Caroline Gordon: A Sense of Place

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Caroline Gordon: A Sense of Place

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Place, as it transcends the immediate setting of a work, is an essential element in Caroline Gordon's early novels. She looks to the past and to the region of her birth to focus on the traditional South. She shows her characters' changing attitudes toward the Cavalier Myth, a view that promotes the value of the land, the patriarchal family, and an anachronistic code of honor. To them, the South is unique, and they resist all efforts to change this "given social order." However, Gordon begins to recognize that change is inevitable. Thus, she reveals her characters' succumbing to the rising merchant class which provides a more practical way of life for the New South. In her seminal novel, _Penhally_, Gordon describes three generations of traditional Southerners struggling to protect the family homeplace and the South itself. They, however, are unable to resist the ravages of the Civil War or the allure of the merchant class. The consequences are a splintering of the family and the demise of the traditional Southern way of life. Gordon also gives attention to place in her novel _None Shall Look Back_. She continues to describe
her characters in their futile efforts to preserve the family homeplace and the Old South. The male characters fight heroically the invading "Yankee" army and the females try to maintain a semblance of unity on the domestic front; the results of war, however, take their toll on the area. After the war, the characters are unable to withstand the insidious rise of the merchant class with its promise of riches. The consequences are again tragic for the individual and the family. In _The Garden of Adonis_, set in the modern period, Gordon reiterates her theme: the unsuccessful struggle of her characters to sustain a satisfying life in the agricultural milieu. Drought, depression, inadequate financial resources, and a changing labor force follow the ravages of war and reconstruction. In addition, the allure of the industrialists draws the traditional family apart, and many of the members desert the rural area for the city. In this work, Gordon begins to question the agrarian tradition as a viable way of life in the New South. The decline of the family and the traditional South is complete in Gordon's work _The Women on the Porch_. The land no longer holds the relevance it does for the characters in the earlier novels. In this place of decay, Gordon's heroine finds it difficult to restore human relationships and establish new ones. Gordon demonstrates that in such an environment, the
men are ineffectual, and the women live unproductive, frustrated, or shallow, pretentious lives. Although Gordon emphasizes her characters' quest for a new truth to replace the loss of the agrarian tradition, she continues to utilize the South as a setting for her later novels The Strange Children and The Malefactors. Place, therefore, remains central to Gordon's art, as she reveals her deep knowledge of the agrarian South yielding to the modern industrial South.
INTRODUCTION

Place is an essential element in Southern fiction. According to Chester E. Eisinger "the community, the place gives identity to those who dwell in it and who are recognized as products made in it over the generations."\(^1\) The value of place, as compared to scene, Frederick J. Hoffman asserts, comes from "its being fixed but also associated with neighboring spaces that share a history, some communicable tradition and idiom, in terms of which a personality can be identified."\(^2\) Thus a writer cannot deny the region of his birth. Indeed, says Allen Tate, he cannot "evade seeking a close knowledge of the elements which have gone to shape his inner being. . . ."\(^3\) Place helps the writer to "focus his vision," notes Eudora Welty; as a result the art that he produces

\(^1\) Chester E. Eisinger, Fiction of the Forties (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 138. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.


"speaks most clearly, explicitly, directly, and passionately" of its origin, and will remain the longest understood."  

Major writers, such as Welty, Robert Penn Warren, and William Faulkner are among the many authors who reveal a sense of place in a clear relation to their characters. H. Blair House concludes that Faulkner, for example, wishes readers to know and understand the physical world of his characters, "what it meant to them and how it was affected by them."  

Caroline Gordon is another important Southern writer who shows a dedication to place in her work. Gordon was born October 6, 1895, at Merry Mount Farm in Trenton, Kentucky. Her mother, Nancy Minor Meriwether, was also from this Southern Kentucky area. Her father, James Morris Gordon, a classical scholar and passionate sportsman, came to Kentucky from Virginia and married Nancy after he became a tutor for the Meriwether family. Gordon was educated in the South, with her parents being her first teachers. As a young girl, she attended her

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father's academy for boys at Clarksville, Tennessee. And in 1916, she received her Bachelor of Arts degree from Bethany College, West Virginia. Gordon began her writing career as a reporter for the Chattanooga News, 1920-24. While working for the newspaper, she wrote a laudatory article reviewing work of the Fugitives, a group of poets in Nashville, Tennessee. Committed to a new kind of poetry, the group met periodically to read and discuss their work. It was from this group that she met Allen Tate at Guthrie, Kentucky, in the summer of 1924. Later that year she married Tate in New York. After her marriage, Gordon began to develop as a fiction writer, learning much from Tate. In addition, she learned much from her mentor, Ford Madox Ford, when she worked as Ford's secretary in New York City in 1924 and again in Paris in 1929. Although she had this international experience and drew upon it, Gordon's roots were in the South, and most of her novels and short stories are set at Merry Mount Farm or in the surrounding area.

As a novelist, Gordon not only relies extensively on family lives, legends, and traditions, reaching back for generations, she also draws upon an inexhaustible amount of historical material of the tragic Southern past. She, too, has at her disposal the New South, which has abdicated, say the writers of I'll Take My Stand, its agrarian tradition for an industrialized society. John Crowe Ransom saw that the Agrarian Struggle was not against the "Yankees," but, as he wrote to Tate, "for survival." He went on to suggest, "it's got to be waged . . . against the exponents of the New South"; Ransom, as well as the other Fugitives, recognized that the New Southerner wanted to reject the old Southern culture as an "embodiment of the aesthetic and religious impulses" for a culture steeped in mechanistic, scientific, and abstract thought (Cowan, p. 245). Although Gordon did not sign the agrarian manifesto, all of her novels involve in some way the Southern setting and Southern ways. As Willard Thorp notes,

She knows the life cycle of the quail, how a house grows from a dogtrot to a mansion with a portico, how the Tennessee walking horse is

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trained, how often the boys at Sawney Webb's school were birched, how crops and animals were bred out of the land, and how nature had to be propitiated if there was to be fertility.8

Critics caution writers against falling into the trap of regionalism: yet Warren maintains, "You're stuck with your experiences, your own world around you."9 Gordon is not writing merely local color. She is not concerned, Warren declares, with the problems of Gopher Prairie, as Sinclair Lewis is; rather than substituting manners, costume, and decor, she goes beyond the "immediate and adventitious significance," to achieve what Warren calls "comprehension," an "essential relationship between man and his background."10 Allen Tate calls this "regional consciousness." Going beyond the immediate interest of provincialism, it is that "consciousness or that habit of men in a given locality which influences them to certain patterns of thought and conduct handed


to them by their ancestors."  

Gordon's characters hold fast to the concept of the South purported by the legend of the Cavalier Myth. According to this myth, gentlemen adventurers settled in the South, establishing a pattern of elegant and gracious living. Ignoring the endeavors of laborers, farmers, convicts, indentured servants, and Negroes who were also among the original pioneers, those who subscribed to the Cavalier Myth found it important to maintain wealth, social status, and power by acquiring large land holdings and Negro slaves to tend the acres of tobacco and cotton.  

They fought with fierce sectional pride the rise of the "Yankee" and his liberal philosophy of replacing an agrarian society with an industrial one. The consequence, Eisinger claims, was a people wrought with guilt, frustration, and a "deep-bone knowledge of defeat," as they adhered to anachronisms such as the patriarchal family, a code of honor, and a resistance to change. By accepting a "given social order," the South, asserts Eisinger, demands a "dedication to place, for it fixes a man in

11 Allen Tate, "The New Provincialism," The Virginia Quarterly Review, 21 (1945), 262-266.

time and in geography" (p. 179).

Thus Gordon reveals a sense of place in her short stories--and in her novels, "beginning with the first one, Penhally, where it is so beautifully rendered."¹³ In Penhally, a work representing her concept of place, Gordon presents her characters living in the South, a place where traditional manners and values are important. She does not idealize the South, however; she sees it as having once been vital, but now decaying under the pressures of time, war, and industrialism. Some of her characters accede to the emergence of the New South, while others are frustrated, reacting unrealistically or violently, as they cling to the idea that the South still retains its former glories. Nicholas Llewellyn, the family patriarch, for example, loves the land and is preoccupied with securing it for his heirs. He sees the country "breaking up," falling into the hands of "New England manufacturers--men who gave no thought to its true interests."¹⁴ Chance, Nicholas's great nephew, also loves the land. And he reacts violently when he sees Penhally being threatened by those who care little for the rich agricultural land.

¹³ Personal interview with Allen Tate, July 7, 1978, Nashville, Tennessee.

