36 CRITICS DISCUSS

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"I read your story carefully and was impressed by it. It is evident that you are already an accomplished writer and can do the thing you set out to do. You will probably have a hard time getting this story published, because of its length, but I think any editor who read it would be impressed by your talent and it ought to be helpful in getting you a publisher."

Caroline Gordon
Letter to Stafford, undated (1941)

"From time to time there appears on the American literary scene an exceptional and original feminine talent. Several over the past few years have exhibited brilliant facets, but Jean Stafford is the first in many years to spread before our eyes a radiant stylistic network of dazzling virtuosity."

Elizabeth Bullock
Chicago Sun Book Week
(24 September 1944) 1

"Miss Stafford writes with brilliance. Scene after scene is told with unforgettable care and tenuous entanglements are treated with wise subtlety. She creates a splendid sense of time, of the unending afternoons of youth, and of the actual color of noon and of night. Refinement of evil, denial of drama only make the underlying truth more terrible."

Catherine Meredith Brown
Saturday Review
(1 March 1947) 15

"In each of her novels, she has begun with what her art and imagination can really create: a densely detailed, spatially narrated image of a place, some people, and their relationships, dramatizing the whole in a diffused, remembered time, rather than any too tyrannical chronological time."

Robert Phelps
New Republic
(10 March 1952) 21

"Character is most important in these stories, but character does not play out a drama of isolated sensibility. Instead, Miss Stafford's people are seen, as it were, in a full round of experience, are set with their problems and conflicts in a milieu that is vital and charged both with intimate and external meaning. To an unusual degree, there is a significant rapport and reciprocal influence between these characters and their environments, and from this ability of Miss Stafford's to relate aspects of character with the details of scene and situation comes a major strength of these stories, their compelling believability."

Gene Baro
New York Herald Tribune
(10 May 1953) 3

"Maladies and misfortunes of one sort or another cause Miss Stafford's characters to retreat from the world of customary urges and responses into a never-never land of dreams and unfulfilled desires, a land where sickness is king and despair his consort. Within its boundaries, Miss Stafford writes with certainty, understanding, and beauty. Like her three novels, (her) stories within their impeccable frame-work, are meaningful and complex. They remind me of children's Japanese flower-shells which when submerged in water open silently to disgorge a phantasmagoria of paper flowers, richly colored, varied and vaguely grotesque in contrast to the bland, unrevealing walls of their temporary habitations."

William Peden
New York Times
(10 May 1953) 5

"In a decade at which we still prefer to look askance, the work of Jean Stafford has rarely failed to call some attention to itself. Her incisive talent, her style so often distinguished, would indeed merit no less. Yet the attention Miss Stafford has won for her work is not all that one should like it to be: it is the kind of attention that takes her limitations for granted, that makes to much of them by accepting them too readily.

The achievement of Miss Stafford, though still in progress (and though time like nothing better than to give a critic the lie) has an air both of freshness and orthodoxy. One feels that she has allied herself with a large tradition of the novel, the tradition of Proust and James most markedly, and with a tradition certainly not less native than Willa Cather's or Katherine Anne Porter's, while others--possibly Flaubert and Jane Austen and Dostoyevsky--stand from a distance silently on guard. Large as this tradition may appear (Miss Stafford does not seem to betray the specialness of a Paul Bowles or a Peter Taylor) a rather definite, and perhaps finite, animating center is recognizable in her fiction. The center, I think, is a metaphor of age and childhood, a composite image of change and experience, caught in an ironic, elegiac, and retrospective vision. It is her attachment to this center that defines the expense of her style and the scope of her sensibility.

Yet it is perhaps as a short story writer that Miss Stafford is best known. One feels that her sensibility, always sudden and mordant, is more happy within the confines of the shorter medium which Frank O'Connor aptly described as a 'lyric cry in the face of destiny.' The metaphor of childhood is expanded in such stories as 'A Summer Day,' 'The Violet Rock,' 'The Healthiest Girl in Town,' 'The Shorn Lamb'; the metaphor of age in 'The Hope Chest,' 'The Present,' 'Life Is No Abyss'; and the ironic vision in 'The Maiden,' 'A Modest Proposal,' 'Children Are Bored on Sunday,' and 'Polite Conversation.' But to speak of an expanded metaphor is to state the achievement of some thirty stories almost too simply. For if some of these stories reinforce what Miss Stafford has already presented in her three novels, and if some recapitulate it, there are others, notably in the collection *Children Are Bored on Sunday,* 1953, which lead us beyond all previous echoes to vantages from which as she herself put it, 'the convolutions and complexities of human relationships....the crucifixions and the solaces of being alive,' may be viewed anew. To particularize there, to give them hue and life, to locate them in the realities of our world is the intent of her fiction.

The hysteria of loneliness and imagination in the plight of Ramona Dunn, 'fat to the point of parody,' against the baroque setting of Heidelberg, in 'The Echo and the Nemesis'; the slow estrangement and hopeless retrenchment of the couple in 'A Country Love Story,' on a wintry scene; the depersonalization of childhood amidst the arid Indian reservation atmosphere of 'A Summer Day'; the betrayal and confusion of the spirit on a bleak Ash Wednesday morning. 'Between the Porch and the Altar' of St. Patrick; the callousness of human intercourse among prurient residents and divorcees visitors of a Caribbean island, in 'A Modest Proposal,' bring from many corners snatches of high lucidity. Two of the best stories in this collection, though they deal with adults rather than children, reveal two different attitudes in which style is transfixed with meaning, captures the acute reality of consciousness: pain and wonder, void and sensation, the magic drama of the mind inscrutably playing the role of object and subject at the same instant of perception, eternally Narcissus, though more in Valery's than in the classical sense.

The import of the story --a girl undergoes a critical brain operation--is anything but clinical: it is that of pain made serviceable in the quest for identity: it is that of an outrage committed against what is most secret in man, perhaps the radical betrayal of life itself: 'The pain was a pyramid made of a diamond; it was intense light; it was the hottest fire, the coldest chill, the highest peak, the fastest force, the furthest reach, the newest time. It possessed nothing of her but its one infinitesimal scene: beyond the screen as thin as gossamer, the brain trembled for its life, hearing the knives hunting like wolves outside, sniffing and snapping. Mercy! Mercy! cried the scalped nerves.' In its strange, closed-in implication, the story merits comparison with Aiken's 'Silent Snow, Secret Snow.'

The manner of 'Children Are Bored on Sunday' is less poetic than ironic, its situation less private than social. Miss Stafford, by confronting urban with rural values, succeeds in making a rather subtle comment on the enervated, disinherited New York intellectual who likes to see himself as 'Pontius Pilate, that hero of the untoward circumstance,' and who, without his stylized gossip and party rituals, succumbs to boredom

and despair on a symbolic Sunday between the museum stroll and the solitary martinis. One feels, however, that the author has risen here to a larger view of her two characters, for the unhappiness of Emma like that of Eisenburg has a depth to which satire alone cannot penetrate.

In point of structure, the stories hold some affinities with a type we commonly associate with the *New Yorker*, though they hold more, when at their best, with the tradition of Joyce and Chekov. The intimate glimpse unresolved, the moment of sudden knowledge, the reversal of a situation, the symbolic crisis, the humor of innocence and perversity, find each some deft application in Jean Stafford's stories. The technique aims, I think, at an effect most nearly presentational: an act is largely apprehended as implication and an event as pure experience. But drama will not suffer itself to be shut out. It is present in the best of these stories under the guise of irony, a kind of irony which, in any particular conflict, is made more valuable by Miss Stafford's attitude of simultaneous criticism towards all characters engaged in that conflict. Such an attitude endows each character with a reality separate from his author's and allows the irony of one point of view to be dramatically modified by that of another--'A Country Love Story,' 'The Maiden,' and 'A Modest Proposal' are examples. The symbolic object, a prominent device in these stories, often serves to heighten the ironic development: the change to which it submits in the character's eyes is a part of the more significant change in the total situation--the sleigh, the two decanters, and the figure of Pan in the three preceding stories submit to this kind of transformation.

When the stories fall short of their intent, it is usually because too much is made of too little, 'The Present' or the satiric conception is too simple, 'Polite Conversation' or the style is too cumbrous, 'Life Is No Abyss'--a story otherwise effective; or the Gothic touch is in parts too heavy, 'The Bleeding Heart.' But perhaps the most serious lapse to which a writer like Miss Stafford is susceptible is the one Frank O'Connor had in mind when he wrote, 'It is one of the weaknesses of the story-writer that, because of his awareness of the importance of the crisis, he tends to inflate it, to give it artificial symbolic significance.'

The expense of style and the scope of sensibility. It is perhaps time to pick up again a phrase which is intended both as judgment and summary. For to define the quality of Jean Stafford's style and sensibility, to find the scope and the expense of each, is, I believe, to grasp the substance of her achievement in contemporary letters. It is an achievement based on pattern and some internal coherence, reenforced by its distinctive motifs, and developing still towards a larger order. Miss Stafford's childhood in California, her adolescence in Colorado, the year in Germany, the time she spent in New York, and particularly her life in New England are all reflected in her fiction with an authenticity that goes beyond regionalism to that immense viability which is American life.

But the pattern of fiction is not of places, it is rather of words and passions. Words and passions, style and sensibility--the terms seem to follow us about. At its worst the style of Miss Stafford lacks resilience: it is brittle and brilliant, learned in chinoiseries and legerdemain. But then it is not very often at its worst and its intent redeems its failures. The intent of her style--which is sometimes also its expense--appears to be multiple: erudite in the substantive and the specific, it attempts to lodge her story in reality, to catch what James called 'the relief, the expression, the surface, the substance of the human spectacle,' and to justify Blake when he observed that 'The Eye sees more than the heart knows'; erudite in irony and persiflage, it wants to criticize what it reveals and describes, to discover the ridiculous and grotesque, to put, as Berenson would say, in every remark some 'metaphysical lining or sting'; and erudite in that inner correspondence of things which reigns in the Romantic world, it aims to weld appearance with reality as Baudelaire did in his 'forests of symbols,' ands to render each detail in a manner that would satisfy Elizabeth Bowen when she asks for 'the naturalistic surface, but with a kind of burning.' But in the end it is not the style's erudition in all these respects that sustains it: it is its poetry and control, and its memorable interpretation of experience--as in *The Catherine Wheel*. So large an intent must occasionally admit of failure. Then we are left with the hiatus in narrative and perception, and that loss of dramatic presence which is the novelist's bane--as in parts of *Boston Adventure*.

The scope of Jean Stafford's sensibility may be viewed through the heightened consciousness of childhood and senescence. It includes the magic apprehension of the first and tragic retrospect of the second, a world too closed and one too open--the realities of the future and of the past converging on the critical present. A sensibility so oriented must, and does, enlist a triple vision: a psychological insight into

the internal life, a panoramic view of the changeful past, and an ironic sense of that unremitting tension between the internal and external in the life of man.

Miss Stafford's opinions on the uses to which psychology may be put in literature are voiced in an admirable essay, 'The Psychological Novel,' and need little theoretic qualifications. She says that 'Because Proust is an artist, his novel transcends its techniques and is a novel and does not smell of the clinic'; and of Freud she remarks that 'He has made our moral attitudes more humane and he has modified our habits of observation.' It is precisely these two statements that I should like to hold up to *The Mountain Lion* by way of delimiting a more general problem: the psychological rendering of human tragedy. For the novel, like some of Miss Stafford's stories, and unlike *The Catherine Wheel*, does not seem to me fully to transcend its techniques, nor does its conflict appear to be the more moral for its humanized psychology. The point is worth making, not because the danger it implies is insurmountable--Miss Stafford does surmount it in her felicitous moments--but rather because its implication puts some limit on the significance of tragedy in the modern world.

The frailty of love which Capote and Carson McCullers sometimes emphasize seems almost to exempt their characters from responsibility; in a writer like Colette, 'abnormal' as her situations are, that exemption from morality, which some take the pathological ward to abet, is hardly implied. As to the panoramic view of the past, it is, I do believe, a contingent of the novelist's art itself; not the dimension of Proust alone, but of every writer of fiction since Fielding. 'There is only one time,' Miss Stafford has Katharine say, 'and that is the past time. There is no fashion in *now* or in *tomorrow* because the goods has not been cut'; and again, 'there was no progression in time because there was no perspective and therefore no shrouding of the past; the present was exactly the same size as the past and of exactly the same importance and except in the most minor and mechanical of ways, the future did not seem to exist.' It is this gravid sense of time, the penetration of experience into memory, that Miss Stafford awakens; for hers is a sensibility attuned to the rhythm of change, the arch drama, both in the life of her characters and in their ambient realities.

The social force impinges on the refractory substance of the soul: this is what both Trilling and Schorer have recognized to the life of the novel. And it is to reconcile these that Jean Stafford resorts to the ironic vision, perhaps the only vision that could reconcile Jane Austen to Dostoyevsky in the world we know. The conflict of time with itself, the present with the past, the future with the present, further generates that conflict of social values of which one manifestation, in Trilling's words, is 'the tension between a middle-class and an aristocracy which brings manners into observable relief as the living representation of ideals and living comment on ideas.' (So did Newman and Strether once seek a 'Europe' to which they were in an innate moral sense superior; so does Sonia Marburg seek 'Boston.' The ideal transferred, in our time, from 'Europe' to 'Boston' suggests a new and interesting conception of America, a conception which Miss Stafford's 'A Winter's Tale' and 'The Cavalier' further enlarge.) But the conflict of class and value goes beyond the possibilities of satire: it presses too closely on 'the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself.' Its labour is of love and fortitude, and of the million crackling ironies that riddle our existence. And perhaps the final measure of Jean Stafford's sensibility is that still in growth, it has assumed the labor with a depth of assertiveness little-credited to our new writers."

Ihab Hassan
"Jean Stafford: The Expense of Style and the Scope of Sensibility"
Western Review 19 (Spring 1955) 185-203
reprinted *A Study of the Short Fiction* (1996) 109-115

"She came by her knowledge of Boston honestly enough. In 1940 she married the poet Robert Lowell, a great-grandnephew of James Russell Lowell, and a descendant of Mary Chilton Winslow, who, according to tradition, was the first woman to disembark on Plymouth Rock. But Miss Stafford herself sprang from settlers who had pushed further west. She was born in 1915 in Covina, California, the daughter of John Richard Stafford, a writer of westerns. Her childhood was spent in California and Colorado. After her graduation from the University of Colorado she went abroad to study philology in Heidelberg. Words have always fascinated Miss Stafford as they fascinated Emily Dickinson; both could find infinite edification in reading dictionaries. In 1936 she returned to America to teach English for a year at Stephens College, Missouri, after which she spent a year as secretary of the *Southern Review*. Since then she has devoted the major part of her time to writing, with occasional periods of teaching. She has contributed short stories,

book reviews, and nonfiction pieces to a variety of periodicals, but her name today is particularly identified with the *New Yorker*.

