ANALYSIS

Boston Adventure (1944)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"It's a conscious imitation of Proust."

Stafford
Letter to James Hightower
(9 September 1941)

"There is no doubt that Jean Stafford, author of *Boston Adventure*, is a remarkable new talent. This is not to say that her first novel is a completely satisfying experience but that Miss Stafford brings to the writing of a novel an unusual native endowment; I would find it hard to name a book of recent years which, page for page, or even sentence for sentence, was so lively and so clever. By the light of any one of the incandescent moments of *Boston Adventure*, it may turn out that the book as a whole is strangely disappointing, reminding us that in the final analysis no amount of skill as a writer substitutes for the total novelistic power. But for its manner, for the way in which it stands up to the literary job, Miss Stafford's novel unquestionably demands a place for itself in the best literary tradition."

Diana Trilling
The Nation
(30 September 1944) 383

"Miss Stafford's remarkably fine novel (*Boston Adventure*) has been praised for its range and perception, its style, and for a distinction, as I see it, that springs from the meeting of genuine personal culture with deep independence of sight. It has also, because of certain echoes, been analyzed for its Proustian qualities. But not enough has been said of the real Proustian epic in it.... Here, at last, is a novel in which sensibility is not sacrificed to representation; in which the inwardness of man, at once the deposit of events and the shaper of them, is functionally related to bold and objective visual power."

Alfred Kazin
New Republic
(23 October 1944) 538

"Second to Henry James, Proust was probably the strongest influence on young American novelists of the 1940's and early 1950's. It became the fashion to see his guiding hand in every reference to time and childhood. But when *Boston Adventure* appeared in 1944, it was apparent, to many of us at least, that here was the first novel that caught the very essence of the master's flavor: the continual contrast of a dreamlike childhood, nostalgically recaptured, with a highly vivid, specific study of the more contemporary 'great world.' Sonia Marburg, one by one, gradually identifies the objects in the fanciful room, the refuge that her imagination has seemingly created out of a void, with items in her past that she has not, until they spring to mind, consciously remembered, while Miss Pride, a Bostonian Guermantes, is engaged in distinguishing carefully the exact social positions of an Emerson and a Revere.

While the themes are everywhere interrelated, Jean Stafford nonetheless, in dividing her novel into two parts, assigns one to each part. The first deals with Sonia Marburg's childhood at a seaside town near Boston where she works as a chambermaid in a hotel for summer residents; the second, with Boston society in which, through Miss Pride, she at last gains a brief and precarious foothold. The atmosphere of the first chapters conveys the cloudy coldness of a winter beach. The descriptions of the sea and the deserted hotel have the eeriness of Dickens and fir perfectly with the unreality of Sonia's background: her lunatic Russian mother, her German cobbler father, the memories of a Europe that has nothing to do with New England or the fold dome of the distant State House in Boston. Sonia has no life but that of her dreams. She rejects the vulgar world of the Brunsons who employ her to wait on table and chooses for her fantasies the Boston of Miss Pride, the grim old aristocrat whose room at the summer hotel she cleans. Like Marcel in Proust's

novels, she has only one ambition, though hers is simpler. He years to be a part of the magic world of the Guermantes, and she wants to go to Boston, merely to live in Miss Pride's house. That is all. Love, marriage, children, a career, none of these things matter. If she can attain a room in that house, she will have attained nirvana.

And in the second part of the book she attains precisely that. She learns what she has deep down always known: that there is nothing particularly admirable or even particularly interesting about Miss Pride's circle of blue bloods. Like the Guermantes family they pretend incessantly not to care about the only things they *do* care about: their own birth and position. Hopestill Mather, Miss Pride's beautiful and reckless niece, marries the young doctor who has engaged Sonia's own rather vague affections, but she marries him only because she is pregnant by another man and needs a father for her child. And Miss Pride herself turns out to be a selfish and heartless old woman who pays to put Sonia's mother in a private asylum only to bind Sonia to her as the companion of her long, fretful old age. Yet Sonia has not been entirely the loser in taking this gift borne by the Greeks. In facing Boston she has fought her way out of her own fantasies, and she knows now that she will not lose her sanity as her mother has.

It is difficult to convey a sense of the unique aesthetic appeal of *Boston Adventure*. It is perhaps in the contrast between its dreaminess and its sudden specificity: characters like the Brunsons, large, ugly, wonderfully droll, suddenly emerge, as if out of a fog, to startle and delight. Nathan Kadish, the young Jewish radical, with the purple birthmark on his cheek and the chip on his shoulder, is as vivid as Marcel's friend, Bloch, when he hisses 'Slave!' at a Boston butler. And there is hilarity, too, when Sonia, drunk, staggers home and wants to suggest to Miss Pride, awful in the doorway, that she have a nightcap with her. Miss Stafford has a poet's eye for slang, the slogan, the comically vulgar detail that will suddenly superimpose twentieth-century commercial civilization on the dignity of the ancient past.

Ellen Glasgow found this novel an 'endless exercise' and protested that to 'anyone who has known Boston and Back Bay, the setting of that adventure is more ludicrous than amusing.' Many who profess to have known the old Faubourg Saint-Germain have said as much of Proust. But it must be remembered that we see society in *Boston Adventure* through Sonia's eyes. People forget how constantly they label themselves in their acts and talk, particularly to the Sonias of this world who are looking for labels. Society people invariably maintain that they are interested in everything in the world *but* society; indeed, it is their constant pose that society, in *their* sense of the world, no longer exists. But Proust and Miss Stafford chose not to be contained by this."

Louis Auchincloss
Pioneers & Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists
(U Minnesota 1961, 1964, 1965) 152-54

"Her first novel, *Boston Adventure* (1944), is an exciting if not altogether successful examination of two...social worlds--the European transplanted to America and the Boston aristocracy--treated in such a way as to conjoin in one work the manner of both Dostoevski and James. The heroine of the book is Sonie Marburg, the child of German-Russian parents who have come to Massachusetts. She is the first of many outsiders who people Miss Stafford's fiction. She years to cast off what is to her an unsavory and unclean European heritage and to identify herself with Boston.

The book charts her movement from one world to another, a movement marked by explosions of consciousness at critical moments that bring her to knowledge and a sense of her self. Sonie finds that the world she had longed for will admit her only to its fringes and that to exist in it at all she must surrender her will and the hope of love and marriage. In Miss Stafford's work, the pursuit of cherished goals or the escape into zones of greater brightness or freedom than one had previously inhabited is inevitably accompanied, when successful at all, by a recognition of the cost and the vanity of human striving. It must be clear that Miss Stafford writes about her characters with an air of detachment. Her special forte, the fruit of maintaining her disciplined distance from them, seems to be a vision capable of capturing them in three-dimensional perspective.

The first part of the novel deals with the displaced Europeans. The vital forces of the Marburg family are dissipate in a chaotic effort to survive in an alien culture. The family collapses because, in its

undisciplined and heedless way, it surrenders whatever stabilizing elements it might have brought from the Old World and clings to that part of its heritage which has the least survival value in America. The father has renounced his Catholicism, which might have been a refuge in Puritan Massachusetts. He thus inflicts upon Sonie a sense of guilt and alienation from both God and man. He persists, on the other hand, in an ideal of craftsmanship, an anachronism in a mass production society, which brings his family the meanest kind of poverty and makes Sonie feel apart from the dominant culture. The precarious position of the family and the deep psychic disturbances felt by its members (including Sonie) account for the monumental quarrels that work to destroy it. Sonie detests her family and wants to escape from it. Her alienation is thus double: from the culture in which she is a stranger and from the family from which she is essentially estranged. It is this condition which induces in her the daydream in which she meets a Harvard student named Andrew Eliot Cabot Lodge, who falls passionately in love with her. She does not want to be outside the dominant culture, but inside.

Miss Stafford has made no frontal attack on the problems of the foreign-born in this novel, or on the question of acculturation. She has said that the novelist is not a social-political messiah, any more than he is a doctor, an evangelist, or a crank. She is not a sociologist. The first part of the novel, however, demonstrates how the perceptive imagination may open to our understanding the nature of a sociological phenomenon. The scope of Miss Stafford's achievement in *Boston Adventure* is enlarged by the inclusion of this social dimension. But that achievement is only partially recorded in the account of the Marburgs; it broadens when we turn to the second half of the book for a consideration of the Boston aristocracy.

There, in an effort to identify herself with the dominant culture, Sonie makes a liaison with Miss Pride, a wealthy Boston spinster who lives in Louisburg Square. Miss Stafford arranges such a fate for her in order to cast a cold eye upon a Boston dominated by a Puritanism from which the religious element has long since departed. Miss Pride is a latter-day Puritan who is convinced that the stewardship of the elect properly maintains control over the totality of society. But while the Puritan will to leadership survives in Miss Pride, and the externals of behavior dictated by Puritanism, as well, the deep-lying moral impulse of the Puritan has evaporated. And the Puritan regard for the works of the mind has become in Miss Pride a complacent anti-intellectualism.

