

Folk Narrative in Caroline Gordon's Frontier Fiction

by M. Lou Rodenberger

Forced to provide the daily food and fuel needs of a band of Shawnee and Cherokee Indians, captive Jinny Wiley keeps her senses by reminiscing about her early life in Harman's Station, a Kentucky frontier settlement in the Big Sandy Valley. Camped with her captors near the legendary Big Salt Licks in northern Kentucky, Jinny, who is narrator of Caroline Gordon's short story, "The Captive," recalls how back home folks laughed at Vard Wiley when he "told tall tales about a lick bigger'n any licks around those parts, where the beasts come up in tens of thousands."¹ Renowned for his tall tales, Vard was also a practical joker. Jinny is startled by the echo of her own laughter through the forest when she remembers one of Vard's pranks. She thinks

Of the time he borrowed my dress and sunbonnet and shawl and went and sat on the creek bank when the schoolmaster was in swimming. He sat there all evening with the sunbonnet hiding his face and old Mister Daugherty shaking his fist at him. "You hussy! You brazen hussy! Don't you know I'm naked?" and finally when he come up out of the water naked as the day he was born Vard took out after him and run him clean to the house. Old Mister Daugherty went around saying there was a woman ought to be run out of the settlements, and Vard would talk to him and make out it was me. But Old Man Daugherty knew wouldn't none of Hezekiah Sellard's daughters be carrying on like that. (pp. 236-37)

Several years ago, her interviewers asked Caroline Gordon what purpose Jinny's recall of events in her early life had in the story of her miserable life with the Indians. Miss Gordon pointed out that "one way of asserting your individuality is through your memories."² In the interview, too, she says that Vard Wiley's joke on Old Man Daugherty was a tale she had heard her father tell during her own childhood. An examination of "The Captive" and Miss Gordon's novel, *Green Centuries*,³ reveals that much of the author's own Southern family

saga, as well as folk life and legend indigenous to the early Western frontier, are used freely to delineate character in these works.

For the adventuresome colonist in the 1770's the westering experience he so avidly sought culminated ideally in his establishing a homestead as near the fabulous land of Kaintuck as the Cherokees, the Shawnees, and the British government would tolerate. Caroline Gordon explores this frontier experience during the time of the American Revolution in both "The Captive" and *Green Centuries*. In these works Miss Gordon demonstrates a comprehensive knowledge of the history of both the Indians and the borderers of that era, but the vitality of her frontier fiction originates in her use of folk narrative.

Folk narrative in Miss Gordon's fiction serves two purposes. Structure of plot depends upon folk history to provide the events which control the action of both the short story and the novel. The protagonists of these folk tales are the prototypes upon whom Miss Gordon bases many of her characterizations. Although neither of these uses of folk narrative is unique among fiction writers, Miss Gordon's portrayal of folk character is singular in its technique.

In her critical study of fiction, *How to Read A Novel*, Caroline Gordon says that folk tales, fairy tales, and good novels show that the "one true subject for fiction" is "the adventures of a hero or heroine—that is, the story of what happened to some man or woman who, through answering the call to the adventure which constitutes the action of the story, comes to stand out from his or her fellows as a remarkable person."⁴ She depicts folk characters as made of heroic stuff. They are already portrayed as people of action in folk legend, but perpetration of stereotypical folk characters—borderers or Indians—is not Miss Gordon's aim. With a sure intuitive understanding of human motivation and human weakness, the writer humanizes the folk hero and endows him with personality and passion. She accomplishes her creation of three-dimensional folk heroes and heroines by incorporation of both the materials of well-known legends surrounding her characters and her inherited store of Southern family stories, customs, and speech. With these materials as resources, Miss Gordon often chooses the techniques of the folk narrator to reveal character.

The legendary materials Miss Gordon employs originated in the historically factual activities of the borderers and the Indians on the Holston, Clinch and Watauga Rivers in Northeastern Tennessee and eastern Kentucky between 1769 and 1787. At Harman's Station, Kentucky, in 1787, Jennie Wiley watched a war party of Shawnee and Cherokee Indians murder and scalp her brother and five of her children. With her youngest child in her arms, Jennie was forced to

accompany the warriors on a long, arduous hike to northern Kentucky. One of the band bashed her crying baby's head against a tree, but Jennie survived to serve as her captors' slave for almost a year. When the old Shawnee chief, who had been her self-appointed guardian, sold Jennie to the ruthless young Cherokee leader, Jennie escaped, and, after a frantic flight, finally found refuge in a blockhouse near her old home. She lived to rejoin her husband and produce another large family. She told her story many times.

