

ANALYSIS

The Catherine Wheel (1952)



Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"*The Catherine Wheel*--her third and perhaps most complex novel--is supported by few of those subsidiary virtues which gave vitality and idiosyncrasy to her earlier work; for all the elaborate rendition of locale and decor, it never really aims--as did *Boston Adventure*--at a systematic investigation of the social fact, nor does it attempt to frame a specialized personal crisis with the masterly precision of *The Mountain Lion*. Its scope is defined by intentions at once more limited and more ambitious than these: Miss Stafford has sought to convey, through two subtly interwoven through distinct narratives, a vision of emotional anarchy assaulting a world of 'traditional sanctity and loveliness'--a vision in which the individual disaster is simultaneously symptom and result of the larger social decline.... Miss Stafford has written a novel to compel the imagination and nurture the mind; she has also written one in which pity and terror combine to reach us in the secret, irrational places of the heart."

Richard Hayes
Commonweal
(25 January 1952) 404-05

"In her superbly controlled novel (*The Catherine Wheel*) Miss Stafford has shown a modern martyrdom; her story discloses the secret torture of two persons, a child and a woman, both caught in a tragic circumstance during a tranquil summer on the coast of Maine.... The village in this novel is named Hawthorne, but even without that reminder it is clear that Miss Stafford is concerned with the identical plight that Nathaniel Hawthorne pondered in his stories--the tragedy of human isolation, the devious, painful, perilous struggle for harmony and understanding. *The Catherine Wheel* is a novel of great restraint and of great beauty."

Walter Havighurst
Saturday Review
(26 January 1952) 11

"In the end it is not the style's erudition...that sustains it: it is its poetry and control, and its memorable interpretation of experience--as in *The Catherine Wheel*."

Ihab Hassan
"Jean Stafford: The Expense of Style and the Scope of Sensibility"
Western Review (Spring 1955) 185-203

"Miss Stafford did not produce her next and (to date) last novel, *The Catherine Wheel*, until 1952. She was divorced from Robert Lowell in 1948 and married to Oliver Jensen, an editor, in 1950. They were divorced in 1953, and in 1959 she married the writer A. J. Liebling. This very happy marriage ended with Mr. Liebling's untimely death in 1964. Miss Stafford is currently working on a new novel which will have a western setting.

The Catherine Wheel, like its two predecessors, has its own peculiar dreamlike atmosphere. The summer colony of Hawthorne, Maine, is composed of lovable, mildly eccentric New Englanders who firmly reject the vulgarity of the present and preserve in their manners and their houses a fine tradition of individuality of taste. Their clinging to better things, to stronger colors, to more dulcet tones gives to the colony a gentle haze of kindness and irreality, as if wandering up the coast of Maine we had come across survivors from the tales of Sarah Orne Jewett. Katharine Congreve, the beautiful, middle-aged spinster heroine, maintains in all its splendor her father's old white-pillared mansion where she is visited every summer by twin teenage girls and a twelve-year-old boy, Andrew, children of her first cousin, Maeve, and of Maeve's husband, John Shipley, with whom Katharine has always been secretly in love. This love of Katharine's, like young Andrew Shipley's love for his ugly pal, Victor Smithwick, who deserts him to look after his sick sailor brother, is a Catherine wheel.

The wheel has actually two significations. One is the wheel on which St. Catherine was broken in martyrdom, and the other, derived from it, is the spinning firework, a symbol, as stated in the T. S. Eliot quotation that precedes the book, of illusion. Katharine Congreve has based her life on her love for John Shipley; it is the concealed centerpiece of the ordered and gracious existence of the beloved old maid with her gentle whims and strong generousities and her habits of accumulating curious bibelots and curious friends. Similarly, if more crudely, young Andrew finds joy only in the summer when he can fish and scout the countryside with the abominable Victor. And in the year in which the action of the novel occurs both Katharine and Andrew are shocked out of their habits and fantasies: she by John Shipley's sudden brutal suggestion that he leave his wife and go off with her; he by Victor's complete absorption in the cure of his older brother. Katharine's and Andrew's are the two points of view through whom we gain our knowledge of the other characters and the action.

Andrew is direct; he is, after all, only a child of twelve. He prays to God that Victor's brother may die so that Victor will return to him. Katharine does not go this far on her own account; indeed, she knows that she can never allow Maeve to be deserted. But this has not been her first jealousy of Maeve; in their young days she has resented her own father's preference for Maeve, his niece, and has prayed that Maeve might be scarred for life by a skin disorder. Only Maeve's death, she knows now, would allow her to take John in good conscience. She has sinned, like Andrew, in begrudging one mortal to another, and the two sinners, in their guiltiness, suspect each other. Andrew wonders if Cousin Katharine does not know of his murderous orison, and she is afraid that he may have read his father's letter declaring undying love for her.

The violent ending to this quiet book has been criticized, but it is beautifully prepared by Katharine's ordering of her own tombstone, on which a Catherine wheel has been carved, and by her giving a party for her friends to view it, where only sherry is served. She has renounced John Shipley, and she saves Andrew from the sinful consequences of his prayer by rescuing Victor's brother from an exploding Catherine wheel, but at the cost of her own life. 'He was not worth it,' she tells Andrew as she expires, meaning his father."

Louis Auchincloss

Pioneers & Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists
(U Minnesota 1961, 1964, 1965) 157-59

"On the whole, *The Catherine Wheel* (1952) is better than the two novels which precede it. It does not have the range or the violent energy of *Boston Adventure*, but it achieves greater solidity by replacing the occasional note of farcical comedy in treating an aristocratic milieu with an assured approach to the same matter that yields greater understanding. Miss Stafford's mastery of the Jamesian moral tradition in this later novel is demonstrable in her treatment of the treachery and guilt that stand at its very center. She here penetrates to the heart of the Puritan consciousness, whereas in *Boston Adventure* she had managed only a rather stylized formulation of this theme. As this novel has a moral intensity that neither of the others has

shown, it also reaches a psychological depth that neither of the others has plumbed. In this respect, too, she draws closer to the master, capturing the reality that lives wildly in the secret recesses of man's being. In place of range, then, it has the merits that arise from intense and concentrated cultivation. The fruits of such cultivation are nowhere more apparent than in her handling of the major symbolic device in the novel.

The Catherine wheel as symbol does virtually everything that the mountain lion failed to do. This novel is dedicated principally to the investigation of the complex relationship between moral guilt and the psychic life. It is built on the two-world pattern--here opposing and combining two generations, age and youth, as well as the past and the present--that serves usually as Miss Stafford's structural device. It is the finest example of its kind that the new fiction produced in the years after the war. *The Catherine Wheel* is a disciplined and completed book.

The story concerns Andrew Shipley, another of Miss Stafford's adolescent outsiders, who comes to spend the summer with his Cousin Katharine at her ancestral home, Congreve House, in a town called Hawthorne. But he is not happy because his best friend in Hawthorne, Victor Smithwick, is caring for a sick brother and is not free to play with him. Andrew begins to wish for the brother's death so that Victor will be free. His Cousin Katharine is once more deeply involved with John Shipley, Andrew's father, whom she had loved and lost many years ago. She had wished for the death of John's wife, and now she wishes for Andrew's death because she is afraid that he has perceived her guilty relationship with his father. Andrew and Katharine bear their burdens of guilty wish through the summer, suffering increasing pain as the days pass, until Katharine is killed at a fireworks display.

The moral life of the book takes place, then, inside the characters and is manifested in judgments they pass upon themselves; we get minimal public expression of the moral crises they undergo. Nor do they commit immoral acts during the summer in which the action of the book takes place. External action is of little consequence in this novel. It is the interior drama that we must fasten our attention upon. It is the kind of dark story, in its moral and psychological life, that Nathaniel Hawthorne might have written, a name that comes readily to mind in this New England locale.

Andrew is made an outsider so that his alienation may produce his guilt. He is estranged from his fellows at school because he is too small to play their games. He is estranged from his family at home. His parents are troubled by a sense of their disintegrating marriage, although his father, a self-centered man, had never helped him, and his twin sisters seem naturally to shut him out. At Hawthorne he is shut off from his anticipated companionship with Victor. It is when he is disappointed, bored, excluded from society that he begins to wish for the death of Victor's brother. He comes to see the brother as the embodiment of all his frustrations and loneliness. But he cannot entertain this wish for the brother's death without a sense of guilt. He thinks that Katharine knows what he is wishing, that she hears the voice in him saying, 'Charles Smithwick, die.' He suffers from the almost intolerable intensity of his guilt feeling.

The moral assumptions in this boy's life are unquestioned. They come to him, we must suppose, from the tradition in which he has been raised. When we turn to Cousin Katharine, we are able to understand the impact of the past upon the characters in the novel. Katharine's refined and civilized way of life is a heritage from the past, and so is her code of conduct. Her tradition demands self-control over tightly disciplined emotions. It demands that she confront her unhappy fate with courage: she must face up to her lot in life. It demands that she give up the man for whom she has been hungry through a lifetime, for will must triumph over appetite and order over inclination. It demands that she suffer for her sin and go on suffering to the end, because man is never free of his sin. Her moral code, obviously, comes from the Puritans. Her failure to live up to it is destroying her.