Miss Stafford has not been kind to Miss Pride as the Boston patrician. Her examination of proper Boston society as a whole sometimes takes on the air of parody as she conducts her comedy of manners with a good deal of exaggeration, laying about her with broad strokes and broad comments. Her Bostonians utter platitudes so firmly and courteously that their opinions seem indisputable. Miss Stafford wants us to see that these self-appointed gods have feet of clay. She is content to show us the limitations, even the decay, of this native American culture, just as she revealed the disintegration of a displaced European culture. Yet she makes Sonie, who knows the superficiality and the evil in it, choose the former, because the half-life of tradition it offers her represents the ballast that will hold her to sanity.

The promise and dimensions of Miss Stafford's achievement are foreshadowed in *Boston Adventure*. The sensitive exploration of Sonie's interior castle, where, in her psychic depths, she fights the fear of madness, is an indication that Miss Stafford has committed herself to psychological techniques in fiction. These she will develop in succeeding novels and stories as she works toward her own particular mode of writing. The Puritan conscience, which is here given a satirical treatment reminiscent of that in Marquand's work, is a subject to which she will return, although in another vein. The Jamesian manner in the second part of this novel she will come to dominate more successfully later on; here she lacks the finish, the subtlety, and the assurance of the master, and, as a consequence, often overextends her prose--makes it too rich and too complicated--in an effort to attain a density of tone and meaning that she is not yet ready to command. The writing of this novel may have convinced her that she lacks the direct, brutal force of Dostoevski, and his is an influence that diminishes perceptibly in the course of her career, although it does not entirely disappear. Finally, the strategy of contrasting worlds, applied here to give both range and tension to her fiction, is carried forward in other books."

Chester E. Eisinger
Fiction of the Forties
(U Chicago 1963) 296-98

"*Boston Adventure* should be compared with Oates's *them* for their common exploration of lower-class life for a young woman. While Oates has more power and intensity, is more memorable, Stafford is more elegant, more shaped, more purely literary. Her Sonia Marburg and Oates's Maureen Wendall, nevertheless, meet in strange areas of choice, security, and near-destruction."

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

"In her first published novel, *Boston Adventure* (1944), Stafford follows the life of Sonia Marburg from her childhood through young womanhood. Stafford gives Sonia an unbelievably melodramatic family situation out of which Sonia equally unbelievably rises. This heroine, unlike many other Stafford characters, triumphs, although her victory can also be seen as her enslavement. She triumphs by holding to a steely self-interest that overrides any consideration of family or friendship.

The prelude to *Boston Adventure* and to the character of Sonia Marburg is the novel Stafford finished in Concord when she first went East but never published. An interviewer reports Stafford's appraisal of the novel in 1952: 'The war came along and its slant wasn't topical enough. Thank Heavens, oh, thank Heaven, its author apostrophizes. It was not, in retrospect, a book she would like to have written.' The slant is, in fact, quite topical, but its subject matter would have been extremely distasteful to the American public in the early forties.

The central character of the untitled novel is Gretchen Marburg, twenty-one, a German-American student at the University of Heidelberg in the late thirties. Gretchen has always felt herself an outsider, a child who has been taunted by other children for her being German, a dude on the ranch to which her father has retired, a young girl disliked by her brother's friends. When she arrives in Germany, however, she finds a place for herself; she immediately embraces, and is embraced by, the young Nazis of Heidelberg. Through them, she is also able to work out her need for revenge for past slights to herself. She becomes an informer against people who do not support the Nazis, including her own brother Karl and several of his friends. Her love affair with a young German aviator is as much an attempt to prove herself loyal to the *Vaterland* as it is a true involvement of the heart.

Motivated by hatred and vengefulness, Gretchen Marburg is not an attractive character. At the end, when her lover is killed fighting in Spain and she piteously asks God what she has done wrong, the reader does not feel the sympathy for her that the author apparently does. Instead, one is inclined to think that Gretchen gets exactly what she deserves. Perhaps Stafford intended to demonstrate the lengths to which a human being can be driven by rejection. The slights that Gretchen suffers, however, are completely out of proportion to the retaliatory action she takes.

Stafford incorporates Gretchen's rather chilling character traits, only slightly softened, into the character of Sonia. She also uses other details from the Gretchen Marburg novel in *Boston Adventure*. In the original novel, Gretchen's father is Herman Marburg from Wurzburg, Germany. The Marburg family vacations each year at the Hotel Vancouver in Seattle, where a Miss Pride also vacations. Gretchen's mother exhibits signs of madness; she sleeps in her coffin, for example. Gretchen and her brother discuss a young Japanese woman, Kakosan Yoshida, who is loved by Heyjim Littlefield, an Indian friend of theirs who is an orphan from near Tulsa. In *Boston Adventure*, Sonia's father is Hermann Marburg from Wurzburg, Germany. Sonia meets Miss Lucy Pride at the Hotel Barstow in Chichester where Miss Pride vacations each year. Sonia's mother goes mad. Kakosan Yoshida is loved by Sonia's childhood sweetheart Nathan Kadish. Gretchen's embrace of the Nazis is transformed into Miss Pride's sympathy with Hitler's persecution of the Jews.

Sonia Marburg, from the time she is ten years old, wants to shed her family and poverty in Chichester, be adopted by Miss Pride, and be given entrance to Boston aristocracy. She wishes for her parents' deaths so that she might achieve her dream. She has to wait the eight years of book 1 of the novel for the dream to come true. Her parents do not die. Her father does desert the family when Sonia is twelve, leaving her mother pregnant with a son whom she hates and torments from the moment he is born until she has driven him to death. Her mother sinks into the madness that has flashed from her even in earlier times she was apparently sane, but driven to frenzy by her husband's inability to give her the riches he had promised her

and by memories of her own wretched childhood in Russia. The child Ivan dies, Sonia carries out a fake burial at sea in order to satisfy her mother's delusions, her mother completely loses touch with reality, Sonia arranges for her to be confined in an institution, and Sonia is free at last. Throughout the eight years of this remarkable history, Sonia remains steadfast in her desire to go to Boston and live with Miss Pride.

The cold objectivity with which Sonia narrates the horrors of the Marburgs' family life makes her protestations of pain and sorrow at the loss of her father, the death of her brother, and the insanity of her mother sound hollow, especially when she says she 'took a cruel and perverse pleasure' in the remorse of her [mother's] inner soul' when Ivan dies. She also takes pleasure, she 'laughed outright,' in doping her mother into insensibility. The hollow sound of Sonia's emotional response persists because Sonia knows and the reader knows that the gradual disappearance of her relatives brings her closer to being adopted by Miss Pride.

Sonia views Miss Pride with the same objectivity. After Ivan's death, Miss Pride does not respond to Sonia's plea for money to bury the child. She instead lies about receiving Sonia's letter. Sonia's response reveals the ice in her blood: 'My first reaction was...almost of disgust as for a few seconds she stood before me, not as that grand Bostonian to whose slightest favor I had aspired, but as a selfish old woman who, as a sop to her conscience, had brought me a potted plant. It seemed to me that she had aged remarkably since the past summer. Probably no change had taken place in her at all. It is difficult, in a wrinkled face, to compute how many new wrinkles have appeared in a year's time, or to see, in white hair, all the stages of its purification. It was, rather, that I had changed and my altered feelings had turned a spotlight upon the arthritic stiffening of her fingers from which she had removed the white gloves, the desiccation and the yellow hue of her creased skin, the protuberation of her veins, the liverish patches on her wrists, the aridity of her thin lips. But a censor in me checked me before I had disarrayed her features beyond repair....' Despite her recognition of Miss Pride's true nature--'an old, ugly woman inspired by a tenuous and urbane evil'--Sonia will take no chances on destroying her possibility of reaching her goal.

Sonia's hypocrisy and persistence pay off, and Miss Pride invites her to live in her house in Boston as her secretary. In book 2, Sonia relates her life on Pinckney Street. Despite the outward appearances of her position there, Sonia remains in control of her destiny. After a few months on Pinckney Street, Sonia, who *has* been received in Boston society but in her special role as Miss Pride's companion, realizes that she has gained an advantage in her relationship with Miss Pride that she will exploit when she needs to. When Miss Pride reveals an uncertainty about Sonia's loyalty to her, Sonia feels 'a sense of power over her that allowed me to make a private reservation. I would stay with her so long as she upheld her part of the bargain and did not deprive me of my freedom in those hours which were not dedicated to her. For it had occurred to me that as she grew older she might become more demanding of my time.' Sonia is no more willing to put up with a tiresome Miss Pride than she has been to endure her own mother.

Sonia's life in Boston is dominated by her hatred of Miss Pride's niece, Hopestill Mather, whom she has detested since she saw her as a child at the Hotel Barstow, and a corresponding love for Philip McAllister, Hopestill's intended fiancé. Since she is conscious of her love for Philip only when Hopestill is around, it appears that it is primarily motivated by a desire to attract Philip away from the hated Hopestill. Her attraction to him has another perverse basis. She realizes in Boston that the deep love she has asserted that she has felt for Nathan Kadish, a childhood neighbor in Chichester, was really only a fascination she felt for a disfiguring birthmark on his face. And she wonders if she 'would have coveted Philip McAllister if he had not been deformed' by a stiff back. She concedes that her attraction is a 'symptom of an abnormal and somewhat repulsive nature in myself.'

