FEMINISTS ASSAULT JEAN STAFFORD

(1915-1979)

Though once both a bestseller and a star in the *New Yorker*, Stafford is underrated and neglected today because of the decline in literary analysis since Feminists took over English departments in 1970 and the literary publishing industry in the 1980s. Identity and political beliefs replaced literary merit as criteria of value, devaluing all the best women writers. Stafford is too independent, subtle, complex and deep for Feminist critics, who lack a knowledge of aesthetics and literary history.

REDUCING HER TO A VICTIMIZED "WOMAN WRITER"

"Stafford did not see herself as a feminist, and she made some rather harsh remarks about aspects of the contemporary feminist movement, which, among other things, she said, 'attracted hordes of Dumb Doras ...and common scolds...' The central characters, the girls and women, are usually portrayed as *powerless victims*--of their poverty or of their wealth, of rejection by people they love, of the roles into which *society forces them*, of the devalued status of divorcees and even widows, of their own deep anger at their powerless state, of their inability to act, of all these things internalized as self-hatred. Often the relationship to the father is crucial; it is usually ambivalent and sometimes hostile. The orphan, often fatherless, sometimes motherless, is a dominant character type. [False generalization: Does not apply to the heroines of *Boston Adventure* or *The Catherine Wheel*, who are spiritually triumphant. Italics added.]

The best case in point is the changing evaluation of *The Mountain Lion*, the novel that has received the most critical attention....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....Stuart L. Burns evaluates it from the thematic criterion of 'the two possible alternatives of alienation or adaptation.' His conclusion suggests that he finds Ralph's adaptation more tragic than Molly's alienation: 'Miss Stafford has depicted the disastrous fate Burns apparently fails to recognize that, because Molly is female, the options for her adaptation are so limited that they are meaningless to her....In two articles, Blanche H. Gelfant has extended Auchincloss's evaluation of Molly's death to assert that Molly must die, not simply because of her virginal innocence, but because she is also female. Gelfant writes: 'Her death is demanded by the great masculine myth of the West--a symbolic place: where boys like Ralph become men, and girls like Molly become not only extraneous and intrusive, but actually threatening to the ritual of male initiation.'

Gelfant's recognition of the importance of the difference in gender of the central characters in the novel is developed further in the two most recent articles on *The Mountain Lion*. Melody Graulich opens her discussion of the novel and of the story 'Bad Characters' with the following general statement: 'Much of Stafford's fiction explores the consequences of rigid sex roles. In her three novels...and in some of her best stories, she shows the price women pay for wearing enforced social masks which deface their inner selves... Stafford's women rebel only indirectly, and often self-destructively....[They] are often too self-effaced to assert a self apart from social norms....They nurture [their real selves] in a private world of alienation....' Graulich goes on, however, to make the particular point of her essay, that Stafford's girls rebel as long as they dare against these norms. Using Stafford's own distinctions of the 'noble' (female) and 'wicked' (male) West [This is reductive Feminism, not Stafford, who obviously does not deify all women and demonize all men like this critic.]

Graulich points out that although Ralph and Molly are almost identical in every way as children, 'her basic identity is unacceptable, denied' in both the stereotyped male and female worlds of the West: 'Independent, alienated, outspoken, and ugly, she is everything a 'noble' woman should not be. Her very presence produces social awkwardness. Even her strengths become weaknesses....Molly's rebellious individualism would seem to make her a natural candidate for membership in the wicked West. And yet again--over and over again--she is rejected....' Rejected for what she is ('wicked') and unable to conform to the role expected of her ('noble'), she is killed off by Stafford because 'she is a misfit who has no wilderness, no territory, to run to.'

Barbara A. White forthrightly states the central issue of *The Mountain Lion*--as it *must be* viewed in the context of Stafford's *primary subject* matter [italics added]...Why is Molly a misfit and Ralph a candidate for initiation? Although the gender of the two protagonists has been ignored, it is essential in the novel that Molly is female and Ralph male....The action of the book would not make sense if the protagonists were two boys. Stafford shows us clearly that because Molly and Ralph are of different sexes, the conditions of their lives and the fates which they may expect are also different.' White concludes: 'Ralph accepts initiation because manhood gives him privileges. Molly resists not growth in general, but growth to womanhood, a devalued state.'

