

INTRODUCTION



Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"Jean Stafford grew up in the West, from her birth in 1915 in Covina, California, to her graduation with both an A.B. and an A.M. from the University of Colorado in Boulder in 1936. She was growing up in a West that was slowly struggling out of its mythicized past into what Stafford perceived as less than a glamorous present. Her father helped in the mythicizing process; he wrote western fiction under the pseudonyms of Ben Delight and Jack Wonder. Stafford was determined to leave the West as soon as she could. Her first opportunity came in the academic year 1936-37, when she was awarded a fellowship to study philology in Heidelberg, during Hitler's nazification of the German universities.

She made her second opportunity, by fleeing, apparently literally, in the middle of the night on a bus to Boston, after a year and a few months of teaching unhappily in the Midwest. After arriving on that bus in Boston in the fall of 1938, she never again lived farther west than Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Except for the months in Louisiana and a few months in Tennessee, she lived the rest of her life on the East Coast--in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Maine, and New York. She owned two homes in her life, her prized first house in Damariscotta Mills, Maine, which she bought with the sales of her first novel, and the place she lived longest in her adult life, the house she inherited on Long Island from her third husband. She married three times, first to a poet who would become famous, Robert Lowell. The last time she married a journalist who was already famous, A. J. Liebling. She had no children. She lived very unhappily with Cal Lowell in Maine and elsewhere' she lived happily with Joe Liebling during the few years they had before his death.

This listing of places and people in the life of Jean Stafford is important in a way that is not always true about an author, because Stafford wrote best when she wrote about places and people she had experienced intensely. She said she shared the 'sense of place' and 'dislocation' of Henry James and Mark Twain. Certainly, in her own work she returned again and again to those places that had been most important in her life--Covina and Boulder, which she called 'Adams,' Heidelberg, Damariscotta Mills. When her characters have left their homes, they often express in one way or another their sense of dislocation, from the rather direct statements in such stories as 'The Bleeding Heart' and 'Children Are Bored on Sunday' to the less direct and meditative expressions in such stories as 'A Reunion' and 'The Lippia Lawn.' As these remarks suggest, her fiction is often highly autobiographical. It is her own life as a girl and as a woman that has inspired much of her best work. Her first story, 'And Lots of Solid Color' (1939), and the last story published before her death, 'An Influx of Poets' (1978), are autobiographical bookends for the work that comes between.

The work that comes between is three novels--*Boston Adventure* (1944), *The Mountain Lion* (1947), and *The Catherine Wheel* (1952)--and nearly fifty stories, plus a substantial body of essays and articles. Most of her nonfiction was published after her marriage to Liebling. She has declared that her happiness with him made her unable to write fiction as she had before. In contrast, her unhappiness with Lowell added

substantially to her production of fiction. The fiction and the nonfiction share a major subject--the lives of girls and women, her own life, often thinly disguised, and her vision of the lives of other women. She wrote only nine stories with boys or men as central characters. She included only two of these in *The Collected Stories*. Two boys, Ralph Fawcett and Andrew Shipley, share the focus with Molly Fawcett and Katharine Congreve in *The Mountain Lion* and *The Catherine Wheel*.

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.

This study examines Stafford's work from the perspective that her exploration of the human condition begins with an exploration of what it means to be female. The perspective allows one to demonstrate that themes such as the conflict in values and manners arising from class distinctions and from different cultures, the struggle to achieve maturity and understanding of self, and the isolation of societal misfits develop in a substantially different way when the central figure is female rather than male. Stafford's fiction is examined here in a way in which it may be collectively viewed--as an exploration of the ages of women: childhood and adolescence, young womanhood, maturity and old age.

Early reviewers and later academic critics have made much of the Proustian and Jamesian qualities of Stafford's style and content. She has expressed her admiration of James and Twain. Labeling her work as part of the school of one of the masters, however, can obscure her uniqueness. She did evoke Proust in *Boston Adventure*. She used themes and an intense psychological realism that James had also used. She had a Twainian ear for the colloquial speech of Americans and a Twainian eye for the grittiness of American places. She melded all these elements, however, into a style and into developing a subject matter that was clearly her own.

The style is compounded of an ironic detachment, a lucidity in language, a 'lapidary speech' studded with words like 'oleaginous,' 'integument,' and 'machicolations,' as well as with the slang and the western language she grew up with, expressed in its own rhythms. Her subject matter, as I have stated above, is the lives of girls and women. And her primary form of expression has been the short story. The excellence of her work in that genre was recognized in 1970 by the award of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for *The Collected Stories*. The stories, both collected and uncollected, and the best of her novels, *The Mountain Lion*, have gained for Stafford a deserved reputation as a twentieth-century author of considerable distinction....

Self-Critique

"In the most straightforward, least tongue-in-cheek essay that Stafford published on the writing of fiction, she writes: 'The novel does not exist that is not psychological, is not concerned with emotional motivations and their intellectual resolutions, with instincts and impulses and conflicts and behavior, with the convulsions and complexities of human relationships, with the crucifixions and the solaces of being alive.' She develops her essay by demonstrating that by this definition she was being inclusive, rather than exclusive, that it applied to all writers whom one would consider 'great,' not simply those post-Freud. She argues for 'true endings based upon true premises, for that detachment from our characters' eccentricities and misadventures that prevents us from making them into improbable prodigies but that, on the contrary, enables us to be psychologically sound.'

She concludes with an observation that is at once stringent and eclectic: 'I do not think it matters what one writes about nor what method one selects to use; one may be altogether autobiographical or use none of one's own experience; it is equally good to innovate and to stick to the traditional rules; one may employ an omniscient observer or tell the tale without a guide. None of this matters if the eye and the ear, and therefore the pen, remain loyal to reality. Like the psychiatrist, the novelist must see his characters at once as individuals and as members of the human race; like him, the novelist must determine why they speak as

they do and why they behave as they do and what in their nature causes them to react as they do to the situation into which he, their omnipotent sponsor, puts them.'