Following the announcement of Hopestill and Philip's engagement, Sonia begins to believe that she is no match after all for the hidebound Bostonians and she begins periodically to sink into a vision of a red room in a manner that raises questions about her own sanity. The room is the only place where she can feel herself in control: 'The room had been a little random daydream which I could have again, or it was like a lengthened *deja vue*, that evasive quasi-memory which is a sort of unlearned knowledge of the soul. I could, I knew, in time, name in its real place each object in the room, and I felt confident that even after my vivisection, the room would accomplish again its impeccable synthesis, a fused and incomprehensible entity. It was a sanctuary and its tenant was my spirit, changing my hot blood to cool ichor and my pain to

ease. Under my own merciful auspices, I had made for myself a tamed-down sitting-room to a dead, a voiceless, city where no one could trespass, for I was the founder, the governor, the only citizen.'

Ultimately, Sonia triumphs. Hopestill dies following a fall from horseback that she has deliberately caused. Philip hates Hopestill for tricking him into a marriage to hide her illegitimate pregnancy. Miss Pride promises to pay for the support of Sonia's mother, in exchange for Sonia's promise never to leave her. And Sonia's mother becomes catatonic, relieving Sonia of any further personal contact with her. Sonia is left tied to Miss Pride, but that is a servitude she has sought.

Early reviewers and later critics have called *Boston Adventure* Proustian and Jamesian. And there are certain superficial resemblances in style and subject matter to the works of these two. But this expose of the conflict of cultures and classes exemplified in the poor young 'foreigner' from Chichester and the Boston Brahmins, this satire of the 'small, dour world' of Beacon Hill, this journey through the memory of a knowing child, is obscured by the critical labeling. In *Boston Adventure*, Jean Stafford was primarily getting her own revenge against the proper Bostonians who had rejected her even though she had married into a family that brought her a listing in the Social Register.

It is not difficult to perceive in Sonia Marburg the outsider, Jean Stafford, the outsider. Sonia acquires her desire to live with Miss Pride when as a ten-year-old she works as a maid at the Hotel Bristow; Stafford had been a twelve-year-old maid at a hotel. Sonia writes a Stafford-like western story about a 'steely blue-eyed foreman of the Lazy S,' which is rejected by her teacher. Her father reads *Riders of the Purple Sage* in German translation, wants to go west, and has made himself cowboy boots in preparation. Sonia reports that when Miss Pride spoke of the West, 'it was not quite a void, but it was something stretching interminably behind one's back.... [S]he had been 'out' once, and had not the least desire to go again.' She tells a friend: 'I dare say their rugged life and bad climate make the people hardy. But I must confess I find the Rocky Mountains quite hideous, quite lacking in style... Even if the landscape didn't offend me, though, I couldn't endure the place more than ten days at a time. There is a crackly feel in western speech that sets my teeth on edge.' The inclusion of these incidents and details and Miss Pride's comment have little really to do with the story of the Russian-German heroine. They do, however, reveal the slights the author had felt because of her own origins.

Stafford specifically satirizes the Lowells, indirectly by a reference to 'the shabbiest delicatessen on Revere Street,' the not quite socially correct street on which Robert Lowell's parents had their home. Directly, she has Miss Pride comment, 'The less said about Amy Lowell, the better.' She also has Miss Pride express dismay with a young poet who is a thinly disguised Robert Lowell: 'Some young person, child of an old friend, had one day come to tea and had brought with him the Holy Sonnets of John Donne, and in spite of her protests, had managed to read one aloud to her...a particularly passionate one.... The same young man had, she understood, taken to writing poems himself...and had composed some vicious lines on the Granary Burying Ground. The young man's "case' was a mystery to her because he had...come from a perfectly dignified family...[and] was directly descended from at least two of the illustrious skeletons in the yard.'

Stafford planned to write a sequel to *Boston Adventure* and did compose fragments of one under two titles, 'Parliament of Women' and 'The Dream of the Red Room.' An additional indication that Stafford put much of herself into Sonia Marburg is revealed in an outline she composed for the sequel--obviously after her divorce from Lowell. The outline traces the marriage of Sonia and Philip in terms of the incidents of Stafford's own marriage to Lowell."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh
Jean Stafford
(Twayne 1985) 54-60

"*Boston Adventure* is by far the longest piece of writing Stafford ever accomplished. In many respects it is also the most ambitious fiction she ever attempted. In 1944 the novel was an anachronism--deliberately old-fashioned in both style and plot, a throwback to the leisurely Victorian novels of education that Stafford had been reading since adolescence....

Book One, called 'Hotel Barstow,' introduces Sonie Marburg, the proper daughter of a German shoemaker and a Russian chambermaid, who grows up in the North Shore, Massachusetts, village of Chichester (based on Nahant). Sonie works summers at the Hotel Barstow, where she eavesdrops on the conversations of Boston dowagers and fantasizes about the life of the rich and wellborn on Beacon Hill, which she can see across the water from the hotel, topped by the gold dome of the State House.

Sonie's father abandons his family and is never heard from again. Her epileptic brother dies after a seizure that leaves him helpless overnight in a snowstorm. Her mother goes crazy, eventually having to be institutionalized. Sonie is rescued from her predicament by Miss Lucy Pride, who has noticed the girl at the Barstow and has taken an interest in her. Miss Pride offers Sonie a job as her secretary, to take down the memoirs she has always planned to write.

In Book Two, called 'Pinckney Street,' Sonie is installed in Miss Pride's house on Louisburg Square, in the heart of Beacon Hill. Initially gauche and timid, she slowly blooms into the society she has always envied from afar. That envy is now focused on Hopestill Mather, Miss Pride's beautiful niece, who becomes engaged to Philip McAllister, a young doctor who has shown an interest in Sonie. Near the end of the book, Sonie divines Hopestill's secret, which is that she must marry Philip because she is pregnant. By deliberately getting thrown from a horse, Hopestill induces a miscarriage, but the trauma costs her her life. The novel ends with Sonie pondering a future moment when Miss Pride's death will liberate her from her servitude to Pinckney Street.... For Stafford the Red Room came to be both a purely mental symbol of an ideal retreat from the world and a retrievable inner arcadia, a tantalizingly familiar sanctum she had never known in real life, but which she 'knew' in intimate detail....

In some respects it is astonishing that *Boston Adventure* became a best-seller. The book makes for slow reading: not only is Stafford's style Proustian, it is Jamesian as well, and some of its paragraphs are steeped in a stiff, awkward formality, which, coupled with that tendency toward imitation, betrays Stafford's apprentice standing. Particularly in Book Two, chapters go by in which very little happens, and pages are devoted to the banal conversations of stuffed shirts at parties. The novel is simply too long. Frank Morley's characterization in his note to Robert Giroux is wonderfully apt: the writing indeed 'creeps on relentlessly.' And Sonie, he complained, is 'a curiously passive creature.'

On the other hand the novel does develop a powerful and complex landscape--that of Sonie's inner life. At its best, this interior richness, mirrored by the sometimes masterly opulence of Stafford's language, seizes the reader's imagination. *Boston Adventure* is the sort of novel that inspires diametrically opposite reactions. Some who start the book find themselves unable to plow through it; others are just as unable to put it down.

The tragedies of Sonie's childhood in Chichester are handled in a lugubrious but effective manner, more reminiscent of the great Russian novels than of the work of Proust or James. Perhaps the plainest clue to why *Boston Adventure* found so many readers is that in its second half it purports to unveil the most snobbish and exclusive social set in American life (a review in *Newsweek*, for example, hailed the expose as 'delicious')....

The novel has a strong psychologically autobiographical bent. In Sonie's loss of her father and brother and in Mrs. Marburg's decline into madness, Stafford dramatizes the alienation she herself felt as a child and as an adolescent. There seems to be an element even of wishful self-orphaning: only by losing her family can Sonie redefine herself in a headier milieu. In the short stories, Stafford wrote throughout the 1940s and 1950s, orphaned or half-orphaned protagonists (as she recognized) abound.

Hopestill Mather, of course, conjures up Lucy Cooke, and Stafford explicitly admitted that Lucy had been her model. Furthermore, Sonie's transplantation from country poverty into provincialism to the pinnacle of Beacon Hill society--which in strictly realistic terms defies plausibility--goes to the heart of what may be the central concern of all of Stafford's fiction. This is an exploration of what happens to the 'hick' who, by dint of sheer intellectual ambition, invades the glamorous cosmopolitan elite, only to discover her contempt for the artifice and hypocrisy upon which the world she has always hungered for is necessarily built. This may indeed have been the pivotal tension of Stafford's own life. It lay behind her

pride in being a 'Barbarian' at CU even as she desperately envied the Pi Phis It is the same tension that she inflicted upon herself by marrying Robert Lowell, who squired her into parlors full of Charlotte Lowells, those pitiable snobs whom Stafford could not pity because her own yearning for social ease was so acute.