Even though Gordon utilizes the Southern setting in her later books, *The Strange Children* and *The Malefactors*, she particularly emphasizes place and the peoples' changing relationship toward it in such early novels as *Penhally, None Shall Look Back, The Garden of Adonis*, and *The Women on the Porch*. In these four earlier novels that are the focus of this study, the characters are aware of the uniqueness of the South and the mysterious bond they have established to their locality. They would speak with Quentin Compson as he declares to his friend Shreve in *Absalom, Absalom!*, "You would have to be born there" to understand it. Therefore in her consciousness of place, Gordon reveals the agrarian tradition as a dominant force in the South, which gradually diminishes in the wake of pragmatic industrialism in the New South.

Penhally

In her first novel, Penhally, "a seed-bed in which many of her novels generate,"16 Caroline Gordon introduces her characters' conception of the value of the land. She shows the tensions caused by the characters' differing interpretations of the importance of place. She treats the decay of a house, Penhally, and the fate of its land through successive generations. Three of her main characters love the land and struggle to maintain its relevance. Some are devoted not to one homeplace but to the Confederacy, and they are willing to sacrifice personal wealth in order to prevent its demise. Gordon also shows the results of the Confederate defeat and reveals the ultimate tragic consequences in the modern era. Many of her characters remain loyal to the Southern tradition and the mystique of land, but others reject the idea that the land and the agrarian life remain economically and psychologically rewarding in the modern South. Thus in Penhally, Gordon shows how the traditional rural South yields to the ravages of war and to the rising merchant class.

Gordon introduces her protagonist, who in _Penhally_, represents the traditional South and its values of family, loyalty, and obligation to a place and to future generations. Nicholas Llewellyn loves the land and remembers helping clear it with care. He recalls that he, unlike the owners of the land in Virginia who wore the land out by planting tobacco every year, always rotated the crops in order to prevent erosion and to retain fertility. (_Penhally_, p. 11). Gordon also illustrates Nicholas' devotion to Penhally as he considers the grey house surrounded by an oak grove and remembers it as "originally a square [shaped] block with a big hall running through it" (pp. 11-12). Important to Nicholas' view of Penhally is the construction of two wings, in anticipation of future generations, to accommodate the extended family who would live at Penhally and care for the place.

Gordon's characters realize that the survival of a particular place is important for the continuance of a traditional society. Nicholas, thus, becomes preoccupied with securing it for his heirs; and in his effort to shape the future of the family, Nicholas thinks that Penhally should be entailed. But place has various meanings to each individual in Gordon's novel. There is a disagreement, then, between Nicholas and his brother, Ralph, who does not subscribe to the theory of
entailment. The two brothers quarrel, and Ralph leaves Penhally to establish his own home at Mayfield. Nicholas, determined that the land should not be parcellled out, fragmented, and of no use to anyone, becomes angry when Ralph arrives to settle the property dispute (pp. 27-28). To Nicholas, Ralph is wrong for refusing to share the property within the family unit; in fact, he thinks that individuals should subordinate their own happiness for the family group. 17 Nicholas, disapproving of Ralph's Jeffersonian ideas, argues more intensely and alienates himself from his brother, although Ralph tries repeatedly to restore harmony with him. Gordon, therefore, shows how her characters feel about place. Nicholas' determination to see that Penhally is preserved for future generations, however, begins a splintering of the family that continues through the years.

Gordon also reveals her characters' differing attitudes toward the South and the Civil War and describes how these attitudes affect their relationships. Nicholas disapproves of the war as "all tomfoolishness anyhow" (p. 81). Because Nicholas believes that Penhally is threatened, and since he has no legitimate heir, Nicholas also tells Captain Dick Elliot to take Charles, Ralph's

son, for the Cavalry rather than John Llewellyn, his cousin's son, who seems to be a good prospect for the supervision of Penhally. Nicholas argues, "Somebody's got to stay home with the women and old men like me" (p. 80). Ralph, however, very supportive of the region and the Confederate war effort, agrees to supply equipment and horses for the army. In addition, he sells land and borrows money from Nicholas to provide a hospital for the wounded Confederate soldiers (p. 172). By contrast, Nicholas exclaims to Ralph and Old Colonel Glover that he himself will not make a fool of himself and lectures them by saying that the young men should stay home to defend and cultivate their own land (p. 94). Therefore, Gordon describes how Nicholas' and Ralph's contrasting attitudes toward the War and their response to it continue to alienate the two brothers.

The ravages of war also threaten the homeplace and the area. Nicholas, however, raises large quantities of sorghum and corn in order to feed his people at Penhally (p. 138). Also, he is "rascally" enough to turn his Confederate paper money into gold and to hide it in the woods (p. 173). He is furious and defensive when the Yankee soldiers take wagon loads of grain from his graneries (p. 144). In addition, he is moved to violence, shooting a soldier when the man insults the
overseer's wife, as she prepares a meal for the soldiers camped at Penhally. As he kills the man, and the man falls, his face hitting the boiling water in the iron pot, Nicholas tells the woman, "The hog's dead. Don't hurt if he does scald" (p. 152). Gordon, therefore, continues her description of her characters who value place, individual and regional, and are determined to protect it during the destructiveness of war.

Gordon analyzes the feelings and methods of her protagonist as he strives to secure proper leadership for future generations that will live at the homeplace. Nicholas passes that leadership on to John Llewellyn. John belongs to the farm; and the land and its needs are never far from the surface of his mind. When he observes a storm, John thinks of the rain's ability to nourish and to destroy: "The corn had been needing rain, but a gully washer did more harm than good. Corn could take a lot of beating down, but this rain would tear it up by the roots, and it would injure the tobacco . . ." (p. 45). Nicholas, thus having observed John's interest in farming, announces to John, "I've left all my property to you sir." Nicholas, however, not wanting to lose control of the destiny of Penhally, entails it to John's children (p. 70).

In addition, Nicholas, wanting someone as devoted to the traditional South as he, disapproves of John's
marrying Alice Blair, the widow of Ralph's son Charles. Nicholas tells John: "I haven't got anything against her personally. . . . It's her blood. . . . I don't want my property to go to any of her blood. . . ." (p. 181). Gordon does not make clear why Nicholas does not like Alice, but his objection likely stems from his fixed idea about entailment and Ralph's subsequent rebellion. Here Gordon shows how resentment continues to split the family members apart.

Nicholas' laudable intentions toward preserving Penhally cause, with Ralph's family, bitter attitudes toward Nicholas. In light of Nicholas' disapproval of Alice, it is ironic that Lucy, Ralph's daughter, comes to Penhally and manages the household. In addition, there is a reversal on Nicholas' part when his attitude of disfavor toward Lucy changes to admiration. Although he thinks his niece is too spirited, he is somewhat impressed with her determination, "unbounded energy," and ability to "get the place in order" (p. 185). Later, Nicholas approves of Lucy and John's marriage. In Nicholas' acceptance of Lucy, she is able to rectify the wrong Nicholas has done to her father. Through her influence and energy, Lucy participates in the control of Penhally. Place is important to her, and she is determined to manage Penhally as efficiently as possible.
John and Lucy still retain the traditional Southern attitude toward the land and the owners' obligation to preserve it for future generations. In this generation, however, Gordon reveals a continued deterioration of the traditional Southern way of life. Because of the depletion of resources during the war and reconstruction, Penhally's owners, John and Lucy Llewellyn, find it difficult to manage effectively the old homeplace, even though Lucy finds the gold that Nicholas had hidden in the woods (p. 191). To add to the stress of caring for the place, Lucy, after having an altercation with the Negroes concerning the gold, changes her attitude toward them. In the past, the Southern patriarch, Nicholas Llewellyn, had felt a responsibility toward the slaves. But Lucy turns against them when the slaves deserted the family, then returned when they found no way to survive their freedom. Their surly attitude angers Lucy; and in protest, she empties a churn of buttermilk in front of a group of Negroes.

Furthermore, the stress of managing the place without adequate resources causes an estrangement and further splintering of the Llewellyn family members. John, for example, provides for the family in a "pool of weariness" (p. 196). Lucy thus turns from him. As a result, a melancholy invades the house. Furthermore, Frank, John and Lucy's son, born on the night that
Nicholas Llewellyn dies, grows up in an atmosphere of "gloomy dignity" (p. 197). As a young man, Frank has an affair with his vivacious kinswoman Faneuil and is forced to leave his home after Lucy and John discover his involvement with the young woman. Frank does write his parents informing them about his life and laconically tells them about himself and his family as he moves them from place to place. Now a lawyer, Frank is no longer a part of the agrarian society at Penhally. Finding life intolerable after his wife is disloyal, Frank in despair commits suicide (p. 204). Gordon, therefore, shows the estrangement and destruction of the second-generation Llewellyn family as it approaches the modern period dominated by the New South. The collapse of the family, claims Marie Fletcher, illustrates the loss of stability and security that Penhally symbolizes. And Frank's suicide foreshadows the final destruction of the family in the modern era.

The third section of Gordon's book, set in the 1920's, reveals the final destruction of the Penhally homeplace. During this period, the war and its devastation are only history to Gordon's characters.