In another essay on the role of the novelist published three years later, Stafford writes: 'I do not advocate the rejection of experience, for if I did, and practiced what I preached, I would have to stop writing tomorrow. But I do argue long and loud against the case history, and particularly the case history that is long on psychological analysis and short on action and plot.'

These observations by Stafford, although they were written rather early in her career, remain significant for understanding her practice as a writer of fiction. 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. It *has* mattered, however, that she made the choices as a writer that she did. She chose, in the main, not to innovate, but to hold to tradition. She chose frequently to be autobiographical. She chose, primarily, to write about the lives of women. And she saw the psychological reality of those lives refracted through her own vision of life as a woman, which began with her own experiences as a child in the midst of an unhappy family.

In an article on the young women who clustered around the murderous Charles Manson, Stafford takes a surprising and revealing stance. She finds it understandable that the women entered Manson's community, 'out of the instinctive (although often inadmissible) need to belong to someone and to own someone, to have brothers and sisters and, above all, a father--to have, in short, kinsmen under the skin if not by blood. The horrendous perversions of the moral code and of the traditions of protectiveness, guidance, and support that accrued to Manson as paterfamilias was not just a cry for love but a desperate shriek in the wilderness. If the tale that is unfolding were not so monstrous, aspects of it would break the heart.' When Stafford wrote this passage, she had already published all the fiction she would publish, except the excerpts from her unfinished novel that appeared almost a decade later....

Stafford clothed the agony of her characters in a brilliant style which has allowed critics to appraise her work without coping with the particular kind of 'desperate shriek' that resides there.... 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 Xanthippes and common scolds....'

Feminist Assessments

Jeanette Mann contended in 1976 that Stafford had received so little serious critical attention primarily because she presents 'a new kind of truth,' which needs 'as with the work of many women writers, new structures and new vocabulary...to understand it.' At least, the serious critic needs to recognize that Stafford is writing about women and women's lives, which indeed display a different kind of truth that recent criticism is beginning to take into account. The best case in point is the changing evaluation of *The Mountain Lion*, the novel that has received the most critical attention.

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 refuse 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 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.

In 1967, in a lengthy and balanced analysis of the novel, 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 awaiting the uncompromising innocent in his encounter with modern society, while pointing out that a loss of innocence and compromise of ideals go hand in hand. Molly, the uncompromising innocent, adherent to the ideals of a vanished nineteenth century society, fails to achieve self-realization; Ralph succeeds, but only by abandoning most of his ideals. Since Miss Stafford obviously prefers the values inherent in the earlier society, both plots are tragic, but the real tragedy implicit 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. Burns apparently fails to recognize that, because Molly is female, the options for her adaptation are so limited that they are meaningless to her.

Contemporary with these early appraisals and in contradiction to them to some extent is Louis Auchincloss's discussion of the novel in 1965. Significantly, he finds Molly at the center of the novel. He begins his discussion with the following sentence: 'It is not so much what Molly Fawcett sees or remembers that is significant; it is what Molly *is*, and, incidentally, what she stands for.' He continues: 'She is a symbol, like the tawny, elusive mountain lion which the men *must* kill, of that virginal, childhood, uncontaminated *something* that is inevitably lost in growing up. In the end she must die with the mountain lion....' Auchincloss, finally, distinguishes the novel from Stafford's others as her 'masterpiece.' Stafford, by the way, indicated indirectly her approval of Auchincloss's evaluation of her work by mentioning his book and the brilliance of its title.

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."

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]: '[The novel] does not simply assume x, an adolescent resistant to initiation, and y, an adolescent accepting of initiation, and move on to other matters. Stafford is primarily concerned with portraying why it is that one adolescent rejects what the other can accept. 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

"Most brilliant of the new fiction writers,' *Life* magazine called Jean Stafford in 1947. Placing her in an elite that included Truman Capote and Gore Vidal, *Life* declared that 'Stafford is the only one of this group of literary psychologists who makes finished art of her material.'

At thirty-one, Stafford had just published her second novel, *The Mountain Lion*, to almost universal acclaim. Three years earlier she had seen her first book, an ambitious novel called *Boston Adventure*, become a best-seller: at one point there were nearly four hundred thousand copies in print. As *Life* was hailing her talent, she had just begun sending short stories to *The New Yorker*, which was proud to publish her. Critics compared Stafford's prose to that of Proust, James, and Austen.

The young novelist had grown up in California and Colorado. Raised in a family beset by poverty, Stafford had blazed her way through school, earning both a B.A. and an M.A. in four years at the University of Colorado. Upon graduating she had fled the West and her family for good. Among bohemian cohorts in Germany, Boston, and New York, her soul selected the society she had longed for throughout an unhappy childhood.

Tall, blond, thin, shy, and cerebral, Stafford had been a misfit in high school and college. On the East Coast, her austere beauty combined with her cutting wit to create a *personnage formidable*. At the age of twenty-four Stafford had married a handsome and self-confident young poet whose Boston Brahmin lineage could not have been more different from her own. They had published their first books in the same year, but while Stafford's had turned her into a celebrity, her husband's had made only a small splash in the literary magazines. With the earnings from her best-seller Stafford bought a house in Maine in which the two writers could hole up and produce masterpieces. It would be a while yet before Robert Lowell would become as famous as his wife.

At the very moment, however, when she ought to have been basking in her achievement--her picture in *Life*, her praises on the lips of such critics as Howard Mumford Jones and Alfred Kazin--Stafford was recovering from a mental breakdown and a long, bitterly lonely stay in a psychiatric hospital. Her marriage to Lowell was finished; the brilliant poet had proved in domestic life to be a spoiled bully. At the end of their troubled year in Maine, Lowell had begun an affair with one of their last summer guests. Devastated, Stafford fled to New York City, then committed herself to Payne Whitney.