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh
Jean Stafford
(Twayne 1985) Preface, 85-91

Jean Stafford and a "Female Literary Tradition"

"The enduring subject of Stafford's short fiction is the lives of girls and women from childhood to old age and the fears and anxieties they suffer at every stage. (Stafford wrote only nine stories with boys or men as central characters, and she included only two of these in her *Collected Stories*.)...Though she continued to resist the label 'woman writer' and objected to any identification of her work as part of a female literary tradition, in her own life and art she continually examined issues central to the female subject in modern and contemporary settings....

Jean Stafford came of age among a generation of literary women, for whom the study of gender construction was not as central as it has since become and to whom the idea of a female literary tradition was only beginning to make itself heard. Certainly, Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* and Carson McCullers's *Ballad of the Sad Cafe* or *Member of the Wedding*, as well as Jean Stafford's *Boston Adventure* and *The Mountain Lion*, all anticipate later feminist issues of female self-definition, powerlessness, and socially constructed gender roles, but for the most part female contemporaries of Jean Stafford were writing out of a *male* modernist tradition [Feminists dis-empower the best women writers by attributing all literary theory and influence to men. Standard among illiterate Feminist critics, this is a sexist failure to recognize the contributions of the best women writers of the 20th century.] and in the case of writers such as Stafford, Caroline Gordon, and Mary McCarthy, were literally married to central figures in the tradition. [Italics added.]

Stafford, in her later years, would in fact rail against aspects of the incipient women's movement, focusing on insignificant details such as the use of 'Ms.' or genderless nouns and pronouns, or writing a scathing review of Simone de Beauvoir's *Les Belles Images* (1968), maintaining that it was precisely the kind of work to elicit the pejorative label 'woman writer' from male critics. Further, she pointedly allies herself to male literary models, Mark Twain and Henry James, rarely acknowledging any debt to other women writers. [Feminist critics do not understand why *none* of the best women writers want to be reduced to "women writers" in a separate tradition from the best male writers. Aesthetics transcend gender. Feminist critics subordinate aesthetics to politics and identity.]

Yet as Ann Hulbert's recent biography of Stafford points out, though she rejected the label 'woman writer' and 'anything that might be described as a feminine literary tradition,' Stafford was constantly and painfully aware of 'the pressures that male influence and expectation exerted on her.' Like her contemporary and sometime mentor, Caroline Gordon, Stafford paradoxically both devalued her work and resisted the essentializing label of 'woman writer,' often deflecting her own confusion about her chosen vocation onto easy targets like the women's movement. Perhaps it is fair to speculate that the literary audience Stafford envisioned for her works was thus emphatically male, though satisfying even this exacting male audience was not enough, as Jeans' 1947 letter to Robert Lowell indicates. After hearing Randall Jarrell's praise for her second novel, *The Mountain Lion*. Stafford wrote to Lowell, 'Why should it console me to be praised as a good writer?... [T]here is no thing worse for a woman than to be deprived of her womanliness. For me, there is nothing worse than the knowledge that life holds nothing for me but being a writer.' Such painfully self-effacing statements reveal a profound ambivalence about her literary vocation on both the personal and the professional levels. 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.

Limited by their creator's own historical shortsightedness [Feminist insult], 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. Sonie Marburg in *Boston Adventure* laments the fact that she is a woman, yearning for the intellectual freedom her friend Nathan seems to possess. Perhaps more to the point, 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. That the forms this self-authentication takes are invariably grounded in the female experience demonstrates Jean Stafford's concern with issues contemporary feminist theory has yet to resolve. As Maureen Ryan aptly notes, Stafford uses woman as a vehicle or symbol for the universal angst she dramatizes.'

[This Feminist alleges that the women in Stafford's fiction "rarely triumph." She complains for example that Sonie Marburg lacks intellectual freedom, failing to notice that Sonie is the fictional author of *Boston Adventure*, that she is free to depict all the characters, triumphs with her satire, far exceeds her occupational goal and becomes well educated and wise, as evident in her narrative and style. Contrary to this critic, Sonie is proof that Stafford can and did "envision a future" for a budding woman writer. Most important, her novel is an allegory of spiritual progress to salvation, as manifest when she tells Miss Pride that she wants to start attending church. Another obvious female triumph in Stafford's fiction is Katharine Congreve's spectacular redemption at the end of *The Catherine Wheel*. To a Christian such as Stafford, there is no greater triumph than eternal life through Christ. But this is no triumph to Feminists because they reject God as the epitome of "patriarchy." The atheism of Feminists blinds them to spiritual triumphs in literature, as do their lack of literary education--they do not recognize allegory for example--their ignorance of figurative language, and their literal-minded identity politics.]