The Puritan past stands in stern judgment upon her, and she submits to it. The civilized way of life, which developed out of the wealth that Puritanism was able to accumulate and pass down to its heirs, reveals the past as irony. The manner is from the past, the sophisticated, literate manner of a sensitive aristocracy, but beneath the manner are the realities of sin: Katharine's assignations, during the preceding winter, with John Shipley; her treachery to his wife, who innocently confides in Katharine about the affections of her husband that Katharine has alienated; the secret wish, that eats at her bowels, that Andrew die.

Katharine loves the past because, she thinks, it is completed. It has the charm of old ways and things. She lives with it, feeling that it is unchanging, but not in it; she is not old-fashioned. But to live with the past is to live with the wounds that mark one's own history. If she wishes to enjoy the stability and dignity of her heritage, she must also suffer from the memory of her rejection, in the past, by John Shipley. The past keeps intruding into the present. Her spinsterhood now is the result of what happened to her in the past; she has, in other words, deprived herself of fulfillment in marriage because of the past. And the malevolent pain that she feels now, she has lived with since John Shipley rejected her. It is a gift from the past. The generations have labored to make of her a polished shell, a thing of grace and beauty, but inside the shell she is going to pieces, the victim of pain and guilt furnished by the so-called finished past.

Andrew and Katharine deeply troubled through this summer, are guilt-laden souls tortured by their own consciences. The trouble of each, caged within, makes each feel the other suspects him. They are locked the summer long in a loving relationship of unadmitted, mutual suspicion, an intensely dramatic relationship in which they prey upon each other. They suffer from insomnia, nightmare, fainting fits, nagging voices they hear within, all signs of the deep psychic disturbances that guilt has induced in them both. Still another irony of the book is uncovered in the mortal antipathy these two feel, since, instead of enmity, it has always been Andrew's experience that Cousin Katharine would offer him her unchanging affection in beautifully unchanged Congreve House. But the generations find themselves, despite themselves, at war--with themselves and with one another. The escape from guilt, for Katharine, is to give up John Shipley and thus renounce the adultery and the hypocrisy that now threaten her; and to burn her diary, in which she has fully recorded the pain of her loss through the lonely years. She will rise purified from the ashes of the diary, but such a purgative ritual, she knows, will not really free her. It is she who must burn. Fire will free her then.

Miss Stafford prepares Katharine's doom with great care. The voices of guilt within her are the messengers of her destiny. It is with some dim sense of an overwhelming fate that she orders her tombstone, a *memento mori* that consoles her in much the same way that Sam Sewall, that old Puritan merchant, found solace in the stored and ready coffins in his barn. And Miss Stafford uses the people of the town like a monitory Greek chorus, a public voice muttering of the tragedy to come. Katharine gives a party, the climax to be a fireworks display in which catherine wheels will be set off. Victor's brother, now recovered, is to light the fireworks. His hair catches fire as he tries to light one wheel. It seems he will perish after all, in accordance with Andrew's wish, by Cousin Katharine's catherine wheel. But Cousin Katharine dashes in to put out the fire, catches fire herself, runs screaming in a circle, a living catherine wheel, and dies.

Catherine of Alexandria was tortured on a catherine wheel in the fourth century. And it was by the light of a catherine wheel in a fireworks display that Cousin Katharine had seen that John Shipley had no eyes for her, but only for her cousin, whom he will marry. Miss Stafford introduces two literal meanings of the term, then, into her story--it is an instrument of torture and a firework--and proceeds to work from this two-footed base into the realm of symbolic meaning. Providing herself in the beginning with a term rich in resources in its double meaning, she creates what E. K. Brown has called an expanding symbol, one which is built up and given layers of meaning throughout a work as are the various musical themes of Vinteuil in Proust. The Proustian character of this novel is to be seen not alone in Miss Stafford's manipulation of the past-present time relationship, which has already been discussed, but in her treatment also of a pervasive symbol which unifies her entire book. The price of her careful workmanship in the exploitation of her symbol is the danger of making her meaning too explicit. The symbol must not lose that necessary power of concealment and subtlety that gives mystery and ambiguity, as has a greatly rendered symbol like the white whale, say, in *Moby-Dick*.

Whatever its shortcomings, Miss Stafford's catherine wheel is an admirable symbol in many ways. As Saint Catherine was tortured in body upon it, Katharine is spiritually tortured on her imaginary wheel throughout the book by her loss of John. At times it becomes a whirling wheel within her as her guilt and her longing writhe together to create a profound spiritual disquiet in her. It is her own rueful self-analysis that moves her to link her name and her fate with the wheel by having one engraved on her tombstone. It is the kind she has lived on as on a rack, not the kind she has seen by--seen disaster--and that will kill her. For in life as in the act of dying, she is a living catherine wheel. She is a wheel of guilty fire that consumes her spirit and at the end a wheel of living fire that destroys her body. The wheel rolls through the novel as the

great moral agent in this tragedy of guilt and sin. It is the inevitably rolling wheel that brings the real purgation by fire, the total destruction that is the inescapable end for the sinner."

Chester E. Eisinger
Fiction of the Forties
(U Chicago 1963) 301-06

"The perception of human experience, relative to the person who perceives it and to the surroundings, the moment, and the mood, may well be applied to the fiction of Jean Stafford, who, like Proust, has the remarkable tendencies to stop time and in time's stoppage to create memorable characters. For both novelists, the ultimate units of reality are events, each of which is unique and can never occur again. In the flux of the universe, these events can only form similar patterns. As Katherine Congreve, a character in Miss Stafford's novel *The Catherine Wheel* (1952), explains, 'There is only one time, and that is past time. There is no fashion in *now* or in *tomorrow* because the goods has not been cut.' In this fashion the characters of both their worlds are betrayed by the inevitable changes of time as places alter and the past becomes as irrevocable as the peculiar moments of time in which particular events occur. And these characters, in spite of the logic of the processes by which they change, always change and finally fade away, disintegrated by illness or old age. Love, on which they counted once to stop time, changes too, and fails; and society, which at first seemed so sure, in a few years recombines its groups, merges, and transforms its classes."

Jerome Massaro
"Remembrances of Things Proust"
Shenandoah 16 (Summer 1965) 114-17

"A novel so sensuously deft that it makes most writers look as if they were slopping words on the page with their elbows.... What I don't understand is how *The Catherine Wheel* came to be neglected in the first place--it beats hollow nearly every novel published by a 'name' author in the post-World War II era."

James Wolcott
"Dissecting Our Decline"
Esquire 97 (March 1982) 136

"*The Catherine Wheel* has as some of its loveliest moments Stafford's awareness of a young boy, Andrew Shipley, left alone, isolated, drifting from room to room in a deserted house, always on the margin of discovering secrets from diaries and letters. Although he is treated decently, no one cares for him, intrigue surrounds him, and we find ourselves back in an Elizabeth Bowen novel or in James's *What Maisie Knew*. Smothered by events just beyond his comprehension, blocked by secrets which he almost discovers, unable to break through to some truth that floats off in the distance, he becomes a demon in his own farce. His scene of rage when others return to the house and interrupt him is an epiphany of a boy's life, rare indeed in the fiction of our time."

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

"*The Catherine Wheel* (1952), whose heroine is thirty-eight-year-old Katherine Congreve, is Stafford's only published novel that focuses on a mature woman. Katherine is unchanging, like Mrs. Ramsey in 'The Captain's Gift,' wearing eccentric clothing of a generation before, riding in 1936 in a brougham, attended by a liveried footman. She is single, to the astonishment of all her friends and relations, her niece believing, as Cousin Isobel has said of herself in 'Life Is No Abyss,' that 'no one in the whole wide world was good enough for her.' She has clothed herself in an ironic detachment, like Jenny Peck in 'I Love Someone,' and attitude learned from her father, 'so endowed with control and tact and insight and second sight that the feelings that might in secret ravage the spirit could never take the battlements of the flesh; no undue passion would ever show...' She resides from May to October at Congreve House, her summer home in Maine, eschewing the more fashionable resorts of her wealthy Boston friends and relatives. Each summer at Congreve House she entertains her young cousins Honor and Harriet and Andrew while their parents John and Maeve Shipley tour Europe.... The Kavanagh mansion, which adjoined Stafford's property, provided the setting for *The Catherine Wheel*....

Beneath the surface of Katherine Congreve's well-ordered and civilized life, however, burn those 'undue passions' that the civilized person never shows. She is unchanging because for her time stopped on the night twenty years before when she realized that John Shipley, whom she deeply loved but to whom she had never revealed her feelings, had instead fallen in love with her cousin Maeve. In a parody of T.S. Eliot, a selection from whose *Murder in the Cathedral* is the epigraph for the novel, Katherine says, 'There is only one time...and that is past time. There is no fashion in *now* or in *tomorrow* because the goods has not been cut.' Her anecdotes follow no chronology. They move 'as if from case to case in a historical museum' or as if one were viewing a Chinese painting: 'there was no progression in time because there was no perspective and therefore no shrouding of the past; the present was exactly the same size as the past and of exactly the same importance and except in the most minor and mechanical of ways, the future did not seem to exist.' The passionate love that froze time for Katherine has been so well hidden by her that the Shipleys took her along on their honeymoon and the three have remained a fashionable and inseparable 'threesome' in Boston ever since.