The crucial interpretive question about *Boston Adventure*, then, is to what extent its second half ('Pinckney Street') aims at satire. It was widely read as such. The *Newsweek* reviewer wrote, 'The irony is not vicious, but it has its moments of devastation and of high wit.' A defensive *Boston Globe* critic repudiated the novel's accuracy, sneering at the book as a 'highly stylized and romanticized literary adventure.' In a sense the *Globe* reviewer was right, for Stafford's Beacon Hill owes more to her imagination (and to her reading of Victorian and Edwardian novels) than to firsthand observation. Moreover, at a distance of four decades it becomes clear that *Boston Adventure* teeters between satire and enthusiasm, just as Stafford herself did. A part of her was endlessly dazzled by what went on inside those drawing rooms on Louisburg Square....

The critical reception of *Boston Adventure* was mixed. *Newsweek* called the novel 'richly imaginative' and 'incisive'; *Time* was cooler, complaining that the characters are 'only technically alive, and never have any particular depth.' Francis Hackett in the *New York Times* remarked, 'Not only is Jean Stafford determined to write literature at any cost, but she is also determined to give us tons of whipped cream on it.' *The New Yorker* was more generous: 'A first novel which will probably invite plenty of comparison with Proust, and which should stand up under it amazingly well.'

The general public had few reservations. By April 1945 the book was in its fifth printing. In addition to the Book League's selection of *Boston Adventure*, the Armed Service Editions had printed a condensed version.... The total sales of *Boston Adventure*... approached four hundred thousand copies within the first several months after its publication.... *Boston Adventure* outsold Charles Jackson's *The Lost Weekend*, John Hersey's *A Bell for Adano*, and all 6,814 other books--nonfiction as well as fiction--that came out in the United States that year.... *Boston Adventure* made most of the critics' lists of the best books of 1944.... In the *Saturday Review of Literature* annual Pulitzer Prize poll, Stafford's novel tied with John Hersey's *A Bell for Adano* for first place. (In the end, Hersey's book won the Pulitzer.)... Jean Stafford was famous....

After the middle of 1945 the stylized, old-fashioned, wan-humored prose of *Boston Adventure* was banished for good. In its place came a supple, lively style, full of concrete diction and startling colloquial juxtapositions, in its own way as well wrought syntactically as the earlier Proustian cadences but with all the labor of the craft disguised.... The exemplar passed from Proust and James to Mark Twain.... In the summer of 1952 Stafford returned to the writers' conference in Boulder.... She was lionized. The local paper proudly declared, 'Jean Stafford is recognized as one of the outstanding writers of this generation. In England she generally is regarded as our foremost young American writer'."

David Roberts
Jean Stafford: A Biography
(Little, Brown 1988) 218-222, 227-28, 256, 262, 296

"Not only does Stafford include characters resembling the Lowells and their Boston circle, but she also portrays her misanthropic father, her embittered mother, Hightower and his Japanese girlfriend, Lucy McKee, and even Lowell in barely disguised form in this female *Bildungsroman* that critics likened to the novels of Proust, the Brontes, and Dostoevsky. It is patently obvious, moreover, that Stafford's first-person narrator, Sonie Marburg, a blameless victim of poverty and of her parents' unfortunate marriage, as well as a person of intelligence and sensitivity who both longs for and loathes the privileged world of Boston society, is a character bearing a great similarity to Stafford herself....

Boston Adventure traces the growth and development of Sonia Marburg, who at the novel's beginning lives with her parents and her younger brother in Chichester, a fishing village not too far from Boston. Her father is a well-educated but impoverished German artisan; and her mother, a Russian immigrant, helps to support the family by working as a chambermaid in Chichester's Hotel Barstow. It is here that Sonie meets Miss Lucy Pride, an elderly member of the Boston aristocracy whose elegant, conservative dress and restrained demeanor contrast markedly with the slovenly clothes and frenzied behavior of her own mother. She also meets Miss Pride's spoiled niece, Hopestill Mather, a character whose resemblance to Lucy

McKee Stafford acknowledged. By the end of Book One, Sonie's irresponsible father has abandoned his family, Sonie's younger brother Ivan, an epileptic, has died, and Sonie's mother has been admitted to a mental hospital after suffering a nervous breakdown.

In Book Two, entitled 'Pinckney Street,' Sonie enters Miss Pride's upper-class Boston world when she is employed as the older woman's secretary. Here Sonie learns about various members of the Boston aristocracy, including a young poet resembling Lowell who is the author of 'some vicious lines on the Granary Burying Ground' and who carries about with him the Holy Sonnets of John Donne. Sonie rejects one suitor, a Jewish intellectual from Denver who gives up the 'pipe dream' of becoming a writer, as Hightower had done,' and she falls in love with Philip McAllister, a Boston Brahmin like Lowell whose mother tells 'damning anecdotes' about her son and relates 'instances of his devotion to herself.' But Philip McAllister marries Miss Pride's niece, a wealthy, reckless, neurotic young woman who dies, as Lucy McKee had done, soon after she is married.

Boston Adventure concludes with Sonie outwardly conforming to the role expectations dictated by her gender and her position in society: female and outsider, she accepts the subordinate role of secretary to the domineering Miss Pride, whom she admires but also fears. Tormented by her desire to enter a world of elegance and civility that seems beyond her reach, Sonie conjures up a sanctuary for her troubled spirit: a 'red room' filled with books and furnished with Louisa May Alcott's writing desk....

Wishing to escape the fate of her embittered, demented mother, whose abandonment by her husband has resulted in a mental breakdown, and rejecting as well the sterile if orderly life of the celibate Miss Pride, Sonie is unable to conceive of an alternative way of life for herself. As does the protagonist of the prototypical female *Bildungsroman*, Sonie outwardly submits to her fate by returning to the house of the overbearing Miss Pride, but her rebellion takes the form of maintaining inviolate the hallucinatory vision of her place of refuge, the imaginary 'red room' in which her spirit resides: 'It was a sanctuary and its tenant was my spirit.'...

The appearance in 1944 of *Boston Adventure* was a major literary event, for this first novel by an unknown writer was applauded by reviewers in newspapers and magazines and by critics in literary journals. A number of critics, including the anonymous reviewers in the *New Yorker* and in *Time*, Ruth Page in the *New York Times Book Review*, and Alfred Kazin in the *New Republic*, compared Stafford's style and that of Proust, and other critics saw parallels between Stafford's novel and those of the Brontes, Dostoevsky, and J. P. Marquand, who had also written a novel about Boston's upper class. Diana Trilling, who said that she found Stafford's depiction of the mature Sonie in Book Two somewhat more convincing than her portrayal of the 'Dostoevskian horror' of Sonie's childhood in Book One, nevertheless expressed the sentiments of the majority of critics when she wrote that it would be 'hard to name a book of recent years which, page for page or even sentence for sentence, was so lively and clever.'

Today, when *Boston Adventure* has been all but forgotten not only by the casual reader but also by literary historians and even feminist critics who have done so much to revive forgotten novels by women writers, it is hard to believe that Stafford's first novel created such a stir when it was first published or, indeed, that it was subsequently reprinted almost a dozen times.... *Boston Adventure* is an impressive first novel. It demonstrates Stafford's brilliant use of language, her ability to create believable and interesting characters, her wit, and her ironic view of mankind. An American Jane Eyre, Stafford's Sonia Marburg takes her place among those female protagonists of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century female *Bildungsroman* who dream of a life very different from the one that circumstances permit them to live. Celebrating Stafford's achievement, Ihab Hassan wrote of *Boston Adventure* in 1955, 'But whatever may be said of *Boston Adventure*, the sweep of is social intentions and the grip of some of its individual scenes put it on a par with any first novel by an American writer of this decade'."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman
Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart
(U Texas 1990) 140-43

"Jean Stafford's *Boston Adventure* and *The Mountain Lion*...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.... Further, she pointedly allies herself to male literary models, Mark Twain and Henry James, rarely acknowledging any debt to other women writers.... Like her contemporary and sometime mentor, Caroline Gordon, Stafford paradoxically both devalued her work and resisted the essentializing label of 'woman writer'."

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 6

"*Boston Adventure*, as its original title, *The Outskirts*, suggests, was a story of exile--of social, but also of spiritual, exile. It was a version of the story that Stafford had tried to tell in *Autumn Festival*, and her protagonist this time, named Sonie Marburg, was a relative of Gretchen, like her an outcast from her family, searching for salvation in an alien society.

But in Sonie, Gretchen's temperament was tamed by a more mature imagination--her own and her creator's. Where Stafford's earlier heroine had been consumed by adolescent self-loathing and disgust with the world around her, Sonie was more patient and ironic in her explorations of her alienation; if Gretchen was a damned soul, Sonie was a spirit in purgatory. It marked the kind of tempering of sensibility that, interestingly, was not much in evidence in Lowell's *Land of Unlikeness*, which consisted largely of poems that emerged under the Tates' roof at the same time that *Boston Adventure* was taking revised shape. As R.P. Blackmur wrote of Lowell's poems, 'There is not a loving metre in the book,' echoing the Atlantic Monthly Press's reactions to Stafford's earlier novel. 'What is thought of as Boston in him fights with what is thought of as Catholic; and the fight produces not a tension but a gritting. It is not the violence, the rage, the denial of this world that grits, but the failure of these to find *in verse* the tension of necessity; necessity has, when recognized, the quality of conflict accepted, not hated.' Stafford had discovered the tension of necessity in Sonie's narrative. In mesmerizing prose, she created a character who confronted the divisions in the self with an eerily calm, fatalistic curiosity.