Typically, the girls and women in Stafford's fictional western world test the limits of what Melody Graulich describes as the 'rigid sex roles' imposed by the West. rebelling against conventions and traditions they consider inhibiting. Yet not surprisingly, it is her younger heroines like Emily Vanderpool who are most successful in their rebellions. When we encounter older versions of these independent, feisty girls, they are resigned, beaten down by experience, and more like the passive victims we see elsewhere in Stafford's fictional world. Daisy and her sister in Stafford's prizewinning 'In the Zoo' (1953) are mere shadows compared to their youthful counterpart Emily. Stafford's ambivalence toward the West effectively subverts the frontier myth animating so much of American literature; her heroines, past childhood, rarely have a chance to start over. Instead, they compromise, accommodate, and simply accept the confinements of a life remembered against what seems to them the inhuman landscape of the West....

In two articles, Blanche H. Gelfant has extended Auchincloss's evaluation of Molly's death to assert that Molly must die, not simply because of her virginal innocence, but because she is also female. Gelfant writes: 'Her death is demanded by the great masculine myth of the West--a symbolic place: where boys like Ralph become men, and girls like Molly become not only extraneous and intrusive, but actually threatening to the ritual of male initiation.' Gelfant also poses an answer to Molly's own death wish, which she finds in Molly's appraisal of her ugliness. Gelfant proposes that 'Molly's life is blighted by her looks; and her character is demoralized by her acceptance of society's judgment [and Stafford's] that her looks are ugly.... Finally hating herself for the same reasons others hate her, because she assaults their sense of female beauty, she wants to erase herself from view, to disappear, to die. Though she is precocious, ambitious, critical, and discerning, her talents go to waste; her epitaph is "trash."

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stories, she shows the price women pay for wearing enforced social masks which deface their inner selves... Stafford's women rebel only indirectly, and often self-destructively....[They] are often too self-effaced to assert a self apart from social norms....They nurture [their real selves] in a private world of alienation....Graulich goes on, however, to make the particular point of her essay, that Stafford's girls rebel as long as they dare against these norms.

[Some] scholars, mining the feminist-despite-herself vein, have saluted Stafford for her 'exploration of what it means to be female' and her resentment of 'the patriarchal society's iniquities against the vulnerable.' Stafford's writing, however, is essentially neither regional nor feminist. Like her heroes Twain, Proust, and James, she took the human condition as her subject....Although Stafford derided the ideologies of the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s in her later years, in her fiction she treated issues of female self-definition, powerlessness, and marginality with remarkable sensitivity. Though she continued to resist the label 'woman writer' and objected to any identification of her work as part of a female literary tradition, in her own life and art she continually examined issues central to the female subject in modern and contemporary settings....

Stafford, in her later years, would in fact rail against aspects of the incipient women's movement, focusing on insignificant details such as the use of 'Ms.' or genderless nouns and pronouns, or writing a scathing review of Simone de Beauvoir's *Les Belles Images* (1968), maintaining that it was precisely the kind of work to elicit the pejorative label 'woman writer' from male critics. Further, she pointedly allies herself to male literary models, Mark Twain and Henry James, rarely acknowledging any debt to other women writers. [Feminist critics do not understand why *none* of the best women writers want to be reduced to "women writers" in a separate tradition from the best male writers. Aesthetics transcend gender. Feminist critics subordinate aesthetics to politics and identity.]

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Limited by their creator's own historical shortsightedness [Feminist insult], Stafford's women rarely triumph [false]. 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. Sonie Marburg in *Boston Adventure* laments the fact that she is a woman, yearning for the intellectual freedom her friend Nathan seems to possess. Perhaps more to the point, 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. That the forms this self-authentication takes are invariably grounded in the female experience demonstrates Jean Stafford's concern with issues contemporary feminist theory has yet to resolve. As Maureen Ryan aptly notes, Stafford uses woman as a vehicle or symbol for the universal angst she dramatizes.'