But the desires of the merchant class are just as ruinous to the last generation of Llewellyns. In addition, the ironies of entailment cause frustration, enmity between two brothers, and final tragic consequences. According to Nicholas’ past plan, Nick, Frank’s eldest son, inherits the property. But he is not suited for farming; his interests lie not in the old Southern traditions but in the modern South, where the merchant and banker take prominence over the farmer. Nick, representing the New South, is president of the Valley Trust Company and is married to Phyllis Foster, whose grandfather had run a bucket shop and her father a feed store (p. 213). Chance, Nick’s brother, is of the agrarian tradition; he is a man in “rough corduroys and battered hat,” a “burly” farmer whose place is on the land. As a child, Chance enjoyed identifying the trees, methodically writing, “There are seventeen trees in the little triangle field seven red oaks and three white oaks and seven sweet gums . . . ” (p. 165). As a man, Chance’s interest is in the welfare of Penhally, its crops, and its remaining occupants. Compared to Phyllis, Chance’s sweetheart, Emily Kinloe, leans toward the traditional South. Realizing that Emily has the same devotion to the family tradition as himself, Chance plans to take her to Penhally when they marry in the fall.

In spite of the activity to preserve the old place,
Penhally continues to decay. Grey and silent in the fading light (p. 225), Penhally is now only a refuge for the older members of the family. Chance notes that the rotting tree is so close to the house that its leaves choke the gutters with leaves. The twisted tree roots are like the gnarled hands of old Cousin Cave, who lives there. Moreover, Chance recalls the "old codgers" who live at the place:

... his own great-grandfather, Jeems, who wore his long white hair floating to his shoulders and was thought to be a bit touched in the head because he spent his whole life perfecting a formula for fertilizer; Cousin Thyra, a well-connected old maid, who owned nothing but her carpet bag and silver snuff box and travelled about the neighborhood, staying as long at each place as it suited her; old Cousin Jessie, who had been the housekeeper here during old Uncle Nick's lifetime. (p. 231)

Although he is only dimly aware of it, Chance, declares Willard Thorp, is "molded by the past" and carries in him "the accumulated legend" of Penhally.19

The characters' frustration brings Gordon's novel to a climax. She thus describes Chance's feelings as he sees the coming destruction of the homeplace. Chance is unhappy and resentful and puzzles that his grandfather, John, did not have the foresight to divide Penhally

between Nick and himself. His resentment increases when Douglas Parrish, a northern millionaire, and his wife, Joan, arrive in Gloversville. These characters lack the same concern for place that Chance and his fiancée exhibit. The son of Alice Blair, Douglas has time to write history and indulge himself in antiquity. He is interested in history, but his thoughts toward the family and Penhally are disinterested and academic. Thus when Chance shows the Parrishes the old house, Douglas, rather than appreciating the significance of the place for the Llewellyn family, writes down dates and facts that are mere records to him. Joan Parrish listens with eyes "golden and expressionless," for she does not see the house as a treasured family dwelling of the past. To her, Penhally is only a place where she can ride horses. Therefore, she plans to convert Penhally into a hunt club.

By contrast, Emily Kinloe feels a closeness and understanding toward Penhally and its significance and senses the detachment Joan has for the history of the place. Emily declares, "I detest rich people! especially the Parrishes" (p. 253). Joan, however, is unwavering in her ambitions: "The gigantic woman's hand might have been swinging out to uproot the big sugar tree, or demolish that whole row of ragged cedars . . . (p. 256). Gordon, therefore, illustrates the ambitions of the
merchant class, whose desires denigrate the treasures of the past. Joan uses money and its influence at the expense of Chance's and Emily's dreams to persuade the men and women of Gloversville of the glamour of "getting themselves up in pink coats" (p. 266). She now accomplishes her plan to buy the rich farming land for a "glorified hunt club" and turn Penhally and Mayfield into clubhouses (p. 265). Even Nick, enticed by Joan's plans, considers the economic advantages of "contacts with Eastern capital," although the transaction will be disastrous for many farmers who have borrowed money from the bank (pp. 266-67). Thus the merchant class triumphs over the traditional Southerner and his way of life.

The conflict of values between Chance and Nick continues. Chance argues with Nick about the selling of Penhally, trying to convince him to persuade Joan to "amuse herself with poor land" such as "the wildland across the river" (p. 267). The new Southerner, Nick, reminds Chance that location is more important than the land itself; and besides, he explains, a hundred thousand dollars is a large amount of money that the family can use (p. 268). Gordon reveals in her character Chance anger and feelings of alienation toward his brother.

The results of Penhally's sale are tragic, and Gordon in the last scene of her novel shows the final destruction of Penhally and the Llewellyn family. Thus
when Chance reluctantly attends the opening of the riding club, resentment rises within him. He thinks of the members of the Penhally household who are scattered: Cousin Cave has been taken to the Kinloes', and Lucy, who has grown to love Penhally, is forced to move to an apartment in town. Drawing within herself, she sits by a window, "like a fierce old hawk that you had caught and put in a cage; the same dead look in the eye" (p. 277). Chance, unable to accept the destruction of the place that meant so much to his ancestors and himself, vents his anger in an uncontrollable rage which erupts into violence. Chance then shoots Nick. Even in this crisis, Gordon presents Chance as conscious of place as he stoically tells Douglas Parrish to call the sheriff, "You can get him at the jail . . . or Frank Ebberly's cigar store" (pp. 282-83).

In this tragedy, Gordon, as she considers the value of place, shows the final destruction of Penhally and the Llewellyn family. Nicholas' emphasis on entitlement insures that Penhally is to be passed through three successive generations of Llewellyns. But securing the inheritance does not assure that those who inherit the place will value it as the original owners do. John in the second generation loves the land and Penhally but is weak and ineffective in maintaining it after the ravages of war. Frank, forced to leave the property and establish
himself as a lawyer, leaves the place to continue its deterioration. The last inheritor, Nick, representing the merchant class that becomes dominant after the Civil War, thinks of Penhally as a commodity to be sold to the highest bidder. Yet, declares Donald E. Stanford, sympathy is aroused as the reader perceives the "heroic endurance" of the characters as they "attempt to carry on the best of ante-bellum culture" amid internal quarrels and suffering after the defeat of the Southern cause in the Civil War. Gordon's characters such as Chance and Emily still value the past and its traditions but are unable to cope with the interests of the New South. The new Southerners, like Nick and Phyllis, are enamoured of the newcomers to the South, who, like the Parrishes, for example, have large amounts of money to spend indulging their own pleasures rather than preserving the rich agricultural land for future generations. In the death of Nick, therefore, and the possibility of the same fate for Chance, Gordon illustrates Old Nicholas Llewellyn's traditional South's giving way to the New South's pragmatic economic philosophy.

None Shall Look Back

In Gordon's novel *None Shall Look Back*, the homeplace, Brackets, is important to the Allard family, just as Penhally is to the Llewellyns. And Gordon in this novel, as in her first, goes beyond one particular place in Southern Kentucky to emphasize the whole Southern region. Some of her characters fight with fierce loyalty in the Civil War to defend the area. Others remain on the domestic front and support the Southern cause, barely surviving, or pragmatically accepting the lost cause and surviving by shrewd economic maneuvers. Most of Gordon's female characters, however, with their indestructible human spirit and love, remain loyal to the traditional South; very few accept the new Southerners and their pragmatic ways. Those women who do remain loyal are shown as idealistic and are repelled by any notion of dishonor. But the fortunes of the South are significant in that the War burns houses and despoils land, thus striking at the roots of the Southern culture. Moreover, the rise of the tradesmen causes the traditional family to weaken, break apart, and scatter. The South, along with Brackets, therefore, with its agrarian tradition, is unable to withstand the rigors of war and rising mercantilism.
In *None Shall Look Back*, Gordon sets the tone of a genteel Southern atmosphere at Brackets, the Allards' Kentucky home, as the young men prepare to leave for war. After the barbecue dinner, young people sit and talk; the women, "chattering animatedly," walk through the rose garden; and a little Negro runs to get his master a mint julep. Fountain (Fount) Allard, the patriarch, enjoys entertaining, for his is reminded that he is in command at Brackets, a place some call "the center of the universe."  

The Virginia creeper is scarlet, and the fragrance of the garden reminds him "of pleasures past and pleasures to come" (p. 10). Although sixty-five, and "peculiarly blessed," Fount remembers with nostalgia a past experience when he was struck with a strong affection for the land—now threatened by war:

> Suddenly walking along through those trees over ground covered by their dead leaves he had a strange feeling, as if a voice had said to him, 'These are your father's and your father's before him.' The emotion had been as immediate, as passionate as desire or hate. He had actually for a moment been overcome by his attachment for that earth, those trees.