Stafford would live for twenty-seven years after the publication of her third novel, *The Catherine Wheel*, in 1952, yet she failed even to come close to completing another. She won the Pulitzer Prize in 1970 for her *Collected Stories*, but by then her knack for short fiction had been effectively dormant for a decade. She survived by turning out book reviews, essays, and cranky polemics. Her nonfiction prose from the 1960s and 1970s includes pieces that are among the best journalism written during those decades; indeed Stafford seldom wrote even a personal note that is not in some way memorable. Nonetheless it is hard not to see the ephemeral articles of these years as a calculated avoidance of the greater demands of fiction.

The causes of Stafford's decline are several and elusive. For all the excuses she loved to make, at the deepest level she knew that she had no one to blame but herself; yet in some sense she was powerless before the tangled imperatives of her own nature. In any event, the novelist who had leapt so spectacularly onto the stage in the 1940s and who had seemed possessed of limitless promise was starting, by the 1970s, to be relegated to a defunct generation. Despite the Pulitzer, her fame faded drastically.

By the mid-1980s, however, Stafford was riding the crest of a revival. Legions of readers are now discovering her for the first time, marveling anew at her humor, her narrative power, her ironic verve, her disdain for all things shabby and chic--and at the perfect sentences she worked so hard to construct. What Robert Fitzgerald wrote about *The Mountain Lion* is true of all her best work: 'Though you read it with amusement, you will feel it aching in you like a tooth for days....'

Shifting fashions, which Stafford's work will also withstand, has actually contributed to her reemergence, at least in the realm of academic criticism. Thus some scholars have begun to claim for her a certain significance as a western regional writer, attuned to the handicaps of growing up smart in California and Colorado. Other 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.

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 [James] Wolcott's phrase, 'to crack the vault of our most protected feelings.'

Boston Adventure, for all its stately, accretive tread, remains a remarkably original psychological novel; there are many readers who still think it Stafford's best. *The Catherine Wheel*, with its potent syzygy between a possessed twelve-year-old boy and a moribund middle-aged woman guarding her clandestine passion, survives the contrivances of its plot. Deceptively laconic, *The Mountain Lion*, by all odds Stafford's finest novel, is an achingly true examination of adolescence. As Louis Auchincloss wrote of its protagonist, 'Molly is one of the memorable children of American fiction.'

"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'."

David Roberts
Jean Stafford: A Biography
(Little, Brown 1988) 3-5, 417-18

"Jean Stafford (1915-1979) wrote three novels and more than 40 short stories that collectively merit her a place among the finest fiction writers of her generation. The recent reissue of her Pulitzer Prize-winning *Collected Stories* and her 1947 novel *The Mountain Lion*, the appearance of three biographies in the last seven years, and the frequent anthologizing of her short stories attest to a renewed interest in and appreciation of this 'writer's writer' whose first and only passion was her craft.

As yet there has been no in-depth study of Jean Stafford's short fiction--the genre she perfected and the one most critics agree represents her major achievement. These short stories appeared in prestigious literary journals such as the *Kenyon Review* and the *Partisan Review* and most frequently in the *New Yorker*, whose fiction editor Katharine White served as both personal and professional resource for Stafford as her career developed. They have been praised by contemporary writers of short fiction such as Joyce Carol Oates, who sees in Stafford a kindred spirit both immersed in the realistic details of her fictional worlds and ironically detached from them.

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*.) 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. In a sense, Stafford kept rewriting her own life in these stories as she tried to reconcile the conflicts in her past through her fiction. In her recent biography of Jean Stafford, *The Interior Castle*, Ann Hulbert distinguishes between writing autobiographically 'in the most direct, concrete sense' and 'writing autobiographically in a thematic sense'; Stafford usually did the latter, since in her best stories the naked autobiographical facts were filtered through the ironic lens of emotional and psychological distance.

Born in Covina, California, but living her childhood and adolescence in the rugged landscape of Colorado, Jean escaped as soon as she could--first to Heidelberg to study philology and thereafter to Boston, New York, London, and Paris as she tried to separate herself geographically from what she viewed as her provincial western roots. But the roots went deeper than she knew, as she admits in the preface to her *Collected Stories*, and she continued to return to the West of her childhood in a series of brilliant short stories, some of which appear in the section titled 'Cowboys and Indians, and Magic Mountains' from her 1969 *Collected Stories*. Growing up female in the rugged West is also the subject of perhaps her best novel, *The Mountain Lion*.

The cultural defensiveness Stafford felt about growing up out West was complicated by her father's failed ambitions as a writer of westerns. Significantly, she invokes his memory in the preface to *Collected Stories* when she refers to his pen names, Jack Wonder and Ben Delight, and his one published work, *When Cattle Kingdom Fell*. John Stafford grew increasingly bitter as his long, rambling works were rejected by publishers, finally refusing to work to support his family. Stafford's mother took in boarders to pay the bills, much to Jean's embarrassment. This complex family dynamic haunted Jean in her choice of a writing career and the almost perverse attraction she felt toward the domestic. Associating her father with the intellectual in her nature and her mother with the domestic, Jean would vacillate between the two throughout her life, often retreating into domesticity to avoid writing. The troubled childhood resulting from these early parental conflicts surfaces in some of her best stories: 'Bad Characters,' 'The Healthiest Girl in Town,' and 'The Bleeding Heart,' Father figures are largely absent from her work.