When Caroline Gordon casually thumbed through William Elsey Connelley's account of Jennie's adventures' in the Vanderbilt library stacks, she became fascinated with Jennie Wiley's story. Connelley was a local historian who valued oral tradition. His account of Jennie's ordeal originated in the stories told him by Jennie's son, Adam, when he was an old man. According to Connelley, he was a storyteller whose "mind was a storehouse of history and border story." Miss Gordon says that when she read Connelley's narration, she knew that she had to write the story. In "The Captive," Connelley's courageous Jennie becomes brash, witty Jinny, who tells her own story.

Local historians also furnish much of the material for the novel *Green Centuries*.⁵ The novelist creates Rion Outlaw and his brother Archy as heroes of this work. But the fictional Rion has explored eastern Tennessee with Daniel Boone, and early in the novel, he watches with envy when Daniel leaves Salisbury, North Carolina, with trader John Findley to explore the land of Kentuck. The venture is financed by Judge Richard Henderson. When Rion's activities with the rebel Regulators against the King's militia are discovered, he goes west and settles with his young wife Cassy and her bookish brother Frank near the stations of James Robertson and Amos Eaton, historically among the first settlers on the Holston River. Young Archy Outlaw, who follows his brother, is captured by the Cherokees, and becomes the adopted son of one of the best-known Cherokee chiefs, Atta Kulla Kulla, head of the Cherokee town, Chota.

Historical events vividly recreated in the novel include the meeting between the Cherokees and Judge Henderson's associates at Sycamore Shoals in 1755. There, Atta Kulla Kulla accepted several loads of clothing and guns for his people and, in turn, agreed to give Kentucky to the land speculators. When Dragging Canoe, Atta Kulla Kulla's son, leads dissident Cherokees against the settlers at Eaton's Station in July, 1776, Rion participates in the Battle of Island Flats, where history records that the Cherokees were defeated and forced back to Chota.

These are well-documented episodes in a dramatic chapter of

America's westering experience, but the men and women who played leading roles in these events were to become heroes and heroines of regional folk narrative. Although usually based on true occurrences, their stories became the material for storytellers, who embellished their exploits to aggrandize their subjects and to entertain their hearers. Protagonists of these narratives fulfill Miss Gordon's criteria for the heroic character. She recreates a number of them as fully rounded characters. Adventurer John Findley, who drifted down to the Yadkin from Pennsylvania and inspired Daniel Boone to make the 1769 surveying trip to Kentucky, is characterized as Rion sees him: ". . . a blatherskite, and by his account a vagrant, yet Daniel seemed to think a lot of him" (p. 16). It is from Findley that Rion first hears about ducks and geese so numerous in Kentucky that they crowd together when they land on the Ohio and swim over falls, stunning themselves so that a hunter can pick them up without effort (p. 18).

Scotch trader James Adair, who lived for a time with the Indians and whose *History of the American Indians* was published in London in 1775, spends an evening with Rion and his family on the Holston. While the men watch Cassy cook supper, Adair and Frank discuss at length Adair's theory, which he develops in his book, that the Indians descended from a Hebrew tribe. Adair's origins and his beliefs are revealed in the conversation. When he mourns his estrangement from his Indian friends, perpetrated by the French, he says that he is destined "to fall in the woods and no man know where James Adair's bones lie" Frank holds up Adair's book and asks, "What do you care where your bones lie? James Adair's grave is here . . . and all men will visit it." And then Adair laughs and "throwing his head back gazed at the ceiling. With his wide grin and his eyes shining he looked like a man drunk on wine" (p. 406).

Even more fully developed are those characterizations of borderers Jennie Wiley and Daniel Boone and Indians Atta Kulla Kulla and Nancy Ward. In Connelley's account of the day the Indians captured Jennie, the reader learns that "Thomas Wiley was absent from home that day. Before daylight he had set out for some trading station with a horse laden with ginseng and other marketable commodities which he could barter for domestic necessities." In Miss Gordon's version, Jinny blames Tom's absence on her own stubborn insistence. "I was bound he should make the trip, Indians or no Indians," she says (p. 213). When daytime owl hoots begin to worry her, she remembers what a man once said to her when she was hunting bear with him. "You're brash, Jinny . . . and you always been lucky, but one of these times you going to be too brash," he warned (p. 215).

Miss Gordon's skill as a tale-teller is given full play as Jinny reveals her personality, her background, and her values through what she tells about her ordeal. Her captors camped for the winter under an overhanging ledge, called a rockhouse, near the salt licks which had so intrigued early explorers and historians. In his account of the discovery of Kentucky, John Filson describes seven-foot rib bones and other huge skeleton parts belonging to "quadrupeds now unknown" scattered around the licks.¹⁰ Jinny knows now that Vard Wiley's yarn is not a tall tale. She says, "I couldn't keep my eyes off the bones. I would take them up in my hand and turn them over and over, wondering what manner of beasts they had belonged to" (p. 235).