Katherine's passions have also been fed by an ugly resentment of Maeve, not only for winning John's heart while unaware of Katherine's feelings, but for incidents from much earlier in their lives. Maeve entered the Congreve family as an orphan, a ward of Katherine's father. The two girls had been reared as sisters. During a time when Katherine's father had been having an affair, he showed especial fondness for Maeve, who 'was not the daughter of the wife whom he did not love.' Later, when the girls were in school in France, Katherine's 'greatest joy' was receiving letters from her father while Maeve wept at receiving none. Katherine thus got her revenge for the earlier slight. But the resentment of Maeve remained. Katherine 'had never really forgiven Maeve for those two or three years when she had been [Congreve's] darling. The fact was that she had never really forgiven poor Maeve for anything.... In Katherine, a grown and apparently integrated woman, there bitterly rankled still the recollection of how all the young men in her girlhood has been taken first with her and every one of them had abandoned her the moment they met Maeve, who was not more beautiful, nor more alert, danced no better.'

Thus, in the winter before this last summer Katherine is to spend at Congreve House, Katherine accepts John Shipley's declaration of love and offer of marriage--if at the end of the summer he still does not wish to remain with Maeve. Her acceptance is not joyful. Instead, she 'somerly contracted to revenge for her ancient wound.... [She] was and had always been 'in love' with John Shipley and she knew that at the moment of conjugal commitment, the state of being in love would be annulled and she would never be accessible to him again through any ruse....' In the course of the summer, during which she sees John's return parodied by the proposals of another of her old lovers, she decides she need not marry John, because she has already accomplished her purpose. She admits to herself: 'what I wanted I have now achieved, my desire is consummated for I have supplanted Maeve...'

Paralleling and entwined with Katherine's own innerly tumultuous last summer at Congreve House is the equally savage emotional experience of her twelve-year-old cousin Andrew Shipley, who nurtures a hatred of the older brother of his only summer friend. Andrew alternatively makes incantations urging the brother's quick death and prays for his quick recovery, either way to remove him from Hawthorne so that Andrew can have his friend Victor as a playmate again. Small, shy, bookish, and dreamy, Andrew is without friends in the winters in Boston. He resents his older sisters for past slights to him. He hates his father. He cannot 'imagine ever being in the least interested in any member of his own family, except Cousin Katherine...' Combined in Andrew, one sees the most awkward and resentful and angry moments of Ralph and Molly Fawcett in their relationships to their family and other people around them, but without the humor that breaks through in *The Mountain Lion*.

Katherine and Andrew both hide their guilty secrets, but each suspects that the other knows what is hidden. Katherine believes that Andrew discovered the past winter what she and his father planned. Andrew believes that Katherine can read his intentions toward Charles, Victor's brother. In fact, neither does know the cause of the other's peculiar behavior. But Katherine *is* sure that Andrew bitterly hates someone and she fears him, for extrapolating from her own experience, she believes that 'within a child there lies an unforgiving heart.' Andrew's torture results eventually in his being unable to stop the chant in his head that Charles must die, with the accompanying fear that other people can hear the chant. Katherine's torture results in moments of what she calls 'dislocation,' which on occasion cause her actually to faint.

Katherine describes her sensations in her journal: 'For I am snatched by moments of hallucination when reality disgorges me like a cannon firing off a cannon ball and I am sent off into an upper air where there is no sound and my senses are destroyed by the awful, white paining light. I know that it is only a matter of seconds but because there...time does not exist, it is also eternity...' Eventually the image in the hallucinations changes to the image of the Catherine wheel. It had been while Catherine wheels exploded to celebrate Maeve's birthday that Katherine had discovered John Shipley was in love with Maeve. At that moment, Katherine felt herself 'fixed upon her own Catherine wheel.' Now, her dislocations find her spinning 'upon a wrenching rack [bringing] again that blinding, dumbing annihilation of reality.' As if to concretize the death wish embodied in her hallucinations, Katherine has her tombstone cut. Above a carved representation of herself, the stone holds an impress of a Catherine wheel, 'seven hooked spikes curved inward from the rim pointing toward the name engraved there.'

Katherine is driven by her turmoil to relive the night when she realized she had lost John to Maeve. She plans her only large party of the summer, to be climaxed by the firing off of five Catherine wheels. When Charles, the object of Andrew's hatred, lights the fifth of the wheels, his hair catches fire. In an irony toward which the novel has inexorably built, Katherine, attempting to save Charles's life, allows her own clothing to catch fire and burn her irremediably, as in imitation of the burning wheels she runs 'in a widening circle' and screams 'unceasingly.'

Katherine Congreve obviously identifies herself with the martyred St. Catherine whose instrument of torture inspired the fireworks that cause Katherine Congreve's death. Katherine Congreve's martyrdom, however, is self-imposed. She dies as she lived, celebrating her desire for revenge against unknowing slights, against unplanned hurts, immolating her lifelong self-pity ('only the Humanist loved me'). She is finally not an admirable person at all, no matter how charming her civilized external appearance. The secret guilt that she carries with her during her final summer, and which Stafford symbolizes in naming the Maine village where Congreve House is located Hawthorne, is only the final eruption of the secret hatred she had carried with her most of her life. Katherine is responsible for a terrible legacy, mirrored in the child Andrew, who worships her. In part, it is a legacy she has received from her father and is manifest in Congreve House:

'Perfect and plenteous, Congreve House was the locus but was also the extension of herself, not the events that had taken place in it which she had clung to out of her stubborn self-destruction, but the very paneled walls themselves and the wide random boards of the floors and the marble mantels and, above all, the ironic spirit of the house, mature (as she must learn to be) and indestructible (as she was despite all her efforts to destroy herself). It was her father who had imbued the house with its spirit of acceptance.'

The mature and indestructible ironic spirit can, however, lead to an objective detachment that allows one to manipulate other human beings, as her father has done and as Katherine does. It can allow the highest level of control while it destroys the sense of humanity....

The Catherine Wheel is Stafford's best-made novel, although it is not her best. Stafford was criticized for not fully controlling the central symbol in *The Mountain Lion*. In *The Catherine Wheel*, Stafford fully controls the central symbol, the wheel, in all its permutations from the instrument that tortured Catherine of Alexandria in the fourth century to its simultaneously degraded and exalted modern form as one of the most beautiful of fireworks. The very dominance of the symbol, however, seems finally too pat; it is overly insisted upon. It makes the ending of the novel more predictable than ironic. The novel is well made also in its paralleling of the stories of the child and of the woman. It is not, however, for its aesthetic qualities, which have been highly praised, but for its content, which has been judged slight, that the novel will remain important.

Although the main characters are Bostonians, Stafford places them in Maine, actually at the Kavanagh mansion in Damariscotta Mills, which she calls Congreve House in a symbolically named 'Hawthorne.' Once again she is writing about a place that she herself experienced intensely, and she peoples the novel with minor characters from that experience. She has done some of that transference that Ford Madox Ford

suggested, but she has brought it off. Andrew Shipley has a strong kinship to Molly Fawcett; he also reads the dictionary for pleasure.

Katherine Congreve is the woman Stafford knows best, the one whose 'instinctive (although often inadmissible) need to belong to someone...to have...above all, a father' has become 'a desperate shriek' not in the desert wilderness but in the equally arid and equally perverse, from Stafford's point of view, high society of Boston. Stafford does not caricature Katherine Congreve, as she did the Bostonians in her first novel, because she is writing about the woman first and her heritage only secondarily. Stafford's personal resentment toward Boston high society, to which she gave full vent in *Boston Adventure*, surely motivated her to make Katherine Congreve a Bostonian rather than a New Yorker, however. She had thereby the opportunity to show once again, but more subtly, the ugly underside of that societal apex."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh
Jean Stafford
(Twayne 1985) 62, 78-82, 93-94

"*The Catherine Wheel* is a novel of some seventy-two thousand words--only a little longer than *The Mountain Lion*. The story is set in a northern New England town called Hawthorne, based in most of its particulars on Damariscotta Mills. Its characters, though, are in no important sense autobiographical, and Stafford further distances herself by placing the action in the summer of 1937.

The central themes of the novel concern conscience and betrayal. Katharine Congreve, still a beauty in her early forties, has never married; a Boston society figure, she holds court every summer at Congreve House, her family mansion in Hawthorne, where she is the cynosure of 'townies' and summer people alike. Katharine had been raised in the same household as her orphaned cousin, Maeve Maxwell. Twenty years earlier she had set her heart on John Shipley; at the climactic summer party, however, she had watched in numb silence as John fell in love with Maeve instead. Now John and Maeve, long married, spend each summer traveling in Europe, with their children deposited at Hawthorne, in Katharine's care. Honor and Harriet are silly, pretentious twin sisters in their late teens; Andrew, the only boy, is twelve. The high point of his year is his annual return to Hawthorne, where he resumes his intense palship with Victor Smithwick, a local Tom Sawyer who guides Andrew through the adventures of the country summer.

Stafford narrates her tale from a point of view that alternates between Katharine Congreve and Andrew Shipley. The boy is the novel's great creation: with uncanny authenticity, Stafford imagines her way into the head of a twelve-year-old protagonist of the opposite sex. In the interaction between these two cousins who are a generation apart in age, the author sets up a powerful symmetry of misunderstanding.