As she attempted to escape her Colorado past, Jean Stafford adopted other regions--Europe, Boston, Manhattan--peopling them with grown-up versions of the lonely, alienated children she treats so compassionately. Always imbued with a strong sense of place like her avowed literary mentors Henry James and Mark Twain, Stafford sought in geography what she lost in time--stability, order, and harmony. The genteel eastern ways and European sophistication she yearned for in early adolescence find their way into her stories of Boston and New England and the adventures of her alienated innocents abroad in Europe. Permeating these stories is the irony of Stafford's mature vision, always questioning and judging the dreams of her characters, who are all rootless--'displaced,' to use her own term--never at home either geographically or spiritually. Time and again in her stories, illusion clashes with harsh reality, and in their Joycean exile her characters exchange one place for another but keep their acute loneliness--from the feisty Emily Vanderpool of 'Bad Characters' to the poignant, aging beauty Angelica Early in 'The End of a Career.'

But irony in Stafford is no mere literary technique. Instead, as Josephine Hendrin notes in her study of post-1945 fiction, *Vulnerable People*, irony is 'an angle of vision from which we view ourselves. More than any other device, irony bridges the distance between our sense of vulnerability and our dreams of power.' Irony became the defensive posture Jean Stafford adopted in her fiction and in her life.

The landscape of Stafford's short fiction is littered with missed connections, unsaid words, and disillusioned lovers, all of which form a thematic pattern of loss and alienation, but Stafford's implicit belief in the shaping power of language and in the craft of the short story form mitigates what would

otherwise be an unremittingly bleak vision. Growing up in the shadow of the great male moderns, Joyce and Eliot, and reaching artistic maturity in a New Critical milieu gave Stafford a view of the artistic life and the exacting devotion it required. Though she struggled with the stern demands of her chosen profession, she never lost sight of its value.

As secretary to the *Southern Review* in 1940-41 and wife of the poet Robert Lowell, Stafford was immersed in a literary life at a crucial time in her career. She watched literary reputations being made in the cramped quarters of the *Review* and suffered through late night, drunken poetry readings by Lowell and his circle of fellow poets John Berryman, Delmore Schwartz, and Randall Jarrell (memorialized in her masterful short story 'An Influx of Poets'). Forced to retype drafts of Lowell's poems if he changed so much as a comma, Jean saw the painstaking evolution of a literary text and internalized from these experiences a belief in the power of the carefully chosen word. Always a meticulous reviser, Stafford reworked her short stories again and again, and with the help of editors like Katharine White, created a body of short fiction a new generation is beginning to discover. Though she never resolved in fiction the conflicts of her own troubled life, like her contemporaries Mary McCarthy and Katherine Anne Porter, Jean Stafford demythologized the female experience and thereby articulated the pressure points of an alienated postwar generation. The form most conducive to Stafford's unique voice was the short story, in whose brief, epiphanic moments she captured haunting fragments of experience that still resonate in our postmodern age.

Following Stafford's example in her *Collected Stories*, I divide my study of her short fiction in part 1 by her own regional headings: The Innocents Abroad; The Bostonians and Other Manifestations of the American Scene; Cowboys and Indians, and Magic Mountains; Manhattan Island. I am aware that Stafford felt such a grouping arbitrary, for whether her characters inhabit the rugged, mountainous West, the pseudogenteel East, or a European landscape, their world is blighted and their anomie a function not of place but of the human condition. Nevertheless, the palpable setting of these stories often emerges as strongly as character, making us aware of Jean Stafford's acute sense of place. Within each of these regional headings I examine a representative sample of major and minor stories from her collections--*Children Are Bored on Sunday* (1953), *Bad Characters* (1964), *Selected Stories* (1966), and *The Collected Stories* (1969)--as well as the best of her uncollected works, including her last two stories, excerpted by her editor Robert Giroux from her unfinished novel *The Parliament of Women*....

Jean Stafford and the New Criticism

Jean Stafford's marriage to Robert Lowell in 1940 and her subsequent move to Baton Rouge to become secretary of the *Southern Review* plunged her into an intensely literary environment--a rigid, formalist world, hierarchical and determined largely by successful male writers. As documented in my article 'In Another Country: Jean Stafford's Literary Apprenticeship in Baton Rouge,' at this formative time in her career Jean had constant access to incoming manuscripts in the *Review* office, read the incisive critical comments on these manuscripts by editors Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, and experienced on a personal level the tensions and ironies of a literary vocation. 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 struggle 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 intermittently 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.

Thus, while Brooks and Warren and their disciples [Caroline Gordon also was a *leader* in the movement, not just a disciple. It was Gordon who applied New Criticism to *fiction*, in her anthology with

Allen Tate, *The House of Fiction* in 1950, whereas Brooks and Warren applied it to *poetry* in 1938 with *Understanding Poetry*] were revolutionizing the teaching of literature in the universities, Stafford was reading proof on *Southern Review* articles espousing similarly anti-historicist tenets and having conflicted thoughts about the meaning--indeed, the possibility--of her own literary vocation. As she cryptically notes in her 1966 essay 'Truth in Fiction,' '[W]rite for yourself and God and a few close friends, and if you meet the exacting demands of this group...you can devote your whole attention to the really important agony of getting through a writing day.' In retrospect, Stafford absorbed the critical imperatives of irony, paradox, and tension: the integrity of a story or poem; and the disciplined rigor of the artistic life as she struggled to meet the demands of an exacting job and an exacting marriage.

Jean Stafford and the *New Yorker*

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. Harold Ross, its founder and editor, had grown up in Colorado like Stafford, and as Charlotte Goodman notes in her biography of Stafford, he was sympathetic to new, unestablished writers. From its inception the *New Yorker* had also been more receptive to women writers than the quarterlies, and with the acquisition of Katharine White as fiction editor, the stage was set for writers like Jean Stafford to appear in its pages.

With a cultured New England background and impeccable credentials from Bryn Mawr, Katharine Angell (later married to E. B. White, another *New Yorker* contributor)...was largely responsible for promoting and encouraging 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. The fact that some of Jean Stafford's stories of this period fit White's model perhaps accounts for the young editor's enthusiastic response to Stafford's submissions. But the range and 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 years later in a 1971 lecture to Barnard College students, there is no 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. Stafford's stories appearing in the *New Yorker* do, in fact, range widely: from the rugged western setting and first-person, colloquial narration of 'Bad Characters' (1954) to the European decadence and urbane tone of 'My Blithe, Sad Bird' (1957).