Stafford's novel was not religious in the same sense that Lowell's contemporaneous poems were. She was not working with explicitly Christian symbolism, aiming to articulate an apocalyptic religious myth, as he was. (He said later that he had been 'much more interested in being a Catholic than in being a writer.') But her basic inclination, like that of her teachers, Tate and Ransom (and, behind them, T.S. Eliot), was to see...mankind as fallen and art as a kind of redemptive witness to that plight. And like Lowell, Stafford was fascinated by the opposition between Catholicism and Boston. Dividing her novel into two parts, she juxtaposed an Old World vision of spiritual damnation with a New World vision of social salvation. Sonie hoped to escape her lowly, blighted past and redeem herself amid high Boston society. But Stafford didn't grant her such a simple pilgrimage. Boston was hardly the salvation Sonie expected, and Stafford offered another alternative, the life of art--only to deny her that as well. Stafford was not proposing Sonie's tale as a portrait of the artist as a young woman. The only prospect of transcendence she held out for Sonie was a contemplative, not a creative, retreat from the corrupt world--a retreat that threatened to mean losing her mind rather than finding her soul.

Sonie's spiritual and social journey began in Chichester, a little village across the bay from Boston where she lived in near destitution with her tormented German father, Hermann, a lapsed Catholic, and her histrionic Russian mother, Shura, immigrants with nothing to cling to in the New World. Her odyssey took an unlikely turn when her childhood fantasy was fulfilled. She was invited to live in the well-appointed Pinckney Street house of Miss Pride, the embodiment of Boston propriety (and, it turned out, of petrifaction) who regularly vacationed at the Hotel Barstow in Chichester and had become Sonie's idol. For years the child had been consumed with admiration of the impeccably bred visitor, and with envy of Miss Pride's niece, Hopestill Mather, Sonie's age and a lucky inhabitant of Pinckney Street. The image of the spinster's old house--hallowed in Sonie's mind by tradition, by association with some vague ideal of civilization--emerged as the presiding symbol of the book. In her daydreams Sonie adorned those solid, orderly rooms with concrete details, drawing on her knowledge of Miss Pride's immaculate Hotel Barstow room, which the child cleaned when her mother, the chambermaid, wasn't feeling well. But the cruel recognition crowning Sonie's quest was that darkness and isolation existed in the aristocratic order of the

Boston elite too. Her life with Miss Pride proved to be anything but a liberation. Garbed in civility and enlightenment, the solitude there was even more chilling.

For the Southerners, the North, especially New England, played a crucial role in the drama of deracination, and both Stafford and Lowell were fascinated by the myth of the 'abstract-minded, sharp-witted trading society' of New England versus the 'simple...personal and dramatic...sensuous' southern mind, as Tate put the contrast in his essay in *I'll Take My Stand.* But their allegiances were, understandably, not so clearcut. Though Stafford, the Westerner (and now a New Englander by marriage), was acutely aware of the formative power of place, she could also become exasperated with the dogmatic views of her hosts. She had listened to countless conversations about the importance of regionalism, a favorite topic among the Tates and the assorted company that gathered at Monteagle.... But sometimes the smugness roused Stafford to indignation, 'We had this statement "I cannot feel that anything out of the south is of any consequence"... Like Lowell, whose ambivalence about New England emerged in the poems he was writing at the time, Stafford was evidently inspired in part by the southern prejudice about the North to write about the place herself... Unlike her husband, however, she wasn't writing from the inside.... It was not as though she could portray New England from intimate knowledge: she had lived in Cambridge and skirmished with the Lowells only briefly, and her reaction had been confused. She had been at once enthralled and repelled by the clannish elite that had given her such a cold shoulder. But if Sonie's lurid Chichester childhood and her frigid Boston coming-of-age bore little resemblance to Stafford's actual life, the progress of Sonie's mind reflected the growth of Stafford's own.

Boston Adventure was the portrait of an adventurous yet vulnerable imagination struggling to make sense of the world. It was steeped more in literature than in life--especially in Proust and James, an intimidating tradition but one that Stafford wasn't afraid to turn to her own uses.... James offered not merely a model of formalism but a version of the conflict of values [Southerners] identified in their own national drama. His juxtaposition of innocent, idealistic Americans with sensuous, experienced Europeans was not so different from the Agrarians' opposition between Northeners and Southerners, for as both Tate and Ransom made clear in their contributions to the Agrarian manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*, the South was America's Europe, the repository of tradition, of landed attachments, in an otherwise shallow-rooted country. James's contrast was evidently helpful to Stafford as she worked to complicate the conflicts in Sonie's Boston adventure....

Instead of a Jamesian heiress, a 'passionate pilgrim' sent forth from innocent New England to encounter in Europe the 'social successful worldly world'...Sonie Marburg was a pauper on what looked like the reverse journey. She started out across the water from Boston with her European parents. Physically she was not far away... But spiritually she was miles away, her life in Chickester a socially unsuccessful impoverished world. Sonie ended up in the heart of New England, but it was far from innocent. If James was one lurking literary model whose international theme Stafford in a sense transposed, Proust was the presiding influence. Here too Stafford inventively adapted. 'With its first page, tuned to the glazed and dying night-music of Proust's Overture,' Alfred Kazin wrote in his review, '*Boston Adventure* brings us into the mind of a young girl so high in her style and so low in society that one's first impression is that Gorky's tramp characters have stolen into the cork-lined room.' The strange tension at the center of Stafford's novel was the disjunction between Sonie's sensibility and her circumstances. She sounded, as Stafford herself said early on, like...Proust--elevated and archaic--yet her origins and her destiny were a world away from Marcel's.... Sonie was Miss Pride's disillusioned secretary--an amanuensis charged with a hopeless project, the old lady's memoirs--not a real writer. She never enjoyed Marcel's miraculous triumph of simultaneously renouncing the corrupt world and possessing it in the creation of a work of art.

That is what made Sonie such a peculiar, and powerful, heroine. Stafford's Proustian and Jamesian ingredients resulted in an idiosyncratic mix. Sonie was neither an artist nor really an heiress. What stood in the way of art was that she aspired to be an heiress--that she wanted to be, and then was, adopted by Miss Pride--more than she wanted to pursue a literary life. What undermined her role as heiress was that she had the ironic spirit of an artist, the imagination to see the distance between pretension, aspiration, and reality. She made not only the opposite of James's journey, but also the opposite of Proust's journey--that is, she chose society over art, even though society was an imprisonment. Yet Stafford shared with both writers a focus on disillusionment, on spiritual alienation and social subjugation. In fact, her vision was completely

dark [except for implicit religious faith]. She allowed no bridging of American and European values, no synthesis of art and life. Neither heiress nor artist, Sonie was an odd combination of dreamer and critic.... Stafford unfolded a sort of mythic progress of the soul, or rather of the imagination....

In Book One, 'Hotel Barstow,' Stafford set in motion Sonie's liberation from Chichester and traced her problematic imaginative heritage. She lived surrounded by--suffocated by--disappointed hopes. Her mother, brought up in horrifying misery in Russia, berated her father for sabotaging her dreams of a lavish life in America. Her father, once a proud craftsman and now a poor shoe repairman, was tortured by self-hatred and shame at his fall, not only from his vocation but from Catholicism... Violence and hatred rocked the Marburgs' dilapidated cottage, especially at night, when from her pallet on the floor she heard her parents rail at each other in bed. As the narrator, she understood the different sources of the common affliction: 'My mother believed herself persecuted by everyone she had ever known.... But [my father] knew, and was powerless to rectify the fault, that all his torture came from his own flabby will which swung him like a pendulum between apathy and fretful indecision'....

To be half Hun was 'infamous beyond pardon,' but to be part Russian was 'utterly improbable.' Sonie was in unwilling thrall to her big-eyed histrionic mother, whose story of betrayal was 'so fantastic that not even I, a little girl, could believe it.' Stafford's great accomplishment was to convey Sonie's enraptured resistance to Shura's lunacy. The two inseparable figures, mother and madwoman, loomed over Sonie, unbelievable yet unquestionable.

Shura Marburg grew more and more fantastically disoriented as the novel progressed, Dickensian in its exaggeration. Impregnated and abandoned by Hermann, she gave birth to a son, Ivan, whom she detested and destroyed, while Sonie struggled in vain to protect the epileptic child, a little monster grown hateful from hate.... Where her mother was an incarnation of the dark urges and fears that Sonie was strong enough to restrain, Hermann Marburg embodied the ambivalent desires and needs that threatened to undermine Sonie's determination, as they did his own.... The artisan was tormented by what Stafford suggested was a deep, and hopeless, desire for transcendence.... He fantasized that the American frontier was his escape from hell.... When, sixty pages into *Boston Adventure*, he fled his wife and family, he was presumably headed out West.

Thus Stafford gave plenty of evidence of the 'violent inwardness' that lurked under Sonie's cool style, though it didn't come packaged in familiar psychological form. This was not subtle introspection at work, but a kind of poetic projection, a drama that called attention to its mythic, religious dimensions. Her parents were not simply the source of certain symptoms in her, but symbols that dramatized her divided nature. In casting Sonie's predicament this way, Stafford couldn't avoid a static, almost surreal quality in the first section of her novel.