For Katharine and Andrew each have a secret. Katharine has begun an affair with John Shipley, who will decide by the end of the summer whether to leave the unsuspecting Maeve and come live with her, or whether to end the affair for the sake of the children. Andrew's summer, meanwhile, has been ruined by the sudden appearance of Charles Smithwick, Victor's older brother, a manly sailor who has seen the world. Now Victor, idolatrous of his sibling, has no time for Andrew Shipley. In despair, Andrew repeatedly prays for Charles Smithwick to die, until his very obsession becomes a voice of evil in his head that he is powerless to quiet--and that he begins to fear Katharine can overhear.

The tension of the novel thus radiates from the psychic rapport between Andrew and Katharine. Each fears that the other has guessed his secret. In reality, neither has any inkling of the other's private torment. The reader knows all, and in this ironic gap of knowledge lies the animating momentum of the story. In this respect Stafford creates a beautifully balanced plot, which, though edged constantly with humor, threatens at every turn to explode into tragedy. In another sense, however, she paints herself into a corner. No plausible denouement can live up to the richness that the plot promises. Unfortunately, as if she half recognized the dilemma, Stafford resorts to her usual *deus ex machina*. At a grand summer fireworks party that echoes the one twenty years before, when John fell in love with Maeve, Charles Smithwick's hair catches fire. As Katharine comes to his rescue, her dress is engulfed in flames. The sailor survives; Katharine dies without telling her secret, or guessing Andrew's.

Both *The Mountain Lion* and *The Catherine Wheel* 'work' as myth: an ending in which a brother accidentally slays his sister or a fateful fire scourges secret betrayers might ring true in a symbolic world of demigods and enchanted woods. Stafford herself understood these two novels to have symbolic cores. But in works of fiction in which everything proceeds according to naturalistic conventions, these resolutions seem engineered and gimcrack. Nowhere in Stafford's oeuvre is the artifice more detrimental to the achievement than in *The Catherine Wheel*. The style of the novel, especially in the chapters written from Katharine's point of view, to some extent harks back to *Boston Adventure*; there is less of Mark Twain here, and more of Henry James. Yet here Stafford is utterly in control, and her prose can be breathtaking in its cadences, its tightrope play between the abstract and the concrete....it reads with an easy coherence....

The Catherine Wheel is not so good a novel as *The Mountain Lion*; it lacks the unity, the vivid surface, the subtle character development of its predecessor. Yet at the same time it is an extremely interesting performance, a flawed book that has in it the germ of a masterpiece. Almost all of the peripheral details--the minor characters, the furnishings of personal history, the trial by gossip in a small Maine town--are handled to perfection. The prose is consistently dazzling. Moreover, in Katharine Congreve Stafford dramatizes a side of her own psyche that she had hinted at before only in *Lucy Pride* of *Boston Adventure*--the dangerous spinster, the passionate romantic regulated by decorum. Andrew Shipley, in his alienation from his giggling, affected older sisters, is a kind of boy version of Molly Fawcett in *The Mountain Lion*--and thus of Jean herself....

The reviews were mixed. One critic after another praised the writing and the craftsmanship but found fault with the story. As Orville Prescott put it in the *New York Times*, 'This technically brilliant book, almost perfect in the mechanics of its writing, resembles an elaborate seashell found on a tropic beach. Its pattern of concentric circles and the soft glow of its pastel colors are beautiful; but the living organism whose protection was the sole function of the shell is no longer there. *The Catherine Wheel* lacks the breath of life.' Perhaps the most perceptive review came from Anthony West in *The New Yorker*, who granted, 'As a story of misunderstanding, and the width that divides children from their elders, it is excellent.' But he went on to argue, 'At other times, the curse of the catalogue, which Flaubert laid upon the novel, descends, and the characters are held frozen while the oversensitive eye travels slowly over the materials of their clothing, the furniture, the bric-a-brac, the curtains, the wallpaper, and the creepers tapping at the windows. Inevitably, such writing does much to cloud the virtues of what is in its essentials a direct and moving story'."

David Roberts
Jean Stafford: A Biography
(Little Brown 1988) 303-06

"The prevailing tone of the work Stafford produced between 1950 and 1952 is one of alienation, loss, disgust, disillusionment, though there are always saving moments of humor and irony. 'Man's life is a cheat and a disappointment'--Stafford chose these words from T.S. Eliot's play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, as the epigraph to her third novel, *The Catherine Wheel*, which was published in 1952. As Wanda Avila has suggested, to deal with life's inevitable betrayals Stafford often adopted 'the stance of the ironic observer--reflective, objective, intellectually, and, above all, emotionally detached.' Whether she was writing about the stultifying dreariness of life in a small town in the West in 'The Healthiest Girl in Town,' or about the pains and joys of the holiday season in 'Home for Christmas,' or about jealousy and emotional deprivation in *The Catherine Wheel*, her work suggests that happiness is elusive or evanescent....

In *The Catherine Wheel*, which was published in 1952, the Christmas carol 'A Partridge in a Pear Tree' is also used to symbolize bitter disillusionment and loss. The chapter headings--'On the First Day of Summer,' 'My True Love Took from Me,' 'The Late Wedding Ring,' 'A Dream of a Dove'--parody the verses of the Christmas carol. Moreover, the only partridge to appear in the novel is a vain young man named James Partridge who asks one of the nieces of his hostess to sing 'A Partridge in a Pear Tree,' his favorite song because his name is mentioned in it.

Set in Hawthorne, a picturesque town in Maine still unspoiled by tourists that resembles the Damariscotta Stafford remembered so vividly. *The Catherine Wheel* describes a summer of betrayal from a dual perspective: that of a middle-aged, affluent spinster from Boston named Katherine Congreve; and that

of Andrew, the twelve-year-old son of her cousins, Maeve and John Shipley. Andrew and his twin sisters, Honor and Harriet, have come to spend the summer with Katherine in Hawthorne, where each year from May to October she presides over her ancestral mansion, Congreve House. Just as Hawthorne resembles Damariscotta Mills, so does Congreve House resemble Kavanagh, the beautiful mansion Jean Stafford and Robert Lowell could see from their windows in Damariscotta. Jilted in her youth by John Shipley, who chose her cousin Maeve instead, Katharine Congreve is given the opportunity to avenge the wrongs that were done to her, for John Shipley is now convinced that he should have chosen Katharine instead of her cousin Maeve.

As the novel begins, we are informed that he has decided to leave Maeve and wants to persuade Katharine to begin life anew as his wife. Outwardly controlled and reserved, Katharine is consumed with corrosive feelings of anger--anger against her father, who had once seemed to prefer her orphaned cousin Maeve to her, anger at her mother, who was more interested in various social causes than in her own daughter; anger at Maeve, who robbed her of John Shipley's love; and anger at John Shipley, who has put his own needs first and tempted her to betray her love for his children by destroying his marriage. Twelve-year-old Andrew, too, silently nurses grievances against the world. He is angry at his irascible father; at his mother for always being too preoccupied to attend to his needs; at his older sisters, who usually ignore him; and this summer, at his former summer pal, a boy from town named Victor Smithwick, who has abandoned him to take care of an ill older brother. Guilt-ridden, Katharine is morbidly afraid that Andrew has discovered her secret desire to betray Maeve; and Andrew, in turn, is convinced that Katharine is aware of his death wishes for Victor's brother.

The Catherine Wheel is both a fine novel and a fascinating document for the biographer. Taking her cue from Stafford's naming of the town where the events in the novel unfold, Jeanette Mann has remarked on the resemblance between this novel and the romances of Hawthorne, in which envy, guilt, and remorse play central roles. The novel is also somewhat similar to Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, for Stafford's novel, too, dramatizes the disparity between the elegant manners of the upper class and their destructive hidden passions. In naming Katharine Congreve's gardener Maddox, perhaps Stafford was hinting at her indebtedness to Ford.

Another important literary source for *The Catherine Wheel* is Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. After Stafford and Lowell had separated, she asked him if she might borrow his volumes of Dickens for a year, and she later reported to him that she had been reading *Great Expectations*. It is probable that she drew on Dickens' Miss Havisham, jilted on her wedding day and in thrall to her past, immures herself in Satis House, so does Katharine Congreve immure herself in Congreve House after she is rejected by John Shipley. Stasis, whether symbolized by the stopped clocks in Dickens' novel or by Katharine's anachronistic horse-drawn carriage and coachman in *The Catherine Wheel*, is a controlling image in both novels. 'Not changing is my only occupation,' Katharine remarks. Plotting revenge against their enemies, Miss Havisham and Katherine Congreve alike are corroded by jealousy, and both die when their gowns catch fire. At the end of *The Catherine Wheel*, Andrew, a parallel figure to Dickens' Pip, survives the blaze that has taken the life of the older woman who played such an important role in his life.