(pp. 10-11)

Characters, like Fount, who value place regard the "culture of the soil" as important. Fount is conscientious about improving the land and breeding stock; furthermore, he is constantly watching the fields for erosion (p. 32). A land owner is also responsible for his property, an obligation he must not neglect. Fount, therefore, insists that his orphaned granddaughter, Lucy Churchill, inspect Cabin Row, the slaves' quarters that she has inherited from her mother. Rives Allard, Fount's nephew, who marries Lucy, later expresses a similar attachment to the land in Georgia. As he and Lucy walk over the fields of coarse grass at his Georgia homeplace, Rives looks down at a broken dead stalk where cotton had grown and declares, "This is my land." He goes on to explain to Lucy how his mother, Susan Allard, had parcelled out the land between Rives and his brother: "This is my field and the one next to it; half of those woods are mine and half Tom's" (p. 177). To Rives, this land is not the "poor, washed out," "red gullied" land that Fount considers it (p. 17).

Regard for the whole South overshadows the characters' love for a specific place. Thus when Rives and his brother, Ned, join the cavalry, Rives is at first exalted by thoughts of going to war. Although he is confused about the political implications of slavery, he is willing to go in defense of the Confederacy—"it did
not much matter on what grounds the invaders had come” (p. 25). Later at the army camp, Rives reconsiders his earlier attitude toward the war. Even though he is still dedicated to the cause, Rives now has an ominous feeling as he thinks that the war might provide "some excitement sterner, more terrible than he had ever imagined" (p. 78). Here Gordon foreshadows the personal and social tragedy that is to come to the South engaged in such a devastating war. Gordon describes the war as dull and fatiguing; even the excitement of victory does not dissipate the characters’ fears that the Confederate cause will fail. Thus Rives knows that if this were the outcome, he can have no happiness "except in the grave" (p. 286).

Rives’ dedication to place, therefore, changes tragically to obsessive patriotism as he pursues death in his effort to preserve the South. His devotion, claims Ashley Brown, "elevates him to heroic stature, but he is doomed almost from the start." 22

Although her characters reveal an obligation and zeal for place, Gordon captures in her work the chaotic conditions and deprivation which precipitate the decline of the traditional Southern family. Like the Llewellyn family, the Allards deplete their store of supplies as

they contribute food for the army. For example, they send wagon loads of potatoes to the Confederate Army at Camp Boone. When General Forrest's rangers stay at Brackets, Mrs. Allard has her servants prepare platters of ham and chicken for the soldiers; moreover, the soldiers strip the "late corn" from the garden (p. 28). Although Charlotte, Fount's wife, considers providing supplies for the men a hospitable thing to do, she does not realize that in one meal the soldiers consume enough to provide for the Allard family for months.

The realities of war continue to diminish the romantic patriotism for the South that pervades the characters' minds at the beginning of the conflict. Fount worries about the consequences of war and remembers Uncle Joe's returning from the War of 1812 with only one leg. Another man still has a bullet in his arm from a previous wound (p. 32). And Lucy observes Brackets with its white columns and green hemlock trees. Although it looks the same, the "whole scene" in front of her is "in some mysterious way altered" (p. 65). Again Gordon indicates the inevitable change that will come to Brackets and to the family members who love the place and find refuge there.

Furthermore, Gordon describes the fears and bitterness of her characters and reveals the public
confusion that ensues in the area throughout the war. The Confederate defeat at Fort Donelson brings Clarksville to a standstill, and runaway slaves talk of insurrection (p. 119). Therefore, the atmosphere is ominous, and Lucy visualizes "the river front swarming with negroes, the warehouse looted, the houses along Second Street deserted or filled with terror-stricken people" (p. 122). Lucy feels a responsibility to examine the abandoned Negro cabins, seeing confusion and evidence that the Negroes have left in haste: "a feather pillow was tossed into a bed of hollyhocks, a rocking chair sat forlornly under a tree, a child's wagon beside it" (p. 127). As Lucy observes the Negro cabins in a chaotic state, she thinks, "we are sinking, sinking; and they know it and have deserted us" (p. 128). When the Negroes find no place to live, then return ill or destitute, Lucy reacts in anger when she thinks of their complacently "settling down in their quarters as if they had never gone away" (p. 131). Thus panic, demoralization, and fatigue take their toll in the lives of Gordon's characters as they try to cope with the realities of a devastating war.

The ravages of the Civil War undermine the spirit of the area citizens as mobs loot and pillage the government stores and public commissary (pp. 138-39). The fate of Brackets, moreover, is in greater jeopardy when Yankee
soldiers arrive and demand that they be permitted to search for three barrels of shot they think the Southerners have concealed there. Fount tries to prevent the search, but is unsuccessful. During the encounter, some of the soldiers take the corn and hay and drive the horses out; others search the house, breaking beds and throwing the slats on the floor. In the process of the soldiers' burning the feather beds, Brackets catches fire and the old family place is destroyed in the conflagration (pp. 155-58).

The plundering and burning of Brackets is devastating to the Allard family. Charlotte Allard is reminded of the origins of the place as Brackets is laid waste: she sees the walls "melt away" revealing in the fire "a rectangle of glowing logs, a cabin . . . burning inside the house" (p. 159). The tragic destruction of the family home also leads to the virtual destruction of its owner. Fount, unable to tolerate the trauma of the fire, suffers a stroke:

One of the men had taken hold of a marble-topped table and was dragging it farther away from the heat. Fountaine Allard saw him and went forward. He had picked up one end of the table when he turned a bewildered face, said something indistinct that sounded like "My child," then fell face downward. His wife heard his head strike the marble slab and ran toward him. (p. 159)

Without the leadership of Fount, the women have to endure
by themselves; their spirit and affection for the place, however, aid them in the difficult task of maintaining the family unit without adequate resources.

In addition, their loyalty to the Southern cause prompts Lucy and Susan Allard, Lucy's mother-in-law, to leave Georgia in order to nurse the wounded on the battlefield at Chattanooga. Lucy observes the horrors of the injured and dying men: They lie "sprawled on pallets" or sit rag-doll-like against the wall [of a cabin]." Two leaning over the railing "vomit blood almost in unison" (p. 270). Nearly overwhelmed by this sight, Lucy continues, however, to nurse the soldiers in spite of her fatigue and revulsion.

Lucy soon feels defeated and disenchanted by the consequences of the war. She also experiences betrayal when Rives dedicates himself entirely to the Southern cause: in "repudiating his ordinary familial loyalties, Rives," claims Ashley Brown, "has become inhuman, and his singular devotion to his cause isolates him and renders his heroism ambiguous."23 After Rives's death, Lucy thinks of her home in Kentucky, and she wishes she could be away from the "piney woods" of north Georgia. Yet in her emerging realization of defeat, Lucy knows that when

she sees the green fields of Kentucky again they will be "as alien as the gullied, pine-clad slopes" outside her window (p. 378). She feels now similar to the way she did on the battlefield; her "illusions are totally destroyed" and "she survives through motion."  

For Lucy, there now is only "bleak endurance." Andrew Lytle notes that "at first reading she seems a cold woman, but it is the coldness of Electra, of an excess of passion and pride before [death] her stupendous rival." Thus in Lucy's dejection, Gordon presents the traditional Southern woman capitulating to the old South's doom.

The results of such a devastating war also cause the diminishing of the Kentucky Allard family to a remnant in an agrarian society. But the land can no longer sustain the Allards. As a result, they become dependent on the merchant class. Fount and his family move to town and rent a cottage from Joe Bradley, a Clarksville merchant, who has become successful by shrewdness, hard work, and practicality. The Allards, however, refuse to accept the Bradleys and their philosophy; thus tension arises between these two


families. The Allards, feeling a certain superiority and resentment toward Joe Bradley, are insulted when Joe compares his boyhood education with that of Fount Allard:

Of course the higher education was of the best, if you were lucky enough to be sent off to the university as Fount was. I had to go to work young to support my widowed mother so I got no more'n the three R's.

(p. 325)

The Allards' response is to feel an affront, for they regard Bradley as one who pretends to be concerned for their welfare, but he, they think, is in reality a notoriously unscrupulous trader and enjoys seeing the Allards dependent on his charity (p. 326). Cally, Fount's daughter, who holds to the tradition of the family and the South, reacts angrily to Bradley's attitude. She concludes that he comes to see "her father the most respected man in the community reduced to imbecility" (p. 326). And as Charlotte and Bradley engage in conversation, Cally's resentment intensifies. After he leaves, she exclaims, "I hate him . . . I wish he was dead. Dead and rotten" (p. 327).