Jinny goes to the licks for her salt supply and remembers Vard, then home, and then the songs her old granny used to sing back at the settlement:

Pa'tridge in the pea patch
Pickin' up the peas
"Long comes the bell cow
Kickin' up her heels. (p. 235)

Jinny "calls to mind" other events in her early life as she goes about her monotonous daily drudgery. She remembers the mighty hunter Lance Rayburn who came a-courting her, and who threw his gift of a fine beaver pelt into the creek when she rebuffed his advances. She dreams one evening that Tice Harman, who is described by historians as a tough little Indian stalker, will come rescue her because she knows that "he loved to fight Indians better'n eat when he was hungry" (p. 239). She dreams another time of seeing all of her family dancing to fiddle music and singing at a party. All through the difficult winter Jinny keeps her senses by recalling episodes, stories, songs and advice which were a part of her frontier upbringing. Her native intelligence and knowledge of woods lore keep her alive when she flees from the savages. She wades down streams to hide her tracks and boils wild greens to give her strength. Her hunger sets her thinking about the smoked herring she once stole out of the smokehouse to feast on with her brothers. She berates herself for ever wasting food, remembering the day she went hunting with the Sellards and Damron boys and shot eighteen gobblers, which they left lying. "I thought about them gobblers more'n once that day and, Lord, how I wished I could git my hands on a rifle butt one more time," she says (p. 252).

Revelation through her memories of her early life realistically delineates Jinny's characterization. She is stubborn, brash, and impulsive; she is also brave, intelligent, and self-reliant. In the interview Miss Gordon granted to discuss this story, she describes her concept of Jinny this way:

The woman is human. She has seen all her children killed. She saw a man tortured to death. She herself was in danger of being tortured. . . . She's frightened to death. . . . I would have been dead or nuts by this time, and I think most modern women would be. She is of heroic stature, but still is a human being."

True to this concept, Miss Gordon creates a remarkable woman and makes her believable through a blending of history, legend, and family saga. Her tale-telling genius is also evident. Jinny is a storyteller, and when she concludes her story, it is with the raconteur's talent for wry understatement. Succinctly, she concludes, "Lord God. I was lucky to git away from them Indians" (p. 256)!

Many popular legends are incorporated into Miss Gordon's creation of Daniel Boone's role in *Green Centuries*. Most of the novel is narrated from Rion's point of view, and Daniel is his friend, as well as his hero. Rion knows Daniel is the best shot and the best trapper in Rowan County. Daniel has taught him woodcraft and trapping techniques. Rion admires Rebecca Boone, who is so patient with her restless husband, and he does not believe the story that Daniel's brother, Squire, fathered one of her children. He thinks, "If she was a whore Daniel wouldn't think as much of her as he did. He was as crazy about that woman as if she was a young girl" (p. 34).

Rion is soon tied down with a young family, but as he cuts trees and plants corn in his new ground, he thinks of how he always wanted to go to Kentuck with Daniel. Finally, Daniel visits overnight with Rion and Cassy. Right away, he takes out a book to show Frank. It is *Gulliver's Travels*, which legend insists Daniel carried with him on one of his trips into Indian country. He tells Rion's family how he lost the book in an Indian fracas. He swam a creek to recover it and named the creek Lulbegrud. He explains that he was reading about the Lulbegruds when the Indians came.

Boone gently teases the baby Sarah. "Cat's got her tongue and I don't believe she's got no teeth either," he laughs. Then he sings to Sarah:

Oh you little dear,
Who made your breeches?
Daddy cut 'em out
And mommy sewed the stitches. (p. 318)

As the evening wanes, the men discuss the agreement made with Atta Kulla Kulla at Sycamore Shoals. Then, Daniel tells them of his son Jamie's untimely death when he was tortured and scalped by Shawnees on his way to get supplies for the family. Folk history describes Daniel's deep depression after that incident, and now he tells

Rion and Frank. "I had one of my spells, the worst one I ever had in my life. . . . Profound melancholy. I've had those spells three or four times in my life. While they last I'm not a natural man" (p. 325)

In this chapter, Daniel Boone becomes, as did Jinny Wiley, a human being, who loves his Rebecca, mourns his son's death still, and wonders about man's spirit. He compliments Cassy, who "minds" him of his Rebecca. And, finally, Rion looks at this man Boone, whom he has always thought "the finest looking fellow he had ever seen," and mentally sizes him up. Rion's evaluation not only describes Daniel but all restless westering borderers who were to move farther west every decade of their lives:

A vagrant he heard his mother call him once. Daniel hadn't changed much in these six years, but looking into his face tonight he saw something that he had never seen before—had they seen it all along? That look he had, almost too bold for a human. When a beast was set on going its way you couldn't stop it, short of killing it. Daniel talked about Kentuck and likely it was all he said it was, but if it wasn't he wouldn't care. He'd be off over the next range to see if the land there wasn't better. Or if Kentuck turned out to be the richest land ever was anywhere, something would take him away from it. He didn't have any choice. He was one of those men had to keep moving on . . . (p. 327).