Mary Anne Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) xi-xiv, 3-8, 20-21, 30-32, 45-46, 60, 66

REBUTTAL TO FEMINISTS

This Feminist, Wilson, alleges that the women in Stafford's fiction "rarely triumph." She complains for example that Sonie Marburg lacks intellectual freedom, failing to notice that Sonie is the fictional author of *Boston Adventure*, that she is free to depict all the characters, triumphs with her satire, far exceeds her

occupational goal and becomes well educated and wise, as evident in her narrative and style. Contrary to this critic, Sonie is proof that Stafford can and did "envision a future" for a budding woman writer. Most important, her novel is an allegory of spiritual progress to salvation, as manifest when she tells Miss Pride that she wants to start attending church. Another obvious female triumph in Stafford's fiction is Katharine Congreve's spectacular redemption at the end of *The Catherine Wheel*. To a Christian such as Stafford, there is no greater triumph than eternal life through Christ. But this is no triumph to Feminists because they reject God as the epitome of "patriarchy." The atheism of Feminists blinds them to spiritual triumphs in literature, as do their lack of literary education--they do not recognize allegory for example--their ignorance of figurative language, and their literal-minded identity politics.

All three of Stafford's novels are realistic Christian allegories of salvation, all ending with the deaths of tragic females--one adolescent, one young and one older: the suicidal Hopestill Mather dies unredeemed, Katherine Congreve redeems herself in an act of self-sacrificial charity, and poor Molly Fawcett is a child very likely to be forgiven by a merciful God. Some of Stafford's short stories also are religious allegories, including "The Interior Castle," "Between the Porch and the Altar," "Life Is No Abyss," and "A Reading Problem." Most critics, especially the Feminists, have missed virtually all of the religious implications that constitute the vision of Stafford. None have explicated the allegories.

"The Interior Castle"

Again the critics try to void the religious implications in the story. Eisinger does not even acknowledge the religious title from St. Teresa, saying that Stafford merely reaches "far down into the recesses of the human personality." Personality? Walsh stops analyzing the religious theme after quoting the Gnostic line about knowledge being the same as the saint's achievement of pure love, perverting Stafford into a heretic. Goodman acknowledges that the story derives from St. Teresa, who described the soul as a pearl, but she reduces the religious theme to mere psychology: "The story is a meditation on the loss of innocence and the violation of selfhood." Wilson, another Feminist, *reverses* the religious meanings of the story, claiming that Stafford subverts religious mysticism, turning it to secular purposes" with the Gnostic line that knowledge is the same as mystical pure love. She finds Stafford guilty of "a savage perversion of a sacramental ritual, with unmistakable sexual overtones": This critic sees a "sexual subtext" in Pansy's pain when the doctor whispers to her in "the voice of a lover." The reference to Jacob's ladder is taken to mean that Pansy gets turned on sexually by her agony--she is "perversely masochistic."

Ann Hulbert is the only critic to pursue the religious theme, acknowledging the influence of St. Teresa: "The progression loosely followed Teresa's *Interior Castle*" as describing "the route to salvation"..."the path to God." Stafford "began to convert her from a psychological to a spiritual perspective on her plight." But then Hulbert merely generalizes vaguely that "Stafford's story was the map of her formative efforts to find some accommodation between writing and religion." Hulbert does not explain Stafford's map, she draws her own: *This atheist critic denies that Stafford affirms religious faith*: "Faith eluded her." Then why did Stafford use the same title and focal metaphor and allegorical development as a Christian saint? Hulbert also trashes *The Catherine Wheel*, which likewise refers to the experience of a Christian saint. *All three* of Stafford's novels are realistic Christian allegories of progress toward salvation.

To support her atheist misinterpretation Hulbert abandons the text and switches from Stafford's primary focus on the *spirit*, which a believer can trust, to the *imagination*, which no one can trust: "The imagination granted vision, but it also increased vulnerability. To see into the alien world was not necessarily to master it; to be at its mercy was perhaps more likely. The imagination threatened entrapment at the same time that it promised transcendence." Hulbert argues that Pansy rejects her mystical vision because it is scary, that the spiritual dimension is an "alien world" to be avoided, that her soul is just a figment of her imagination, and that the interior castle is meaningless. Hulbert is handicapped as a critic not only by her materialism and subjective inattention to significant detail contrary to her own beliefs, but by her aversion to allegory because she cannot understand it, for which she blames Stafford, awkwardly: "the ungainly grasping after, yet holding back from [?], analogy or allegory often resulted in heavy obscurity." Behind this accusation of incompetence against a master of fiction is the arrogant critic's own ungainly grasping after the meanings of a text beyond her comprehension, resulting in heavy obscurity.