Cally's loyalty to the traditional South is evident also when she responds to her elder brother Jim's mercantile attitude. Jim himself is now a Clarksville merchant and married to Joe Bradley's daughter, Belle.
He reveals his pragmatism when he refuses to accept Confederate bills from a customer, instead requiring a "shin-plaster" for payment of goods. But Cally cannot tolerate his seeming disloyalty. In a rage she brushes the paper currency to the floor and "grounds it into the floor" (p. 330). She then accuses Jim of being unfaithful to the Southern cause: "You take the enemy's money . . . You're no better than a spy or a deserter" (p. 330). Jim, however, defends his stance and reminds his sister that she will see other Allards engaging in actions she will not approve (p. 331). He then rationalizes that he appreciates Mr. Bradley's kindness toward the family and prefers working at the store to trying to manage Brackets "with a lot of ungrateful niggers" (p. 331). Thus Jim has become the new Southerner, a man ironically as practical as Nicholas Llewellyn, the traditional Southerner, in Gordon's Penhally. Jim no longer concerns himself with the aristocratic old South with its agrarian, genteel values that no longer seem profitable in the modern South of rising technology.

Despite the compelling argument for change, some of the characters remain constant in their devotion to place. Ned Allard, Jim's younger brother, still retains his affection for Brackets and for the traditional South. As a consequence of war, however, Ned's health
is ruined: his knee shrunken; his hands "putty colored," except for his blue knuckles; his whole body emaciated from the suffering and deprivation of the war and the army prison camps. Yet he wants to return to war, finding it difficult to accept the defeat of the Southern cause, even after Jim explains to him that Atlanta has fallen and the war is essentially over. In spite of his handicaps, Ned chooses to return to Brackets, although Jim tries to convince him to "get into something that'll give you a living" (p. 337). When Jim angrily reminds Ned there is nothing at Brackets for him, the younger man refuses to relinquish the family place. He responds, "I reckon the land's still there. The Yankees couldn't burn that and they ain't strong enough to cart it off" (p. 337). Therefore, Gordon's characters such as Ned, Cally, and Charlotte Allard cling tenaciously to the rural way of life as opposed to the city's.

However, the lure of the town is compelling. True to Jim's predictions that others would choose to remain in town, Love Allard, Cally's niece, decides to stay with Jim and Belle rather than return to Brackets. In addition, she plans to marry Arthur Bradley. Cally opposes Love's plans and criticizes her for joining the merchant class. She explains to Love:

There's just two kind of people in the world, those that'll fight for what they
think right and those who don't think anything is worth fighting for. (p. 340)

To Cally, the latter includes the Bradleys and those who agree with their philosophy of making money to the exclusion of all other values. In fact Jim fits into this category, claims Katherine Anne Porter. She asserts, he at this point is confused and cynical; he is a "truly defeated man, the lost soul who thinks nothing is worth fighting for, who sets himself to survive and profit meanly by whatever occasion offers him." 26 After a futile argument with Love, Cally ceases to try to persuade the girl differently (p. 341).

Love's decision to marry a Bradley is the final insult leading to a splintering of the family. The measure of the defeat of the Allard family is seen says Willard Thorp, "when a granddaughter of the house declares her love for Arthur Bradley, who did not fight in the War and whose father has been secretly hedging against disaster by converting his property into United States bonds." 27

As she does in Penhally, Gordon, therefore, gives attention to place in her novel None Shall Look Back.


Her characters vary in their response to the land, the Confederacy, the War, and the rising merchant class. Those who represent the traditional South cling tenaciously to the ideals of the land, family, honor, loyalty, and to the traditional aristocratic obligation. Moreover, they are willing to fight fiercely to defend the agrarian life from the encroaching Yankee influence. But the war conditions—chaos, deprivation, fatigue, fear, bitterness, and hopelessness—contribute to the diminishing of the Allard family, the Confederacy, and the ante-bellum way of life. The final decline is effected when some of the traditional Southerners choose to join the growing, powerful merchant class. The South's traditional values, then, are eroded and eventually give way to those of the New South, an alteration resulting in inevitable change for the individual, the family, and the area.
The Garden of Adonis

Gordon continues to emphasize the value of place for many of her characters in her book The Garden of Adonis. As she does in Penhally and in None Shall Look Back, Gordon describes those like Ben Allard, who struggle unsuccessfully to sustain a satisfying life in an agricultural milieu. She reveals the allure of the merchant class as it entices many of the characters to desert the land for the city life. In addition, she depicts how drought and depression replace the destructiveness of war in depleting the resources of the land owners. Gordon also introduces a new element in this novel: the poor white families, the Mortimers and the Sheelers. They replace the Negro, who had been an integral part of the agrarian life during the ante-bellum South. These conditions--economic, social, and cultural--therefore, persist in sacrificing of the traditional Southern family, its home, and its region to the New Southern interests. And in The Garden of Adonis, for the first time, Gordon questions the agrarian tradition as a viable way of life in the South. As she does in her earlier novels, Gordon describes how place is important to the patriarch of a homeplace. Ben Allard, the owner of Hanging Tree, enjoys the land, "especially in the
spring when there was so much going on" (p. 18). Once a prosperous tobacco planter, he faces, however, the menace of drought, depression, depleted funds, and loss of his land. Year by year Ben had seen it, "felt it drop away from him acre by acre until he stood up, a naked, landless man" (p. 16). Although he fears losing his farm, Ben retains an optimistic view as he thinks how he persuaded the bankers to extend his credit:

I know that Mr. Woodward. . . . Naw, I don't want you to do more'n you can do. . . . Last August? You bet I remember. But God, man I ain't a weather bureau. How'd I know it was going to hail in August? On a farm, you got to keep taking chances. . . . Well, say you sell me out next spring. . . . Six hundred dollars is running it close but yes, I can get my crop out, with six hundred dollars.

Ben is joyous and relieved when the bankers leave. He wants to shout and sing and has to check "an impulse to stoop down [reverently] and touch the earth" (p. 17).

In the agrarian tradition, the family plays an important part in the managing of the homeplace. But many of the members are changing their loyalties. Thus Gordon shows Ben Allard as one person who contends with more than the realities of weather and the economic

plight. His son and daughter, Frank and Letty, do not have the same love for the land that Ben does. Frank chooses to leave the farm and head an insurance agency in Countsville, Alabama. Consequently, when Ben considers asking Frank for aid, Frank’s wife, Elise, explains to Ben, “Father... it’s all right for you to mortgage the farm... but it isn’t all right to ask Frank to mortgage his future... for something he doesn’t want...” (p. 228). Frank has a negative attitude toward the place, and Gordon shows his recalling how he decided not to become a farmer: After making one tobacco crop, Frank remembers not the yield nor the money he received for it; he recalls the "rows and rows of green plants stretching interminably" (p. 230). Thus Frank succumbs to the New South; the land no longer provides an incentive for him to live there. Moreover, he feels no obligation to preserve the Old Southern tradition.

Letty Allard, Ben’s daughter, also refuses to aid Ben in his effort to keep Hanging Tree a functioning place. Over indulged, restless, and dissatisfied with the "slow-paced" farm, Letty periodically takes the money that Ben gives her, buys clothes, and leaves home to visit friends in Countsville. Although enticed by the city life, Letty changes her attitude toward her decaying homeplace when she retuns home after a long visit. Observing the "grey, ugly house," Letty also surveys the
scene outside her window: the sugar trees, their "broad new leaves [shining] in the afternoon sun, depth on depth, a sea of green, showing here and there like the crest of a billow..." Letty then turns from the window and thinks, "I'm home...back at home" (p. 33). But Letty is, like Lucy Llewellyn, unsympathetic toward the Negro servants who live at Hanging Tree, although she realizes that her father is a lonely man and is dependent on the old Negro woman, Pansy. Letty concludes that her father is "not of the new generation" (p. 239). Gordon, therefore, shows Letty as an ambivalent woman. She has modern ideas, while retaining feelings for the past and the rural tradition. These fluctuating feelings, however, are unproductive to the stabilization of the rural life and its demands.

Diametrically opposite to the traditional views of place held by Ben and others like him are the New Southern attitudes of the Camps, a Northern industrialist family living in Countsville. The Camps own a factory that manufactures diapers and other products. Billboards advertising the factory's products deface the landscape (p. 132). But the Camps are rich and are able to set themselves apart in a more aesthetically pleasing environment. They have a home with elaborately landscaped gardens, a swimming pool, and a Jamaican Negro to serve drinks to the guests on the terrace (p. 138). The Camps'
wealth also enables Joe, their son, to pursue an education at Harvard and at Oxford, England. Sara, the Camps' dutiful daughter, goes through the expected behavior of giving parties and attending cotillions in order to make appropriate social contacts. Gordon does not make an explicit judgment of the Camps, yet she reveals them as obviously a threat to the traditional way of life, since the city lifestyle of this family is inviting to a new generation of Southerners.