Miss Stafford is a constantly surprising person. It would be natural to assume that a woman of such intense sensitivity and intellectual awareness might be vague and otherworldly, or that a woman as dogged by illness as she has been might be deficient in physical vitality. But she is sharply practical as a housekeeper, as a cook, in all the minutiae of life; she can summon a taxi out of air and find a telephone booth in a block where one knows there was not one before; and one is constantly amazed at the breadth of her travels and acquaintances. For all the exoticism of her studies and interests, however, she remains firmly rooted in the western soil where she grew up....

Jean Stafford loves the American landscape and the American past: the Colorado desert, the coast of Maine, the old streets of Boston, Miss Pride picking her way through an ancient graveyard, Katharine Congreve wandering about her father's old mansion. Yet she always sees the relevant modern comment and fits it in exactly. She is very conscious of the deodorant in the drugstore window, the giveaway formality of the *arriviste*, the blue or pink head of the dowager. Her great gift is to be able to place the vulgar detail in the center of the picture without making the picture vulgar, making it, on the contrary, something at once more vivid, faintly humorous, accurate, and at the same time fantastic. What she does to the American scene is to show it as a landscape with a billboard in the center, a billboard that represents the human encroachment on nature, at times funny, at times sordid, at times pathetic, but at all times the reader's and the author's principal concern.

She can find salvation in a detail, a word, a patch of color. Her world is a world of closely observed minutiae. We sometimes have difficulty progressing into a story because our attention is so constantly arrested, and there are times when we may wonder if the parts do not add up to a greater sum than the whole. This may be so in *The Catherine Wheel*, possibly even in *Boston Adventure*, but it is certainly not so in that masterpiece, *The Mountain Lion*.

Only when cruelty or ugliness are absolute does Miss Stafford lose hope. In her terrible short story 'The Home Front' she treats a settlement where there is not a detail, a tradition, an artifact to redeem it from the modern wasteland: the hastily thrown together housing development near a war industry in the 1940's. There the bleakness is unrelieved: 'Here people lived as headily and impermanently as soldiers on battlefields. There seemed to be no natives unless the babies born here during this long pause could be called such. No indigenous architecture was visible. Probably it existed but it was hidden away behind blocks of temporary structures, by barrack-like apartment houses, sprawling into the yards of churches, huddling in the sulphurous shadows of factories. And although everything was new, made freshly for this especial period in the world's history, it had a second-hand look. Houses, oil drums, buses, people seemed to have been got at a fire sale.'

Miss Stafford has written as much fiction in the form of short stories as in novels, and much of it is of the highest order. Best are her character sketches of grotesques, sometimes hideous in their evil, like Persis Brooks, the Bostonian heiress in 'A Winter's Tale' who marries a German professor and becomes a Catholic bigot while threatening her Jewish lover with exposure to the Nazis if he betrays her (one must turn to Moliere for another such study of hypocrisy); sometimes comical, like Lottie Jump, the little thief in 'Bad Characters'; sometimes a pathetic and terrible combination, like Ramona Dunn, the compulsive eater in "The Echo and the Nemesis,' whose fantasy is that her lost thin self is a mocking twin.

The themes are apt to be darker than in the novels, and there is a deep concern with pain and with the cruelty that may go into inflicting it. 'The Interior Castle' is an unforgettable picture of the anguish of a nose operation without anaesthetic; 'The Home Front' tells of a brute of a father who shoots a lodger's adored cat on the suspicion that it has eaten one of his hateful little son's captured birds; 'In the Zoo' describes how a dog, brutalized by an old fiend of a woman, savagely kills its former owner's pet monkey. And in "The Maiden' a cultivated German lawyer, happily married to a serenely beautiful woman for twenty years, tells how he had proposed to her after watching the execution of a client.

They are beautiful pieces...but they are not on the same level with the novels. This is simply because the particular aesthetic delight of the moods of the latter takes more time to create than a short story can encompass. It is surprising, too, for if one had read the short stories before reading the novels, one would probably have concluded that Miss Stafford, mistress of the brief effect, would have difficulty sustaining the longer theme. Yet that is precisely her genius. She is first and foremost a novelist."

Louis Auchincloss
Pioneers & Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists
(U Minnesota 1961, 1964, 1965) 154-55, 159-60

"Jean Stafford's works include three highly praised novels and a number of short stories. She particularly excels in the rendering of the minds and speech of children, with a notable grasp of what the *New York Herald Tribune* called their 'recurrent sense of pain and apprehension.' For this reason, perhaps, her most successful book was *The Mountain Lion* (1947), a story of a brother and sister in the years between childhood and adolescence, which was commended for its brilliance of language and imagery as well as its subtlety and understanding. Her first novel, *Boston Adventure* (1944), was praised as a striking and original book which stood up 'amazingly well' to comparison with the work of Marcel Proust (*New Yorker*). *The Catherine Wheel* (1951) was described as a novel of great accomplishment' (in *The New Statesman & Nation*). In her collection of short stories, *Children Are Bored on Sunday* (1953), her gift for precise, evocative prose and impeccable form was evident."

Max J. Herzberg and staff
Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 1071

"Among contemporary writers Jean Stafford has merited considerable critical attention and received surprisingly little....Reviewers have pointed out her affinities with Proust, James, Austen, and Dostoevski and solemnly agreed that she is not their equal. But since not many novelists are, it is perhaps fairer and certainly more instructive to think of her in relation to such authors as Eudora Welty and Carson McCullers, both of whom have commanded far greater attention than Miss Stafford, if only by virtue of their connection with the currently fashionable South. All three are fascinated by the image of childhood and adolescence; by the misfit or freak who dramatizes isolation, loneliness, and inversion; and by the poignant quest of the individual for understanding and love. *The Member of the Wedding* echoes in mood, theme, and character *The Mountain* Lion; *The Golden Apples* and *Boston Adventure* both focus on the exclusiveness of a group, whether familial or societal; and the tormented creatures of *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter,* and *Reflections in a Golden Eye* find their kin in all of Miss Stafford's novels and short stories.

At the same time there is a considerable difference in the sensibility of these three novelists. Carson McCullers has a gift for the initial perception which is also a basic one and which she enshrines in the movement of the plot. Eudora Welty, a virtuoso of style and mood, is a fabulist of the imagination. In contradistinction to both of these, Jean Stafford is firmly committed to the ironic vision of the external world of manners and the internal world of psychological process. Whatever the reason for critical neglect, then, whether her slender output or simply her failure to capture the popular imagination, it is time that a closer look was given to her novels: *Boston Adventure* (1944), *The Mountain Lion* (1947), and *The Catherine Wheel* (1950), as well as to her short stories, ten of which were collected as part of *The Interior Castle* (1953). By so doing we may discover a fictional world with manifest interest and significance for our time.

For the historical orientation of this world, Miss Stafford uses the inexorable drift towards the Second World War and its chaotic aftermath. Though she is not primarily concerned with politics, national or international, nor with the events recorded in history books, references to storm troopers, anti-Semitism, the Spanish Civil War, and the attraction of Communism convey the tensions of a world bent on its own destruction.

These dark impulses, expressed not only in individual acts but in the wholesale slaughter of battle, remain as part of war's aftermath of disorder and dislocation. The latter finds its embodiment in the alien as hero, simultaneously epical and picaresque. Like Henry James, Jean Stafford sends her characters to

Europe, usually Germany, to have their illusions tested and their innocence shattered in a culture they cannot understand. Typical of these is the young American journalist in 'The Maiden,' who sees serenity, sensitivity, and, most important, a capacity for love in an unloving world embodied in a German lawyer and his wife, only to discover that their love had had its origin in the *totentanz*, in the sexual excitation of observing the execution of a petty criminal. The theme of an ancient evil, of guilt and disillusionment, is inextricably a part of the European adventure. Conversely, Europeans are driven by necessity or their own restlessness to become aliens in America. A German shoemaker and his Russian wife, a wealthy countess, a doctor from Heidelberg, a Hungarian landlady, their ties with Europe broken and those with America not yet established, take their place as residents of a cultural limbo where they live the marginal existence of the deracinated....

Linked to the alien and the rebel is yet another figure, the freak. For what Miss Stafford refers to as 'spiritual mutilation' has a physical equivalent in the symbolic scar. In contrast to the beauty and serenity of Congreve House, there is a veritable gallery of freaks--and epileptic, a monstrously far lady, a man with an ear no bitter than a peanut, and another with no nose. Others, more normal in appearance, reveal a variety of eccentricities which never fail to fascinate Andrew Shipley and his friend Victor Smith wick. Though not actual freaks, many of the major characters display some disfigurement, some evidence of their invisible wound. An incongruous note in the perfection of their beauty is provided by Katherine Congreve's snow white hair and by Shura Marburg's cracked and reddened hands.

More striking are the crosswork of scars on the face of the young girl in 'The Interior Castle.' the ugliness, at once pathetic and ludicrous, of Ralph and Molly Fawcett, the unsightly wen covered by the yellow ascot of the seemingly impeccable Bostonian in 'The Bleeding Heart,' and the livid purple patch on the cheek of Nathan Kadish, making him 'as sensitive as if his mark were a raw sore, continually being rubbed against or hit.' As long as they bear these scars, such characters are the outcasts and misfits of the human community, presenting the most extreme form of alienation possible, alienation from the self as well as the world. The image of the former is found in Ramona Dunn of 'The Echo and the Nemesis' brooding over the Ariel self she had buried under layers and layers of fat, or in Pansy Vanneman of 'The Interior Castle' recognizing 'that she could never again love anything as ecstatically as she loved the spirit of Pansy Vanneman, enclosed within her head.'

These three archetypal figures--the alien, the rebel, and the freak--serve, then, as a focus for exploring the cultural condition of the modern world. That condition is given an ethical dimension through a fusion of psychological, humanistic, and Christian terms. Moral judgment is couched in the language of Freud as well as of the Bible, and the fusion is effected through imagery. The serpent, referred to in crucial scenes of each of the novels, is equally at home in the worlds of theology and depth psychology, and possession by the devil may be construed literally or metaphorically. By seeing the eternal problem of innocence and guilt, good and knowledge, from this threefold perspective, Miss Stafford gives full scope to her ironic vision while enriching and extending her material. The use of terms, concepts, and images drawn from a variety of ideologies is the language and technique of the ironist who seeks to show both the metaphoric, incomplete character of the insights they articulate and their inability to command single-minded belief.

Caught up in this dualistic universe, the individual is necessarily involved in a never-ending conflict conducted on a multitude of levels. Dream struggles against reality, leading Rose Fabrizio of 'The Bleeding Heart' to escape her own environment by inventing a story of being adopted by a cultured Bostonian whom she has seen in the public library, or the young wife in 'A Country Love Story' to imagine a lover who finally becomes more real and more precious than her taciturn, suspicious husband. Those who do not retreat into 'the interior castle' of fantasy are confronted with a twofold quest: the search for a unified self which will establish inner harmony and the search for love which will assure external accord. The former focuses on the moral and psychological problem of guilt arising out of the divergent pressures of desire and duty or emotion and reason. The latter quest is concerned with the social problem of the relationship between the self and others, bearing its own dichotomies of love and hate, acceptance and rejection, communion and an intensified sense of isolation.

In the macabre symbolic marriage of Emma and Eisenburg of 'Children Are Bored on Sunday' the two quests are fused to reveal their full complexity and irony. If only for a brief time, they seek 'to compare

their illnesses, to marry their invalid souls for these few hours of painful communion, and to babble with rapture that they were at last, for a little while, no longer alone. Only thus, as sick people, could they marry. In any other terms, it would be a *misalliance*....If only it could take place--this honeymoon of the cripples, this nuptial consummation of the abandoned."

Olga W. Vickery
"Jean Stafford and the Ironic Vision"
South Atlantic Quarterly 61.4 (1962)

"In the forties certain novels and short stories began to appear that critics presently identified as the 'new fiction.' The term is far from satisfactory, but since nothing better offers and since it has gained a certain currency, I shall use it. One difficulty with it is that it does not designate a fiction that is genuinely new in any significant way. No innovations of technique and no original ideas appear in the new fiction. What newness it has lies in what it emphasized and what it rejected rather than in what it originated: in concentrating its attention upon certain thematic considerations, in rejecting social-political or philosophical ideas as the legitimate subject matter of fiction, in emphasizing the craftsmanship of writing. Another difficulty is that the term does not apply simply to one kind of fiction. It embraces the psychological novel and the novel of manners, as written by Jean Stafford, for example; the desperate nihilism of Paul Bowles; the gothic decadence of Truman Capote. What unity it has as a meaningful category is not found in any monopoly of region or generation, for the new fiction appears in North and South, is written in the forties by writers old and young. Yet the new fiction *is* different, despite the variety within its own boundaries, from anything else written in the decade. And its difference will help us, in a positive way, to see what, essentially, it is.

The task of defining this difference is complicated by the similarity of the new fiction to other kinds of fiction written in the forties. It is not an isolated phenomenon in its time. It shares with the new liberalism and the conservative imagination a conviction that the end of innocence has come to America. Lines of sympathetic understanding run from it to the conservative imagination; they both have a high regard for myth, tradition, a code of behavior, aesthetic form. They have a mutual ally in the new critics. Caroline Gordon and Robert Penn Warren, as critics and fiction writers, are at one with the new fiction in many respects. But they, and the new liberals too, are always conscious of an idea of society in their work and are attached to a particular idea. The new fiction is generally innocent of any such idea. Its writers want to create a pure fiction, apolitical and asocial. In this desire lies one aspect of its separateness.

Since, in my judgment, no fiction is without some connection with the society in which it is created, the safe generalization about the new fiction is that it is without loyalties to any order of society and without hope for a different or better order than the one it sees. This is a second part of its separateness from both the liberal and the conservative imagination. It has no allegiance to a particular social structure. Yet, in regarding society as a subject for satire or a reason for nihilistic despair, it reveals its dependence upon a social order, or disorder--the given social situation which it tends to view with contempt, or horror, or indifference. It tends to be solipsistic, but not because it regards the pursuit of the self as a sustaining quest for meaning in life, as Warren does, for example. On the contrary, the new fiction confronts the irreducible self negatively, fantastically, pessimistically.