As graphically depicted as Boone are Atta Kulla Kulla and Nancy Ward. Atta Kulla Kulla earned his name Little Carpenter as a peace treaty maker between the settlers and his people. As a young man, he had been one of several Indians who went to England as guests of Sir Alexander Cuming, a Scotch Baronet with interest in Cherokee trade. In *Green Centuries* the Indian is an old man, still influential and still beloved by his wife, the Dark Lanthorn. Characteristic of Miss Gordon's long fiction, the chapter in which the Lanthorn sets about painting the history of her husband's life on her newly-woven carpet is a short story within the novel. There is both pathos and humor in the Lanthorn's reminiscences about her husband's long associations with the whites. Whites were different in her eyes from the Real People. A Cherokee physician had told her that they were not even human beings and that his grandfather had told him that in the old days it took "ten of the short-tailed eunuchs (as the old people called them) to make up the life of one man of the Real People" (p. 236). But she trusts her husband's judgment in his dealings with whites, and "as always when she thought of that small wrinkled man, her heart grew warm."

A little later, Archy Outlaw, now the adopted son of Atta Kulla Kulla, wanders down to the town square where the old men talk. When Atta Kulla Kulla begins to tell once again about his trip to London, the young men yawn. As old men often do, Atta Kulla Kulla mentions this

great event in his life whenever the opportunity arises. But, he is also portrayed as a forceful little man, able yet to command the respect of both his council members and the borderers.

It is through the Lanthorn's eyes that the reader sees Nancy Ward for the first time. The Lanthorn is not so impressed with this influential woman as the folk narrators have been. She thinks of Ghigau, or the beloved woman, as one "whom in the last few years it was the fashion to praise above all other women." Later, as the Lanthorn talks to the Ghigau, she mentally recounts Nancy's story, including details which historians have recorded. Nancy officiates with great dignity in the Chota council meetings, but the Lanthorn remembers when the Ghigau's white husband, Brian Ward, left her, and she screamed and raged all through one night. Heroine though she has become in folk narrative because she often befriended the white man, Nancy Ward is depicted by Miss Gordon as having not so favorable an image among her own people, particularly the women and the young warriors. One remarks, "Our grandmother, the Ghigau, moves more like a cow these days" (p. 244). *Dragging Canoe* notes harshly, "She drinks the milk of the cow. Perhaps it makes her heavy—or it may be the heaviness comes from lying with white men" (p. 244). No idealized goddess is Nancy in this novel, but a real human being, who is admired by some and criticized by others.

Caroline Gordon's folk heroes and heroines lead daily lives. Her knowledge of folk legend, folk life and regional dialect links the outstanding figures in the historical westering movement with their stories which oral tradition has preserved both dramatically and effectively. In his introduction to *The Longhorns*, J. Frank Dobie says, "I am a teller of folk tales, and as a historian I have not hesitated to use scraps of folklore to enforce truth and reality." The same may be said of Caroline Gordon as a fiction writer when her subject is the frontier experience.

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NOTES

1. *Old Red and Other Stories* (1963; rpt. New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1971), p. 236. Subsequent references to this short story will be made in the text. "The Captive" originally appeared in *Hound and Horn*, 6 (Oct.-Nov. 1932), 63-107.

2. Catherine B. Baum and Floyd C. Watkins, eds., "Caroline Gordon and 'The Captive': An Interview," *Southern Review*, 7 (Spring 1971), 456.

3. 1941; rpt. New York: Coopers Square Publishers, 1971. Subsequent references to this work will be made in the text.

4. 1953; rpt. New York: Viking Press, 1964, p. 171.

5. *The Founding of Harman's Station*, New York: The Torch Press, 1910.
6. Connelley says also in his "Preface" that Adam Wiley "possessed fine oratorical and conversational powers."
7. Baum and Watkins, p. 449. Harry M. Caudill also tells Jennie's story in his novel, *Dark Hills to Westward*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1969.
8. Miss Gordon acknowledges as one source, John P. Brown, *Old Frontiers*, Kingsport, Tenn.: Southern Publishers, 1938. She mentions, too, that she is indebted to works by Judge Samuel C. Williams and A. V. Goodpasture.
9. Connelley, p. 36.
10. *The Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucke* (New York: Corinth Books, 1962), pp. 34-36. This work was originally published in 1784.
11. Baum and Watkins, pp. 460-61.