The life of the rich casts its spell on another Southern aristocratic family, the Carters, and changes their view of the South. Jim and Helen are members of a proud Southern family that disapproves of manufacturers like the Camps. The mother, for example, feels superior to a family that "buys its own things" and are not "out of top drawer" (p. 167). The father, Judge Carter, considering himself more a farmer than a judge, knows his region intimately. In fact, he was able to evaluate the type of worker that the Camps would be using in their factory. The "Southern hill-billy," he says, is not "suited temperamentally to the work"; in addition, he declares, even for "any amount of money," they will not work" a single lick faster" than they desire (pp. 162-63).

Jim and Helen Carter, however, are seduced by the Camps' wealth. The old Southern traditions no longer capturing her imagination, Helen marries Joe Camp, thus
joining the merchant class of the New South. Jim, however, has a conflict about the two ways of life and has difficulty in finding his place. After spending eight years in a St. Louis advertising firm, Jim returns to Countsville and eventually accepts a position in the Camps’ factory; moreover, he impulsively elopes with the unimaginative and selfish Sara Camp. Although Jim has the talent to succeed in managing the Camp factory, he becomes restless and dissatisfied with his marriage and his work.

Gordon indicates that Jim is actually a "man of the country." Through circumstances, however, Jim is unable to follow his inclination. As a young man he had trained a championship dog; in addition, his father’s positive attitude toward the farm influenced Jim to value the land. Later, now divorced from Sara, Jim explains to Letty Allard, with whom he is now in love, "I’d like to have a place like this. . . . Run it with just one ‘hand’ and do a lot of it myself" (p. 37). He and Letty describe the deterioration of their homeplace, with only their aging parents making a futile effort to manage the farms. Both Jim and Letty express a desire to stay on the Allard farm, but both realize that Ben would disapprove of their relationship. Consequently, they feel compelled to leave the place. Marie Fletcher claims that Jim and
Letty think only of their sensual pleasures and "take flight from family and responsibility." Gordon, however, does not make clear the couples' motivation for leaving. She does suggest that the difficulties they must overcome if they stay in the area are more than they are willing to struggle against. But the consequence is the splintering of the family when Jim and Letty depart the homeplace.

Ben Allard, who has now lost most of his land and his children's support, struggles to manage the place with the aid of his tenants. Gordon, therefore, demonstrates in her novel the relationship of the farm laborer to place. In her earlier novel, Penhally, Gordon shows the dependence of the land owner on the Negro to supply needed labor. However, in The Garden of Adonis, she introduces a new element, the poor white tenants, the Sheelers and the Mortimers, who are unambitious or frustrated in their attempt to rise above their condition. But Gordon describes this system of labor as unsatisfactory. The Sheelers have the reputation of being shiftless and hedonistic. When young Random, for example, draws the tobacco plants, he is careless with the delicate slips. The women are fat, sluggish, and unaccustomed to working in the fields. And rather than concentrating on the

29 Fletcher, p. 23.
tasks at hand or planning for future security of the family, the Sheelers emphasize their love of entertainment; fiddling, dancing, and drinking much liquor are their usual pleasures.

The Mortimers Gordon describes as slightly above the Sheelers, who, no matter what they do, are failures. Joe Mortimer, the father, claims that of all the farms where he has been a tenant, he is partial to the Allard place. Nora, Joe's wife, is interested in gardening and never makes trouble with the other tenants. Having the ability to make judgments makes her, according to Ben, an asset to the farm. The Mortimers's son Ote, having just returned from the city where he had an unsatisfactory experience working in a factory, agrees to aid Ben on the farm; Ben is delighted, since he considers Ote as having good judgment like Nora. Gordon further shows the potential in Ote, for he is open to new ideas in farming. He is convinced that the new hay clover, lespedea, should be profitable. But he, like Ben, is blind to the realities of drought; he refuses to recognize it and feels "a determination [that] it should not be" (p. 233). There is the possibility for success in the Mortimers, especially in the younger generation, but their heritage, which emphasizes the instant gratification of needs, prevents their establishing roots on the land for future generations.
In addition, there is much tension between the Sheelers and the Mortimers, for the Mortimers consider the Sheelers shiftless and lazy. Thus Gordon continues to describe the poor white class as an unsatisfactory element in preserving the land. Conflict is inevitable in the lives of the tenants, and the results are tragic for the Mortimer and the Allard families. For example, Ote becomes involved with Idelle Sheeler. Considering her different from the rest of the Sheeler family, Ote has observed her fastidiousness, and he is aware of her disdainful attitude toward her family's shiftlessness. Complications, however, arise in the relationship when Idelle becomes pregnant. Ote, fearing that Idelle will marry Buck Chester, appeals to Ben to build a tenant house for them and lend him funds in order to marry Idelle. Ben, though, is insensitive to Ote's plight, claiming that he does not have adequate funds in the bank. Even the tenants themselves are not cooperative in this crisis. Nora objects to the idea of having Idelle live with the Mortimers. In addition, Idelle refuses to live, even temporarily, with the Mortimers after Nora calls Idelle "low life" (pp. 282-83).

Ote's predicament leads him to a climactic confrontation with Ben and the final destruction of the
homeplace, and by implication the old Southern way of life. To supply his needed funds, Ote decides to cut the second crop of timothy hay growing above the lespedeza clover. Ben fears the destruction of the lespedeza, his last hedge against the threatening creditors. Ote claims a right to "a third of the clover," but Ben, still unsympathetic to Ote's dilemma, threatens Ote if he cuts the hay. He shouts to Ote: "It may be your clover, but it's my land ... You'll regret it ..." (P. 292). Although both men act irrationally in this situation, Gordon illustrates the desperation that drives them both. Ote, acts the only way he knows; Ben acts to protect the loss of the crop and his land. Therefore, when Ben threatens Ote, Ote strikes the old man with a single-tree, killing Ben almost instantly. Frederick P. W. McDowell claims that the assault and Ben's death demonstrate "how even well-disposed individuals, motivated by affection and by passion for the earth, survive precariously, if at all, in a hostile age.\textsuperscript{30} Ben Allard's obsession with the land, like that of Nicholas Llewellyn, makes him oblivious to the need of another individual; thus he forces an issue that ironically leads to tragic circumstances. Ben Allard's death thus represents the final destruction of

\textsuperscript{30} McDowell, p. 20.
the family place. One must flee the land he loves; he can no longer remain on the place that had given him a sense of security.

In the destruction of these two men, Gordon reveals that the Hanging Tree, like Penhally and Brackets, belongs to another era. The owners of these old Southern homplaces are dead or engaged in activities that require their attention in the town. They have turned to insurance, advertising, law, or factories to provide for their needs. Moreover, the Negro servants and poor white tenants are not equipped mentally, physically, emotionally nor financially to sustain the old Southern aristocratic life. As Gordon, therefore, sees it in her novel, traditional rural life, once dear to the original owners, is no longer adequate for those who survive. In fact, Gordon seems to be moving away from the idea that the agrarian tradition holds the truth for the South. James E. Rocks asserts that as Gordon's career progressed, she became "uneasy in her myth of conservative agrarianism and began to question it openly" in novels such as The Garden of Adonis and The Women on the Porch.31

Rather than treating the decline of place as she has in previous novels, in *The Women on the Porch*, Gordon describes a Tennessee homeplace where decay is complete. The land no longer holds the same relevance for her characters that Gordon reveals in earlier novels. As a result, Gordon shows a place where some of her characters find it difficult to restore human relationships or establish new ones. In this kind of atmosphere, the tragedy is that the men are ineffectual and the women are barren, frustrated, or superficial.

Gordon's heroine, Catherine Chapman, is distraught because her husband, Jim, a history professor, has established an intimate relationship with Edith Ross, his colleague at the university. Catherine then flees New York to return to her ancestral home, Swan Quarters, in Tennessee, seeking consolation where, says Fletcher, values are "fixed and stable." As she travels, Catherine contemplates suicide; however, she checks these dark thoughts and thinks of Tennessee and the significance the place has for her:

32 Fletcher, p. 25.
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. She did not think about them often but when she did the thought seemed part of something that has gone before, not something that was starting. . . . 33

Although she is nostalgic for the past, Catherine senses a decaying of the traditional way of life at this place. In fact, Catherine finds Swan Quarter deteriorating; the old house is "a grey spreading bulk"; the bricks around the place are crumbling (p. 11).

Also contributing to the atmosphere of the place in decay and Catherine's response to it are the empty lives of the women on the porch. These women on the "gallary" have rejected, says Fletcher, an "inner life, having "no adventure and joy of mind, spirit and heart. . . .". 34 Catherine Fearson Lewis, Catherine's grandmother, is old, physically helpless, and haunted by voices as her mind vacillates from the present to the past. She has snatches of memory about the Civil War and remembers a man who came home from the war with one foot amputated, the other gangrenous. She thinks also how her mother was unwilling to accept the Southern defeat; "We can't

33 Caroline Gordon, The Women on the Porch (1944; rpt. New York: Cooper Square, 197†), p. 49, Subsequent references will be cited within the text.