This same ambiguity of difference within similarities extends into a consideration of the origins of the new fiction. It may be explained as having a social origin, as being a negative reaction on the part of writers in the forties to a world of such bleak confusion and hopelessness that they have had no choice but to reject it. The difficulty is that so many other writers rejected the world they lived in during the forties. The differentness of the new fiction is that it turned its back more firmly, more studiedly, more finally upon the Western world of experience and ideas than others did. Yet such an observation applies more to the work of Paul Bowles than it does to that of Jean Stafford. Her novels suggest that the origins of the new fiction may be found in literary history and that it may be defined in terms of its literary progenitors. She is an authentic daughter of Henry James. To Miss Stafford the new fiction means a combination of the psychological novel and novel of manners in work wrought with careful attention to the craft of writing, fiction in the tradition not only of James but of Edith Wharton too.

The new fiction generally, to leave Miss Stafford, found in Flaubert and Joyce other masters of technique, from whom it learned the lessons of point of view, novelistic structure and dramatic action, stream of consciousness. It found in the work of Hawthorne and Melville models for the symbolic rendering of experience. Beyond technique, that work revealed the sharklike, ubiquitous evil that the writers of the new fiction found peculiarly appropriate in their time. The new fiction had available, finally, the work of Kafka, the haunted mind from Central Europe, who domesticated the alienated personality in the twentieth-century nightmare. To be sure, the new fiction shares this literary ancestry with other kinds of fiction, especially that of the conservative imagination. But these influences, regarded in their totality, play such an intense and decisive role in the new fiction as to differentiate it from all other contemporary work.

The Two Worlds of Jean Stafford

Jean Stafford is the finest example of the Jamesian tradition in her generation. A true daughter of James, she gathers together various strands in the fictional practice of her contemporaries, writing social satire that is reminiscent of Marquand and exploring the maturation theme as Schorer and Maxwell do. But these superficial resemblances to others do not convey the quality of the exquisite sensibility that she has dedicated to the pursuit of psychological realism in her work, an approach which James showed her the way to and which Freud, as she acknowledges, both deepened and illuminated for her.

'To be writers, then,' she has said, 'we must be good psychologists, and this is only another way of saying that we must be experts in the study of reality and cool judges of our own natures.' In this enterprise of studying and judging, writers are indebted to Freud, for he has 'made our moral attitudes more humane and he has modified our habits of observation, making us more alert to our conduct and to the patterns and symbols of our experience, enriching our insights, sharpening our sense of meaning.' This psychological vision, which she so intensely cultivates, is one of her chief aids in drawing the fine distinctions that characterize her work and link her in still another way to James. These distinctions arise out of her concern with the interior consciousness of her characters, where much of the action in her fiction takes place, and issue in the moral relations she establishes among her people. James and Freud join forces, then, to teach her how to see, from a psychological and moral point of view, what must be the consistent business of the novel, which is always concerned, she says, with 'emotional motivations and their intellectual resolutions, with instincts and impulses and conflict and behavior, with the convolutions and complexities of human relationships, with the crucifixions and solaces of being alive.

She has had other teachers as well, to join those two, who only appear to be an odd combination. Dostoevski, whom Nietzsche regarded as a great psychologist, makes his presence felt especially in the first part of her first novel, although he has a continuing influence upon her. His special ability to summon his imaginative resources for a scene of excessive emotionalism or of erratic human behavior seemed to present Miss Stafford with a model of power in the writing of fiction. She seems also to have been moved by Dostoevski's penetration to the dark truths that lie below the surface of human reason. She knows from Dostoevski that rending mixture of love and hate in the human personality which makes for the complexities of human relationships. Although she did not mention Proust in a list of favorite authors she once compiled, her manipulation of time and her sharp awareness of the presentness of the past remind us readily of this writer. And finally she had drawn upon Jane Austen's accomplishments in the drawing room. She gives a more muscular and less disciplined account of life there than Miss Austen does, but it is nonetheless laced with the sharpness of wit and depth of perception that so consistently marks the writings of Jane Austen.

The uses to which she puts her mixed and celebrated literary heritage are very much her own. The prevailing pattern in her fiction is to exploit a conflict in contrasting spheres of experience; her stories emerge as the fruits of the tension thus generated and of the differences thus exposed. The process is not a dialectic, because Miss Stafford is not intent upon a synthesis. But this is not to say that her fiction is static. The movement, the development, in her stories take place independently within each sphere, and sometimes simultaneously. This pattern of conflict prevails in two major areas in her work: it may take the form of a clash of cultures, or it may be seen in the division of the self represented by the conscious and the unconscious levels of human experience.

The two worlds of her fiction are the social world of cultural differences and the psychic world. And within the social world are many contrasts: between national groups, Americans and Germans, for example; or between regional groups, representing New England and the West, for example; or between outsiders, like European immigrants, and insiders, like the Boston aristocracy; or between the world of the adult and the world of the child. Often, as she manages the conflicts that arise from differing cultural allegiances and moral standards, she is at the same time slipping back and forth between the conscious and unconscious minds of her characters to record in depth the impact of these conflicts. It is the carefully traced and felt intricacies of this complicated procedure that give the depth and intensity to Miss Stafford's fiction....

In 1953 Miss Stafford published *The Interior Castle*, an omnibus volume which contained a collection of short stories called *Children Are Bored on Sunday.* All these had appeared between 1945 and 1950. (In the same period she published additional stories in various periodicals, but these have not yet been collected.) The stories in this volume have the brilliant surface sheen that we have come to expect from the fiction that appears in the *New Yorker*, where many of them were first published. But they are not superficial. Built around the clash of two worlds, the conscious and the unconscious as well as national or regional polarities, they reach, especially in their psychological penetration, far down into the recesses of the human personality. Sometimes one has the feeling that they are nothing more than exercises in Miss Stafford's talent for insight or for psychological empathy, as in 'The Interior Castle,' a concentrated study of pain which in the end is only a tour de force. In the stories involving a clash of cultures, Miss Stafford is ironic and disciplined, always giving her loyalties conditionally in recognition of the universal fallibility of man 'The Bleeding Heart' is a plant in the story of that name, but the title refers also to a Mexican girl who deludes herself, idealizes the New England character, and then must face the realities of an impoverished and decadent New Englander, who is himself something of a bleeding heart. This story, where the irony compels our perception of the difference between reality and appearance, is one of the few that presents a fully rounded form. Many are wanting in a design for the whole that gives the aesthetic satisfaction of completion. Few are astir with the moral overtones of Miss Stafford's imagination when it burns most brightly.

Charles Feidelson, Jr. has argued that modern American literature began with the turn toward symbolism in the mid-nineteenth century. Miss Stafford's work is the expression, in the forties, of that continuing tradition in which the moral life of the novel has centered in its symbolism. I have not been able to speak of her fiction without reference to Hawthorne and Melville. Her achievement has been to carry on what they started. Finding in James a similar morality, she might have passed him over. But he offered her a different manner, and this was decisive. It is what makes her a writer of the new fiction, a writer for whom style always counts, and counts for more than it did with Hawthorne or with Melville. It is her style that is the enabling instrument in the fabrication of her irony and her symbols, that bares to us the truth of her psychological insights. She shows us, then, how the new fiction is in reality a continuation of a certain line in American fiction and has its roots in a past which still nourishes it. This is a different line from the one to which Capote and Bowles are attached, the one that runs from Poe. Seen together, the two lines place the new fiction in a proper perspective, confirm its Americanism, and demonstrate that its newness lies in making the old current."

Chester E. Eisinger
"The New Fiction Defined: The Triumph of Art"
Fiction of the Forties
(U Chicago 1963) 231-33, 294-307

"Just as the artistic conscience of the twenties was sharpened by the experience of disillusionment, so was the artistic accomplishment of the fifties influenced by the encounter with nihilism. The forms of literature tended, first, to be elegant, mythical, or intricate, a ceremonious structure of balanced ironies, as in the early work of Richard Wilbur, Jean Stafford, and Frederick Buechner. But as the reaction against the formalism of the forties gained impetus, literary forms began to open themselves freely to the assaults of reality. They became more jagged and irregular; they admitted chance and resorted to improvisation. Such was the character of the work of...Allen Ginsberg and of the later work of Norman Mailer and Saul Bellow. The rift between formalist writers, usually labeled Academic, and anti-formalist writers, usually termed Beat, was widened by the controversies surrounding the so-called Beat Movement....It was...obvious that

the Jamesian ideal of the well-made novel, as prescribed by academic or formalist critics of the forties, had come very close to a dead end. The novel of manners or elegant sensibility found laudable examples in such works as Jean Stafford's *Boston Adventure* (1944)."

Ihab Hassan
Literary History of the United States: History, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-1963) 1413, 1421

"Miss Stafford writes with a dry precision about those currents of life that run deepest in our lives and which control our most insignificant actions. In a childhood friendship she can expose the whole art of hypocrisy. In a story about a beautiful woman who is nothing but a beautiful woman she can make human vanity stand naked, helpless, caught in the act. The training of a dog reflects for her all the malevolence in the society of a small Colorado town. A cat can be made to contain the agony of a professor who has found at last what he thought he had always wanted, a devoted, adoring student--who turns out to be a petrifying bore.

These stories are built by a master's hand; no detail is wasted, no irrelevance introduced. Yet they are visually rich and fast of action. At heart Miss Stafford is a psychologist, interested to trace the influence of one mind upon another, or to show the power of an idea growing in the mind. Action is but a metaphor for ingrained thought, thought that is often ironically at variance with the best interests of its subject, or so devilishly disguised that it moves best when undetected by the mind that harbors it."

Guy Davenport
"Tough Characters, Solid Novels"
Review of *Bad Characters* (1965)
National Review (26 January 1965)

"At the end of *Swann's Way*, Marcel Proust has his narrator say, 'The places which we have known do not belong to the world of space, where we locate them for convenience. They were only a narrow slice among the other contiguous impressions which made up our life of that time: the memory of a certain image is only the regret of a certain instant; and the houses, the roads and the avenues are fugitive, alas! like the years.' The perceptions of human experience, relative to the person who perceives it and to the surroundings, the moment, and the mood, may well be applied to the fiction of Jean Stafford, who, like Proust, has the remarkable tendencies to stop time and in time's stoppage to create memorable characters. For both novelists, the ultimate units of reality are events, each of which is unique and can never occur again. In the flux of the universe, these events can only form similar patterns.

As Katherine Congreve, a character in Miss Stafford's novel *The Catherine Wheel* (1952), explains, 'There is only one time, and that is the past time. There is no fashion in *now* or in *tomorrow* because the goods has not been cut.' In this 'fashion' the characters of both their worlds are betrayed by the inevitable changes of time as places alter and the past becomes as irrevocable as the peculiar moments of time in which particular events occur. And these characters, in spite of the logic of the processes by which they change, always change and finally fade away, disintegrated by illness or old age. Love, on which they counted once to stop time, changes too, and fails; and society, which at first seemed so sure, in a few years recombines its groups, merges, and transforms its classes.

For Miss Stafford the outlines of these betrayals begin with Sonie Marburg's disenchanting cinderella venture into the world of Miss Pride in *Boston Adventure* (1944) and continue through *The Mountain Lion* (1947), *The Catherine Wheel* (1952), and *Children Are Bored on Sunday* (1953). Their classic statement is 'A Country Love Story,' in which a wife, unable to win back the affections of her husband, creates an imaginary lover who in turn falls irrevocably victim to a continuum of human experienced: 'She knew now that no change would come, and that she would never see her lover again. Confounded utterly, like an orphan in solitary confinement, she went outdoors and got into the sleigh. The blacksmith's imperturbable cat stretched and rearranged his position, and May sat beside him with her hands locked tightly in her lap, rapidly wondering over and over again how she would live the rest of her life.

The ten stories which comprise *Bad Characters*, Miss Stafford's second collection of stories, continue these betrayals of external and internal life, of past and present, of reality and the dream. Moreover, as this

discrepancy is most noticeable and painful to the aged, young lovers, and children, the stories concern one of more of these groups. In them, realism opposes romanticism; the aged find that the past cannot be relived; lovers, that their havens of happiness are infringed on; and children, that their dreams prove false; and since, like Proust, Miss Stafford is a moral relativist [debatable], what emerges is the notion that right is whatever is necessary to live at any particular moment of time, so long as it does not hurt others. Her most admirable characters go into realms of isolated dreamworlds which destroy them, and her 'bad characters,' as she calls them, destroy others with their imagined views of the universe.

In all these stories the limitations of Miss Stafford's Proustian approach are made too-easily apparent. Like the physicist whose view of the universe becomes more comprehensible and acceptable as he views a greater variety of events in an organic structure of interrelationships and interdependencies, each involving every other and the whole, her world and its acceptability gain from an increased, gigantic, dense mesh of complicated relationships. This density is sometimes present in her novels, but of necessity diminishes in her shorter fiction where the less-complicated glimpses of life seem oversimplifications, relying upon predominant relationships.

The oversimplification, most apparent in stories like 'The End of a Career' and 'The Captain's Gift,' couples with her moral relativism which stresses the uniqueness of each moment, tends to increase the exaggeration, the sentimentality, and the nostalgia of her portrayals and caricature them by turning even the most casual and commonplace of her climaxes into irrevocable moments of great decision. Moreover, since the values on which these decisions are based fail to extricate themselves from situations and larger extractable morals are impossible, there tends to be in all her fiction an overemphasis by both Miss Stafford and the reader on the manner of portraying these dense relationships--her style and her characterization. In both these areas one cannot mistake her accomplishments. Her prose style is remarkable and withstands any comparison with Henry James's prose; her grasp of situation is often flawless; and her characters, even when unimportant, emerge fully-drawn.

As a result of this apparent emphasis and oversimplification, the writing in *Bad Characters* does not seem major. The reader has the feeling that Miss Stafford has not asked herself the real questions about man, that she has skirted these questions by creating unreal conflicts, or rather by stressing the moments in life when man, knowingly almost, wraps himself in unreality. In addition, for the fashion-minded reader of literature her fiction seems unaffected by the major social, intellectual, artistic, and philosophical movements since the mid-forties. Her stories, as a consequence, resemble the pasts which she steadfastly denies her characters--a pleasant regression on the reader's part into a simpler world 'where grandparents on their grand tours breezed on their trust funds.' This is most evident in that the oldest of the stories, 'The Captain's Gift' (1946), is little different from 'The End of a Career' (1956). Thus, too, the reading of her fiction like the recollection of her characters like the novels of Marcel Proust becomes a kind of contiguous remembrance of things past. Yet for any reader to dismiss her work on these grounds solely is to be naively unaware of the durability of memory."

Jerome Mazzaro
"Remembrance of Things Proust"
Review of Bad Characters (1965)
Shenandoah 16 (Summer 1965) 114-17

"What, then, does she write about? Only about incidents that have happened to each of us: minor cruelties, misunderstandings, family dissension, loneliness, indifference, personal failings and character abrasions of one kind or another. Out of these commonplaces she builds an emotional environment so that each story emerges as a harmonious entity. Above all, she is a stylist; her sentences, abstracted from the whole, are beautiful in a way that has almost become passe....