The Mountain Lion

Stuart L. Burns is a representative critic in summarizing the novel: "The real tragedy in *The Mountain Lion* is that, in order to achieve self-realization in a changing society, the individual must compromise or deny those very qualities which constitute the self." After Barbara A. White protested that "the gender of the two protagonists has been ignored," Feminist critics thundered into the novel like a posse out to arrest "the great masculine myth of the West" that "excludes Molly completely." So Charlotte Margolis Goodman complains: "Blanche Gelfant, Barbara White, Melody Graulich, Mary Ellen Williams Walsh, and I have all focused on gender issues in this novel....*The Mountain Lion* contrasts the coming of age of a male and a female character in a patriarchal society."

The trouble with this Feminist argument is that until age 12, Molly is raised in a *matriarchal* household dominated by her overbearing mother and older sisters. The females oppress Molly more than the males do. Likewise, Ralph has more reason to complain of oppression by females than Molly has of oppression by males: "At Grandpa [Kenyon's] place they could have done what they pleased." Molly develops mental problems long before she goes to the patriarchal ranch in Colorado and they were caused more by her mother than by "a patriarchal society." Her father is dead. And she was born with what she hates most about herself. Nature is more the villain than nurture.

As Ann Hulbert says, "It is a mistake to read the novel in programmatically feminist terms, as critics have been increasingly inclined to do (to Stafford's evident impatience, judging from her marginal comments on one such reading--a reconsideration of the novel in *The New Republic* in 1975)....Stafford was interested in the broader social and sexual implications of her story." To her credit, Hulbert notices that "Stafford gave plenty of evidence that had Ralph been the poetic one of the pair, the predicament would not necessarily have been any easier. A creative, reclusive boy on Uncle Claude's ranch would have violated expectations even more dramatically than Molly did....It was not clear that Ralph would have met with much more approval had he displayed a similarly idiosyncratic imagination and vocational obsession." She argues that "Molly was not simply a victimized female, a misfit crushed by society's narrow expectations of feminine development. This was a portrait of the artist as a young girl....If the novel had a message, it was that the cost of growing up female and artistic was far greater than the cost of being a boy ready to make his peace with a conventional future." Mary Ann Wilson adds that "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....And Maureen Ryan aptly notes that "Stafford uses woman as a vehicle or symbol for the universal angst she dramatizes."

Frederick R. Karl, an atheist, relates the mountain lion not to Christianity but to paganism: She "is like a golden god....She is his Golden Fleece." The Feminist Mary Ellen Williams Walsh likewise misses the point: "Their sighting of the lion at Christmas and at Easter underscores the ritual nature that the hunt has taken on for Ralph." She does not explain the relationship of the ritual to Christianity in the novel. In fact, the vague phrase "ritual nature" is applied only to Ralph's perception and avoids relating the meanings of Christmas and Easter to the thematic context of the novel.

Ann Hulbert is the only critic to pursue the religious theme, mentioning that Sonie in *Boston Adventure* "decided that religion might hold out hope for her." But Hulbert's focus on autobiography diverts her from a closer analysis of *The Mountain Lion*. She minimizes the religious content of this novel, claiming that Stafford "evidently had difficulty drawing from her more immediate, mature life of religious and marital turmoil." Hulbert remarks that the "hunt for the golden mountain lion...had become [Ralph's] and Uncle Claude's grail," but she does not relate the grail to the rest of the novel nor to Christianity.

Hulbert recognizes that "Molly was determined to deny the corrupt world of the flesh" and that "her bathing ritual...was religious in spirit." It was a "religious retreat"...."Her regimen was straight from a medieval nunnery"...She "wanted to waste away to spirit. Stafford once again blended religious and psychological perspectives on her character's spiritual, social, and sexual alienation. Molly was the austere novitiate...the fanatic creative soul and the confused adolescent....Molly's category of 'fatness,' which applied to the rest of the world--all body and no mind--was...a metaphor with well-established religious and psychological associations. St. Teresa's style and teachings seemed to lurk behind Stafford's portrait of

asceticism. *In the ongoing war between the flesh and the spirit, the world and the word, the concrete and the abstract, Stafford, like Teresa, was a committed materialist* as she wielded her pen. The flesh must be acknowledged in all its grossness and weakness." [acknowledged, not preferred] St. Teresa was a Christian mystic, not a "materialist." Nor was Stafford. Here the critic imposes her atheism and reverses the meaning of the novel, denying that Stafford is religious, claiming that she affirms the Flesh over the Spirit. Hulbert is guilty of the "fatness"--lack of soul--that Molly and Stafford detest. [Italics added]

Hulbert reduces the religious content of the novel to the asceticism of the dedicated artist and does not relate it to the mountain lion nor acknowledge Stafford's implicit affirmation of Christianity as her own "perspective." When her Christian perspective becomes most obvious in her fiction, in *The Catherine Wheel,* the atheist Hulbert trashes the novel.

