
AGRARIANISM VERSUS ART IN CAROLINE GORDON'S *THE WOMEN ON THE PORCH*

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In her novel *The Women on the Porch*, Caroline Gordon presents her main characters, Catherine and Jim Chapman, responding to Catherine's rural homeplace in the South. In Gordon's earlier novels -- *Penhally*, *None Shall Look Back*, and *The Garden of Adonis* -- her characters are aware of the uniqueness of the South and the mysterious bond they have established to their locality; at the same time, the characters in these novels struggle with the gradual decline of the agrarian tradition in the wake of pragmatic industrialism. In *The Women on the Porch*, however, Gordon describes the complete decay of the genteel society of the Old South while dramatizing the Chapmans' quest for renewal after their relationship has been broken by infidelity.

Hoping to find solace after discovering Jim's infidelity, Catherine flees New York to Swan Quarter, her ancestral home in Tennessee. Although she is emotionally devastated, Catherine checks dark thoughts of suicide and thinks of the significance the place has for her: "Those ponds, a hill at Swan Quarter...These remote places, rarely glimpsed places had for her a reality, an importance that no other places had" (49). To her surprise, however, she senses here the decaying of the traditional rural life. She sees this in the house, its "grey spreading bulk" deteriorating, its bricks crumbling (11).

Moreover, Catherine responds to the empty lives of the women on the porch. These women on the "gallery" have rejected, says Marie Fletcher, an "inner life, having no adventure and joy of mind, spirit, and heart..." (25). For example, Catherine's grandmother, Catherine Fearson Lewis, is old, physically helpless, and haunted by remembered voices, as her mind vacillates from the present to the past. She has snatches of memory about the Civil War and reveals her unwilling acceptance of the Southern defeat. Catherine's cousin Daphne, dedicated to mycology, takes pride in discovering new varieties of mushrooms. Her hobby provides a passion to distract her from thinking of her frustrated love affair and aborted marriage that left her shocked, humiliated, and alone. Aunt Willy Lewis is the self-sacrificing woman on the gallery. Her life consists of taking care of Old Catherine, managing the farm, and becoming the "leading breeder" of Tennessee Walking Horses (31). Although her friend, Quent Shannon, asks her to marry him, Willy refuses, choosing to live without male companionship, enduring "gallantly but without delight" (Fletcher 26). Thus Gordon describes three women, forced by circumstances to lead empty lives.

Choosing neither the abyss of suicide nor the gallery with its three ineffectual women, Catherine seeks to establish her own place at Swan Quarter, despite its decay. To achieve her goal, Catherine becomes engaged in the affairs of the place, managing it when Aunt Willy leaves to enter Red, her prize show horse, in the Fair. Catherine becomes involved with her neighbors, the Manigaults, the "new" Southerners. They are rich and have not had to sell any of their land, as have Catherine's ancestors, the Lewises (48). Elsie Manigault commands Oak Quarter, her home place. She has razed the old red brick house and replaced it with a copy of the family house in Virginia. She always has the farm bells ring and serves lunch at twelve -- thus keeping "the customs of the country" (60).

Gordon, however, indicates that Elsie is as superficial as the "gleaming facade" of her farm home. Elsie's son Tom is, on the contrary, a "natural man" who belongs to the land (76) and so has a conflict with his mother as they plan to divide the place between them (77).

A complication arises when Tom and Catherine become lovers (150). Soon he tries to persuade her to marry him by trying to appeal to her interest in the land. Finding it difficult to decide what course her life should take, Catherine is torn between establishing a bond with Tom on the land and reestablishing the one she had with Jim in the city. She must choose between returning to New York and joining Jim in his artistic and academic environment or remaining in the rural South with its illusions of past glories. As she ponders her situation, Catherine recalls her horror on finding the letter that revealed Jim's infidelity (181). In her despair, she again contemplates suicide. However, her new-found hope in Tom causes her to cease these destructive thoughts.

Catherine, therefore, decides that she will accept her place in the country and will live there the rest of her life (190). Thoughts of Jim and her former place with him reinforce her decision. Unlike Gordon, her protagonist is neither an artist nor an intellectual. In New York, Catherine felt a certain inadequacy in comparison to Jim and his intellectual friends. Catherine recalls evenings when only an occasional phrase from their conversation was intelligible to her (192). Gordon told her friend Sally Wood that Catherine "in herself didn't amount to much, but the thing she had in back of her, even in its decadence, made her in a way the equal of her intelligent, gifted husband... The woman represents the earth. It may be fine, rich soil or it may be barren. But anyway, it is earth. The man represents the mind of the modern, rootless American" (Waldron 239). Thus realizing that she can never "measure up" to Jim's expectations, Catherine is determined to marry Tom and stay in the rural setting.