If timeliness is prerequisite to art, it is debatable that Miss Stafford's work will endure. Certainly it is not representative of its age. It is not ugly, like a Campbell's Soup label. It is not iconoclastic, like the destruction of universities or the burning of cities. It is not violent, like the smashing of heads. On the contrary, it is the antithesis of all these things. It does not even share the helter-skelter, breakneck, self-confident impatience of the this-is-the-worst-of-all-possible-worlds-and-can-only-get-better-from-here-on-in school of thought. Her brooding words hold no brief for the world as it is, but neither do they indicate a

hope for improvement. There is both acceptance and regret of its imperfections, with the added corollary that it is the business of the artist to depict them. So much for one side of the debate.

On the other, if timeliness is an attribute of art, then Miss Stafford may be considered a success. Monkeys will always behave like monkeys, and old men like old men, and little girls like little girls. It is the recognition of our own experience that enchants us in her work, winnowed as it is through her unique perception. As long as the language of the century remains intelligible, so long the enchantment will survive."

Mary Hegel Wagner
Review of *The Collected Stories of Jean Stafford*
America (April 1969) 426-27

"In some writers the style is a leading character, as in Jean Stafford's elaborately written *Boston Adventure* and those brilliantly ungiving stories whose tightness of structure is at such variance with the usual theme of a young woman's inability to sustain relationships."

Alfred Kazin
Bright Book of Life: American Novelists and Story Tellers from Hemingway to Mailer
(Little Brown, 1971) 174-75

"Jean Stafford, California born and Colorado raised, follows a long tradition of American writers who have ambivalent attitudes about East and West, about civilization and primitive nature. Miss Stafford, like Cooper, Twain, and James, has visceral and cerebral attractions which simultaneously draw her to the city and to the country. This tension creates in her fiction a dramatic depth typical of much good Western fiction.

Jean Stafford now lives in New York City, and like Henry David Thoreau, she occasionally flees from the artificial city to the natural land (to a cabin in Maine) so that she may live deliberately. But like Thoreau, she tramps back to the city to have some of mother's apple pie. She loves the country, but for an artist it is too distracting. 'There are so many fine things to do,' she says.

But the city, where she does most of her writing, is just as distracting. Even though she attempts to keep her city life simple, she doesn't have much luck. As she says, 'It's so easy in New York to fall into the habit of going to parties. You go to one cocktail party and then find yourself making a date for another. And having lunch with someone every day. It doesn't work.' Jean Stafford, like most of us, wants the best of two impossible worlds.

Wanting the best of both East and West, Jean Stafford cannot live comfortably in either. She attempts to resolve her conflict by discarding the worst and keeping the best of the two worlds. Her fiction reflects this attempt; and consequently, many of her stories show the conflict of the two cultures. Usually East and West clash with a jarring discord, but occasionally the civilized East and the primitive West merge to produce a new culture which surpasses either of the two.

The stories which depict the cultural clash of East and West are not Miss Stafford's best. The central conflict, as in "The Bleeding Heart,' is simply between a man and his environment--simply a physical clash. But in the stories which unite the best of East and West, as in 'The Tea Time of Stouthearted Ladies,' Jean Stafford shows the tension of a dramatic conflict in which a man struggles with himself, and in this way Stafford achieves both a philosophic and an artistic success.

The West for Miss Stafford is a place where one has the opportunity for physical and mental catharsis, but it lacks the opportunity for aesthetic development. In the cultural East one can develop aesthetically; however, one may also become artificial and effete. In the West one an perceive directly what is honest and true, but too often the crude West so blunts man's aesthetic spirit that he becomes insensitive to everything except the physical....

Jean Stafford's view of the West was heavily influenced by two books which she read as a child--her father's When Cattle Kingdom Fell, and her cousin's A Stepdaughter of the Prairie. The conceptions of the

West in these two novels reflect not only the immediate background of Miss Stafford's Colorado home, but of America as well. The two views portrayed in these novels are held in the phrase 'the golden savage land,' or to use Miss Stafford's terms, 'the noble wicked West.'

For centuries, from Horace to Horace Greeley, men have looked hopefully to the west, futilely searching for the golden land, hoping someone will point and say, as Shakespeare said in Twelfth Night, 'There lies your way, due west. / Then Westward-hoe...'

In contrast to the golden view is the view of William Bradford who saw the New World to the West as a hideous wilderness which must be subdued. But Shakespeare looked beyond the narrow view of his countrymen, and also beyond the views of men who came much later. In The Tempest Shakespeare satirized both the savage and the golden views. He affirmed, as Leo Marx has said 'an intellectual and humanistic ideal of high civilization,' believing that only through humanistic love and civilized skills could a liveable world be made out of the land which lay 'due west.'

James Fenimore Cooper, two hundred years later, carried on this intellectual, humanistic tradition of America. Henry Nash Smith has pointed out that the character of Leatherstocking was originally 'conceived in terms of the antithesis between nature and civilization, between freedom and law, that has governed most American interpretations of the westward movement.' Cooper, like Jean Stafford one hundred and fifty years later, had a conflict of interest between the freedom and independence of the natural man and the laws and social responsibilities of the civilized man. 'The profundity,' Smith notes, and part of the failure 'of the symbol of Leatherstocking springs from the fact that Cooper displays a genuine ambivalence toward all these issues, although in every case his strongest commitment is to the forces of order.'

Like Cooper, Jean Stafford portrays in her fiction an attitude toward the West which shows the strong influence of the mixture of the golden-savage views, and like Shakespeare and Cooper, civilization is never discarded for a primitive landscape. But unlike Cooper, Jean Stafford attempts to reconcile her ambivalent attitudes about East and West. And different from Shakespeare, Stafford's civilization is in the West--an easternized West, not a westernized East. The civilized East must come to the setting of the primitive West; the trappings of civilization are portable, but the landscape of the West isn't. Shakespeare's Prospero returns to the Old World; but in America, Leatherstocking must die with his socks on somewhere out there on the prairie."

Sid Jenson
"The Noble Wicked West of Jean Stafford"
Western American Literature 7 (1973) 261-70

"Marked speech frustration experienced by patient along with marked inclination to search...for polysyllabic word rather than common colloquial word which is easily within patient's linguistic grasp."

Sonia Keahon, speech therapist for aphasia
Suffolk County Department of Health Services (May 1977)

"Since her death I have re-read her collected stories which, at the time of their publication, won her the Pulitzer Prize. She has not ordered them chronologically; they are grouped, instead, under regional titles: *Innocents Abroad, The Bostonians and Other Manifestations* [*sic*], *Cowboys, Indians, and Magic Mountains* [*sic*], *Manhattan Island*. This, in itself, tells us a great deal about Jean Stafford. Like her idol, Henry James, she was a 'homesick' writer, one of the breed who, while nourished by their roots, are driven by unappeased curiosity, rebellion and a longing for new places and different people. Good literature does not grow in the soil of a peaceful mind, *nor* unquesting spirit. As James was a self-styled Londoner, Jean was converted to New England. But she often looked back with a cool, humorous, unsentimental regard to the Colorado of her growing up.

Although she had a hearty appetite for the 'adventures' met in Boston, Manhattan and abroad, they could precipitate attacks of mental indigestion: disappointment permeates her stories. Yet the disillusion is medicated by her unfailing wit and an undramatized stoicism inherited from her pioneering forebears. She could not resist the lure of Pinckney Street, Fifth Avenue, or the playgrounds and capitals of Europe and

she was often ticked into mistaking the sham for the real. But, upon recovery, she would model a character or shape a plot from the basic, opposed materials of innocence and irony. Always, she would be drawn to the manicured gardens and interiors of inherited wealth, viewing them with the star-dusted gaze of a poet. But the same eye that constructed those 'castles in the air,' destroyed them. We are grateful for both the visions and the honesty that brought them down.

Jean's childhood was spent in a mountain town she calls Adams. Her mother, a practical nurse, tended the consumptives who came there to be healed by the altitude and the pure air. Because Jean was a toughminded author, who fended off the treacheries of the heart, the child heroines from her past are, in the main, 'bad characters': fighting, scratching hellions, kleptomaniacs, gawky misfits, tomboys and wild cats. Yet the reader loves them, while remaining cold to the meek 'little women' and child wives of Victorian literature. For animals, household pets as well as the miserable caged beasts in the zoo, Jean could permit herself the indulgence of demonstrated affection. But the disciplined emotion of a large heart is all the more powerful for being dammed.

The people of her foreign tales (I include here, Boston, New York City and their environs, as Jean was a perpetual outlander) are mostly elderly. She was rarely concerned with the ages between early adolescence and old age. Notable exceptions and most successful ones are: 'Children Are Bored on Sunday,' 'A Country Love Story,' and 'The Interior Castle.' The first deals with a tentative attraction, a chance meeting between a lonely young woman and man lost in the vastness of New York City, the second, with the death of a marriage in a farmhouse in Maine while the third reveals Jean's intimacy with hospital life and the lunar geography of pain. Perhaps it was her prickly, virginal quality that caused her to leap across the middle years with their sexual preoccupations and to concentrate on old age, a state she barely reached herself. But one identifies her with the octogenarians, full of grit and iron, who from wheelchair and nursing home bed, shut-ins imprisoned in mansions and seedy rooming houses, direct their poisoned shafts at those who stand upright and can still walk--though usually in the wrong direction! The scrawny little girls with scabby knees, the cantankerous, cranky old ladies are with us. Jean Stafford lives."

Dorothea Straus
"Jean Stafford"
Shenandoah 30
(Autumn 1979) 85-91

"Although it often may have seemed otherwise to those who didn't know her well...Jean set little store by the literary world....It was only her work, not herself, that she wanted to deliver into the narrow ways of the literary world....*She* remained a 'private person' (her phrase)."

Peter Taylor
Commemorative Tribute
American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters (1979)

"Certainly the stories are exquisitely wrought, sensitively imagined: like glass flowers, or arabesques, or the 'interior castle' of Pansy Vanneman's brain ('Not only the brain as the seat of consciousness, but the physical organ itself which she envisioned, romantically, now as a jewel, now as a flower, now as a light in a glass, now as an envelope of rosy vellum containing other envelopes, one within the other, diminishing infinitely'). Dramatic tension is subdued, in a sense forced underground, so that while narrative conflict between individuals is rate, an extraordinary pressure is built up within the protagonists, who appear trapped inside their own heads, inside their lives (or the social roles their 'lives' have become), and despair of striking free. Intelligence and self-consciousness and even a measure of audacity are not quite enough to assure freedom, as the heroines of the late stories 'Beatrice Trueblood's Story' and 'The End of a Career' discover painfully; even 'the liberation' of Polly Bay (in the story with that title) will strike the sympathetic reader as desperate, an adolescent's gesture.

The finest of Jean Stafford's stories possess an eerily elegiac tone, though they are never morbid or self-pitying. 'In the Zoo' tells a frightful tale, the narrator confesses that 'my pain becomes intolerable,' but the story concludes with an extravagant outburst of paranoia that manages to be comic as well as distressing; and poor Ramona/Martha Dunn of the early story 'The Echo and the Nemesis,' trapped within layers of fat, achieves a sort of grotesque triumph over the 'normal' and unimaginative Sue, who can only flee in terror

the spirited (and insatiable) appetite Ramona represents. ('I am exceptionally ill,' Ramona tells her friend, with as much pride as if she were saying, 'I am exceptionally talented' or 'I am exceptionally attractive').

This is an art that curves inward toward the meditative, the reminiscent, given life not by bold gestures or strokes but by a patient accumulation of sharply-observed impressions; the wealth of a poet's eye, or a painter's. 'The Lippia Lawn,' for instance, is an exercise in recollection, so graphically presented as to allow the reader to share in the young woman's grasping, groping effort to isolate an image out of her past. The 'friendless old bachelor' Mr. Oliphant, while an arresting character in himself, is far less real than the protagonist's thoughts--the 'interior castle' of her subjectivity. She half-listens to the old man's chatter as 'the tenuous memory wove in and out of my thoughts, always tantalizingly just ahead of me. Like the butterfly whose yellow wings are camouflaged to look like sunlight, the flower I could not remember masqueraded as arbutus....Slowly, like a shadow, the past seeped back. A wise scout was reconnoitering for me and at last led me to a place where I never would have looked.'...

One cannot quarrel with the prevailing critical assessment that finds Jean Stafford's art 'poised,' 'highly reflective,' 'fastidious,' 'feminine.' And certainly she worked within the dominant fictional mode or consciousness of her time--there are no experimental tales in the *Collected Stories* (which cover the years 1944-1969); no explorations beyond the Jamesian-Chekhovian-Joycean model in which most 'literary' writers wrote during those years. (Joycean, that is, in terms of *Dubliners* alone.) Each story remains within the consciousness of an intelligent and highly sensitive observer who assembles details from the present and summons forth details from the past, usually with a graceful, urbane irony; each story moves toward an 'epiphany,' usually in the very last sentence. There is very little that remains mysterious in Stafford's stories, little that is perplexing or disturbing in terms of technique, structure, or style. Some of the stories, it must be admitted, are marred by the arch, over-written self-consciousness, too elaborate, too artificial, to have arisen naturally from the fable at hand (as in 'I Love Someone,' 'Children Are Bored on Sunday,' 'The Captain's Gift'). Characters tend to resemble one another in speech and manners, and there is little distinction between men and women...

When one considers the finest of the stories, however, one is impressed by the rigorous structure that underlies the 'beautiful' prose. And there are of course sudden jarring images, sudden reversals, that brilliantly challenge the sensibility evoked by the fiction's near-constant authorial voice--which is, for the most part, reflective, obsessively analytical, compulsively self-conscious....'Cops and Robbers' [is] one of the most successful of the stories. The most startling image in all of Stafford's fiction is the 'perfectly cooked baby'--a black baby, of course--offered to the racist Sundstrom by a similarly racist friend in 'A Modest Proposal': 'It was charred on the outside, naturally, but I knew it was bound to be sweet and tender inside....I heated the toddler up and put him on a platter and garnished him with parsley'...(It is one of the ironies of 'A Modest Proposal" that the reader never learns whether the incident ever happened, or whether the speaker has been telling a tall tale to upset the Captain's guests.)

Subdued and analytical and beautifully-constructed stories, then, in what might be called a 'conventional' fictional mode: but they are not to be too quickly grasped, too glibly assessed. The 'interior castle' of Stafford's art is one which will repay close scrutiny for its meanings open slowly outward, and each phrase, each word, is deliberately chosen."