From the appearance of her first *New Yorker* story, 'Children Are Bored on Sunday' (1948), to her last, 'An Influx of Poets' (1978), Stafford and Katharine White sustained a mutually beneficial personal and professional relationship, documented in a 30-year correspondence. Initially drawn together in 1947 at stressful times in their lives--Stafford emerging from a sanitarium in New York after her divorce from Robert Lowell, and White recovering from a painful spinal operation--the two women, according to White's biographer Linda Davis, were to share a lifetime of physical ailments, personal tragedies, and artistic triumphs. (White even arranged a meeting in London between Stafford and her third husband A. J. Liebling.) White's aristocratic bearing and Ivy League education appealed to the young Stafford, 22 years White's junior; Stafford's physical and emotional suffering brought out the older woman's maternal solicitude. They shared a keen intelligence and meticulous eye for detail, resulting in Stafford's willingness to follow White's editorial suggestions, though admittedly her polished manuscripts required little grammatical or syntactic editing. White's comments on Stafford's short stories are more contextual, noting flaws in character motivation or plot inconsistencies. The final product of such fruitful collaboration was inevitably a tighter, more focused story. At one point in Stafford's career when she was suffering from writer's block, Katharine White even gave her an idea for a story, based on an incident White has heard about. The resulting story, 'The Mountain Day,' appeared in the magazine in 1956.

What seems clear, looking back on Jean Stafford's life, is that Katharine White (and to a lesser extent other women writers such as Evelyn Scott) served as a female literary community for Stafford, reminiscent of Lowell and his generation of doomed poets, or Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren and their fledgling critical movement during the Louisiana State University period. Perpetually insecure about her provincial childhood and frightened of the New York literati whose withering cocktail party banter she had witnessed firsthand, Stafford craved approval and desperately needed encouragement from a woman like

Katharine White, who represented the eastern literary establishment but who genuinely admired Stafford and gave her work a sympathetic reading. White had a marvelous gift for making each writer she edited feel unique and valued, and this kind of support gave Jean Stafford the objective critical judgment she needed as an artist, as well as the surrogate mothering this self-styled 'orphan' frequently invited. As William Leary aptly notes, if and when contemporary readers remember Jean Stafford, it is rarely for her novels. Instead, they remember her *New Yorker* stories, a fact that would no doubt please Katharine White, to whom Stafford dedicated her *Collected Stories*.

Jean Stafford and a Female Literary Tradition

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--and in the case of writers such as Stafford, Caroline Gordon, and Mary McCarthy, were literally married to central figures in the tradition.

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. M.H.]

The Innocents Abroad

[Stafford's] innocents abroad, whether male or female, share a radical alienation and a fragile sense of self that are often reflected in the historical upheavals framing their personal lives. Though Jean Stafford's primary focus in her short stories was on the marginalized lives of girls and women, her male characters often confront the same cruel limitations...

The Bostonians and Other Manifestations of the American Scene

While Jean Stafford's roots were in the West of her Colorado childhood, her adopted home and the locus of her early dreams of culture, breeding, and civilization was Boston and New England. This imaginative landscape appears in her first novel, *Boston Adventure* (1944); her last novel, *The Catherine Wheel* (1952); some of her finest short stories; and several of the brilliant pieces she would write in the last decades of her life. As she borrowed freely from Mark Twain, Jean also invoked Henry James in her choice of title for this segment of her short fiction. James dissected the American landscape he would ultimately abandon, just as Stafford would both admire and vilify New England and its rigid sensibilities. Time and again when we read Stafford's stories set in Boston or Maine, she seduces us with the weight and solidity of the objects that embellish an upper-class New England household: 'damask tablecloths, Irish linen tea napkins, Florentine bureau runners, China silk blanket covers, point-lace doilies'; time and again we witness the emptiness beneath this facade of respectability. The qualities of intellectuality, breeding, and taste such objects seem to suggest are the very things Stafford could so virulently scorn.

But New England represented not only tradition, family structures, wealth, and power to Jean Stafford; it represented literary culture as well. Like Twain, who coveted the *Atlantic Monthly* milieu of William Dean Howells, Stafford equated a literary life with a New England setting. Before she married Robert Lowell, she settled herself in Concord, a town she called 'a wonderful place for a lady writer,' and made frequent visits to Sleepy Hollow Cemetery and the Louisa May Alcott house. Certainly, New England played a crucial part in Jean Stafford's unfolding literary identity--first as a youthful ideal and later, as it was for Sonie Marburg in *Boston Adventure*, an actual home. Her experiences helped her to flesh out this ideal, to penetrate its veneer, and to find that beneath it lurked the same passions and unfulfilled longings she found elsewhere. As part of her determined effort to remake herself and shed her undistinguished western background, Jean rarely returned to the West of her childhood except in fiction.

Boston and New England would never be a part of Jean Stafford's natural landscape, though she appropriated them for her own uses. Perhaps that is why with few exceptions the stories in this grouping are unrelievedly somber, peopled with lonely, orphaned young girls, some unhappily married, or bitter, frustrated old women. In some stories the setting is clearly delineated, as in 'Polite Conversation,' 'A Country Love Story,' 'The Bleeding Heart,' and 'An Influx of Poets,' while in others it is subtle and secondary to plot or character development, as in 'The Interior Castle' and 'Life Is No Abyss.' Throughout these stories set in New England, Stafford's female characters seem to echo Sonie Marburg's haunting

statement: 'I was invaded by the strange feeling that I was not myself...that this was a phantom of myself, projected into Boston by my real being, still in Chichester.'