One is reminded of Dickens, too, by the way in which Stafford introduces several weighty symbols, such as Katharine Congreve's tombstone decorated with the motif of the Catherine wheel. As a character explains in the novel, the Catherine wheel was the symbol of the intrepid martyr Catherine: 'They tied her to a thing like that and set it spinning, but it broke before it killed her and then they chopped off her head.' Introduced first on the evening that Katherine Congreve is betrayed and later to symbolize her disintegrating consciousness, the Catherine wheel finally comes to represent the cross that Katherine Congreve bears in silence and her own ultimate martyrdom. Mixing humor, pathos, and melodrama, combining the lofty style of Henry James and the colloquial style of Mark Twain, *The Catherine Wheel* is Stafford's most complex novel.

In *The Catherine Wheel*, Stafford focuses not on one but on two protagonists, just as she had done in *The Mountain Lion*. However, whereas the earlier novel was based on Stafford's recollections of her own early childhood and that of her brother Dick, in *The Catherine Wheel* the dual protagonists represent, respectively, versions of Stafford's adolescent and adult selves. The town of Hawthorne, too, is obviously

an amalgam of her memories of Boulder and her later impressions of Damariscotta. The original for the outcast named Em Bugtown, a town character in Hawthorne, for example, actually lived in Boulder when Stafford was a child, and Billy Bartholomew, the 'blasphemous and long-winded blacksmith' who observes 'the doings of his fellows with a misanthropic eye,' is yet another fictional character resembling John Stafford.

During the period when Stafford was writing the novel, she was confronting in therapy sessions with Dr. Sherfey the painful memories of her childhood as well as her marriage to Lowell. In *The Catherine Wheel*, these two parts of her life are juxtaposed via the consciousnesses of Andrew and Katherine Congreve. Andrew Shipley is a rich prep school student from Boston, as was Robert Lowell, rather than a poor girl from the West like Jean Stafford, and the surname Shipley may be an allusion to Lowell's father, a naval commander. Nevertheless, Andrew's resemblance to Jean Stafford and to her other autobiographical personae, Sonie Marburg and Molly Fawcett, is apparent. The youngest in his family, as Jean Stafford was in hers, Andrew feels himself to be disliked by everyone. He hates the fact that his irritable father, another incarnation of John Stafford, 'greeted the slightest mishap with a towering rage'; he feels slighted when his mother responds only with polite interest to his discovery of the meanings of unusual words because she lacks intellectual curiosity and is preoccupied with housekeeping matters; and he resents it when his older sisters either make fun of him or ignore him. As Stafford did, Andrew delights in using colloquial expressions like 'in a pig's valise'; has nightmares and sleepwalks; spends his days in the public library reading the *New English Dictionary*; wishes he had an altogether different father; and feels dismayed, fearful, and guilty when he is forced to acknowledge his own 'atrocious inner nature.'

In contrast to *The Mountain Lion*, in this novel Stafford chose a male rather than a female character to embody her younger self. While in doing so she might merely have been trying to create a character who at least superficially was different from Molly Fawcett, her use of a male protagonist to portray her earlier self might have psychological significance as well. As a young girl, the bookish Stafford preferred males like her father and her brother to females like her mother and her older sisters, and thus in thinking about herself at the age of twelve, it was as easy for her to represent herself in the guise of Andrew Shipley as it had been to see herself as Molly Fawcett. Always sympathetic to the plight of neglected children, Stafford identified with the 'lost boy' Andrew Shipley just as she had identified with Molly Fawcett. 'My theory about morality is my theory about children,' she said in an interview soon after *The Catherine Wheel* was published. 'The most important thing in writing is irony, and we find irony most clearly in children. The very innocence of a child is irony...'

One crucial difference between Andrew Shipley and Molly Fawcett is that Molly Fawcett is killed at the end of *The Mountain Lion* whereas Andrew Shipley, another incarnation of Stafford's younger self, survives. It is to Andrew that the dying Katharine Congreve entrusts the sacred task of burning her diary with all its revelations of her secret life and hidden desires. In a letter to Lowell that Stafford had written when she was a patient at Payne Whitney, she had described how she had burned her old letters in the fireplace on their last night in Maine. Recalling, perhaps, that terrible final night in her house in Damariscotta, she concluded the novel with Andrew feeding the pages of the dead Katharine Congreve's diary into the coal stove, 'leaf by leaf, without reading a word of them,...his big tears hissing and skittering away in minute bubbles on the iron lids.'

While Andrew Shipley exhibits many of the characteristics and attitudes of the young Jean Stafford, Katharine Congreve appears to be a fictional representation of Stafford as an adult. Stafford indulged in a bit of fantasy by making Katharine Congreve the heiress of an affluent Bostonian's fortunes and the mistress of a splendid mansion. However, far from glorifying her protagonist, she reveals Katharine's corrosive envy, her disintegration, and her self-destructiveness. Like Stafford's mother, the mother of Katharine Congreve is an 'extremely busy' woman who has 'nothing at all in common with her daughter.' More like Stafford's paternal grandmother than her mother, however, Katharine's mother is devoted to various causes, from Baconianism to antivivisectionism, to health foods and rat control. Katharine Congreve identifies not with her mother but with her father, 'a humanist, steadfastly ironic,' with vitally bright black eyes and coarse tight black curls like those of John Stafford.

The independently wealthy George Congreve, a 'note-maker for study's sake,' does not jeopardize his family's livelihood by devoting himself to intellectual pursuits, however. Hence, he is a far more sympathetic character than various other characters representing John Stafford who appear in her fiction. But even in this novel she complements an idealized portrait of John Stafford with portraits of the irascible John Shipley and the 'garrulous and tiresome and usually angry' Billy Bartholomew, both of whom also resemble her father in certain ways. Idolized by his daughter, George Congreve gives her a statue of Minerva, goddess of wisdom and the arts, realizing that unlike other girls her age, his intellectual daughter would prefer such a gift to one of clothes or jewelry. In her portrait of George Congreve, Stafford pays tribute to the intellectual legacy her own father had bequeathed to her even if he did do damage to her in other ways. Her portrait of George Congreve may also owe something to her impressions of her surrogate father, the affluent and cultured elderly cardiologist, Dr. Alfred Cohn. When Stafford described the statue of Minerva that George Congreve gave his daughter Katharine, it is possible she was remembering that Dr. Cohn had sent a copy of his book *Minerva's Progress* to her in 1946.

Given to 'lapidary speech,' as was Stafford herself, Katharine Congreve enjoys many of the same pastimes that Stafford did: she loves flowers and once took up the study of botany, as Stafford had done; she enjoys old-fashioned pastimes such as playing Patience, doing needlepoint, and making potpourris with sun-dried petals; she is a voracious reader of esoteric texts such as the writings of St Thomas Browne; and she records her thoughts and feelings in a diary. Though she is rather aloof, she is also generous to her relatives and friends. Such details help make Katharine Congreve an attractive if somewhat eccentric character. However, Stafford also anatomizes unsparingly the less savory characteristics of her protagonist, something *she failed to do* when she described Sonie Marburg in *Boston Adventure* [This critic failed to read that novel closely enough. Italics added.]. Fiercely competitive with other women, as was Sonie in *Boston Adventure*, Katharine comes to despise her cousin Maeve, who first became a rival for her father's affections and then stole her lover, John Shipley.

Even before John Shipley fell in love with Maeve, Katharine was jealous of her and actually prayed that a skin disorder with which Maeve was afflicted would prove to be incurable. And now in middle age, as she contemplates being the cause of the breakup of Maeve's marriage to John Shipley, Katharine admits to herself: 'The fact was that she had never really forgiven poor Maeve for anything though she had struggled to. Bending every effort of her will and intelligence, she had tried to love Maeve and failing, had come at last to this ultimate betrayal.' Into her description of Katharine's antagonism to Maeve, Stafford projected her own recollections of her competitive relationships with other women: with her sisters, with Lucy McKee, with Bunny Cole, and with Gertrude Buckman.

The connection between the events in the novel and Gertrude Buckman's visit to Damariscotta that fateful summer of 1946 is evident, for example, in a passage in which Stafford describes Katharine Congreve painfully observing Maeve and John Shipley falling in love: 'As if it had been yesterday, she remembered her demeaning anguish when on idle afternoons, they begged her to read aloud to them *The Georgics*.... They sat in the while demurely far apart, stealing glances and mouthing pet names. In the intoxication of their romance, furthered--even created--by this house, these grounds, this lake, this river that Katharine's father and grandfather and great-grandfather provided them with, in this lavish, extravagant Roman holiday, they had had energy and lunacy to spare and had showered her with it.'

In some of the most remarkable passages in *The Catherine Wheel*, Stafford describes her protagonist's mental disintegration. Just as women writers such as Sylvia Plath, Janet Frame, Doris Lessing, and Antonia White have recorded their own mental breakdowns in the pages of their fiction, so did Stafford draw on her recollections of the mental and physical torment she too had experienced in Damariscotta and later in New York. Insomniac and prey to momentary hallucinations, Katharine Congreve writes in her diary: 'Poor, lonely, obsessed Katharine. For I am snatched by moments of hallucination when reality disgorges me like a cannon firing off a cannon ball and I am sent off into an upper air where there is no sound and my senses are destroyed by the awful, white, paining light.... At the same time that I rise, ejected from the planet into the empyrean, I plummet through the core of the world.'