Joyce Carol Oates
"The Interior Castle: The Art of Jean Stafford's Short Fiction"
Shenandoah 30 (Winter 1979) 61-64

"I begin with a passage obviously intended to be dense, rich, and evocative, carefully made, self-conscious, but solidly of the late modernist period, unmistakably before the work of the postrealist, postmodernist writers who are my subject. Jean Stafford's 'A Country Love Story' begins in this way: 'An antique sleigh stood in the yard...'"

Philip Stevick
Alternative Pleasures: Postrealist Fiction and Tradition
(U Illinois 1981)

"California-born novelist reared in Colorado, after graduating from the University of Colorado and further study there and in Germany began the writing of fiction noted for sensitive interpretations of adult isolation and the problems of adolescence. *Boston Adventure* (1944) presents the character of a foreign girl working as secretary to a wealthy Boston spinster; her second novel, *The Mountain Lion* (1947), depicts the unhappy youth of a brother and sister and their escape on a Colorado ranch. Later novels include *The Catherine Wheel* (1952) and *A Winter's Tale* (1954). *Children Are Bored on Sunday* (1953) and *Bad Characters* (1964) collect stories, definitively assembled in *Collected Stories* (1969, Pulitzer Prize). Her only work of nonfiction was *A Mother in History* (1966), about Lee Harvey Oswald's mother. She was married to Robert Lowell (1940-48) and A. J. Leibling (1959-63)."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, Fifth Edition
(Oxford 1983) 717

"At a time when so many young female novelists are wistful softies, writing about the lunk snoring on the next pillow or the plink of rainfall on summer lawns, the hard-grained determination of Stafford's fiction takes on an even firmer sturdiness. Unlike those sorority sisters of anomie who now gently cough into their fists at *The New Yorker*, Stafford wasn't trying to capture the whiff of a drifting mood but carpentering stories of loss and estrangement that would withstand the stresses of time and shifting fashion."

James Wolcott
"Blowing Smoke into the Zeitgeist"
Harper's 266 (June 1983) 59

"Because of its Jamesian pacing and tones, its Whartonian rhythms, Jean Stafford's work seems more at home in a prewar context. But her three novels are very much part of the mid-forties to early fifties, and *The Mountain Lion* (1947; reissued in 1972) is quite a remarkable book about growing up. In include Stafford here not only because of the fine quality of her work, but because she is in danger of being omitted from studies of the novel. She appeared in a marginal time, neither prewar nor modern, and for that reason may be neglected. She deserves better....

Normally, questions of class in the postwar novel come in naturalistic settings, in the gap between officers and men in the service, or in distinctions established by educational opportunities or fortunes of birth. But Stafford has created a class system based on taste, manners, speech, choice of dress, living styles, assumptions about family life, children, education. These are Jamesian rather than Dickensian factors, for Stafford sees them as miniature instead of huge, minor elements rather than major transfigurations. And yet they add up to class distinctions of the most vibrant and vital sort."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 135-36

"The line about lasting 'with joy as long as our bodies' will be conceptually rhymed seven poems later in the poem for Jean Stafford, with its scrambled platitude: 'the spirit is very willing to give up / but the body is not weak and will not die.' Both affirm a kind of minimal desire to survive thwarted expectations--to be; but both waive, it seems vain designs upon the quality of the life that remains. 'Jean Stafford, A Letter' is interesting in relation to both 'Last Walk?' and 'To Frank Parker' because it both clearheadedly and self-defeatingly points out an inherent limitation in nostalgia: that it can become a means by which one ignores necessary truths about other human beings. 'I can go on imagining you,' Lowell says of the period of his and Jean Stafford's courtship and early marriage, 'in your Heidelberry braids and Bavarian / peasant aprons you wore three or four years / after your master's at twenty-one.' This image is among his diminishing 'little set / of favored pictures.' But the image is false insofar as it is a projection of his own need--and perhaps was false at the time--and it has the effect of enabling him to evade the difficult fact of his first wife as a mature woman, as herself.... Lowell's capacity for being simultaneously self-deceived and unself-deceived no doubt contributes in large measure to his demoralized sense of being existentially stranded and will-less. He says later: 'It's impotence and impertinence to ask directions, / while staring right and left in two-way traffic' ('The Downlook')."

Vereen M. Bell

Robert Lowell: Nihilist as Hero
(Harvard 1983) 207-08

"Of the few critics who have written about Jean Stafford, a Pulitzer Prize winner in 1970, most begin their essays, as I do, with a comment about the lack of critical attention her fine work has received. This neglect seems especially surprising among feminists, for much of Stafford's fiction explores the consequences of rigid sex roles. In her three novels, *Boston Adventure* (1944), *The Mountain Lion* (1947), and *The Catherine Wheel* (1952), and in some of her best stories, she shows the price women pay for wearing enforced social masks which deface their inner selves. Pressured to be attentive ('Beatrice Trueblood's Story'), proper ('Polite Conversation'), thin ('The Echo and the Nemesis'), and beautiful ('The End of a Career'), Stafford's women rebel only indirectly, and often self-destructively. Although their needs for authority and a measure of free will cause the fictions' conflicts, these heroines are often too self-effaced to assert a self apart from social norms. They assent to their prescribed identities because they can find no social space for their real selves, which they nurture in a private world of alienation Stafford called 'The Interior Castle.'

While Stafford's women have learned to conform, her girls hold on as long as they can to their rebellion. Two of these adolescent rebels, Molly Fawcett, the heroine of the critically neglected *The Mountain Lion*, and Emily Vanderpool, the narrator of the title story in *Bad Characters* (1964), struggle to escape from conventional definitions of masculine and feminine behavior so powerful that they cannot be challenged without consequences. While Molly's refusal to conform leads to her violent death, Emily 'grows up' by compromising her sense of self. In these two stories, Stafford suggests that girls cannot escape stereotyped women's roles, that the young female rebel should give up on the possibility of becoming Huckleberry Finn and accept that she must be an Elsie Dinsmore.

Molly and Emily, Stafford has hinted, possess much of her own childhood character. Like their creator, the two girls are raised in the West, the setting for the masculine themes of escape and rebellion which have dominated the American literary canon from Cooper to Fiedler, where masculinity and femininity have becomes so stripped down and antithetical that they are reduced, depending on one's point of view, to myths or to cliches; the never-changing book jacket image of the freedom-loving, identity-seeking man and his sidekick leaving behind the fences, houses, and churches of the dogma-spouting, civilizing woman. Stafford makes the West a major theme in both fictions in order to explore the pressures of growing up in a world dominated by such myths, and her stories' autobiographical nature helps illustrate her struggles as a woman writer using male conventions and writing within a male tradition.

Many women writers, too, have characterized themselves as representatives of the social world, but they present themselves as protagonists, not antagonists, as constructors and not destroyers. Stafford's cousin Margaret lived the myth of the 'noble West,' where, in sharp contrast to the male archetype based on freedom from social contract, the writer values pioneer cooperation and women's contribution to building community. While the journals of the first women to go west frequently express a longing for the East, for the networks they left behind, 'as the period of isolation came to an end, women's social contacts multiplied ....With growth came the opportunity to carry out the civilizing mission. In nostalgic and cheerful accounts, the 'stepdaughters of the prairie' stress the powerful role women played in breaking the isolation their mothers had found so difficult to bear, in creating a culture based on their understanding of humanity's needs for communication, manners, and art. Although she may be high-spirited, brave, and even independent, the noble western woman is nevertheless a 'joiner' who supports institutions and subdues in herself any anti-social western spirit.

By emphasizing in her preface that she is not a 'regional writer,' but that her roots remain in the West, Stafford seems to imply that while her fiction may not always be *about* the West, it is *of* the West, the area that shaped her fundamental attitudes toward the self and its relations to the world around it. Her ironic focus on the tension between the wicked and the noble Wests suggests, despite her comic disclaimer, that she saw the interplay between these two myths as a significant influence on the western character. Through her creation of Molly and Emily, she questions the rebellious-male-and-civilizing-female stereotypes and shows their effect on a woman's developing sense of her own capacities and her place in the world."

Melody Graulich
"Jean Stafford's Western Childhood: Huck Finn Joins the Camp Fire Girls"
Denver Quarterly 18.1 (Spring 1983) 39-55

"All of her significant work is grounded in the immediacy of experience, and it reaches the level of high art because as a writer she constantly explores the intensity and complexity of the human experience, the emotions and motivations of her characters, which lead to not often happy, but 'true' endings. Stafford remained 'loyal to reality,' as she perceived it....

A major influence on her early writing was reading the dictionary. 'My language was incredible,' she recalled. 'I remember in one of my stories writing that a man had *oleaginous* black hair'....In the first critical article published on Stafford's novels, in 1955, Ihab H. Hassan finds the contrast between Grandfather Kenyon and Grandfather Bonney essential and finds that it isolates 'Miss Stafford's recurring themes of past and present, of the expense of spirit; of the perpetual engagement between sense and insensibility, ideal and reality.' He represents Molly as merely the one of the two adolescents who refuses to change. And he finds the mountain lion, the central symbol, unsuccessful because 'it lacks emotional immediacy and lacks the power to unite and reveal.' He considers the novel limited because 'the tragedy of Ralph and Molly is not sufficiently rendered in the terms of moral perception,' and finally summarizes the novel as 'the small tragedy of two adolescents.'

Five years later, in 1962, Olga W. Vickery discussed Stafford's novels in terms of the aliens, rebels, and freaks that she finds as Stafford's chief archetypes. In her discussion of *The Mountain Lion*, she finds both Ralph and Molly aliens and rebels, but of Molly she writes: 'Clearly Molly is one of the true freaks who cannot fit into any pattern. Because she offends both nature and society, her destruction is inevitable....' There is no indication in Vickery's assessment that Molly's freakishness has anything to do with her gender or that she 'offends both nature and society' because she is a girl who refuses to accept the strictures nature and society impose."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh
Jean Stafford
(Twayne 1985) 2, 86, 88

"A remarkable reviser. Stories would come in with very hopeful material that hadn't quite jelled; and...over and over again I [would] ask her to rewrite a story, and over again she [did] so successfully."

Katharine White
Stafford's editor and friend at the *New Yorker*
Onward and Upward: A Biography of Katharine S. White
Linda H. David (Harper & Row 1987) 154

"The following contrast of East and West is the most specific one that Stafford makes in her fiction. Some of the 'western' details appear in the Adams [Colorado] stories. Some of the 'eastern' ones in *Boston Adventure*: '[Rose] rejoiced in the abundance of imposing trees, in the pure style of the houses and the churches, in the venerable graveyards and in the unobtrusive shops. One was not conscious of any of the working parts of the town, not of the railroad or of the filling stations or of the water towers and the light-plants. Her own town, out West, had next to no trees and those were puny and half bald. The main street there was a row of dirty doorways which led into the dirtier interiors of pool halls, drugstores where even the soda-fountain bar had a flaccid look, and small restaurants and beer parlors and hotels whose windows were decorated sometimes with sweet-potato vines growing out of jam cans painted red, and sometimes with nothing more than the concupiscent but pessimistic legend that ladies were invited or that there were booths for them. The people here in this dignified New England town, shabby as they might be, wore hats and gloves at all hours and on all days and they appeared moral, self-controlled, well-bathed, and literate. The population of her own town was largely Mexican and was therefore, by turns, criminally quarrelsome or grossly stupefied so that when they were not beating one another up they stared into dusty space or lounged in various comatose attitudes against the stock properties of the main street: the telephone poles and fire hydrants and hitching posts. They were swarthy and they tended, on the whole, to be fat and to

wear bright, juvenile colors. Repudiating all that, she greatly admired the pallor of the people here and their dun dress and their accent so that the merest soda-jerk sounded as if he had gone to Harvard.'

'If the facts of her life exerted an influence on Stafford's work, the era in which she grew up was significant as well. Jean Stafford, born during the war whose end brought the beginning of the twentieth century and the 'modern' period, was--almost inevitably--a modernist. As 'Souvenirs of Survival' and many of her stories demonstrate, Stafford was keenly aware of the poverty and injustice of the Great Depression. Her fiction exhibits, too, the pervasive influence of World War II on modern society. The terrors of the war hover in the background of 'The Maiden,' 'The Captain's Gift,' 'The Home Front,' and other stories, and war-inspired nihilism and loss of faith in human ideals reverberate throughout her stories. Unable to believe in the possibility of positive change, Stafford and her contemporaries rejected social action and embraced an art whose value lay in craftsmanship and a conservative regard for tradition. [This critic is a Postmodernist at pains to avoid crediting Modernist art with beauty or wisdom.] And yet, Stafford the ironist always accepted the validity of ostensibly opposite concepts, and in "The Psychological Novel,' her asseveration against social novels, she qualified her rejection of 'do-good books' in the statement that best presents her bleak vision of modern society.

Against the backdrop of the violence and chaos of World War II, Stafford explores the accompanying social and cultural dissolution; the questioning of liberal, humanistic ideals; the collapse of the family; the alienated individual's search for self and for communion with others, and dangerously, the alternative retreat into what Stafford calls the 'interior castle' of the mind. For Stafford, as for many of her contemporaries, the complexities and horrors of the modern condition dictated the distanced, objective stance of the ironist. Only thus removed could she present the twentieth-century human situation, the 'one great incongruity, the appearance of self-valued and subjectively free but temporally finite egos in a universe that *seems to be* [italics added] utterly alien, utterly purposeless, completely deterministic, and incomprehensively vast.'

Stafford's ironic vision, though a particularly appropriate response to the modern condition, was reinforced by her inheritance of the American literary tradition. American literature has from its beginnings been characterized by antithetical impulses, the innocence and naive faith in a brave new world shadowed by the dark symbolism of the Puritan tradition. As Richard Chase illustrates, contradictions and dualities are endemic to American literature, so that as Alfred Kazin notes, by Stafford's era, 'the greatest single face about or modern American writing [was] our writers' absorption in every last detail of their American world together with their deep and subtle alienation from it.' Stafford inherited and merged in her work the Gothic symbolic tradition of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville; the social criticism and novel of manners of Henry James and Edith Wharton; and the comic frontier tradition of Mark Twain and the early local colorists. Her successful manipulation of the paradoxically varied yet similar strains in American literature lends to her work a diversity and vivacity that qualify her as an important minor American writer.

Ultimately, Stafford's modernist sensibility and her American heritage are mediated by a more fundamental birthright; Stafford the ironist and Stafford the American are tempered always by Stafford the woman.... I would argue, her special sympathy for the sufferers in her culture derives from her sex.... Certainly Stafford's characters' ailments, both physical and mental, are metaphors for the modern human being's alienation from society. Yet the theme is particularly appropriate for Stafford's cast of female characters. Social scientists and historians have in recent years examined the relationship between women's position in our society and the prevalence of certain types of illness among women...Jean Stafford, herself a notorious hypochondriac who nonetheless genuinely suffered from a variety of illnesses throughout her adulthood, examines the typically feminine escape into illness from the anxieties of life....