What suspense there was in the plot lay in the question: Was Sonie, unlike her father, someone whose misery could be mitigated by 'a change of environment or an increase of worldly goods or an establishment in a society'? That was certainly her dream as a child, as she announced on the first page of the novel. Huddled in the same room with her haranguing parents, her secret wish, cultivated in great detail in her head, was 'that I might have a room of my own, and the one I imagined was Miss Pride's at the Hotel Barstow.' With the echo of Virginia Woolf, Stafford was playing off the expectation that Sonie's transcendence might lie in literature, and she continue to point tantalizingly to that path for Sonie.

But as the soulless nature of Miss Pride's room suggests, Sonie's primary aspirations were, in fact, the opposite of aesthetically liberating. Her fantasies were of a potentially suffocating order. The Boston grande dame displaced Shura in Sonie's dreams, an anti-mother if there ever was one. Miss Pride was repression incarnate, which the child interpreted as desirable aristocratic rigidity. Surrounded by violent passions, Sonie yearned for a kind of serene passivity that seemed ominous. 'It was not until then, in the summer of my 10th year, that I learned, in what terms of childhood I cannot remember, that peace was to be desired above all things,' she announced, and showed herself eager to submit to Miss Pride's tyranny.

Against Miss Pride, the heroine of Sonie's childhood, however, Stafford juxtaposed another force, or direction, in Sonie's adolescence: her Jewish neighbor in Chichester, Nathan Kadish. He represented the

path of rebellious creativity, which had almost as much allure for Sonie as the route to social success, so commandingly staked out by the well-connected Bostonian. Precocious Nathan's combative dedication to learning, which was his way of high-mindedly rejecting Chichester, thrilled Sonie. He dogmatically lectured her about his life's course, much of which he cribbed from George Moore's *Confessions of a Young Man*, which he pressed on Sonie, too. She was captivated but confused: How could this iconoclastic vision of culture and self-definition fit with her ambitions toward Pinckney Street?...

It was a tension that Stafford knew firsthand in life and that she came back to often in her fiction--fascination with wealth and status in conflict with dedication to independence of mind. Sonie understood that she was pulled between two contrasting poles: 'Between these two astronomies, the young man's whose earth was plural, and Miss Pride's whose solitary world was Boston, round which the trifling planets revolved at a respectful distance. I could not choose, for both were true.' Here Stafford drew more directly from her own life, as she introduced another character to serve as a possible bridge between the two. Dr. Philip McAllister, a young Bostonian who mixed Miss Pride's breeding with Nathan's rebelliousness. He seemed the fulfillment of Sonie's ideal, the independent insider who aimed to disconcert but not to destroy the smug establishment, and who thus could offer a potential solution to her dilemma--much as Lowell did for Stafford. In one of Sonie's Boston reveries, Stafford conjured up this ideal young man in terms quite clearly reminiscent of Lowell. Sonie's dream man was a literary radical--a reader of Donne, a writer of unconventional poetry--who posed an overt challenge to the old lady with her impossibly provincial views.

But Stafford finally didn't allow a constructive synthesis, though at first it seemed she might. A man with a taste for transcendence, Philip McAllister enabled Sonie's liberation from Chichester by helping her to commit her mother to a mental hospital. In Boston, however, he failed her. There he was too late in warning her against Miss Pride's tyranny, distracted from Sonie's troubles by his fascination with, and then marriage to, Hopestill Mather.

True to the injunction that art ought to be impersonal, Stafford had cast Sonie's predicament in ambitiously encompassing terms in Book One. Though the facts of her own life were discernible, she was notably successful this time in transforming them into inevitable forces in her characters' lives. The parents represented the most extreme metamorphosis. Sonie's crazed mother was a kind of demonic inversion of Stafford's own long-suffering, matter-of-fact mother. The father figure, violently embittered in his disappointment, had to disappear early in the novel; he was so daunting. Stafford recognized later, that she couldn't confront him straight on in her fiction. The domineering, aristocratic woman was the mother Stafford didn't have but acquired through marriage, and to whom she then felt masochistically susceptible: Mrs. Lowell lurked not very far behind Miss Pride, an emblem of social power and ruthlessness and an enemy of creative energy. (Miss Pride's aesthetic views seemed to echo from Mrs. Lowell, who considered serious writing a thoroughly unsuitable pursuit for a well-bred Bostonian. 'I think he writes doggerel,' was Miss Pride's assessment of Eliot. 'I have never quite got his connections clear. All I know of him is that he was born in St. Louis, even though he really was an Eliot.')

The younger men, too, could be assigned their counterparts: McAllister as Lowell, Nathan as Hightower. Moreover, the deeply ambivalent view of Boston reflected not simply Stafford's personal dilemma but a preoccupation of her husband's as well. At any rater, that was how Lowell sometimes told it, as he worked alongside Stafford on poems in which he couldn't quite decide whether the Puritans were forces of enlightened rebellion or of benighted authoritarianism and inhumanity.

In Book Two, 'Pinckney Street,' Stafford shifted the scene from Chichester to Boston and settled the question. This was her Proustian anatomy of corruption, though as Dr. McAllister explained to Sonie, the drama of decadence among the Bostonians was wan: 'Boston was something in the days when hell was immediate, altruism was ruthless, and justice was Mosaic. Now, cured of its chills and fevers, its blood watered down, it was no longer exciting. Still puritanical, it tried to imitate Sodoms and Gomorrahs in their decenter fashions, but the result was only dowdiness.' The inward, subjective perspective gave way to a more objective approach as her heroine matured. Delivered to the Boston of her dreams, Sonie now had to face the disintegration of her ideal. She had escaped the wild frustration of the powerless, her parents, only to discover the more decorous desperation of the powerful.

On one level, 'Pinckney Street' was the more manageable part of Stafford's enterprise. It was scathing social portraiture in a well-established tradition, a novel of manners about an often-caricatured corner of America. And though Stafford hadn't penetrated Boston society very deeply, she had been formatively exposed to it, directly and indirectly. In shot, it was less a challenge to her mythic imagination--as 'Hotel Barstow' had been--and more a task for her analytic, satiric powers. And certainly she had those in abundance. Stafford's principle was once again juxtaposition, this time between crowded social scenes, in which Sonie was more observer than participant, and intimate encounters, in which Sonie watched--and was in turn watched by--Miss Pride, Philip, and, most important of all, the renegade Hopestill Mather (a name as unsubtle as Miss Pride's). Miss Pride's niece and ward, Hope was the offstage object of Sonie's envy throughout Book One. In Book Two she became her dark alter ego.

Precisely because she was so naturally gifted at lampooning the 'pilgrims' heirs in Boston, Stafford had more trouble managing the tension for Sonie between creativity and gentility in Boston than she did in Chichester. As a child, both Sonie's outlandish imagination and her yearning for aristocratic rigidity cohabited uneasily but credibly. It wasn't hard to see how this imaginative girl's vision of escape featured the repressive Miss Pride, whom she saw as admirably rigid. But in Boston, it was more difficult to balance Sonie the social aspirant and Sonie the detached outsider. Perceptive satire came so readily to her (as Hope acknowledged, 'It takes an outlander to trap us alive') that her continuing myopic adulation of Miss Pride strained credulity.

Stafford did her best to deal with the problem by developing in Book Two the tension that she had introduced in 'Hotel Barstow' between Sonie's social and artistic aspirations. Although Nathan had drifted out of the foreground temporarily, George Moore was still at her bedside, unsettling her Boston reveries. 'I read him constantly...out of the desire to prove to myself that the 'best' Nathan had wanted for himself and for me was in reality only second best.' Sonie was clearly struggling. Her yearning for propriety and order had to do battle with a zeal for vital experience that she found hard to suppress: 'My talents were not artistic, not creative. I felt that they were assimilative and analytical, that what I saw in Boston, what I had seen in Chichester I understood, but that I could not reassemble my impressions into something artful. I could not ennoble fact. It was experience of the most complex order that I desired, and while there were times when...I wished my knowledge to include the cafes and *ateliers* and quays of George Moore's Paris, the wish was diluted as I turned home and thought of my room, of Miss Pride, and of our conversation over the sherry glasses. She, I thought, was worth all the freedom and all the abandon, worth, indeed, all the triumphs.'

It was in the intimate scenes, which directly or indirectly centered in Hope, that Stafford tried to fine-tune Sonie's perceptive on Pinckney Street and her own fate. By setting up a doppelganger relation between Sonie and Hope--two black sheep, one the insider, one the outsider--she found a way to have both drama and detachment in her story's plot and in her protagonist's psyche. It was a structural and thematic strategy she used again in her fiction after *Boston Adventure*. Through Hope's melodramatic relations with Miss Pride and Philip, Stafford gave Sonie vicarious exposure to the real, brutal Boston, while still sustaining Sonie's own eerily distanced and submissive presence amid the clan.