The Catherine Wheel

The first critical responses to *The Catherine Wheel* in 1952 consisted mostly of praise in generalizations made without any or much interpretation, such as those by Richard Hayes and Ihab Hassan. Hayes makes the point that this is *not* a work of conventional Realism, but something "larger." Walter Havighurst calls attention to the fact that "The village in this novel is named Hawthorne, but even without that reminder it is clear that Miss Stafford is concerned with the identical plight that Nathaniel Hawthorne pondered in his stories"--the "secret torture" of guilt. In 1961 Louis Auchincloss defended the book against criticism of the violent surprise ending, arguing that "it is beautifully prepared by Katharine's ordering of her own tombstone, on which a Catherine wheel has been carved, and by her giving a party for her friends to view it." Auchincloss is the first critic to recognize that this is a religious novel dramatizing *redemption*: "She has renounced John Shipley, and she saves Andrew from the sinful consequences of his prayer by rescuing Victor's brother from an exploding Catherine wheel."

In 1963 Chester E. Eisinger elaborated on the significance of the setting in Hawthorne: "It is the kind of dark story, in its moral and psychological life, that Nathaniel Hawthorne might have written, a name that comes readily to mind in this New England locale." "This novel is dedicated principally to the investigation of the complex relationship between moral guilt and the psychic life." "Andrew and Katharine deeply troubled through this summer, are guilt-laden souls tortured by their own consciences." Eisinger rightly stresses "the realities of sin," and the Puritan tradition informing Katharine's morality. "Miss Stafford's catherine wheel is an admirable symbol in many ways. As Saint Catherine was tortured in body upon it, Katharine is spiritually tortured on her imaginary wheel throughout the book by her loss of John....She is a wheel of guilty fire that consumes her spirit and at the end a wheel of living fire that destroys her body. The wheel rolls through the novel as the great moral agent in this tragedy of guilt and sin....She will rise purified from the ashes of the diary." Although he is wrong about symbolism in *The Mountain Lion*, Eisinger provides a sound partial interpretation of *The Catherine Wheel*. Scholars now had a foundation on which to build a more complete objective analysis.

However, in the 1960s the tradition of objective New Criticism in literary analysis got overwhelmed by subjective political criticism. *The Catherine Wheel* became politically incorrect because neither the author nor the protagonist is a Feminist and the vision of the novel is Christian, taboo because Christianity is "patriarchal." Especially after radical Feminists began to take over English departments in 1970, the liberal academics who monopolized literary analysis ignored Stafford. The male Feminist Frederick R. Karl pays little attention to Stafford in his study *American Fictions 1940-1980* (1983) and his few generalizations about *The Catherine Wheel* are superficial and do not mention religion at all.

Six years after her death, the first book-length study of Stafford appeared, by a Feminist more interested in women than in literature. Mary Ellen Williams Walsh starts her discussion of *The Catherine Wheel* by emphasizing that this is "Stafford's only published novel that focuses on a mature woman." Walsh notes that indeed the setting is "symbolically named 'Hawthorne'," and she emphasizes the secret guilt of the two protagonists, but she entirely misses the religious plot. It is as if she did not finish reading the novel. She did not read any of it closely enough to spell Kath*a*rine's name correctly: "Kath*e*rine Congreve obviously identifies herself with the martyred St. Catherine." But because the martyrdom is "self-imposed," Walsh denies that in the end Katharine's martyrdom is redemptive: "She dies as she lived, celebrating her desire

for revenge." On the contrary, Katharine has *forsaken* revenge: "What I wanted I have now achieved, *my* desire is consummated for I have supplanted Maeve." "He was not worth it." Feminists advocate revenge against men and Walsh is so vindictive she denies that there is anything virtuous in Katharine's sacrifice of her life in trying to save a boy's life: "She is finally not an admirable person at all...Katherine is responsible for a terrible legacy, mirrored in the child Andrew, who worships her." Walsh misses the redemption of *both* protagonists, Andrew's salvation as implied by his burning Katharine's diary without reading a word of it and by his vision of Katharine "perishing in glory." This vision of her salvation replaces his desire that the brother of Victor die: "The voice in Andrew was silenced now."