As her novels and stories indicate, in technique as well as theme, Jean Stafford is interested in discovery, in the revelatory moment, in the burgeoning of awareness. Appropriately, of all her characters, her children most vividly and cogently present her world view. Handicapped by their youthful inefficacy and their limited knowledge and understanding, these young people are frequently put further at a disadvantage by less common circumstances: some are orphaned and unwanted; some (like Molly Fawcett) are precocious and misunderstood; and nearly all bear the double burden of being both young and female. As the titles of some of her stories about adult female protagonists indicate ('Children Are Bored on

Sunday,' 'The Children's Game'), Stafford metaphorically associates women and children, who, as minority members of a *male-dominated society*, often share the bleak recognition that life is inequitable. [Stock Feminist propaganda phrases like "male-dominated society" are contradicted by the matriarchal societies depicted in *Boston Adventure* and *The Catherine Wheel*. Italics added.]....

For Stafford, women and children, *equally powerless and underestimated*, share a fundamental alienation from the patriarchal society in which they live....' [Feminists who rely on politically correct stock phrases often do not realize what they are saying: women and children are 'equally' powerless? This is an example of Feminist doublespeak: On the one hand, women should be treated as equal to men in combat; on the other hand they are like children, not responsible for their actions and in need of 'safe spaces' on campus where they can hide from ideas. Italics added.]

Maureen Ryan
Innocence and Estrangement in the Fiction of Jean Stafford
(Louisiana State U 1987)

"Stafford continued to write short stories well into the mid-Sixties. Indeed, as her novels faded in the reading public's memory, she began to be known primarily for her work in that field, and, in particular, as one of the most celebrated practitioners of the controversial genre known as the *New Yorker* story. Stafford's short fiction, most of which was assembled in various volumes during the Fifties and Sixties and brought together in the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Collected Stories* (1969), represents one of the finest moments of the American short story.

Witty, luminous, and impeccably crafted, her contributions to the genre and crowded with people named Otis and Meriwether and Fairweather, with troubled children and snobby society women, and with garden-party conversations reported word for word. Extremely long sentences abound, and the vocabulary is unusually rich: a single page of the story 'A Modest Proposal' contains the words *concupiscently, nares, sybarite, mufti,* and *cereus*. Yet Stafford succeeds in fashioning a lucid, well-upholstered style into which such words fit very gracefully.

To read *The Collected Stories* is to note the recurrence of certain themes, many of which recall the preoccupation of Stafford's life as well as the plots of her novels. The book abounds in protagonists who are, to some extent, Sonie Marburgs--unsatisfied with their lot and eager to be taken into someone else's world. In 'The Bleeding Heart,' for instance, 'a Mexican girl from the West' named Rose Fabrizio longs to be adopted by a mysterious elderly man who visits the New England library where she works; but her illusions about the man are soon shattered. The most prominent of Stafford's themes, indeed, may well be the shattering of illusions--the illusions of Americans about Europe, of Westerners about the Eastern seaboard, of poor people about the rich, of naive people about the *beau monde*. One story after another seems to derive in some way from the young Stafford's encounter with Lucy Cooke's bohemia, with the *Kultur* of Heidelberg, or with Robert Lowell's Boston.

In 'Maggie Meriwether's Rich Experience,' a girl from Nashville on her first trip abroad is intimidated into silence by a host of rich and titled folk at a garden party in France' in 'The Echo and the Nemesis,' Sue Ledbetter, an American student in Heidelberg, feels painfully inferior to the more worldly Ramona Dunn; in 'The Healthiest Girl in Town,' a girl named Jessie is made to feel *declasse* by two well-to-do classmates who regard their delicate health as a sign of privilege. (Like Ralph and Molly Fawcett, they're *proud* of their illness.) Time and again, however, sophistication is revealed to be a mask for vulnerability, for failure, for loneliness, for a history of personal tragedy. And tragedy is certainly plentiful in these stories. Just as Stafford lost her brother immediately prior to the appearance of her first novel, so some of her characters are struck by tragedy on the threshold of their greatest joy. In the deeply haunting story 'The Liberation,' for instance, Polly Bay--who has been saved from a life of spinsterhood in her aunt and uncle's tomblike Colorado house by a proposal of marriage from a wonderful young Harvard professor--learns just before her would-be triumphal departure that her fiance has died.

Naturally, some of Stafford's stories are more impressive than others. Aside from the ones I have named, Stafford's strongest stories include 'A Country Love Story,' 'The Interior Castle,' and 'An Influx of Poets.' But even her weakest stories are a joy to read, if only because their prose is so lovely. The deficiencies that

they do manifest are, for the most part, those which are notoriously characteristic of *New Yorker* short stories in general. For instance, like any a fiction writer associated with that illustrious magazine, Stafford places a good deal less emphasis on plot than on character. That is, to be sure, not always a weakness, but it is hard to read the *Collected Stories* in sequence without eventually becoming irritated by their mostly ambiguous, well-nigh pretentious endings; one has the feeling that the author doesn't want to push too far, doesn't want to face the difficult choices attendant upon reaching the conclusion of a story, doesn't want the emphatic sense of closure achieved in *The Mountain Lion* and *The Catherine Wheel* is striking; and the result is too often a denouement that feels dry to the point of heartlessness and pat to the point of meaninglessness. Another *New Yorker*ish problem is that the stories tend to be cluttered up with gratuitous details--inventories of clothes, furnishings, meals, and the like, with a frequent emphasis on the hoity-toity.

A failing more specific to Stafford's stories is that her sarcasms toward a character sometimes overwhelms her sympathy. This is true, for instance, of 'A Polite Conversation,' in which a recently married young woman is forced to endure a visit to her new home by a rich lady who lives nearby. The only apparent point of the story is to make fun of the lady, who in her fatuity, condescension, and bigotry is rather too easy a target--not to mention a very familiar one, whose like (in male and female form) may be found throughout Stafford's fiction. These stories, then, are not without serious flaws; to compare them to the short fiction of John Cheever--and especially to that of Eudora Welty and Peter Taylor--is to notice, on Stafford's part, a relative want of sympathy and narrowness of range....Yet the very fact that one is compelled to speak of Stafford in the company of such masters is to acknowledge that her achievement in the genre is of a very high order indeed."

Bruce Bawer
"Jean Stafford's Triumph"
New Criterion 7
(November 1988) 61-72

"[The] encounter with Stafford's two short stories set in Maine, 'A Country Love Story' and 'Polite Conversation,' introduced me to a writer whose command of English prose--and of the human heart--left me dumb with admiration...It was odd that I had never read Stafford before, for she had lived from age ten to age twenty-one in Boulder, Colorado, the town in which I had grown up. In part because of her caustic ambivalence toward the West, the best writer ever to come out of Colorado is not honored in her own land....

Stafford's writing...is essentially neither regional nor feminist. Like her heroes, Twain, Proust, and James, she took the human condition as her subject. Her style, which so many other writers envied, is sui generis, with its exquisitely qualified, complexly subordinated sentences spiced so oddly with the vivid colloquialisms she scavenged from her childhood. If in her weakest fictions the style seems to be an end in itself, in her best work all the technical skill serves, in Wolcott's phrase, 'to crack the vault of our most protected feelings'....Archie Ogden [editor, Atlantic Monthly Press] had read the Stephens [college] novel with great care. To his colleagues he reported that Stafford had written 'a perfectly good book.' He went on to praise her stylistic virtues: 'Here is a young author who can handle the English language as a skilled carpenter handles a chisel....A situation is summed up in a line of conversation; a character delineated by one fatuous remark that tells the whole story'....

It is not surprising that the writing came painfully and slowly, for Stafford was in the throes of the most important artistic advance of her career. She was indeed 'sick of the way I write.' After the middle of 1945 the stylized, old-fashioned, wan-humored prose of *Boston Adventure* was banished for good. In its place came a supple, lively style, full of concrete diction and startling colloquial juxtapositions, in its own way as well wrought syntactically as the earlier Proustian cadences but with all the labor of the craft disguised.... To tell this story [*The Mountain Lion*], Stafford shucked off the mannerisms of *Boston Adventure* and discovered a tone and diction almost entirely new for her....

Style is the most private of stratagems. The calculations and experiments that may have lain behind this wholesale reworking of Stafford's prose, during her fits of craft in Black Rock, Westport, and Damariscotta Mills from 1944 to 1946, remain secrets between Stafford and her typewriter. In terms of her favorite writers, the exemplar passed from Proust and James to Mark Twain. The transformation, however, is more

than a matter of simple mimicry. When asked about the startling change in prose style from her first published novel to her second, Stafford tended to minimize the shift. But her philosophical attitude toward life--in fictional terms, her tone--had undergone its own revision. She had discovered an irony appropriate to her surest subject, childhood and adolescence....'My theory about children is my theory about writing. The most important thing in writing is irony, and we find irony most clearly in children. The very innocence of a child is irony. Irony, I feel, is a very high form of morality'....

The great stride forward that *The Mountain Lion* embodies is rather a matter of her having learned (as Twain may have taught her) that the most solemn human predicaments are most effectively rendered not in a melodramatic lot (as in her Heidelberg novel), not even in the sort of quasi-omniscient periphrases of Sonie's voice in *Boston Adventure*, but in a plain American prose whose tone itself bridges the gap between the protagonist's earnest attack on the world and the author's rich and distant understanding. In that tension--the gulf that separates Molly Fawcett from Jean Stafford--lies all the pleasure and wisdom of a great novel....

It seems probable...that in general Stafford composed directly on the typewriter. More surprisingly, Stafford's rough copy almost never shows signs of any extensive revision. Most writers scratch out and scribble over wantonly, but when Stafford rejected a paragraph or even a sentence, she seems to have retyped the whole page from the top. Because she sometimes kept her variant sheets, we occasionally find as many as twenty discrete typed versions of the same page, some differing from others by only a word or a phrase. Her drafts are in this sense exceptionally 'clean.' It seems likely that just as in conversation Stafford 'always planned her way from the beginning of a sentence to the end,' so in her written prose all the work of constructing was done in her head....

Although no two readers would come up with the same list, it seems unarguable that some ten or a dozen of Stafford's short stories are near masterpieces. In the long run, it may be her stories for which she is remembered. For this enthusiast, the list would have to include 'The Interior Castle,' 'Children Are Bored on Sunday,' 'A Country Love Story,' 'The healthiest Girl in Town,' 'The Violet Rock,' 'Cops and Robbers,' 'In the Zoo,' 'Bad Characters,' 'A Reading Problem,' and 'An Influx of Poets'....

In the course of his marriage to Stafford, the only period during which [Robert] Lowell actually earned his living was the nine months he worked at Sheed and Ward. A small but steady trust-fund income came his way from Boston, but most of the time he lived off the money his wife made--first as a secretary, then as a writer. There is little or no indication that Stafford bridled at this state of affairs. Lowell seemed to take it for granted that his development as a poet exempted him from the normal responsibilities of 'providing.' The parallel with Jean's father is eerie."

David Roberts
Jean Stafford: A Biography
(Little, Brown 1988) ix-x, 134, 149, 205, 227-28, 233, 262-63, 417-18

"Jean Stafford was a novelist and short-story writer of considerable distinction...At age six, Jean began to write poems and stories, and she completed her first novel by age eleven. She also began to read the dictionary for pleasure and, even as a child, displayed an incredible command of language....Shy and intellectual, Stafford was a misfit in both high school and college. Returning from [Heidelberg University] Germany, she attended a writing school in Boulder [Colorado] and was introduced to poet Robert Lowell, a man with a very different background from her own, whom she would late marry.

She spent one unhappy year as an instructor at Stephens College and, in 1938, taught briefly at the Writers' Worshop in Iowa. There, she decided to write, not teach, and left abruptly in midsemester for Boston, arriving with one-third of a manuscript under her arm. In Boston, Stafford renewed her acquaintance with Robert Lowell. One night, returning home from an evening of drinking at a Boston nightclub, Lowell lost control of the car in which they were driving and Stafford was seriously injured. Despite the accident and the lawsuit which followed, a courtship blossomed and the two were married....

Stafford's first novel, published in 1944, was a best-seller and was praised by reviewers for its traces of Marcel Proust and Henry James. *Boston Adventure* deals with a young woman's realization that discovery

of self requires rejection of society's limitations and introduces concerns that would reoccur in Stafford's later work: human motivations, instincts, relationships, and the complexities and incongruities of being alive, especially of being alive as a woman. In 1945, Stafford received a Guggenheim Fellowship for fiction and a National Institute of Arts and Letters grant. In that year, she also bought her first home in the small village of Damariscotta Mills, Maine, and she was at work on her second novel, *The Mountain Lion.*

Stafford's and Lowell's marriage had always been stormy, even violent, and they were separated in 1946. The subsequent months were difficult for Stafford. She traveled, spent a few days in a mental hospital, then stayed in a run-down Greenwich Village hotel. In 1947, she committed herself to the Payne Whitney Clinic in New York and spent a year there under treatment for hysteria and deep depression. Also in 1947, Stafford's masterpiece second novel was published. Unlike the first, *The Mountain Lion* was written out of her own experience in the West rather than her imaginings of an East she hardly knew. It explored this geographical dichotomy as well as the complexities of childhood, themes that appear in many of Stafford's stories. The style was also more naturally her own in this work, reflecting her ability to find the most appropriate word for her creative expression, no matter how unusual it might be.

In 1948, Stafford obtained a divorce from Lowell. In that same year, she was awarded another Guggenheim Fellowship for fiction and the National Book Club Award. In 1950, Stafford married Oliver Jensen, a second unhappy marriage that lasted only a few months. In 1952, Stafford's third novel, *The Catherine Wheel*, was published. In what is considered her most carefully structured novel, Stafford again deals with psychological motivation and alienation and explores the major theme of her work: women and their situation in society. In 1953, Stafford was divorced from Jensen and, as before, experienced a psychological collapse, this time complicated by physical ill healthy. While recuperating with friends in the Virgin Islands, she wrote 'In the Zoo,' which received the First Prize O. Henry Award in 1955.

Stafford is best known for her more than fifty short stories, which, like her novels, are largely autobiographical. Almost all of her characters are girls and women; many are orphans, aged, or ill. Stafford deals with the powerlessness of women caught in social roles; for those who assert themselves in an attempt to develop identity, her stories suggest, the result is often madness. Her first collection, *Children Are Bored on Sunday*, appeared in 1953. In 1959, Stafford married A. J. Liebling, critic and columnist for *The New Yorker.* During this four-year marriage, she published no fiction, except for two juvenile books, and explained that perhaps it was because she was happy for the first time in her life. Nevertheless, Stafford and Liebling began to drift apart before Liebling's death. They quarreled over Stafford's drinking, which was a problem throughout her life, and they were frequently separated.