One of the most prominent locales in Stafford's short fiction is Damariscotta Mills, Maine, the site of her first house, bought in 1945 with the proceeds of her first novel. This remote village was the setting for a difficult period in Stafford's marriage to Robert Lowell, a period documented first in the lighthearted 'Polite Conversation' and later in the bleaker stories 'A Country Love Story' and 'An Influx of Poets.' The first of these stories, appearing in the *New Yorker* in 1949, was enthusiastically received by Katharine White, whose editorial comments include only relatively minor suggestions, such as dropping a reference to a radio show no longer current and clarifying the length of time the young couple in the story have been in the tiny village.

Cowboys and Indians and Magic Mountains

Though Jean Stafford adopted other geographic regions as her own, the West of her childhood and adolescence formed the background for the majority of her short stories. Jean spent the first six years of her life in California, but her father's unwise financial decisions caused the family to relocate to Boulder, where she spent the remainder of her childhood and young adult years. This journey from California to Colorado served as the subject for her first published essay, written at age 15 and appearing in the Boulder *Daily Camera*. Titled 'Disenchantment,' the essay anticipates the more mature Stafford in both subject matter and style, as it deflates the family's romantic dreams of adventure in Colorado while assuming the Twainian narrative persona of *Roughing It*. As Ann Hulbert maintains, Twain's rough-edged travel narrative lies behind Stafford's youthful piece.

As Stafford mapped this childhood terrain in her western stories, Boulder became Adams, Colorado--and Edenic place whose name conjures up images of primal innocence and a fall from grace. Like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha or Anderson's Winesburg, Adams assumes mythic proportions for Stafford and her readers, for it evokes an imaginative landscape we all share. Eudora Welty asserts about these places of our youth, 'There may come to be new places in our lives that are second spiritual homes--closer to us in some ways, perhaps, than our original homes. But the home tie is the blood tie. And had it meant nothing to us, any place thereafter would have meant less, and we would carry no compass inside ourselves to find home ever, anywhere at all.' Near the end of her life, Jean Stafford echoes these words in the prefatory 'Author's Note' to her *Collected Stories*, maintaining that her 'roots remain in the semi-fictitious town of Adams, Colorado, although [she]...may abide in the South or the Midwest or New England or New York,' a surprising admission from the writer who confessed to 'leaving home' at age seven. The same impulse that drove her to seek surrogate homes and surrogate parents inevitably brought her back--imaginatively, at least--to the West of the childhood.

As with Henry James, Stafford's prefaces are revealing. In this introduction to a compilation of her best work, she not only asserts her geographic roots but also establishes a complex literary heritage: her father's ill-fated western novel, *When Cattle Kingdom Fell*, and her cousin Margaret's feminized view of the West, *A Stepdaughter of the Prairie*--neither of which she claims to have read. But by imaginatively situating herself in relation to these two diverse images of the West--what she called the 'wicked' and the 'noble' West--Stafford is also articulating what later feminist critics such as Elaine Showalter have identified as the woman writer's dual heritage. In 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,' Showalter speaks of women writers confronting both 'paternal and maternal precursors,' being 'not inside and outside of the male tradition' but 'inside two traditions simultaneously.'

More specific to Stafford's western stories, critics like Susan Armitage and Annette Kolodny have distinguished between a male and a female West--the one stereotypically linked with space, adventure, and passion; the other with domestic spaces, nurturing, and creativity. But as Stafford admits in the 'Author's Note' to *Collected Stories*, by the time she began writing neither of these two heroic Wests existed. In their place was a sanitized, tamed-down landscape full of dandies from the East and leftovers from the glory days. In *The Mountain Lion*, her most extended treatment of the western theme, Stafford demythologizes the West by making it the focus of distinctly unheroic actions and frequently comparing it to the East, that other frontier of the American consciousness--to the detriment of both. In Stafford's fiction, then, the West emerges not just as a geographic region but perhaps more importantly as a complex of attitudes and

assumptions that gave her a way of mocking not only the East of her childhood dreams but also the West itself.

Jean's later comments on the rugged contours of the West illuminate a landscape she often found threatening and alien. In a 1950 essay called 'Enchanted Island,' she contrasts the island topography to the mountainous terrain she knew as a child, asserting that she found the Rocky Mountains 'too big to take in, too high to understand, too domineering to love.' She goes on to articulate her impassioned attempt to tame this landscape and 'to reduce the world to a rational arena where I knew, at all times, what was going on.' Because Stafford is intimidated by the stark, forbidding mountains and prairies, she must, like her heroine Molly in *The Mountain Lion*, find a way to tame and domesticate what is so frightening and inhospitable. The comic voice of her childhood narrators and her skillful manipulation of both formal and colloquial diction in some of the western stories represent Stafford's way of taming the difficult terrain of her past.

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....

Beyond Childhood: Another View of the West

The lighthearted tone of Jean Stafford's childhood tales set in the West is notably absent from her western stories with older protagonists. The young women in 'The Liberation' (1953), 'The Mountain Day' (1956), 'The Tea Time of Stouthearted Ladies' (1964), and 'The Philosophy Lesson' (1968); the elderly sisters of 'In the Zoo' (1955); Stafford's fictional portraits of her parents and grandparents in her last published story, 'Woden's Day' (1979)--all face a world that thwarts and inhibits them, a world without childhood dreams of power and invulnerability. In these stories Stafford treats familiar themes of displacement, isolation, social inferiority, and cultural conflicts between East and West within the larger framework of identity and self-authentication. She explores the inevitable loss of illusion these older characters suffer, often treating thinly disguised autobiographical material from a typically ironic, detached third-person point of view. In most, Adams is clearly delineated in various guises--as the stultifying hometown of Polly Bay in 'The Liberation' or of Kitty Winstanley in 'The Tea Time of Stouthearted Ladies' or as the locus of childhood misery for Daisy and her sister in 'In the Zoo.' Like her first published short story, 'And Lots of Solid Color,' these stories end with characters accepting a life of compromise, accommodation, or at best, dreams of escape....