One of the several books on psychology that Stafford owned was psychiatrist Karen Horney's *Self-Analysis*. In this book Horney, a revisionist Freudian psychiatrist especially interested in the psychology of

women, presented a case history of a patient named Clare. Focusing on the subtle pattern of female devaluation in a patriarchal society, Horney used the fictitious Clare's experience to explore the conflicts she herself had experienced in her lifetime. In *The Catherine Wheel*, Stafford, too, used a fictitious character to explore her own conflicts, as she had done earlier in both *Boston Adventure* and *The Mountain Lion*. It is worth noting, however, that although Katharine Congreve has many intellectual pastimes, as did Stafford, she is not a writer. Rather, we are informed that, like her father, 'she would read astutely and never write, observe wholeheartedly and never paint, not teach, not marry god.'

During a trip to Germany in her youth, Katharine had begun to write a novel, but she was told by a German youth she liked, 'You should take up the harp. Or paint ring-around-a-rosy on saucers.' Just as Charles Tansley in Virginia's Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* maintains that women should not paint or write, so this young German maintains 'women should never try to write,' and his teasing remarks about her novel make Katharine Congreve suffer 'small fractures of the heart.' The only writing Katharine Congreve sees as an adult is contained within the pages of her diary, and the diary, as she had wished, is destroyed by Andrew after she dies. Although Stafford never actually wrote a *Kunstlerroman*, she incorporated into *The Catherine Wheel* many of the conflicts she had experienced as a woman and a writer.

Stafford's depression during the months she was completing *The Catherine Wheel* originated at least in part from the same tormenting self-doubt she had experienced during the months she was working on the final draft of *The Mountain Lion* in Damariscotta. Writing to Caroline Gordon just before *The Catherine Wheel* was published, she said, 'Please do not read my new one coming out in January. It is not good,' and she observed to this woman who had served as her mentor a decade earlier: 'I really mean it about my new book. I feel like absolute hell about it and am ashamed of myself when I think how patiently you and Allen tried to teach me not to do the very things that I have done.' Perhaps she feared that the complicated plot and intricate style of her third novel would not appeal to Gordon, whose own prose was more spare, her use of symbolism less intrusive.

In addition to warning Gordon about the deficiencies of *The Catherine Wheel*, Stafford also wrote to other literary friends about the novel. Apprehensive that her latest novel would not meet with their approval, she confided to them that she was fully aware of its shortcomings. After receiving one of these self-deprecatory letters, Philip Rahv, dismayed by what he perceived to be a breach of decorum, told Allen Tate: 'Jean seems to have sent out a round-robin to all her old literary friends warning them against her new novel. I, too, was the recipient of a confidential missive informing me that she herself thought little of the book and that therefore I was not to judge her by it. Literary manners are changing continually and Jean's procedure is really something new; she is trying to have it both ways.'

Yet another writer to receive a self-deprecatory letter from Stafford was Eudora Welty. Once Welty had read *The Catherine Wheel* and had also read some of the reviews of the book, she wrote to Stafford to tell her how sorry she was that Jean had had such bad feelings about the novel. Gently chiding her for being so insecure about her writing, she exclaimed, 'Oh, Jean, it is full of goodness, and you don't need me to tell you so. I love all the detail and the splendor that belong to it--and the fine sustaining level and mood you set in it.' Another friend, the novelist Louis Auchincloss, who would soon include a chapter about Stafford in his study of American women writers, *Pioneers and Caretakers*, also tried to reassure her about *The Catherine Wheel*. 'It may not be your best, but it's still better than anyone else's so why be ashamed of it. You're like a hard-boiled parent who wants all the children to be head of the class. Don't reject this latest; it has some of your best moments,' he said.

Not all of the critics were as charitable about *The Catherine Wheel* as Stafford's friends were. Although critics found much to admire in this novel, their response on the whole was less enthusiastic than the critical response to either *Boston Adventure* or *The Mountain Lion* had been. Philip Rahv, for example, thought this novel to be much less satisfactory than *The Mountain Lion*, which he had warmly praised. He described *The Catherine Wheel* to Allen Tate as her 'worst performance so far.' Although Rahv was willing to grant that she had 'a fine narrative gift,' he said that after reading the novel he wondered whether she would ever 'get over her infatuation with the rich and well born,' an infatuation he believed would 'do her in.' Stafford was not privy to these remarks of Rahv. However, she must have been pained by Irving Howe's criticism of the novel in the *Kenyon Review*. While Howe credited her with being 'a brilliant stylist,'

he felt that her style, 'so fine and frequently so winning,' ultimately served 'to undermine the matter it was meant to reveal.' The reviewer for the *New York Times Book Review* was also disappointed with the novel, which she said 'strains credibility, seeming manipulated and merely strange.' Another negative appraisal of the novel appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*, whose reviewer felt the novel was too reminiscent of the fiction of Eudora Welty. Instead of portraying the continuities between Welty's work and that of Stafford in a positive light, as critics had done, for example, when speaking of the relationship between the fiction of Turgenyev and James, the reviewer maintained that *The Catherine Wheel* revealed 'a decline in originality.'

The reviews of *The Catherine Wheel*, however, were by no means all negative. Paul Engle observed that the novel provided 'further proof of the fictional and *psychological* brilliance of the author,' and Walter Havighurst commended it for its 'great restraint and...great beauty.' Subsequently, Ihab Hassan and Jeanette Mann published lengthy critical articles about the novel, both applauding Stafford's achievement. '*The Catherine Wheel* shows that Miss Stafford has caught the stride of her talent,' Hassan wrote; he found the novel to be a 'happy development in Jean Stafford's writing, from satiric wit, to irony and sensibility, from stylistics to poetry.'

Yet despite the fact that the majority of reviewers found much to admire in the novel, it has received little critical attention. After it was republished by Ecco Press in 1981 as part of its series called Neglected Books of the Twentieth Century, James Wolcott remarked, 'What should have been an event became little more than a passing breeze.' The least well known of Stafford's three novels, *The Catherine Wheel* deserves to reach a wider audience. In an interview in the *New York Times* in 1952, after *The Catherine Wheel* was published, Stafford said that eventually she would like to fuse the style of *Boston Adventure* and the style of *The Mountain Lion*. *The Catherine Wheel*, in fact, does attempt to fuse these two styles, the first represented by the consciousness of Katherine Congreve and the second by the consciousness of Andrew Shipley. The fusion of these two distinctive narrative voices contributes to the richness of the novel, as does Stafford's intricate use of symbolism.

The Gothic elements remind one not only of Dickens but of Faulkner; her depiction of the genteel Bostonians who spend their summers in Hawthorne is reminiscent of James, Wharton, and Ford; and her portrait of the townspeople in Hawthorne as well as the unhappy Andrew Shipley suggests her indebtedness to Twain and to local color writers such as Sarah Orne Jewett and Eudora Welty. Yet despite these literary echoes, *The Catherine Wheel* does not seem to be merely a pale imitation of the works of others. Interweaving the western and the eastern strands of her life, as well as her life when she was a child like Andrew and her life as an adult, Stafford succeeded in creating a beautiful novel of childhood desolation and adult despair that is uniquely her own....

Another mark of Stafford's renewed visibility after the publication of *The Catherine Wheel* was the fact that she was selected as a judge for the 1952 National Book Award... 'the only gentler sex jurist' to be selected as a judge.... The fact that James Jones's naturalistic World War II novel, *From Here to Eternity*, won the National Book Award that year suggests, perhaps, why Stafford's own reputation as a writer, and especially as a novelist, might have suffered a decline in the fifties, although she had been named one of the six best writers of the postwar era in 1949 in *Quick's* poll of leading critics. During a decade that gave rise not only to Jones's war novel but to the fiction of ethnic male writers such as Ralph Ellison, Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth, as well as to innovative works like William Gaddis's *Recognitions* and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, Stafford's *The Catherine Wheel* would begin to appear as old-fashioned as Katharine Congreve's horse-drawn carriage and as feminine as her protagonist's 'mousseline de soie' evening gown.

Being a woman novelist during this period, as James Wolcott has observed, might itself have had a negative effect on Stafford's literary reputation, for the prevailing literary values then were aggressively masculine ones, and novelists, critics, and readers alike tended to deprecate or ignore the achievements of women writers. Only one work of fiction by a woman writer, Katherine Anne Porter's *Collected Stories*, received the National Book Award between 1950 and 1970."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman
Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart

"The setting of *The Catherine Wheel* was New England, a town called Hawthorne that Stafford modeled more or less on Damariscotta Mills and that, as an exotic commingling of locals and summer intruders from Boston, was also a kind of inland, upscale Chichester, Sonie's birthplace. The characters were not based on friends or relatives. As in many of the stories she had been writing, Stafford drew only thematically, not explicitly, from her own life. In fact, *The Catherine Wheel* blended essentially the themes of those stories in its two interwoven plots.

In the portrait of the summer agony of shy, twelve-year-old Andrew Shipley, who was tormented by the sudden indifference of his erstwhile best and only friend, Victor Smithwick, Stafford found a new incarnation of the alienated youth who yearned to participate in the world but was instead overwhelmed by it. The counterbalancing portrait of Andrew's summer cousin, Katharine Congreve, a generation older than he, was perhaps Stafford's most polished tale of an ossified heart. Katharine's usual passionless calm had been disturbed when Andrew's father, who two decades earlier had betrayed her to marry her orphan cousin Maeve instead, suddenly declared his love anew. Depositing his three children with her and setting off on a summer cruise with Maeve, he pleaded with her to marry him on his return.