Although very much a part of the New York literary world, Stafford had often felt ill at ease with the New York intellectuals. Thus, after Liebling's death in 1963, she made her home in Springs, Long Island. There, known as the Widow Liebling and in failing health, Stafford became increasingly reclusive. Her second collection of short stories, *Bad Characters*, was published in 1964. In 1965 she contracted for an autobiographical novel, 'The Parliament of Women,' which remained unpublished at her death. Another collection, *Selected Stories of Jean Stafford*, was published in 1966. During the 1960's and 1970's, Stafford wrote nonfiction for popular magazines and, in 1969, her *Collected Stories* was published. In 1970, Stafford received the Pulitzer Prize for *Collected Stories* and was also made a member of the National Academy of Arts and Letters. As she aged, Stafford grew more and more to resemble the ill-tempered old women in her fiction. Her life--beset by physical and mental illness, unhappiness, lack of deserved recognition of her work, and lessening creativity--was further debilitated in 1977, when she suffered a stroke resulting in aphasia. The Jean Stafford who had read the dictionary for pleasure then found it difficult to speak even the simplest of thoughts. She died on March 26, 1979, at the Burke Rehabilitation Center in White Plains, New York.

Critics have suggested that Stafford's ironic vision allows for no clear-cut perspective on her work. Her preoccupation with language is reflected in a rich and complex style, rooted both in the formal, rhetorical tradition of Henry James and the more informal and colloquial of Mark Twain, and she has been compared with both. Stafford has been praised for her nonsentimental approach but perhaps more often criticized for emotional detachment from her characters, who are seldom able to resolve feelings of alienation. Ironically, this same detachment seems to suggest that the objective, intellectual viewpoint is the only way for

individuals to rise above the inevitable difficulties of life to experience realization or knowledge, however short-lived.

Most critical analyses tend to view Stafford's treatment of women as a metaphor for the universal alienation in modern society, rather than as a commentary on the lives of women. Stafford would probably approve of the lack of attention she has received from the feminist perspective, because she expressed strong disapproval of the feminist movement in articles written toward the end of her life. At the time of Stafford's death, her name was not familiar to most readers. Although she has to some extent been 'rediscovered'--*The Catherine Wheel* was reissued in 1981 in a series called 'Neglected Books of the 20th Century--critics still suggest that she deserves more attention."

William S. Haney II
Cyclopedia of World Authors II, Vol. IV
ed. Frank N. Magill
(Salem 1989) 1403-05

"Her best stories--'In the Zoo,' 'A Country Love Story,' 'The Echo and the Nemesis,' 'The Interior Castle,' 'Children Are Bored on Sunday,' 'The End of a Career,' 'and 'An Influx of Poets'--are accounts of female experience as accomplished and as moving as the stories of Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Willa Cather, Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O'Connor, and Eudora Welty....

[Stafford sent] a draft of a long short story to Caroline Gordon [1941]....Twenty years older than Stafford, Gordon liked to play the role of mentor to younger writers. She would soon promote the writing career of one of Stafford's contemporaries, the extraordinary writer from Milledgeville, Georgia, Flannery O'Connor. In a letter to Stafford, Gordon first praised the story Stafford had sent her....Gordon then went on to discuss specific matters of diction and form. Critical of Stafford's predilection for using long words when shorter ones would suffice, she said, 'I balk at "dulcified." I think I have reason for balking. A high-falutin word like that ought to be *forced* from you. It isn't here, it's rather poured on from the top.' In view of the face that Stafford's use of 'high-falutin' words would become a noteworthy characteristic of her writing style, it is obvious that this bit of advice was later discounted by her. Another of Gordon's suggestions was that the dialogue should sound less artificial and more 'like talk--a sentence can ring in the memory'....

Robert Giroux...said she brought to American letters what he considered potentially the greatest new talent in a decade,' and he mentioned that the style of her new novel would be a fusion of the baroque style of *Boston Adventure* and the sparer style of *The Mountain Lion*. And John P. Marquand, another person who wrote on her behalf, not only endorsed her new project himself but asserted that Henry Canby, Christopher Morley, Dorothy Fisher, and Clifton Fadiman all agreed with his assessment of her talent.... Why, I wondered, was her fiction far less renowned than that of some other women writers of her generation, despite the fact that she had been awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1970?...In the forties, when her first two novels, *Boston Adventure* (1944) and *The Mountain Lion* (1947), were published, she was considered one of this country's most promising fiction writers. In the fifties she published a well-received third novel, *The Catherine Wheel* (1952), and she regularly contributed short stories to the *New Yorker*. Yet only recently has Jean Stafford's work begun to receive the sustained critical attention it merits....Until recently much of her fiction was out of print....Adept at writing in both the elegant manner of a Wharton or a James and in the colloquial style of a Twain or a Welty, she sensitively and poignantly portrays the entrapment, alienation, and despair of her characters in beautifully crafted works notable for their subtlety, their wit, and their irony....

Robert Lowell, in Boston for the Christmas holidays, had borrowed his parents' car to take Stafford to a Boston nightclub. Despite her frequent protestations to the contrary, she seems to have been interested enough in him--or worn down enough by his pursuit--to consent to go out with him. Lowell was known to be a very careless driver and had very bad eyesight; furthermore, he had been drinking before they set out in the car together for that fateful ride. Stafford claimed subsequently that the car crash into a wall at the end of a dead-end street in Cambridge had not been an 'accident' at all: when she had told Lowell once more that she would not marry him, he had become so angry that he threatened to kill them both and headed for an embankment....Lowell was unharmed....Stafford, however, was seriously injured...Her nose was smashed, and her skull and jaw were fractured. She was taken by ambulance to a Cambridge hospital,

where she would remain for almost a month...She wrote to Archie Ogden that the [Ford Madox] Fords had convinced her Cal Lowell was really 'pathological and capable of murder.'...

She left [her second husband] the day after election day, when she learned that Jensen had voted for Eisenhower. An ardent supporter of Adlai Stevenson during the presidential campaign of 1952, Stafford had relentlessly attacked Jensen's more conservative political views and had accused him of being a Philistine....Her teaching was disrupted...when student activists at Columbia, protesting the policies of the university, staged a sit-in, which in turn prompted the administration to summon to police to campus. Observing later that the disturbances at Columbia had both repelled her and bored her to death, she said tartly, 'I have become very set in my ways, very conservative, very much down on the young...as a social class and I take no responsibility for slavery.' The following year she would again speak of her growing conservatism, describing herself as 'reactionary and paranoid, racist and coploving and opposed in general to this so-called twentieth century.'...

She could not help but feel she had been betrayed or abandoned by all the significant men in her life: her father, her brother, Hightower, and even Lowell....She confessed to [Albert] Erskine that she was 'full of neurotic fears' and often thought of suicide....Increasingly conservative in her last years, she inveighed against the recent 'hysterical tantrums, the collective conniption fits on campuses and on the plazas of city halls.' In an article that appeared in *McCall's* in January of 1970, she wrote: 'The next ten years will probably be characterized by even more protest than the past five years have been, but let us pray devoutly that it will be inspired by reason and not by the frivolous impulse to make noise...'

One group of protesters Stafford attacked repeatedly in her articles were the more vituperative members of the women's liberation movement, the 'hordes of Dumb Doras and Xanthippes and common scolds' who had 'raised such a hue and cry at the beginning that you couldn't hear the woodwinds for the crashes of the trees.' In an article that appeared in the *New York Times* the week she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, she exclaimed: 'The fustian and the hollering, the deification of Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan, the strident jokelessness attendant on the movement are woefully unpropitious because they obfuscate a good many justified grievances.' As a college student, Stafford had objected to the lack of equality between the sexes. In a paper that she wrote called 'The Utopian Woman,' for example, she observed that most men discriminate against women, the sentimentalists arguing 'that a woman's place is in the home with roses around the door and bouncing baby boys squalling around the threshold, the pietists shouting that a woman's place is in the home, making it sound more like a prison...and raging against the licentiousness of women, clearly seen in their wanton habits of dress and cosmetic.'...

During the last years of her life, Stafford said she found it objectionable that some women received lower salaries than men who performed the same jobs and that women were not promoted as readily as men. Forgetting that in the past *Time* had not been willing to hire her because she was a woman, she insisted that she herself had never been discriminated against because of her gender, but she did agree with the claims of feminists who maintained that women and men were often not treated as equals in the work place. She also declared that she was in favor of legal abortion, and she supported the establishment of day care centers for working mothers. Stafford concluded, however, that no amount of legislation could alter what she believed were very real innate differences between men and women.

One activity of feminists that especially aroused her ire was the attempt of feminist scholars to promote the work of women writers. Distressed by the proliferation of books by women about women, she insisted that the work of 'the older stars'--Madame de Stael, Jane Austen, and Willa Cather--did not 'need exegesis in terms of "'the new woman".' As a number of prominent women writers of her generation had also done, she argued that the work of women writers should be judged by the same standards as the work of men: 'If women are not to be isolated, if they are not to be "the Second Sex," (what a self-defeating temper tantrum that title describes!) they are to be garlanded with the same variety of laurel as the men with whom they compete'....

From her caustic comments it is also evident that she disapproved of feminist interpretations of her work [as do all the best women writers]. In 1975, after reading Blanche Gelfant's reexamination of *The Mountain Lion* in the *New Republic*, for example, she observed snidely to Nancy Gibney that Gelfant had suggested

'Ralph has to kill Molly in order to prove he is a male chauvinist pig.' Stafford would probably have been surprised, perhaps even dismayed, to discover what a major role feminist literary critics have played in championing her fiction during the last decade.

One misdemeanor of the group she referred to sarcastically as 'Fem Lib' that aroused her ire was their use of the neologism *sexism*, a term which she described as 'the most teratoid coinage so far in the 'heyday of odious neologisms.' A self-appointed guardian of the English language, she was also adamantly opposed to the use of the term *Ms.* In an amusing article in the *New York Times* that was sure to offend many feminists, she remarked in 1973: 'Whenever there comes in the mail a piece of first-class matter addressed to me as 'Ms.,' I slit the envelope open and if there is a check within, abstract it. Then when I reseal the envelope with Scotch tape (I like to do this when I have just finished changing a typewriter ribbon or have been out in the garden messing with the beets or scallions or other vegetables that grow underground--and you know what scotch tape is like when it is applied with grimy fingers) and circling the 'Ms.' in red, I write also in red: NOT ACCEPTABLE TO ADDRESSEE, RETURN TO SENDER, and put it back in my box.'

Although Stafford's most detailed response to the women's liberation movement, an uncompleted essay she called 'Sisterhood,' was never published, the articles that she did publish in response to feminism reveal her unwillingness to be identified with its more militant proponents....As Peter Taylor once observed, Stafford really didn't like most women, to which Eleanor Taylor replied that, if Jean really didn't like other women, it was because she was so much more intelligent than most of them....She frequently declared that the 'fem lib' movement 'left her cold,' and she publicly ridiculed some of its leading figures....A vitriolic review in *Esquire* of Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will*, in fact, gave rise to the kind of 'hate mail' from outraged feminists that she had earlier described in her 1974 essay in *Esquire*, 'Somebody Out There Hates Me'."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman
Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart
(U Texas 1990) ix-xi, 90-91, 157, 190, 231, 293-94, 300-03, 310

"Under her father's influence, she developed the taste for the incongruous textures of language that became a hallmark of her virtuosic style. She learned some Latin, read his favorite highbrow and lowbrow authors, and pored over the dictionary, cultivating a vocabulary as exotic and as colloquial as his. By high school she had also cultivated a tone of arch irony and a prose of strident individualism rather like her father's. (Even in elementary school, she apparently took pains to stand out, and John Stafford was the inspiration)....Writing about her recent past--her college and German adventures--she had found herself struggling unsuccessfully to overcome a solipsistic self-loathing....

That division [oppositions in irony] was reflected in Stafford's style as well as her themes. In the course of the story ["The Interior Castle"], her prose underwent a striking transformation. She opened in an abstract, discursive, rather mandarin style, but by the second section, she had shifted to concrete, imagistic language and was inclining toward a colloquial tone. It was an evolution entailed by the shifting focus of her subject matter. The first section, as the patient lay undisturbed in her bed, was introspective and meditative. The second, when she was ambushed by the doctor and his knives, was interactive and dramatic. But the shift was itself also part of the subject matter, for in probing the place of the self in the world, the story also probed the role of language in linking the mind to physical and metaphysical reality.

The Latinate discursiveness of the first half ["The Interior Castle"] conveyed a *mistrust of metaphor* [?], an insecurity about how to relate the subjective and the objective, the abstract and the concrete [Give an example. Italics added.] The ungainly grasping after, yet holding back from, analogy or allegory often resulted in heavy obscurity--the 'words, merely' problem that was all too familiar to Stafford: 'The steadfast plant was like an allegory of her body in which comfort followed pain in progression syncopated with retrogression. [It is the critic, not the author, who is obscure, ungainly and grasping, because she discerns *none* of Stafford's allegories.] The sameness of her occupation was, indeed, as unrelieved as the winter sky, yet she was not so mournful as the scene, nor was the protracted interruption of her activity suitable to arbitrary categorizing.'

Stafford's discovery in the second half of the story was an increasing confidence in concrete detail as a vehicle for metaphysical meaning. She had set herself perhaps the most difficult challenge of all in the use of metaphor: to give expression to pain--that is, to find for the most subjective of experiences some objective form. It meant venturing out onto the poetic verges of metaphor, as she did in her geometric allusions. As important, it meant creating a more solid, prosaic, context to set off those poetic excursions. Stafford was inspired to a mixture of the mandarin and the mundane, of elevated and lowly diction and imagery, which came to be a staple of her style....In 'The Interior Castle' Stafford took the advice that Evelyn Scott had offered years earlier, dispensing with much of the Latinate abstraction and refining the concrete description of the protagonist's ordeal. It was the author of *The Mountain Lion* at work, letting symbols emerge naturally from specifics, making an abstraction like pain speak through physical details; with unerring intensity, she worked metaphor and simile hard....

Stafford may well have conceived of [*In the Snowfall*] as the fulfillment of the aim she announced in an interview not long after it was published. Her ultimate goal, she said, was to 'fuse the two manners' of her first two very different novels--that is, to blend the 'leisurely...embroidered, contemplative, old-fashioned' style of *Boston Adventure* and the more symbolic approach of *The Mountain Lion* [Stafford is *consistently* symbolic]. On the surface she did just that. Stafford's serpentinely introspective prose, which had become even more elaborate than in her first novel, wound its way to a symbolic ending, which was even more freighted than Molly's end in *The Mountain Lion*. The refined diction of the elegant Katharine, more arch than the Bostonian argot, was juxtaposed with the almost caricatured rustic talk of the local folk....