Manhattan Island

The last geographic grouping of Jean Stafford's stories, and the last section of her *Collected Stories*, covers her most productive years in the genre of short fiction--1945-56--and contains three of her finest stories: 'Children Are Bored on Sunday,' 'Beatrice Trueblood's Story,' and 'The End of a Career.' Perhaps because Jean Stafford spent so much of her adult life in New York and its environs, all of these stories have female protagonists, from the young girls in 'Between the Porch and the Altar' and 'Cops and Robbers' to the aging beauty Angelica Early in 'The End of a Career.'

New York became the scene of triumph and tragedy for Stafford: it would be the site of her Heidelberg homecoming; the setting for some of her young married life with Robert Lowell amid the New York literati; her place of incarceration for alcoholism in Payne-Whitney after her divorce from Lowell; her home with her second and third husbands, Oliver Jensen and A. J. Liebling; the site of her short-lived career as creative writing teacher at Columbia in the 1960s; and finally the place of her death. Though she loved the distractions and diversions of the city throughout her life, Stafford was also dangerously drawn to

its anonymity--an experience she dramatizes so poignantly in her first *New Yorker* story, 'Children Are Bored on Sunday.' From Tenth Street to Fifth Avenue, from the shabby apartment she shared with Lowell to the posh uptown apartment Liebling rented, Stafford traversed New York and its surrounding area geographically and emotionally, sliding up or down the social scale as circumstances dictated. New York ultimately represented the transient existence, the rootlessness, that became the controlling metaphor of her fictional world. As Ann Hulbert notes in her biography of Stafford, New York was 'a city of rootless souls among whom [Stafford] saw herself fitting all too well.'...

Twilight in the City: Jean Stafford's Aging Heroines

The plight of the woman alone was a consistent focus of Jean Stafford's fiction, as the next two stories show. Married three times but living alone for long periods of her life, Stafford was perhaps inordinately attuned to the pleasures and dangers of solipsism--a necessary condition for the writer but not without its social and emotional costs. Characters like Mrs. Chester Ramsey, the general's widow in 'The Captain's Gift,' and the spinster Jenny Peck in 'I Love Someone' are aloof and withdrawn from the larger world, much like Katherine [Katharine] Congreve in Stafford's last novel, *The Catherine Wheel* (1952). They are older versions of Pansy Vanneman in 'The Interior Castle,' listening from their isolated and silent rooms to the sounds of children playing and friends calling to friends. The impersonal urban landscape serves as a fitting backdrop for these stories of strategic retreat from life."

Mary Ann Wilson

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

Jean Stafford wrote three distinguished Modernist novels and is one of the best American short story writers--with Hawthorne, Hemingway, Faulkner, Porter, Gordon, O'Connor, and Welty. Her first novel *Boston Adventure* was a bestseller, she published over 20 stories in the elite *New Yorker*, she earned an annual O. Henry Award for the best short stories 7 times, and in 1970 she won a Pulitzer Prize for her *Collected Stories*. Compared by critics to Dostoevsky, Twain, Henry James, and Proust, she is known in particular for a versatile witty style, for irony and for insightful fiction about children, adolescents, women, acculturation, alienation, and physical trauma. Stafford was heroic to write so well after a car crash (her first husband the poet Robert Lowell was driving) that smashed her face to pieces and required many painful reconstructive surgeries. For the rest of her creative life she had to overcome severe depression, mental instability, and alcoholism. She had to enter New York Hospital thirty-four times. Her greatest short story, "The Interior Castle," sublimates her suffering in high art.

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. She is one of the few fiction writers to have written extended realistic allegories of *symbols*--as distinct from *signs*--the most complex and difficult form of fiction to write. Most classic novels are allegorical and all three of Stafford's novels are realistic Christian allegories overlooked by critics. The consensus is that her best short stories, often anthologized, are "The Interior Castle," "In the Zoo," "Children Are Bored on Sunday," "An Influx of Poets," "A Country Love Story," and "Bad Characters," perhaps her funniest.

Boston Adventure (1944)

Stafford's first novel attracted critical praise *and* became a bestseller, a double success rare for literary first novels. On page one the poor girl Sonie Marburg sees Boston as a kind of secular heaven, with its State House gleaming gold. Ironically, however, the descendants of the Mathers and other Puritans have devolved into their opposites, whereas Sonie, a Russian/German immigrant, is the one who most exhibits virtues of the anglo-Puritans. But she has been alienated from God by her horrible fighting parents. Her insane mother is a satanic figure who exclaims to her father, "Christ God, I hate you." Salvation is the major theme in the novel with the first mention of Miss Pride on page one. Pride was the original sin. Sonie's evolving attitudes toward Miss Pride are allegorical, a spiritual narrative reflecting the state of her

soul--a pilgrim's progress. Likewise, her relations with Hopewell Mather--a false Hope--reflect the state of her mind: her increasing knowledge of the corrupt Boston society, human nature and the world. The allegorical dimension of the novel shows the influence of Hawthorne, who is evoked by Sonie's visits to Concord and by references to *The Old Manse* and the "scarlet letter."

Sonie seeks peace and security by mistakenly choosing the aristocrat Miss Pride as her role model, rather than Jesus. However, at the end of the first section of the first chapter she also identifies herself with Jesus in an image that evokes Moses parting the Red Sea for the escaping Israelites and Jesus walking on water: "I watched the waves part and saw a dry path laid for me between the water's furniture and then I stepped forward off the beach and walked across to the first wharf in Boston Harbor." This imagery alludes to two famous events in the Bible, with Sonie placing herself on a path to imitate Jesus. Identifying Sonie with Christ here in chapter one prefigures her becoming a Christian, as implied at the end by her decision to start attending church. Although Sonie remains among the proud aristocrats in Boston, she becomes one of the "few believers" in "larger things," hence she retains her independence of mind and transcends her literal world. She feels like she has a devil inside her and has promised her soul to the Devil. There is true hope at the end when she decides to fight the Devil in herself and in society.