During the summer spanned by the novel, which passed slowly on Katharine's graceful Hawthorne estate, Andrew's and Katharine's preoccupations undermined what had for years been a special sympathy between them. In fact, suffering side by side, each was made only more miserable by intimations of the other's unhappiness. While Andrew guiltily dreamed of killing Victor's brother, Charles (to whom Victor now devoted all of his attention), Katharine guiltily nursed resentments of Maeve--and their guilt was compounded by the conviction that the other had somehow glimpsed their secret, shameful desires. Both were visited by the fear Stafford evoked so well. They were convinced that the mind could all too easily tyrannize the world (their evil wishes had for them the status of murderous deeds), and yet they were also convinced that the mind could be all too easily tyrannized by other minds. Katharine 'was looking right through the back of his head,' Andrew was sure, 'reading everything written there.'

As that summary suggests, Stafford had not been quite accurate when she implied that it was a novel of airiness and light. To be sure, she wasn't plunging into the black humors of her own past, but she was again writing about the ravages of gentility and about the masochism of the mind, about social and psychological entrapment. At the same time, as in some of her stories about the perils of experience and the allure of detachment, the novel also encourages a self-reflexive reading. This all but plotless, painstakingly crafted book is an illustration of literary entrapment, of the encroachments of style on substance. But it is harder to tell how consciously Stafford had fashioned a mannered, static book to reflect the lives within it. To judge by her own comments on the novel, she hadn't started out intending such a detached and coolly wrought book, even if she was aiming to avoid the immediacy of *In the Snowfall*.

Stafford may well have conceived of this novel as the fulfillment of the aim she announced in an interview not long after it was published. Her ultimate goal, she said, was to 'fuse the two manners' of her first two very different novels--that is, to blend the 'leisurely...embroidered, contemplative, old-fashioned' style of *Boston Adventure* and the more symbolic approach of *The Mountain Lion*. On the surface she did just that. Stafford's serpentine introspective prose, which had become even more elaborate than in her first novel, wound its way to a symbolic ending, which was even more freighted than Molly's end in *The Mountain Lion*. The refined diction of the elegant Katharine, more arch than the Bostonian argot, was juxtaposed with the almost caricatured rustic talk of the local folk. Andrew's first scene, for example, included this 'leisurely...embroidered' evocation of his mood: 'He waited, in the larger chambers of his being, for the world to right itself and to become as it had been in all the other summers here, at Congreve House in Hawthorne, far north, when he had gathered the full, free days like honey and had kept his hoard against the famine of the formal city winter when he was trammled and smothered by school and a pedagogical governess and parents whom he barely knew and certainly did not understand.' By contrast Victor, the local boy, inspired a colloquial turn: 'Once Andrew had seen a green worm in [Victor's hair] and when he reached up to brush it off, Victor said, 'Leave um be. I put him there. He's measuring me a hat.'

The characters, too, alluded back to her earlier novels. Andrew, cut off from his twittering twin sisters, was a cross between the young Ralph and Molly, less brilliantly strange than she was, more uncommon and unmasculine than he. (The boy's sexual ambivalence, hinted at, was more explicitly suggested in some of Stafford's earlier drafts.) Miss Pride lurked not too far behind Katharine, whose family physiognomy could almost be lifted from the earlier book. The Congreve portraiture hanging on the walls of the grand summer house in Hawthorne would look fine in Pinckney Street: 'These fine long faces were civilized. They were the faces of people so endowed with control and tact and insight and second sight that the feelings that might in secret ravage the spirit could never take the battlements of the flesh; no undue passion would ever show in those prudent eyes or on those discreet and handsome lips. For there was no doubt here, no self-contempt, but only the imposing courage of sterling good looks and the protecting lucidity of charm.'

But rather than achieving a successful synthesis of the two manners, or a conjunction of the characters, Stafford ended up succumbing to style. The description of the Congreve gallery could almost apply to her own portraiture, for given the absence of real plot, portraiture was what the book essentially consisted of: alternating tableaux of her two protagonists. The poses that her lapidary prose allowed them to take were stiff, and their passions seemed artificial. Andrew in particular never emerged as remotely the riveting soul that poor Molly immediately was; he seemed to occupy a central place in the novel for reasons more of symmetry than sympathy. In earlier drafts, Stafford had made him an older boy and complicated his unhappiness, with mixed success, by suggesting at once an incestuous fascination with his cousin and effeminate leanings that enraged his father, and by implying a potentially artistic nature. In her final version, Stafford had retreated, deciding to hang the whole of his spiritual malaise on a summer breach with a friend. But Andrew's circumstances and his crisis inevitably seemed disproportionate, and lengthy abstract introspection only accentuated the difficulty. Since Stafford told so much more than she showed about this boy--slumped in a hammock for most of the summer, Andrew offered little opportunity for action--he threatened to become what so few of her children are: an adult's idea of a child. The ritualistic, timeless world of childhood that Stafford had captured so well before often seemed simply static here.

Katharine, who 'in her rarefied world...countenanced no change'--she drove around in a brougham, among other quaint habits--was a more interesting figure, a social specimen Stafford had limned in *Boston Adventure* and a psychological type she had sketched in her stories. Katharine was the hypertrophied Puritan, the Bostonian as seen from, in a sense, the southern perspective: she was cut off from all vital sense of the past and from feeling, but was fanatically devoted instead to desiccated notions of history and humanity. And she was the frigid woman, who had sacrificed a life of substance for an existence of appearances. Unlike her Brahmin relatives in the earlier novel but like her aloof predecessor in 'I Love Someone,' she saw her chilling predicament: 'It struck her...that...she would never participate, that she would read astutely and never write, observe wholeheartedly and never paint, not teach, not marry God. Untalented and uncompromising, she would not commit herself.' But her self-knowledge did not liberate her; in fact, it only added to her resigned complacency.

Stafford had set herself a real challenge in trying to create a changeless yet compelling protagonist. She had demonstrated that she could sustain such a figure, almost fablelike in frozen detachment, over the course of a story, but in her novel, her sense of distance collapsed. The fact that the whole tone and style of the book were so close to Katharine's tone and style introduced a central problem. In place of the old controlled irony there was a recurring confusion: How much was in fact meant as irony, and how much was romanticization? To what extent was Katharine intended to be a charming anachronism and to what extent an exemplar of petrification? In earlier drafts, Stafford had included episodes to suggest a truly sinister sterility at work: Katharine had wreaked real havoc in the Shipleys' lives, encouraging Andrew's deep distraction and actually driving one of his sisters mad.

But by the final version, she was a considerably tamer figure. There was a deeply unhappy woman beneath the unruffled surface--Stafford referred throughout to the image of Katharine's Catherine wheel of torture--but her tribulations didn't live up to the metaphor. When Stafford played out the St. Catherine symbolism in Katharine's end (she was burned to death by a misfired Catherine wheel in a fireworks display at a grand party on her estate), the very melodrama of the conclusion called attention to the absence of real drama until that point. The only resolution for this disengaged life was a final, fantastic flight. Stafford's epigraph from Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* stood as a kind of endorsement of her

protagonist's rarefied detachment--and a justification of her own slow, oddly hollow novel: 'Man's life is a cheat and a disappointment...'

Although the book sold quite well (it even made it onto the bottom of the *New York Times* best-seller list), the critical reception was distinctly cool, and the emphasis was the same: the masterful formalist had abandoned life. In *The New Yorker*, the reviewer Anthony West was disappointed in the novel's preciosity: 'At other times, the curse of the catalogue, which Flaubert laid upon the novel, descends, and the characters are held frozen while the oversensitive eye travels slowly over the materials of their clothing, the furniture, the bric-a-brac, the curtains, the wallpaper, and the creepers tapping at the windows.' To be sure, her technique was stunning, but the trouble was that it was too stunning. 'Miss Stafford's prose is so fine and frequently so winning,' Irving Howe wrote in the *Kenyon Review*, 'that it finally becomes a source of fascination in itself, undermining the matter it is supposed to reveal.'

Oddly enough, Stafford herself seemed to offer a similar indictment in her interview with Harvey Breit in the *New York Times* when the novel appeared. At least it is possible to read her criticism of current trends as a comment on herself: 'You need to get back to even the confusions you had, which all help. I think the self-consciousness today, the over-editing, is a mistake,' she told Breit. 'The writer today is competent. The English writer can't write a bad sentence, but too often it doesn't add up. Writers have been directing their talents to tiny things. There's a fear of making a mistake, of sticking your neck out, there is a finicking.'

Stafford's great 'gifts for language and for details' were, as Peter Taylor rightly saw, 'one and the same gift and...inseparable,' and there was real brilliance in the carefully crafter surface: 'For me,' Taylor wrote, 'the genius shines forth in the selection and use of all the paraphernalia.' But here she seemed to be relying more heavily than ever before on style, and she was using her virtuosic skills less to dramatize than to elaborate abstractly on her characters' anxieties, which were in any case wan compared with the raw unhappiness in her earlier novels. It was as though, as her own earlier story had predicted, she had laid out an expensive banquet at which there was nothing to eat."