Her strategy in the Colorado stories is a stark contrast to *The Catherine Wheel*. Where her baroque manner predominated in that book in almost exaggerated form [example?], she drew on her *Mountain Lion* style for the central group of stories she wrote during the 1950s....Her virtuosic style was ideally suited to capturing the nuances of speech, and in these stories she found a way to make language itself one of her main subjects, without succumbing to mere surface preoccupation with style....[Give us an example of a "mere surface preoccupation with style."] By then ["Maggie Meriwether's Rich Experience," 1955] Stafford had already shown how to tell the tale with a display of her stylistic repertoire. She mocked the varieties of vacuous chatter, relishing the occasion for exotic words, serpentine sentences (she opened with a ten-line extravaganza, colloquialisms, and daringly manipulated similes and metaphors.... Twain's spirit and his satiric, colloquial American voice preside over her juvenilia, the short stories about Adams, Colorado, of her middle career, and some of the journalism of her last years....

To demonstrate a new stylistic austerity, she sent on some fragments from a story about a cat run over by a car: 'Well, I don't know if you can get any idea about what it's about, but that's the style I'm using which in comparison to the rest of my stuff is as pristine as Hemingway'....'I realize that...words, merely, unsupported by thought or action are utterly dull....It is funny and insofar as possible I am going to keep it on the comic side as I feel that is healthier and probably a more effective vehicle for satire....She had been reading Joyce almost obsessively, and this influence lay behind some of the 'genuine merits' of the manuscript as well as its excesses [unpublished *Autumn Festival*]. Stafford was still readily carried away by abstract 'words merely,' seduced by their sound as much as by their meaning, but she was also striving for greater concreteness and often attaining it.

Working her way out of the old loose introspection, she displayed a new, if sometimes less-than-nuanced, concern for form....'I worked 7 months on the suicide story and it, I was proud of, but although the style was sustained and the rhythm carried, it lacked, still, much precision and all imagery. But the present one--you remember my queer room daydream--is almost successful, though it is awkward. It is obscure, allegorical, and the prose is loaded'...

By setting up a doppelganger relation between Sonie and Hope--two black sheep, one the insider, one the outsider--she found a way to have both drama and detachment in her story's plot and in her protagonist's psyche. It was a structural and thematic strategy she used again in her fiction after *Boston Adventure*...The successful balance between carefully structured patterns of symbolic imagery and density of specific detail was doubtless the product of Stafford's endless revisions, begun under the auspices of the Tates....In 'The Darkening Moon,' Stafford turned to a dramatically different terrain and style, harbingers of the texture of *The Mountain Lion* and of Stafford's subsequent Colorado stories....Stafford's progress...had been steadily

away from the 'words, merely' difficulty of her early unpublished efforts. In her stories of 1944 and 1945, which introduced her major protagonists--disoriented old women, lonely young women, sensitive but stalwart children, uneasy expatriates--she was taming some of the Proustian ornamentation that had *cluttered* parts of *Boston Adventure.* [Example of "clutter"? Italics added.] She was perfecting her gift for the well-selected detail with symbolic resonance, and she was working at mixing more colloquial cadences into her Jamesian style...

Though she emphasized the contrast, Stafford recognized that her second novel did not represent transformation in her as a writer. On the contrary, she felt that the two books expressed two poles of her imagination, equally important. 'What I would like eventually to do, is to fuse the two manners.' From James she had traveled to Twain, an incongruous pair of models who had seen nothing in each other but in both of whom Stafford found a great deal. *The Mountain Lion* was Stafford's emphatically American book. She had discovered a colloquial voice that could barely be glimpsed in the elegance of her earlier prose, and she had perfected her gift for staging small epiphanies in her choice of concrete details. In her trim new novel she let those details do their work and dispensed with the discursive integuments she had favored in *Boston Adventure*. She was 'less inclined...towards some of those baroque effects that we talked about in connection with the first book.'...'Digression is integral to my style. Parenthesis is my middle name,' she lectured Shana Alexander at *McCall's.* 'I have been assiduously at work on my style for a great many years. Style is the morality of language, and I look upon myself as a moral writer.'...

[*The Mountain Lion*] is a 'double bildungsroman'--the intertwining stories of siblings who journey from childhood union to adolescent conflict to a final resolution, in this case tragic. For Stafford, this pairing was a variation on the device of doubling that already in her first novel had been a key to dramatizing the idiosyncratic development of her autobiographical protagonist. Both Nathan and Hope served as foils to Sonie, characters who lived out alternate fates while she watched from the sidelines, frustrated--and yet also in her peculiar, self-punishing was fulfilled--by her own marginal status....Doubling was the principle of the entire, studiously symmetrical novel--which itself was a curiously inverted reflection of her first novel....[In "The Echo and the Nemesis"] 'Sue and Ramona are mirror images, through a glass darkly, indeed very darkly, a dual person and so of course also one'....The basic dichotomy of *The Mountain Lion* was between the Bonney merchants and the Kenyon men, between effete California and rugged Colorado. The division oriented the world for Ralph and Molly...The novel traced their troubled shuttling between two poles--between their tame California home and the Colorado ranch....It was the redskin-paleface distinction of *Boston Adventure* viewed this time from the Twainian, rather than the Jamesian, perspective. And this time the raw frontier won out over the cultivated city....

Toward the end of 1947, Stafford began her decade long close association with *The New Yorker*, a world away in sensibility from the *Partisan Review* and the quarterlies....Her specialty became meticulously crafted short stories, renowned for their stylistic and structural polish, for their mercilessly ironic, detached treatment of states of alienation. She was moving further and further from *Boston Adventure*, her sprawling debut....*A Winter's Tale* is high historical drama. Yet the prose was in the cool style of Stafford's maturity... It showed how she had modulated the paired themes of the sadistic tyrant and the masochistic outsider, desperate to belong and seeking in vain for real love....[In drafts of the unpublished *The State of Grace*] Stafford let loose with language that mixed the baroque convolution of her earliest style and the intense, symbolic concreteness of her later prose....

Stafford relished incongruity in these stories, turning it into comedy that was mirthful precisely because it wasn't reflexive. She had the distance to make the most of juxtapositions and tensions that had once seemed threatening. And in writing about language, she was in a sense commenting on her own stylistic experiments, her effort to intermix the polished and the colloquial, to avoid precious refinement in the first and facile contrivance in the second. Her stories reflect an appreciation of the ways in which style can betray its supposed masters. Pretensions don't last long: appearances can be deceiving, but the way people sound tells more than they may want others to know--or than others may want to know....

She continued to write about language and commented intermittently on the women's movement. (Her most celebrated pieces were a little diatribe against the use of 'Ms.' for the *New York Times* and an article for the same paper entitled 'Women as Chattels, Men as Chumps,' in which she declared that 'the fustian

and the hollering...The strident jokelessness attendant on the movement are woefully unpropitious because they obfuscate a good many justified grievances,' such as unequal pay.)....

During the 1950s she wrote one more novel, *The Catherine Wheel*, a circumscribed exploration of mental and emotional isolation, but her specialty became meticulously crafted short stories, renowned for their stylistic and structural polish, for their mercilessly ironic, detached treatment of states of alienation. She was moving further and further from *Boston Adventure*, her sprawling debut. By the last third of the 1950s, she had encountered a block and all but stopped publishing fiction."

Ann Hulbert
The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford
(Knopf 1992) 13, 19, 59, 96-7, 118-19, 128-9, 140, 156, 163, 190, 197-8, 200-01,
240, 251, 276, 286, 293, 296, 303-04, 333, 361, 365-66

"When one settles down to read Jean Stafford's novels and stories one advisedly has a dictionary--a big dictionary--close by. For she was a literary artist in the most literal sense. Her most profound and her wittiest effects alike are got through words, themselves. And her remarkable diction, her complicated syntax, her elaborate sentence structure all spilled over into her conversation (if it wasn't, as a matter of fact, the other way around) and were to some degree responsible for making her conversation the delight it was. In life--as a conversationalist, that is--she sometimes seemed at once the most articulate and the most inarticulate person one can imagine. She seemed to talk, as she sometimes seemed to write (in retrospect it is often difficult to distinguish between the two)--seemed to talk or write round and round a subject, dazzling you with her diction; but finally when she stopped (and it was hard to stop her) you realized that somewhere back there in her discourse she had penetrated the tough integument (as she might have put it) and touched the core of truth she had been probing for, had done so without your ever having realized that she had got to the heart of the matter. It was as though she wished always to conceal anything in her narrative so vulgar as mere purposefulness--her narrative spoken or written. Sometimes it was only in retrospect, and long after the conversation or the story was finished, that you saw what she had been saying. And somehow her statement was the more effective because of that.

In life Jean was, in a sense, always playing a role. She had many roles, roles like those in her written fiction--a grande dame, a plain spoken old maid, a country girl from the West, a spoiled rich woman, her diction always changing to fit the role. And sometimes she played the role of a writer, a woman writer. This surely entailed as much playacting as the other roles. For it no more represented the real Jean than did those other roles, although many people--allegedly sophisticated people--mistook her play-pretend Manhattan bluestocking for the literary genius who wrote under the name of Jean Stafford. Actually, what she was like when she sat down to write her wondrous novels and stories may be something beyond the comprehension of any of us. In a sense, her literary personality remains her best kept secret. Perhaps it was in that role that she was the most private of private persons, and perhaps, in order to preserve that role, it was necessary for her to have the privacy she was always seeking."

Peter Taylor
Jean Stafford:A Study of the Short Fiction
ed. Mary Ann Wilson (Twayne 1996) 153-54

"The following selections cover more than 30 years of critical commentary on Jean Stafford's short fiction, ranging from one of the earliest critical assessments, by Ihad Hassan in 1955, to one of the most recent, by Bruce Bawer in 1988. Concluding this section are two personal reminiscences of Stafford, written after her death by her friends Dorothea Straus and Peter Taylor.

I have attempted to give a range of critical stances and approaches indicative of their time periods: Olga Vickery's 1962 article, for example, places Stafford in the tradition of the great ironists who saw human nature as radically alienated; Charles Eisinger's 1963 essay links Stafford to a distinctly American literary tradition of symbolists like Hawthorne and Melville; Sid Jenson's 1973 study examines the two images of the West emerging in Stafford's fiction. Joyce Carol Oates's 1979 essay studies Stafford's contribution to the short story genre, then enjoying somewhat of a renaissance; Philip Stevick's 1981 study of post-realist fiction and the tradition preceding it compares Stafford's artfully crafted stories, with their solidly grounded portrayals of character and place, to the fiction of writers like Barth and Coover, whose fictional techniques

identify them as distinctly postmodern; Melody Graulich's 1983 article treats the archetypal male myth of the West as it is reflected in Stafford's fiction; Maureen Ryan's 1987 critical study of the entire Stafford canon places her in a distinctly female literary tradition.

Interspersed with the criticism are reviews of *Bad Characters* and *Collected Stories*, by Jerome Mazzaro, Guy Davenport, and Mary Hegel Wagner which ironically note both Stafford's reluctance to incorporate broad social or philosophical issues of her day into her fiction and the corresponding timelessness her work evokes. Without exception, critics praised Stafford's searingly honest portrayals of human nature, her deft and sensitive use of language, her incisive wit. More contemporary critics also note her links with other women writers who treat women's powerlessness and marginality in a patriarchal culture. Inevitably, each literary generation reenvisions and recontextualizes the work of earlier writers, finding in the work of literary artists like Jean Stafford signs of their own cultural and social predicament. The fact that readers and critics continue to discover and admire Jean Stafford's fiction testifies to her abiding capacity to entertain, surprise, and illuminate....

Like her early mentor James Joyce--and his literary descendants the New Critics--Stafford came to believe in the value and necessity of form as a way of harnessing inchoate experience. Stafford criticism consistently notes that she imposes on her fiction an order and structure--a timelessness--gratefully at odds with her shifting fortunes. Her own troubled life perhaps strengthened her belief in another major tenet of New Criticism, the impersonality of the writer. Having been cautioned by Ford Madox Ford about the dangers of writing too close to life, Stafford would struggled with this autobiographical impulse throughout her life, writing several novels in manuscript dealing with painful events from her college years, such as the suicide of Lucy Cooke, a close friend, and working...throughout her life on an autobiographical novel, *The Parliament of Women*, which she never finished. Her last two published stories are excerpted from this unfinished text. Clearly, her best stories evidence an ironic detachment from the merely personal and contain instead a healthy dose of the aesthetic distance the New Critics counseled....

It is perhaps fitting that the magazine the young Jean Stafford wrote so earnestly about in her journals as the epitome of eastern sophistication should, by 1978, have published 22 of her short stories....What has since become known as the typical *New Yorker* story: one that de-emphasizes plot and focuses instead on nuances of character and situation....But the range and variety of writers and stories appearing in the magazine, as well as the variety of writers and stories appearing in the magazine, as well as the variety of Stafford's *New Yorker* pieces, belie such a formulaic label. As Stafford would attest...there is not such thing as a *New Yorker* story. She went on to enumerate such diverse writers as John Cheever, J. D. Salinger, Isaac Singer, William Faulkner, and Flannery O'Connor--maintaining that such distinctive voices make it ridiculous to speak of a generic *New Yorker* story....Perpetually insecure about her provincial childhood and frightened of the New York literati whose withering cocktail party banter she had witnessed firsthand, Stafford graced approval and desperately needed encouragement from a woman like [her editor] Katherine White....

Like her contemporary and sometime mentor, Caroline Gordon, Stafford paradoxically both devalued her work and resisted the essentializing label of 'woman writer'...If topics concerning women emerge from Stafford's fiction--and they do--they were always secondary in her mind to both the human dilemma the works dramatize and the aesthetic problems such as character consistency a particular story poses.... Stafford's women rarely triumph. Instead, they compromise, fall prey to illusion, or resign themselves to a life of loneliness and alienation: Angelica Early in 'The End of a Career' sees growing old as the end of her life as a beauty; Beatrice Trueblood in 'Beatrice Trueblood's Story' capitulates to a loveless marriage, even the young Sue Ledbetter in 'The Echo and the Nemesis,' though she escapes physically from her, is haunted by the memory of her grotesquely fat, demented roommate....Stafford kills off her intellectually precocious young Molly in *The Mountain Lion*, unable to envision a future for the budding writer. Permeating all of Stafford's works is the lingering question of identity or self-authentication in a largely inhospitable, unloving world....Though Jean Stafford's primary focus in her short stories was on them marginalized lives of girls and women, her male characters often confront the same cruel limitations."

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Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 3-7, 107-08

Michael Hollister (2020)