The Mountain Lion (1947)

They call the mountain lion Goldilocks, the name of the girl in the fairy tale who wants soup to be neither too hot nor too cold and a term in astrobiology referring to balanced conditions ideal for life, as on Earth--the balance of Nature, in contrast to disordered human society. Molly Fawcett runs both too hot and too cold. She is out of balance, a wild child, a rebel who refuses to adapt to society in any form. Adapt or die is a rule of Nature. Her brother Ralph is equipped and willing to adapt. Symbolically apt, as he becomes less rebellious Ralph is able to stop wearing glasses. "Her eyes were much worse than his and without her glasses she was as blind as a mole." Molly is not blonde or beautiful like the mountain lion but she is wild, solitary and dangerous like the lion. From experience she has an unconsciously Christian view of the fallen world as an unjust nasty place ruled by "the devil" who speaks through Ralph in the tunnel, ironic since she rejects Christianity as hypocritical and "bourgeois," she is a passionate advocate of the Spirit and scorns the Flesh--figuratively "fatness" in all its forms--but she is unforgiving and destructive. Belief in Jesus, the supreme incarnation of Spirit, could have helped Molly transcend her misery.

At the end of the novel the coinciding deaths of Molly and the lion clearly associate her with the lion. Both their deaths evoke Jesus Christ by happening on Easter. Jesus sacrificed himself as the "Lamb of God" to gain eternal life for believers, ending the need for animal sacrifices. According to Christian tradition, when Jesus returns to judge humans at the end of time, he will come not as a gentle lamb but as a roaring lion: "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" (*Revelation 5.5*). Uncle Claude and Ralph have made an idol out of the gold mountain lion, like a pagan Holy Grail, in effect replacing God. Ralph has "the devil" inside him, as revealed in the tunnel, and he wishes Molly were dead. Poor Molly herself has condemned almost everyone including herself as unforgivable and has become a suicidal killer (drowning the wood mouse). For her, death is merciful. Ralph will no doubt suffer from terrible guilt for the rest of his life, but his remorse may save his soul, thanks to the coming of the lion.

On Easter, the day of the hunt, Ralph "found the skulls of two deer with horns so tightly interlocked that he could not get them apart"--a vivid metaphor that perfectly explains the final relationship of Ralph and Molly: "the two bucks charged one another and then, by lunatic accident, being joined as one, toppling into the water to drown, still struggling to get free." Both Ralph and Uncle Claude are too eager to be the one to kill the lion to take the right precautions. Ralph is to blame for being selfish and taking the shot rather than waiting for Uncle Claude, Molly is at fault for being such a rebel she disregards all warnings and goes out wandering around unarmed in a forest where a mountain lion has been sighted.

The Catherine Wheel (1952)

Most critics have failed to recognize that Stafford is an allegorist like Hawthorne, despite the obvious governing religious symbol of the Catherine wheel. That is why she named her setting Hawthorne and repeated the name as a motif in the novel, in order to orient readers to her aesthetics. Katherine Congreve

and her young nephew Andrew Shipley both suffer from secret guilt and each becomes the conscience of the other, like Pearl to Hester in *The Scarlet Letter*. The basic elements of the plot are the same in both novels: two secret sinners go on sinning while their suffering from guilt increases to the point of becoming suicidal until a fatal climax in which one dies redeemed and the other lives on to implicit redemption.

Of course, Katharine Congreve is very different from St. Catherine. Most obviously, unlike the saint, she is wealthy and popular rather than poor and persecuted. She is also proud like Miss Pride in *Boston Adventure*, more imperious and dominant, but also more virtuous and in the end even heroic. She is basically a very charitable person, giving much to her neighbors, and she is eligible for Christian salvation despite her wealth, vanity and self-absorption. When she sees that John Shipley has fallen in love with Maeve, Katharine identifies herself with the torture wheel: "She had been fixed upon her own Catherine wheel." One of the most resonant of archetypal symbols, rich in implications since ancient times, the wheel becomes a symbol of her life and of the universe: "She was wheeled outward"..."in a widening circle." The wheel is monadic like the ancient symbol of the universe as a snake swallowing its own tail, though most people are like Mrs. Wainright-Lowe, so superficial in spirit she is comical: She points "to the Catherine wheel with the handle of her butterfly net."

Katharine's role model is her deceased father, a humanist who honored the pagan goddess Minerva more than he honored God. Minerva is the Roman goddess of wisdom. Eventually, Katharine finds that the humanism of her father is inadequate to ease her suffering over the loss of John. Also, pagan humanism offers no way to cope with guilt as does Christianity. At times, in their guilt, both Katharine and Andrew wish they were dead. Andrew's belief that Mercy the cat killed one of her litter--"I think it was a mercy killing"--implicitly parallels the death of Katharine by accident and hints that her death may have been a mercy killing by a loving God. She redeems herself by asking Andrew to burn her red diary in a repudiation of her vanity and a sign of her repentance for the sins she has committed against Maeve and John; she asks Andrew to "forgive me my trespasses if you love me," using the word "trespasses" widely known to be part of The Lord's Prayer, casting Andrew in the role of a savior; she repents over pursuing John because "He was not worth it," which is exactly what Andrew says of *his* sin, his desire that Charles die; she saves Andrew by example, prompting him to repent as well, making her a Christ-evoking figure; and she leads him to redemption when he burns her diary without reading it. The expanded consciousness and salvation of both Katharine and Andrew are evoked by the final image of the expanding universe: "Wheels wheeled within the wheels..." Katharine earlier echoed the famous Christian hymn with the line, "Swing low sweet chariot": "I heard the Catherine wheel swinging low to get me."

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 Hopetill 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.

Michael Hollister (2021)