In 1988 a biography of Stafford was published by David Roberts, an author mainly of mountaineering literature with a Ph.D. in English from the University of Denver who taught English at Hampshire College for about nine years, though he appears to have had no literary education--an example confirming Stafford's low opinion of academe and of intellectual life in Colorado. Roberts likes Stafford's local color realism but he admits to a prejudice against symbolism and "mythic" fiction, including the Modernist allegorical fiction of Stafford: "In works of fiction in which everything proceeds according to naturalistic conventions, these resolutions [of hers] seem engineered and gimcrack." Roberts is himself too gimcrack to understand *The Catherine Wheel* and blames the author for his own limitations, as bad critics always do. "Stafford creates a beautifully balanced plot...[but] she paints herself into a corner. No plausible denouement can live up to the richness that the plot promises." What *is* the plot? It is the development from sin to redemption. Roberts claims the novel lacks "unity" because he cannot understand Stafford's symbols let alone the unifying pattern they make--the allegory of redemption. He does not explain the plot nor acknowledge any religious content. The catherine wheel symbol is to him merely a "*deus ex machina*" because he failed to see the organic preparations for the ending and does not understand the novel. Furthermore, to non-believers, any influence of God in a work is a *deus ex machina*--a fault. Again, Stafford suggests through the killing of the cat as a parallel that the death of Katharine is God's mercy.

Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart (1990) by Charlotte Margolis Goodman is another Feminist biography that misreads *The Catherine Wheel*, being less interested in the meanings of the novel than in "female devaluation in a patriarchal society." Goodman praises the "intricate use of symbolism" and acknowledges "the resemblance between this novel and the romances of Hawthorne" with the theme of secret guilt, but she does not recognize the allegorical plot of redemption, saying only that the catherine wheel symbolizes Katharine's "disintegrating consciousness" and "comes to represent the cross that Katharine Congreve bears in silence and her own ultimate martyrdom." Yet she calls the symbol "intrusive," as if she understood all of its implications. Eisinger had explained it as "an expanding symbol, one which is built up and given layers of meaning throughout a work as are the various musical themes of Vinteuil in Proust." Examining the novel from almost exclusively an autobiographical perspective, Goodman offers some intelligent and sometimes persuasive arguments, as on the influence of Dickens and the two protagonists being "versions of Stafford's adolescent and adult selves," but she is able to make only vague generalizations about the implications of *The Catherine Wheel* as a whole, describing it from an interpretive distance as "a beautiful novel of childhood desolation and adult despair," "about jealousy and emotional deprivation," and "bitter disillusionment and loss."

Goodman betrays her lack of understanding in her interpretation of the ending when she compares Andrew burning Katharine's letters to Stafford burning her letters after a terrible quarrel with Lowell in Maine, part of a miserable ending to their marriage. Goodman fails to see that Andrew is transformed and redeemed by the martyrdom of Katharine, who has silenced the evil voice within him. He envisions her as glorified, rising toward Heaven. He is filled with love and exaltation, transcending sorrow: "The voice in Andrew was silenced now but in its place there was a swishing, sibilant swirl and the eyes in his mind saw four bright Catherine wheels perishing *in glory*. Wheels wheeled within the wheels and Cousin Katharine wheeled with them." [Italics added.]

In the fattest book on Stafford, *The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford* (1992), Ann Hulbert, the literary editor of *The Atlantic*, cites not one but "two interwoven plots" in *The Catherine Wheel*, but then she claims the novel is "all but plotless." She reduces the book as much as she can, arguing that "given the absence of *real* plot, portraiture was what the book essentially consisted of: alternating tableaux of her two protagonists." [Italics added.] Goodman had disagreed, calling the plot "complicated."

Hulbert refers to the symbol of the catherine wheel but does not explain it, she just summarizes the literal ending in a *parenthesis*! as if the spectacular climax of the novel is merely incidental.

Despite the religious title of *The Catherine Wheel*, Hulbert dismisses its plot of redemption as merely an example of "desiccated notions of history and humanity." Because the plot is religious, to Hulbert it is not "real." Hulbert's disdain for religion is consistent with Feminist atheism and the reluctance to acknowledge Christianity or God. To her, religion is "fanatical." To avoid looking like the bigot she is, Hulbert must come up with some plausible excuse for calling *The Catherine Wheel* a "mannered, static book"--a "hollow novel." The best she can do is complain that it isn't exciting--another subjective criterion: "Katharine's tribulations didn't live up to the metaphor." That is, she didn't suffer in a dramatic enough way. "The very melodrama of the conclusion called attention to the absence of real drama until that point"--evidence of how superficially Hulbert reads. Psychological drama is too subtle for Hulbert. She barely notices Andrew: "He seemed to occupy a central place in the novel for reasons more of symmetry than sympathy."