34 Fletcher, p. 25.
lose!" she kept saying (p. 202). The worst thing she recalls concerns her lover, Ned Lewis. He had been shot in the neck, leaving his face paralyzed and his power of speech lost. Frustrated and feeling shame, Ned rejected Catherine entirely and withdrew to Oak Quarter, the neighboring farm. Because of their estrangement, Catherine had married his brother, John. She had not, she thinks, loved Ned "better than John," only in a "different way" (p. 211). Thus she exists with feelings of guilt because she thinks she betrayed Ned.

Catherine, moreover, observes her Aunt Daphne, frustrated by love, also consigned to the porch. She now dedicates herself to her hobby of mycology and takes pride in being able to identify "two hundred and three varieties" of mushrooms and discovering (p. 42). She remembers her joyful childhood experiences engaging in her hobby. Even after the passage of all these years, it still provides a distracting passion to relieve her mind of her frustrated love affair and aborted marriage. Daphne remembers that her husband, Richard Starrs, had married her thinking she had money. When he asked for a loan on their wedding night, Daphne admitted that she too did not have extra money. Richard then left her on the pretense of calling a friend for aid; the abandonment left Daphne frustrated and alone.
Moreover, just when she thinks that she is over the hurt "that she is sound again," she remembers the shock and humiliation of being jilted (p. 185).

Catherine's 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 (p. 31). She is too busy to have a male companion, but her friend, Quent Shannon, is attracted to her. Like Willy, he is interested in horses and accompanies her to the Fair where she plans to show Red Allen, her prize stallion. At the Fair, Willy observes other women who have perfected the art of flirtation. She, however, responds with "lonely, impotent anger" (pp. 254-55). Furthermore, she refuses Mr. Shannon's offer of marriage (p. 260). She is accustomed to living without the affections and delight of male companions and chooses to endure without them, says Fletcher, and Willy, like Daphne and Old Catherine, lives "gallantly but without delight,"\(^{35}\) She is "beautifully strong and endearing," declares Radcliffe Squires, "yet in the modern world perhaps not quite effectual."\(^{36}\) Thus Gordon describes how these

\(^{35}\) Fletcher, p. 26.

three women on the porch, who through circumstances, have been forced to lead empty lives. Catherine's grandmother clings to a long guilt; Aunt Daphne chooses a substitute for an aborted love; and Aunt Willy spurns a warm human relationship with Quent Shannon. The lives of these women represent, asserts Fletcher, Gordon's "alternative to an unsatisfactory marriage." 37

Choosing not the abyss of suicide nor the "gallery" with her grandmother and aunts, Gordon's heroine, Catherine, seeks to reestablish her place at Swan Quarter, despite its decay. To achieve her goal, Catherine becomes engaged in the affairs of the place. She manages Swan Quarter when Aunt Willy leaves to enter Red in the Fair. She tends the stock, gathers the vegetables (p. 189), and takes care of her grandmother (p. 196). She also becomes involved with the Manigaults, whom Gordon would describe as the new Southerners. They are rich and have not had to sell any of their land as Catherine's ancestors, the Lewises, have had to do (p. 48). Elsie Manigault commands Oak Quarter. She has razed the old red brick house with two squared turrets and replaced it with a copy of the family house in Virginia, with its "massive white columns, a deep, recessed porch, wings so wide that they disappeared

37 Fletcher, 26.
behind the evergreens" (p. 53). She always has the farm 
bells ring and serves lunch at twelve--thus keeping "the 
customs of the country" (p. 60).

Gordon, however, indicates that Elsie is as superfi-
cial as the "gleaming facade" of her farm home. Tom, 
Elsie Manigault's son, is a "natural man" who belongs 
to the land (p. 76). Claiming he cannot "live anywhere 
else now" (p. 151), Tom farms the property and raises 
herefords. He and Elsie, usually in conflict, plan to 
divide Oak Quarter between them. Tom is furious, 
though, when he first sees the old house razed and re-
placed with a modern reproduction (p. 76). Furthermore, 
he is attracted to Catherine, and they become lovers 
(p. 150). Soon he tries to persuade her to marry him by 
promising to build a house away from the Manigaulds' 
main farm house and telling Catherine that she can raise 
horses or anything she desires (p. 154).

Finding it difficult to decide what course her life 
should take, Catherine is torn between establishing a 
bond with Tom and remembering the one she had with Jim 
in the city. She is fascinated with prospects of 
choosing between returning to New York or remaining in 
the rural area, with its illusions of past glories. 
Tom's proposal is enticing, and Catherine compares it to 
the fascination of examining travel brochures and plan-
ning a trip she never means to take. Yet she is
relieved to know that she can escape to another life if she so chooses (p. 154). As she ponders her situation, she thinks of Jim and recalls her horror on finding the letter that revealed Jim's infidelity. She has developed a measure of calm during her stay at Swan Quarter; but when Jim writes her after a few weeks, Catherine relives her hurt and loss (p. 181).

The house at Swan Quarter now begins to represent her alienation. She hears the creek "babble" announcing its purpose, of "flowing in a great circle about the farm, of cutting it off from the rest of the world" (p. 185). In her despair she again contemplates suicide. However, her new-found hope in Tom causes her to cease these destructive thoughts.

Catherine, therefore, decides she will accept her place in the country and will live there the rest of her life (p. 190). She now sees the old, grey clapboard house in a different way. As a child she had perceived it as being filled with ghostly presences with whom she was unable to communicate. When she grew older, she found her former spiritual companions menacing or prophesying evil (p. 191). Now the presences do not warn her; they move under the tree as if in a dance; their voices seem almost gay (p. 192). Thoughts of Jim and her place with him reinforce her decision. For example, in New York, she had felt a certain inadequacy in
comparison to Jim and his intellectual friends. She recalls evenings when only an occasional phrase from their conversation was intelligible to her (p. 192). Realizing that she can never "measure up" to Jim's expectations, Catherine is determined to marry Tom. As she contemplates her life in this place, Catherine anticipates a series of "country pleasures" (p. 193); but later when she tends her grandmother's toilet and sees the deterioration of Mrs. Lewis's mind, Catherine feels her exhilaration diminishing (p. 197).

In addition, thoughts of Jim keep intruding on her new-found passion for Tom. Catherine, therefore, begins to evaluate her relationship with Tom. To her, their lovemaking in the woods is analogous to two romantic rural figures in a "Giorgione landscape" (p. 215). Moreover, Catherine perceives that Tom's attachment to his possessive mother is stronger than he realizes. In a conversation with Catherine, Tom describes his conflicts with his mother. Catherine concludes, therefore, that Tom hates his mother and has since he was eight years old. Catherine now knows that her own relationship with Tom will not succeed: "The land is not enough for him ... or his beasts or his friends or the women he will love" (p. 220). Catherine now feels she may have made a mistake in leaving Jim and wonders if she will ever be able to reestablish a satisfying life with him (p. 220).
Fletcher asserts that Catherine in her search for love has expectations difficult for anyone to completely fulfill. To Catherine, modern man does not have the capacity to satisfy "the female need for total love and for loyal, courageous, forthright action."\textsuperscript{38}

In the meantime, Jim in New York contemplates his 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 \textit{Inferno} "... In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself in a dark wood..." (p. 83). Although he thinks of Catherine as an enigma, her personality, "subject to sudden, inexplicable withdrawals" (p. 83), he does recall his attraction for her. Jim also considers his first visit to Swan Quarter and remembers its isolation and "melancholy aspect" (p. 107). Comparing it to his own Midwest home at Mount Hope, Jim muses about man's attachment to the land. He concludes that fertile land seems to repel human attachments, since men find it easy to form relationships but have difficulty in maintaining them (p. 109). He realizes that he himself does not have the strong identification with the land that Southerners have.

\textsuperscript{38} Fletcher, p. 38.
As an historian, Jim is drawn to the older culture; moreover, Jim belongs to the Waste Land school, claims W. J. Stuckey, and finds the city dehumanizing. The only place Jim has ever felt at home, however, is at a room on Eighth Avenue. He had difficulty surviving materially, but his writing had sustained him mentally (pp. 110-11). In his contemplation, Jim realizes that in Catherine's leaving, he has lost "his constant, dear cell-mate" (p. 111). He thus breaks with Edith Ross and boards a train for the South, hoping he can effect a reconciliation with Catherine (p. 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" (p. 275). It reminds him of the "glimpses of homely country living that Hesiod affords" (p. 275). Jim marvels that Southerners "always come from somewhere . . . and they have such distinguished ancestors" (p. 276). He is aware of the Southern dialect, thinking as he talks with a young Navy officer that certain phrases which the man uses survive like "outcroppings" of strata or like "the ruins" of Poussin's

landscapes. To Jim, the person who utters these words speaks unconsciously, with the "voice of the past," and becomes "more interesting" to the hearer (p. 284). Thus Gordon reveals the ambivalent attitude of Jim Chapman as he copes with the loss of Catherine and considers his own roots.