Hope was not a realistic character any more than Sonie's parents were. She was an emblematic figure, the product of psychological and spiritual pressures that arose from a larger social situation. Hope was the culmination of bad blood and rebellion in the Brahmin enclave--the daughter of a philandering, drunken brute who died when thrown from his horse. But as with the Marburgs, Stafford spared no effort on the vivid particulars; for all the caricature, she was also drawing on a reality even stranger than eccentric stereotype. (She included an outlandish detail from the Lowell family history that surfaced in a poem of Lowell's a decade later: to spare the ears of her husband, Hope's poor mother was forced to play on a dummy piano, a punishment actually visited upon Lowell's Great-Aunt Sarah, as he wrote in 'My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow' in *Life Studies*.)

Hope's story was a familiar one of self-destructive revolt. To the horror of her family, she disappeared to New York, where she spent time with psychoanalysts and fast-living bohemians who were more dedicated to drink and general decadence than to art. Her fate among them was the predictable one. She got pregnant by a cad beneath her station, a Machiavellian social climber with plenty of money but no class and no

conscience. She returned to Boston and successfully plotted a solution to her dilemma. She maneuvered her way into marriage to Philip, ousting Sonie from her position as the doctor's confidante and companion (and, though Sonie hardly dared admit it to herself, aspiring lover). And then Hope's rapid decline began, as Philip, his love transformed to hate, exacted his revenge with the Puritan rigor that had lurked in his idealistic character from the start. In the end Hope, a passionate horsewoman, committed suicide in the Mather tradition. She goaded her horse to throw her late in her pregnancy.

As Elizabeth Hardwick observed in 'Poor Little Rich Girls,' a piece she wrote for *Partisan Review* after the novel came out, Hopestill Mather was a 'literary convention [out of] the novels of the twenties': she was the 'romantically wayward' and theatrically jaded flapper. Hardwick assumed that the convention was being unselfconsciously employed. By Sonie, it was, at least up until the end of the novel. She saw Hope, the aristocratic rebel, in her most symbolic dimensions, because that was how her untutored, ambitious imagination worked on the facts of Boston. But Stafford's own perspective is less easily pinned down, a problem posed by many of her exaggerated portraits: Just where does the irony begin? In part, she seemed to share Sonie's rapt immersion in Hope's lurid life, and her fascination is not hard to account for. As she herself wrote to an old college friend much later, 'Hopestill in my book is Lucy. Miss Pride (and I did not connect these things until the other day) is named Lucy.' Behind the Bostonian decadence, and Hope's suicide, was the frightening memory of Lucy McKee and Stafford's own loss of distance and control in that relationship. No wonder irony sometimes eluded her.

Yet Stafford was also very much in control of her characters and of the relations among them. If Hope on occasion escaped her grasp, for the most part Stafford successfully, and consciously, exploited her as a literary convention. The stereotypical quality of Hope's character highlighted the contrast between her and Sonie, whose reverse aspirations--to join precisely the Bostonian gentry that Hope revolted against--were played out so unconventionally. If Sonie had been the typical arriviste, she would probably have shared some of Hope's salient qualities: feverish energy, manipulative skill, and a calculating understanding of power, along with some vision (however delusory) of autonomy. There is a natural kinship between those literary favorites, the highborn rebel and the lowborn arriviste. But Stafford's purpose was to subvert the conventions in Sonie's case. She was not simply the provincial who triumphed in the city either by mastering its manners or by seeing through them. She did both, and yet she remained convinced that she was the one who had been mastered and seen through. Disillusioned, she was still in thrall. Peace and powerlessness exerted a seductive appeal for this heroine.

Where Hope was finally driven to death as the escape from the merciless sway of Boston--the conventional, dramatic response--Sonie's reaction to Boston was highly unconventional and hardly dramatic in the standard sense of the term. Miss Pride's ruthless pursuit of power was belatedly revealed to Sonie (our class, Hope helpfully whispered, lives for power). Betrayed by her ward, Lucy Pride had hired her secretary not really to write her memoirs, but to tend her through the terrors of a lonely old age. Sonie was indentured unto the death of the indomitable lady, the same fate she had faced in Chichester with her own, real mother--and then faced again when she learned from the doctors in the asylum that Shura was improving and might be released. All at once, the world closed in on Sonie, as two crabbed women claimed her freedom, and her only choice, as she saw it, was between enslavements.

Until, that is, she stumbled upon a strange escape in reverse. Late in Book Two, Stafford turned to the 'red room' of the surgical story she had written in Baton Rouge, inserting whole sections of the meditative vision she had developed there. This time the suffering that impelled retreat to the inner sanctuary was not physical (surgery on her flesh) but mental. Sonie was not a patient in need of release from vivid pain, but a nurse in need of respite from less tangible oppression. The setting for Sonie's first visionary experience, however, was similar. She was in the cool, white asylum visiting her mother--the undistracting surroundings that permitted that first step on St. Teresa's path, the willful cultivation of memories. Instead of the surgeon's knives, it was Miss Pride's eyes that propelled Sonie into the more terrifying culminating instant when the will retreated and the corner was turned. That moment arrived in the midst of one of Hope and Philip's cruel cocktail parties, at which the hosts quietly tortured each other and the guests feigned obliviousness. Some slipped into her sanctuary, only to discover that she was trapped by her mistress's gaze: 'The eyes, like a surgeon's knives, were urged into my brain'....

Once again, there was an ambivalence at the heart of the escape, for it was a kind of imprisonment of its own. In liberating herself from external experience by retreating to her internal chamber, Sonie acknowledged that she was not just cutting herself loose but cutting herself off.... Sonie's subsequent portrait of her room, a variation on a similar passage in Stafford's original story, was, if anything, more chilling. 'It was a sanctuary and its tenant was my spirit, changing my hot blood to cool ichor and my pain to ease. Under my own merciful auspices, I had made for myself a tamed-down sitting-room in a dead, a voiceless, city where no one could trespass, for I was the founder, the governor, the only citizen.' Where Stafford had previously left it at the cozy enough 'tamed-down sitting-room,' she now ominously amplified the room of her own to suggest a post-holocaust city. There was a high price to pay for escape.

In her novel, unlike in her story, Stafford treated the room as a prelude not to spiritual readjustment--whether fulfilling or disillusioning--but to insanity. Sonie dreaded succumbing to her mother's fate. The drama here was not simply one of mind over matter, of a patient coming to new terms with the material world through the experience of physical pain; it was one of mind versus mind. For the problem was that Sonie's brain was not healed, 'sealed and rounded and impervious.' Her imagination was all too permeable, confused between facts and fantasies. She knew all too well 'the fear of my own mind which had conceived so awful a possibility.' More frightening than the confusion between subjective and objective worlds was the confusion between subjective worlds. By virtue of its penetrating power, the imagination itself was rendered vulnerable. It could see into other minds, and thus it had to assume that other minds could see into it. For someone as hypersensitive as Sonie, there was nowhere to hide from the tyrannical eyes. Sonie the child had watched the deadly gaze that locked her mother's and her brother's wild eyes. Sonie the young woman closed with this ominous, understated image of mind-forged manacles: Miss Pride 'looked again as she had done when I was five years old in Chichester; her flat, omniscient eyes seized mine, grappled with my brain, extracted what was there, and her meager lips said, 'Sonie, my dear, come out of the cold. You'll never get to be an old lady if you don't take care of yourself.'...

The successful balance in *Boston Adventure* between carefully structured patterns of symbolic imagery and density of specific detail was doubtless the product of Stafford's endless revisions, begun under the auspices of the Tates. In a crucial step beyond her old 'words, merely' problem, she had found not only themes but a newly concrete style that suited her natural inclination to captivate through carefully wrought language rather than through the representation of raw experience and action. The central symbolic pattern of the novel, which must have required plenty of tinkering to get right, sheds light on the organic relation of Stafford's stylistic method and her themes. Sonie's vision of Miss Pride's Hotel Barstow room and her actual experience of it, then her vision of Miss Pride's Pinckney Street room and her experience of it, and finally her vision and experience of her own 'red room,' give the novel its underlying structural unity. The imagery links Books One and Two, establishing ironic cross-references between them, and it helps set up the key counterpoint of the novel: the play between internal and external worlds. Sonie's fascination with these evocative chambers, which seem to speak to her of some peaceful tradition that she has been born without, has a metaphysical as well as a social resonance. Stafford had found a place for her meditation on St. Teresa's castle of receding rooms.

The room that began its existence in Sonie's mind (Miss Pride's room) became in the end an image of that mind (the 'red room'). As Stafford developed the symbol, it acquired a new dimension: house evoked head, the outer room became an inner chamber, windows were linked to eyes. For Sonie the Chichester dreamer, Miss Pride's room offered an escape from subjective hell into objective calm. Yet for Sonie the Bostonian, it became an objective hell from which she tried to retreat to subjective calm--only to discover that there was no real escape. Miss Pride could peer in through the windows. Just as no room in the world was the salvation she dreamed of, so the mind was not the asylum she hoped. In fact, it might be precisely the asylum she had feared all of her life. Miss Pride's small, piercing eyes evoked Shura's huge, terrifying eyes. Thus Stafford implicitly returned at the close to the little cottage, barely bigger than a room, rocked by raging passions, where the stove blazed in the middle of summer. With this tour de force, Stafford proved herself an exemplary student of symbolism [Modernism] who was faithful at the same time to the world of objects [Realism]."