Because thoughts of Jim keep intruding on her new-found passion for Tom, however, Catherine begins to reevaluate this new relationship. After Tom describes his conflicts with Elsie, Catherine perceives that his attachment to his possessive mother is stronger than he realizes. Thus, Catherine concludes that she and Tom can never develop a mature relationship, for "the land is not enough for him...or his beasts or his friends or the women he will love" (220). Catherine now decides she may have made a mistake in leaving Jim and wonders if she will ever be able to reestablish a satisfying life with him (220). Fletcher asserts that Catherine has expectations difficult for anyone to completely fulfill (25). Fraistat agrees that Catherine, like Dante, has "lost her way in a dark wood in her middle years (she is thirty five, we learn), but unlike the poet, she has not fully realized that she is in an inferno -- one of her own making" (107).

While Catherine is considering her place in the rural South, Jim in New York contemplates his own need for roots. After finding Catherine's farewell note in his typewriter, Jim's immediate shock turns to loneliness, as he thinks of lines from Dante's *Inferno*, "*In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself in a dark wood where the straight way is lost*" (83). Although he thinks of Catherine as an enigma whose personality is "subject to sudden, inexplicable withdrawals" (83), Jim does recall his attraction to her. He also considers his first visit to Swan Quarter and remembers its isolation and "melancholy aspect" (107). Comparing it to his own Midwest home, Jim concludes that he does not have the strong identification with the land that many Southerners have. As a historian, with literary interests, Jim is drawn to the older culture; moreover, he belongs to the *Waste Land* school, as W.J. Stuckey claims (74), and finds the city sterile and dehumanizing. Also, he realizes that in Catherine's leaving, he has lost his "constant, dear cell-mate, the best companion he had ever had" (111). He thus breaks with his mistress and boards a train for the South, hoping he can effect a reconciliation with Catherine (271).

As Jim journeys south, he begins to appreciate the rural landscape and considers its meaning for those who live in the area. For him, the landscape becomes softer "not wild, like Maine," but a "landscape dominated by man,

tutored to his needs" (275). It reminds him "of the glimpses of homely country living that Hesiod affords; it was alive, a great beast with flowing, sinuous limbs that disposed themselves in various attitudes, a gentle beast that stood or gazed or marched docilely, drawing behind it the great wain loaded with harvested fruits" (275). Thus Gordon reveals the attitude of Jim Chapman as he seeks to reclaim Catherine and to find his own place.

As a result of his meditations, Jim is now ready to seek a reconciliation with Catherine. Yet after learning she is having an affair with Tom Manigault, Jim responds by trying to strangle her. The struggle shocks Jim out of a trancelike violence; he then releases Catherine and runs to a nearby spring, where he contemplates the horror of his actions (304). Here he has a vision in which he sees the son of Irish John Lewis, Catherine's ancestor, who settled the area. Jim argues with the shadowy figure, warning him not to settle the land because it is cursed, warning him of a homelessness of spirit: "It is No Man's Land. . . . The land will turn brittle and fall away from under your children's feet, they will have no fixed habitation, will hold no one spot dearer than another, will roam as savage as the buffalo" (308). The pioneer does not listen and advances across the stream to find his land (307-309). After this vision, Jim stumbles off and sleeps between two poplars, an image Gordon uses to indicate his heroic, almost mythological, stature.

In the woods, Gordon's hero resolves his psychological crisis, and with new awareness, he returns to the house and restores a harmonious relationship with Catherine. Their joy is broken, however, when Aunt Willy returns to tell them that Red, her horse, has been electrocuted when he champed an electric light bulb dangling from the stable ceiling (315). Saddened by the news of Red's death, Catherine extinguishes the lamp on the table, symbolizing the loss for her of all that is exciting, valuable, and aesthetically pleasing in the rural South. In doing so, she recognizes that she is at the end of her stay in her native region. Since she and Jim have regained their intimacy, the two resolve to leave the rural setting and seek satisfaction in the city, where Jim, with Catherine's help, can pursue the artistic life of the writer.

Gordon no longer continues to consider the rural South as a place of refuge. Therefore, *The Women on the Porch* seems to be a critical point in her writing as she presents the final decay of the agrarian tradition. Her characters are unable to find consolation for the tragic circumstances in their lives. The women on the porch are so established in one place that any idea of leaving threatens their psyches. Thus, they engage in activities that keep them close to the land. The Manigaults pretend to love the land, but the "customs": they keep are only for appearances. Jim, a sophisticated intellectual, rootless and suffering from a "spiritual dehydration" (Squires 472), is drawn to the land as Catherine is, but the land can sustain neither Catherine nor Jim. Thus they flee the ruined South, as many of Gordon's characters do, seeking a place where they hope to gain some measure of effectiveness in their lives.

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