As a result of his meditations, however, Jim is now ready to seek a reconciliation with Catherine. When he arrives at Swan Quarter, he asks her to forgive him. She responds honestly that she has had an affair with Tom Manigault. However, Jim is not prepared for this news and responds by trying to choke Catherine. Horrified by his actions, he releases her and runs to a nearby spring where he composes himself. There he dreams of Catherine's ancestors who settled the area. In his dream, Jim argues with the shadowy figures, who warn him that the land is cursed and advise him not to settle on it (pp. 307-09).

With new awareness, Jim returns to the house and restores a harmonious relationship with Catherine. Jim feels the strain between Catherine and himself diminish; and as a result, new warmth envelops them. Their joy is broken, however, when Aunt Willy returns telling them that Red, her horse, has been electrocuted. Saddened by this news, Catherine extinguishes the lamp on the table. In doing so, she recognizes that Red's death symbolizes
the final decay for her of the traditional South.

Thus Gordon presents the final decay of the agrarian tradition in the South. Her characters are unable to find consolation from the tragic circumstances in their lives. The women on the porch are so established in one place that any idea of leaving threatens their psyche. Therefore, they engage in activities that keep them close to the land: Willy in farming and horse-breeding, Daphne in hunting mushrooms. Their mother, Old Catherine, cannot accept the realities of the modern age and slips into the past, there to live in her mind with the presences that inhabit the house. The Manigaults pretend to love the land, but the "customs" that they keep are only for appearances: the house and furnishings, the horses, and the superficial relationships between relatives and friends. Jim, the sophisticated intellectual, is rootless, suffering, says Squires, from a "spiritual dehydration." He is drawn to the land as Catherine is, but the land cannot sustain Catherine nor Jim. Thus they flee the ruined South (as Ashley Brown notes many of Gordon’s characters do) seeking a place where they can gain some measure of effectiveness.

40 Squires, p. 472.
in their lives. Although Catherine and Jim’s choice is imperfect, it would be futile for them to perpetuate a ruined existence as the Manigaults try. Moreover, Catherine is saved, asserts Fletcher, from joining "the women on the gallery."\(^{42}\)

\(^{42}\) Fletcher, p. 25.
Conclusion

"Place in fiction" claims Eudora Welty, "is the named, identified, concrete, exact, and exacting . . . gathering place for all that has been felt. . . . Location pertains to feeling; feeling profoundly pertains to place." 43 Evoking this sense of place is exactly what Caroline Gordon does in her early novels. In the process, she shows the futile efforts of many of her characters to maintain a traditional society—one, according to Donald Davidson, that is stable, rural, and family-oriented. 44 Indeed, these characters fail to accomplish their dreams because they have to confront various elements of change: the Civil War, the rise of the merchant class, weather, financial exigencies, and shifting attitudes of family members toward the family unit and toward the South itself.

In her first book, Penhally, Gordon illustrates a South, with a paternalistic and plantation-centered social system, that C. Van Woodward describes as based on "class

43 Thomas Daniel Young, The Past and the Present (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), p. 120.

44 Young, p. 2.
consciousness and the firm awareness of social responsibility and personal honor." Yet in this novel, her seminal work, Gordon's characters hold differing attitudes toward the traditional family unit and the agrarian South itself. Through three generations of the Llewellyns, some of her characters love the land, value a particular place, and struggle to preserve the property for successive generations. Other characters concern themselves with the Confederacy and sacrifice personal wealth to prevent its demise. Tensions arise because of these different interpretations of the importance of place, and the consequences lead to a splintering of the family. Gordon also reveals in Penhally how the ravages of the Civil War deplete the resources of the surviving generation and weaken its chances of sustaining the family unit. As stresses increase for the characters, the rural society begins to lose its allure. Moreover, Gordon describes how the homeplace, Penhally, succumbs in the third generation to the enticements of materialism. Although some of her characters still cling to the traditional agrarian South, other reject it. These characters are seduced by the New South's pragmatic economic philosophy. The results are tragic as the traditional Southerner reacts violently to the rape of

45 Young, pp. 12-13.
the family homeplace.

As the Llewellyns do in Penhally, the Allards in Gordon's novel *None Shall Look Back* value the land and the family; furthermore, they feel an obligation to the whole traditional South. Yet, they have to endure the destructiveness of war as it exhausts supplies and human resources. Some of Gordon's male characters fight with intense patriotism but are unable to withstand the enemies' onslaught. Other characters, especially the women, support the Southern cause with fierce loyalty at home. However, they cannot overcome the chaotic conditions and deprivation that weaken the traditional Southern family, lead to the fall of the homeplace, and precipitate the tragic stroke of the family patriarch. As they try to maintain their place in the Southern tradition, the characters in *None Shall Look Back*, like those in Penhally, also have to cope with the moneyed element. Although some of the characters hold tenaciously to the rural way of life as opposed to the city's, others no longer subscribe to the genteel values of an agrarian society. They align themselves with the powerful merchants in the city; the ultimate consequence is again the splintering and scattering of the family members to a different locale.

In her novel *The Garden of Adonis*, Gordon demonstrates how her protagonist, Ben Allard, like the two
previous patriarchal characters, struggles to maintain a satisfying life in the modern agricultural milieu. Allard does not have the immediate results of the Civil War to contend with, but he has to face other obstacles, such as inadequate financial resources and the lack of support from his family. As a result, this character seeks others to aid him in his efforts to preserve the family homeplace. Besides appealing to the mercy of the local bankers, he turns to the poor white tenants to support him in his struggle. The members of this group, however, are too shiftless, lazy, and intent on instant gratification to establish roots in a traditional society. As in the previous novels, an altercation results in the tragic death of the protagonist, which leads to the apparent end of the Allards' identification with the family place.

Gordon treats the final decay of the traditional homeplace and the Old South in general in her book *The Women on the Porch*. In the novel, Gordon shows that the land and the traditional society no longer hold the relevance they once did for her characters. Gordon's heroine, Catherine Chapman, seeks to establish her roots at the old homeplace, away from her unfaithful husband in the city, but she observes three traditional Southern women: one who refuses love, one who is frustrated by love, and another who clings to an obsessive guilt.
concerning it. In addition, she becomes dissatisfied with superficial and possessive persons who try to mold a new Southern tradition with the facade of the old. As a result, Catherine reestablishes a relationship with her husband, who has in the meantime developed a growing appreciation for the uniqueness of the rural South and for the Southerners who value their location.

Thus, as she traces the significance of place in a traditional society, Gordon, like other writers, "acknowledges the shortcomings of the region." She describes the South's economic and social dilemma and reveals how her anxiety over its problems begins to change her own and her characters' idea that an idealized agrarian life could remain a reality in the modern South. Richard King claims that after the agrarian culture had been discredited, there was "no public realm in the normative sense, no notion of the common good, whether politically or religiously defined."  

In her later novels, *The Strange Children* and *The Malefactors*, Gordon continues to use the area near Clarksville, Tennessee, to show her characters' nostalgia


for a place that symbolized the old Southern traditions. Yet the characters in these novels do not remain "slaves to the past" as Quentin and Sutpen do in Faulkner's novel. Gordon emphasizes her characters' quest for a new truth, for a "source of values beyond history" to give order to their lives. Therefore, after her conversion to Catholicism in the 1940's, Gordon turns from a celebration of the "ordered past" to explore the "ordered present" which Christianity extends.

Her characters search for a "way out or a way up" to replace the loss of the agrarian tradition in the modern world. Thus, as Gordon explores her Southern heritage, her characters seek and find a larger vision in Christianity.

Place, therefore, is extremely important in Caroline Gordon's novels. Gordon, however, transcends the depiction of the surface peculiarities associated with local color to reveal universal truths. Although she relies on extensive material of family lives, legends,

48 King, p. 126.
49 McDowell, p. 8.
and traditions, Gordon goes beyond the scope of her particular birthplace. She deals with the larger region whose culture of the Old South is embedded in the pattern of elegant and gracious living as is purported by the Cavalier myth. In her novels, Gordon reveals the traditional culture of the Old South being fragmented and being replaced by the manners and values of the emerging New South. The resistance by her characters to the Old South's fragmentation and change takes the form of manipulative action or sacrificial support of the old way. The frustration and rising tensions often lead to tragic consequences: violence or an attitude of resigned superficiality.

Through her art, Gordon, a minor, but important Southern writer, exemplifies her "deep-bone" knowledge of the traditional South's succumbing to the "gospel of progress." Therefore, an examination of Gordon's novels must, indeed, take into account the centrality of place.
Selected Bibliography


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