Hulbert claims that *The Catherine Wheel* "is an illustration of literary entrapment, of the encroachments of style on substance." But she herself does more than merely encroach upon the substance, the religious content, of the novel--she tries to bury it. She fails to specify how somehow the style "encroaches" on the substance. Or how the style "traps" the substance: "Rather than achieving a successful synthesis of the two manners, or a conjunction of the characters, Stafford ended up succumbing to style." Hulbert does not give any examples or explain *how* the author "succumbed." What does this mean? More importantly, Hulbert fails to see the "conjunction of the characters" in the mutual redemption of Katharine and Andrew. Her final insult is a quote out of context applied by Stafford to a character in a *different* story: "She had laid out an expensive banquet at which there was nothing to eat." After granting that the novel has *some* virtue, as in the language, Hulbert ends by implying that there is *no* substance to it--there is "nothing to eat." What Hulbert serves us to eat induces moral vomiting. She even cooks up the rancid old complaint of critics with imaginations deadened by prejudice that the novel did not "come to life." She does not try to understand the novel, she tries to bury it under bullshit. She does not cite the pertinent analyses by either Auchincloss or Eisinger in her study, illustrating the "women's studies" policy of not reading males. If she had consulted them, as a true scholar would, she might not have made such a disgrace of herself. In ignoring previous scholarship because it is by males, Feminists choose to be stupid out of spite.

The most recent book on Stafford is the very useful *Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction* (1996) edited by Mary Ann Wilson, a partial anthology including the pertinent criticism by both Auchincloss and Eisinger. Typical of Feminists, however, her own criticism focuses on autobiography. The complaint by Walsh in *Jean Stafford* that the wheel symbol is too obvious is ironic, since none of the Feminist critics, especially her, understood its implications: "The very dominance of the symbol [the wheel] seems finally too pat; it is overly insisted upon." Like the scarlet letter? Like the red badge of courage? Eisinger cautioned that "The price of her careful workmanship in the exploitation of her symbol is the danger of making her meaning too explicit. The symbol must not lose that necessary power of concealment and subtlety that gives mystery and ambiguity, as has a greatly rendered symbol like the white whale, say, in *Moby-Dick*." Clearly the multiple meanings of Stafford's archetypal wheel, one of the most resonant symbols in American fiction since the white whale, were *too* subtle for Feminists.

All the initial insights and the most accurate objective interpretations of this novel by a woman are by males, using the methods of New Criticism. The worst male critic, Roberts, was "educated" in the 1960s, when subjective political criticism began to displace objective New Criticism. All the females except Wilson, being subjective Feminists, missed the essential religious meanings of the novel. In fact, they *reversed* the most important meaning at the end, turning redemption into damnation. Feminists dislike Stafford because she criticized them harshly. She got hate mail from Feminists. In effect, by identifying Stafford with Katharine, these Feminist critics took revenge by damning her to Hell. It should be added that some male ideologues have been no better on the novel than the Feminists--Philip Rahv, editor of *Partisan Review*, and Irving Howe, for examples, to cite two of the most powerful and influential male critics--literary pontificators rather than explicators. As atheistic Socialists, Rahv and Howe probably dismissed *The Catherine Wheel* based on its religious title alone.

Rahv is quoted by Goodman as telling Allen Tate he thought her most religious novel was "her worst performance so far." As a Marxist he complained about Stafford's "infatuation with the rich and well born." He particularly disliked the novel because its main protagonist was rich rather than working class like the Marburgs in *Boston Adventure*. Rahv himself never published anything of enduring value. Irving Howe was like Ann Hulbert in complaining that the fine style of the novel ultimately served to "undermine the matter it was meant to reveal." This amounts to admitting that he too did not perceive the religious allegory of redemption. Howe wrote some useful criticism, such as his book on Faulkner, and he was an entertaining polemicist, as in his evisceration of *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millett, but he was not deep. The spiritual dimension was missing. He was the most dynamic classroom teacher I ever had, when he visited Stanford, but English department faculty said he was the most arrogant person they ever met.

Michael Hollister (2021)