Ann Hulbert
The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford
(Knopf 1992) 144-60, 163-64

One of the most resounding ironies in *Boston Adventure* is that aristocratic descendants of the Mathers and other Puritans have devolved into their opposites--Cotton Mather would have proclaimed them all possessed by Satan and might have succeeded in exiling them from Boston--whereas Sonie Marburg, an unchurched German-Russian servant, is the one who most exhibits virtues of the anglo-Puritans: Sonie is modest, responsible, hardworking, charitable, honors her family, conforms to the manners of her society, and follows her humble calling. Her hope is mainly social, but is religious too.

The name Hopestill has three successive meanings that encapsulate the allegory of her failure as a social model for Sonie: There is still hope; there is hope, still (the outcome is uncertain); and Hope is still--because she is dead. "I had slowly come of age in knowledge of her and of her milieu into which I had willed myself... What marked the advent of my adulthood." This 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." Critics do not detect allegory in part because they are unfamiliar with its tradition and with the Bible. The importance to Stafford of Hawthorne and a clue that she is writing in his tradition of allegory is indicated by her naming the setting of her third novel Hawthorne.

Because they do not perceive allegory, most critics have failed to include religious hope in the vision of Sonie, though salvation is a theme in the novel with the first mention of Miss Pride on page one, because that name is a spiritual concept in the tradition of sign allegory popular in the Middle Ages and later, especially among the Puritans. Pride was the original sin. Eating apples is a motif in the novel, as in "The girl was aboriginal and had eaten the whole apple." There is a parallel between Sonie and Eve: Both rebel against authority in seeking higher knowledge, but whereas Eve loses her truly ideal place, Sonie attains hers while learning it is not ideal after all, but decadent--a false Hope. Throughout the novel, Sonie's evolving attitudes toward and interactions with Miss Pride are allegorical, a spiritual narrative reflecting the state of her *soul*--a pilgrim's progress. Likewise, her relations with Hopestill reflect the state of her *mind*: her increasing knowledge of Boston society, human nature and the world.

Going to church is a motif in the novel. Each Sunday, "the descendants of believers and a few believers gathered sociably before Emmanuel and Trinity." In early New England, all the Puritans went to church, whereas most of the current Boston aristocrats, if they attend church at all, have reduced religion to a social convention--to being "sociable." To them, religion is merely an aspect of manners. "Unitarianism had been out of *style* for more than half a century." [Italics added.] "There had been a time...when New England had not been so naive, when sin was looked for in every stratum and duly punished." Unitarianism turned the harsh Calvinist doctrines of the Puritans upside down and was such an easy, rationalizing, watered-down remnant of Christianity that it was false prophesy. "Miss Pride thought of God as a big man who had, in misty times, drawn up the Ten Commandments, and about Whom it was in bad taste as well as half sacrilegious to talk." "Although it was fitting for one to have an acquaintance with God and with Milton, it was not proper to display more than the merest courtesy towards them." That is to say, the poet Milton, best known aptly enough for *Paradise Lost*, is equal in importance to God and more important than Jesus, who is not mentioned. "The amenities of society, arbitrary and often absurd, beset us at every turn and it is only in larger things that one's will is really free." Although Sonie decides to remain among the 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: "I grant the possibility that a soul might continue to operate in some imponderable place." Furthermore, "I had felt presences in my room."

On page one Sonie sees Boston as a kind of secular heaven, with its State House dome gleaming gold. At age 10 she learns that "peace was to be desired above all things," but because her father has neglected to raise her as a Catholic, she seeks peace with Miss Pride as her model rather than Jesus. Her unstable mother is a satanic figure who exclaims to her father, "Christ God, I hate you." Her father is said by one character to have been "crucified" by his own conscience. When he laughs at her mother, Sonie says his laugh was "made up of all the scorn of devils and all the resentment of the damned," evidence that she believes in God. In fact, at the end of the *first* section of the *first* chapter she implicitly identifies herself with Jesus in an image that evokes Moses parting the 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

of the most famous events in the Bible, with Sonie placing herself on a path to imitate Jesus. Identifying Sonie with Christ here prefigures her becoming a Christian at the end of the novel.

Miss Pride lives on Beacon Hill, which recalls the first Puritan settlers who wanted to establish a "city on a hill" that would be an earthly version of the Celestial City of God and a beacon to the world. An old lady on the beach watching young people in bathing costumes that expose their legs poses a question that resonates throughout the novel: "Are we advancing? Or are we going back to paganism?" Miss Pride says to Sonie's father, "My father used to liken your countrymen to our own Puritans"--calling attention to the irony that German immigrants are more like the original anglo-Puritans than the current Bostonians. Sonie follows her father to church, watches him pray and senses "a presence there, not of God nor of angels, but of something human, yet shockingly bodiless." The experience reminds of her of a dream she had of being dead and "I ran from the church appalled."

Sonie has been schooled by her mother in "the treacheries of men" and is curious "to know what were the manifestations of a man's descent from Satan." Her mother is in effect a Feminist "with the conviction that men were all villains and women were their innocent victims." However, descent from Satan is most evinced by Hopestill Mather, who "was altogether without religious conviction and never went to any services." At school she "deliberately chewed gum in chapel, had spoken of God as 'the old boy,' and of the Apostles as 'the whole gang'." Hopestill "had chosen, instead of normal pleasures, the ugly affectation of the bluestocking" [Feminist]. She declares, "There's probably a devil in me, one straight from hell like those in the Salem witches my ancestors used to burn." Sonie is "provoked by the devil that had taken up permanent residence in [Hopestill] and, anxious for a wider acquaintance, sought admission also to me." The devil succeeds: "I was hampered by the fixed gaze of my mother as if she were waiting for the devil inside me to make me cough again so that she might pounce on him."

Ironically, the devil inside her manifests as her role model: "I still looked upon Miss Pride as my model for character." Sonie does her best to help her little brother Ivan because "he was not yet damned." Yet when desperate she prays for help to her false exemplar, "'For God's sake, Miss Pride, help me,' I thought." One damning characteristic of Miss Pride is revealed when she says in reference to Jews, "I must confess I sympathize with that particular of Hitler's program." "She had no use for any race but the Caucasian." Sonie is quick to say "I did not share Miss Pride's prejudice" and considers the possibility that she herself may be part Jewish. "I had gone too far, by becoming myself a protagonist, to believe blindly any longer that Miss Pride's was the ideal pattern."

Sonie studies the famous Christian poem by Wordsworth, "Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" and infers that "my mother was returning to her childhood and if her mood lasted, she might go even further and briefly visit her heavenly home," as evoked in the poem. Sonie was alienated from God by her own horrible childhood. An elderly guest without his glasses on mistakes her for Hope, who was hopelessly spoiled by her privileged childhood. Once when Father Mulcahy says "Good morning," Sonie mistakes his words as "God's warning." Later, when she hears the church bells ringing and her devilish mother has fallen asleep, she escapes to her father's shop and picks up his rosary. She feels like she has damned herself: Gloom "seemed to await me in my house, like a devilish creature that I had promised myself to on the condition that it would not come out into the light." She feels like she has promised her soul to the Devil, thus it should come as no surprise that "I told Miss Pride that henceforth I should be free on Sundays to accompany her to church."

Her imaginary "red room" is a sanctuary of peace like a church "and its tenant was my spirit." "Taking the cathedral spire...as my landmark, I placed my red room somewhere to the left of it." "I must find the room in the real world before the real world intruded, as Miss Pride's face was doing now and confused me to the point of madness." "I must find the room or I will be like Mamma and then Miss Pride will find out and lock me up!" The protagonist finds such a room in 'The Interior Castle': 'The room was a refuge like a church which she had impetuously deserted only to find better comfort nowhere else'.... Although in *Boston Adventure* she comes to imagine the room as in far-off Heidelberg, because it represents being out of this world, it is actually within herself, and guidance to it is as close as the cathedral. There is true hope when she resolves to fight the Devil, in herself and in society: "When the time came I would resume the battle on the condition that I might always return to [the red room], as a warrior pauses to *pray*. The milder, though

not sovereign, wardens of my being, granted me permission." The milder wardens are of this world. Presumably, the "sovereign wardens" of her being are of God, since she associates her red room with praying. When she starts attending a *real* church, the refuge of the red room will be replaced by Jesus, the personification of Peace.

The Jamesian characteristics of Stafford's (Sonie's) style in this novel make it amusing that when Sonie borrows a copy of *The Awkward Age* by Henry James she cannot read it: "After a tormenting evening of poring over the completely unintelligible sentences of the novel, I returned it." The Jamesian characteristics are evidence of how much Sonie eventually matures. James was a member of the larger upper-class society of Boston and is mentioned a number of times. At the end of the novel, a Mr. James is on the list of dinner guests for a party to be given by Miss Pride. This cannot be Henry James, however, since it is the 1930s and Henry died in 1916. The inclusion of an unknown Mr. James in contrast to the illustrious Henry James exemplifies Boston's loss of distinction in the early 20th century. Henry James's distinguished satire *The Bostonians* (1886) focused on political activism, discreetly avoided religion, and offended the ladies of Boston so much that he left the city and never set another novel in the United States. In an ironic reversal, Sonie is offended by the ladies of Boston, but she does not intend to leave.

Michael Hollister (2021)