time as you could?' Leaving this question unanswered, he puts himself to sleep by imagining an idyllic scene of fishing a quiet pool. Maury does not appear much surprised when Reynolds drowns himself the next morning. The matter-of-fact way in which he reacts to the suicide indicates that he had expected something of the sort. For Maury knows that although Reynolds was married (his wife had accompanied him to the river), he centered his life on his sport, not his family; and that when he could no longer fish, nothing of meaning was left to him. Reynolds chose to die in the water he loved, and although he does not say so, Maury probably envisions a similar fate for himself someday. For these hunters, defeat before time is inevitable; the only question is how to face up to the final battle.

Gordon makes it clear in her other fiction from this early period that such a defeat awaits everyone. The dark forces of life are going to sweep everything away, and *to try to structure reality into a meaningful whole or to transcend it with a faith in the timeless are useless* endeavors. [This critic is an Atheist who falsely interprets the story as if Gordon too is an Atheist. Italics added.] Even the potentially meaningful study of the classics, Gordon's early love and the storehouse of human archetypes, appears lost to modern man. Cousin Cave, for instance, a scholar of the ancients in *Penhally*, relishes the classical myths only as fantasy and is hopelessly out of touch with contemporary life. And Aleck Maury, although he has certainly informed his life with meaning and understanding derived from the classics, is one of a dying generation and a willing outcast of family and society."

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.  
*Three Catholic Writers of the Modern South*  
(U Mississippi 1985) 84-85

"Once again, she uses the voice of Aleck Maury, this time to tell the story of an incurably ill fishing companion who drowns himself rather than die a lingering death without the pleasure of sport. Maury's confidence in the future in which 'tomorrow was *bound* to be a good day' is undercut by the appearance of his terminally ill friend. Without realizing its significance, he repeats his friend's advice about willow flies: 'Here today, you know, and gone tomorrow.' The reader knows that the words are true for the aged Aleck as well, and that, with his unquenchable zest for sport, he too will long for 'one more time'."

Veronica A. Makowsky  
*Caroline Gordon: A Biography*  
(Oxford 1989) 131

"Again she used Aleck as a narrator to reflect on mortality. Aleck could still fish, but an old friend of his, Bob Reynolds, could not. Bob was dying. With his wife Bob came to the old lodge for one last visit. Before Aleck or anyone else realized what was happening, Bob had killed himself. What else could a true sportsman do?"

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

Most of the critics reduce what Aleck and Bob Reynolds experience while fishing in the Elk River to merely "the pleasure of sport." That interpretation is contradicted when Aleck says "I hadn't caught a single fish and yet I was happy. I was *here*..." And Bob does not say he wants to catch some more fish, "he said he wanted to see the old *place* one more time." [Italics added] The place is more important than catching fish, including, for Aleck, the food served at the inn, in particular the "steaming burgoo... I could hardly wait to take up my spoon." The holistic experience of Nature while fishing in an ideal place is what gives Aleck feelings of ultimate meaning and spiritual fulfillment, precisely what the Atheist critic Brinkmeyer claims

is "useless": "To try to structure reality into a meaningful whole or to transcend it with faith in the timeless are useless endeavors."

In reference to Bob's suicide Jonza asks, "What else could a true sportsman do?" Aleck has answered that: "Try to have as good a time as you could." Makowsky does not give Aleck enough credit when she suggests that he too will commit suicide, equating him with Bob, saying that "he too will long for one more time." It seems more likely that, rather than kill himself, facing death in a comparable situation Aleck would do what Bob's wife suggests he could still do, "Just stand on the bank and cast." Aleck is admirable, even heroic, for continuing to row out alone into challenging places and fish despite his fear of death and his disabilities as an old man, still making the very most he can of every experience: "I shifted to paddling with my right and casting with my left."

Michael Hollister (2020)