Ann Hulbert
The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford
(Knopf 1992) 285-90

"[In] *The Catherine Wheel* (1952)...her last and most complex novel...[the heroine] Katherine Congreve, remains...trapped in the past. Congreve House is an extension of Mrs. Ramsey's aging brownstone ["The Captain's Gift"], as Katherine's pronouncement--"Not changing is my only occupation"--echoes the earlier heroine's philosophy of stasis. Both women are eerie projections of Stafford in her later years--painfully detached from the post-1960s world, determinedly railing against everything from deplorably modern children's books to the emerging women's movement. This innate conservatism--both literary and political --manifests itself particularly in her older women characters, who live in a densely textured world of antimacassars, silver tea services, Irish linen napkins, and ornate family portraits. Increasingly, Stafford came to resemble the women she had examined with such cold scrutiny, and she of all people would have appreciated the irony in that."

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 68

ANALYSIS IN DETAIL

Critics have failed to recognize that Jean 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. "There was a general predilection in Hawthorne for the out-of-the-way or the archaic or the unlikely." The characters in *The Catherine Wheel* likewise often "spoke allegorically." In effect, the critics faulted Stafford for writing an allegory that emphasizes its controlling abstractions rather than limiting itself to the characteristics of

Realism--it is symbolic rather than literal-minded. They criticized her as if she were William Dean Howells rather than Hawthorne or a Modernist writing a realistic allegory of symbols.

Hawthorne is known in particular for the theme of secret guilt, which is Stafford's theme here as well. Andrew Shipley hears the secret "voice" of his Jungian "shadow"--his sinful desire that Charles die: "The voice began again and Andrew lurched backward into a shadow." Katharine Congreve and Andrew Shipley both suffer from secret guilt and each becomes a conscience to 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.

St. Catherine was a martyr because she would not renounce her Christianity. Like St. Paul, she was so persuasive she converted almost everyone who came in contact with her. Of course, Katharine Congreve is very different from St. Catherine, as indicated first by the different letters in her name. Most obviously, unlike St. Catherine 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 called "Empress Katherine," as John Shipley named his yacht. In her mansion "there hung six likenesses of Cousin Katharine, by six different painters." She records her inner life--her sins--in a diary that has a red cover suggesting hell but is embossed with a "gilded fish." The fish was a recognition symbol among early Christians, but this fish is gilded, suggesting that Katharine is unredeemed, until the end. Her cook "Mrs. Shea had God. Cousin Katharine, universally adored, had everyone." But no one can save her except God.

At the first mention of a Catherine wheel, at the party when Katharine sees that John Shipley has fallen in love with Maeve, she identifies herself with the wheel and realizes that John "could not, could never see her." "She had been fixed upon her own Catherine wheel. The figure was unwise: shutting her eyes against the insipid presentation of herself, she spun upon a wrenching rack and there came again that blinding, dumbing annihilation of reality." The wheel is a resonant archetypal symbol, rich in implications since ancient times, especially "the wheel of fortune." The wheel as a symbol of progress is ironic, as Katharine has internalized the medieval instrument of torture as an apt symbol of what she has done to herself. "The wheel began, in the dark vault of her heart, slowly to revolve... She could not stop the wheel." The wheel becomes a symbol of her life and of the universe: "She was wheeled outward"..."in a widening circle." The Catherine wheel is monadic like the ancient symbol of the universe as a snake swallowing its own tail--the ouroboros--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 goddess Minerva more than he honored God. Minerva is the Roman goddess of wisdom who sprang from the head of her father Zeus. Katharine "felt as heroically proportioned as the statue of Minerva...which her father had had made as a present to her." One night she "prostrated herself before the figure of Minerva, the protectress assigned to her by her learning-loving father." Minerva is a strong motif throughout the novel. Katharine's father is buried near the statue of Minerva, she uses the same stonecutter who sculpted the statue to craft her headstone and she is compared to Minerva: "The stone was as impressive as the statue of Minerva and the figure of Katharine, in marble effigy, was as heroic and as handsome."

The great tension in Katharine's life is symbolized by the two statues in the window recesses of her bedroom, opposite each other--one of Minerva and the other of Venus, who leads her unwisely into sins against the Shipleys. She has repressed her love for John Shipley but she expresses a true love for his children, especially Andrew, and a humanistic love for almost everyone else, unlike Miss Pride in *Boston Adventure*: "Her greatest virtue was that she immediately welcomed and attended anyone who came within her orbit." She is basically a charitable person, giving much to her neighbors, and she is eligible for Christian salvation despite her wealth, vanity and self-absorption: "Cousin Katharine annually bought the handicraft of the convicts to give away as Christmas presents to maids and godchildren."

Eventually, however, she finds the humanism of her father inadequate to resolve her suffering over the loss of John and over her vindictive plotting, deception and betrayal of Maeve. Pagan humanism offers no

way to cope with guilt as does Christianity. "She had misplaced her rose-colored glasses which until now had taken the place of the gift of tears, and because she was herself bedeviled without them, she saw in everyone the symptoms of decay." Recognizing the symptoms in herself, including her fainting spells, she prepares for her death like a Roman: "I intend to have my gravestone made in Thomas by the man who made Minerva and Papa's stone." The name Thomas evokes the apostle of Jesus who doubted his crucifixion, suggesting that she may be doubtful herself: "She felt, these days, that she was living in a *void* and that she would continue to for the rest of time with an occasional swift trip to chaos, changing the climate from despair to dementia." [Italics added.]

On her tombstone: "Over her head there was an intricately carved circle; seven hooked spikes curved inward from the rim pointing toward the name engraved there." That the spikes "curved inward" indicate that she imposed the torture of her life upon herself by refusing to accept the loss of John. This is why, when asked "Is that supposed to be a halo," she replies "I do not really claim to have a cross." Catherine wheels are "sunlike"--and they symbolize transcendence--"the absolute"--as attained by St. Catherine, "singing with the music of the spheres." "Some of them look like rose windows" in a cathedral. Katharine becomes increasingly spiritual: She considers making "a retreat at some Roman Catholic convent of a silent order, not to pray, but simply, for a time, to drop appearances."

At different times, 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. Ever since losing John to Maeve, Katharine's life has been a conspiracy of revenge against her, a sinful competition she finally wins: "What I wanted I have now achieved, *my* desire is consummated for I have supplanted Maeve, and we would have to be *born again* and to live our lives up to the night of the Catherine wheels for me to pull up from my earth my intricate, tenacious roots." [Italics added] The phrase "born again" is so familiar as the phrase used to describe religious conversion to Christianity that it points to the final triumph of Katharine over her sinful self.

The evidence that Katherine achieves salvation: (1) She backs off her competition with Maeve after she wins and does not lead John on to get a divorce as she could have--"she repudiated John Shipley as he was now"; (2) she is killed in an act of charity trying to save the life of Charles, ironically, contrary to the sin of Andrew in wanting Charles to die; (3) she asks 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; (4) she asks Andrew to "forgive me my trespasses if you love me," using the word "trespasses" from The Lord's Prayer, putting Andrew in the role of Christ; (5) she repents ever pursuing John because "He was not worth it," which is exactly what Andrew says of *his* sin, his desire that Charles die; (6) she saves Andrew by leading him to repent as well, making *her* a Christ-evoking figure. Andrew proves his salvation when he burns her diary "without reading a word," the opposite of his attitude when he would have read the diaries of his sisters if he could have found the keys to them. (7) Andrew unknowingly prefigures Katharine's salvation when he puts the lemon drops (both sweet and sour) she gives to children "squarely on her diary," as if her sweet charitable spirit triumphs over her sour selfishness. It is ironic that both Katharine and Andrew are saved by each other--by love--dramatized when he envisions Katharine on the fiery wheel "perishing in glory." The expanded consciousnesses of both Katharine and Andrew are evoked by the final image of the expanding universe: "Wheels wheeled within the wheels..." We recall her echoing the Christian hymn with the line "Swing low sweet chariot": "I heard the Catherine wheel swinging low to get me."

CRITICS

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

it." Auchincloss is the first critic to recognize that this is a religious novel dramatizing *redemption*: "She has renounced John Shipley, and she saves Andrew from the sinful consequences of his prayer by rescuing Victor's brother from an exploding Catherine wheel."

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

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

Six years after her death, the first book-length study of Stafford appeared, by a Feminist more interested in women than in literature. Mary Ellen Williams Walsh starts her discussion of *The Catherine Wheel* by emphasizing that this is "Stafford's only published novel that focuses on a mature woman." Walsh notes that indeed the setting is "symbolically named 'Hawthorne'," and she emphasizes the secret guilt of the two protagonists, but she entirely misses the religious plot. It is as if she did not finish reading the novel. She did not read any of it closely enough to spell Katharine's name correctly: "Katherine Congreve obviously identifies herself with the martyred St. Catherine." But because the martyrdom is "self-imposed," Walsh denies that in the end Katharine's martyrdom is redemptive: "She dies as she lived, celebrating her desire for revenge." On the contrary, Katharine has *forsaken* revenge: "What I wanted I have now achieved, *my* desire is consummated for I have supplanted Maeve." "He was not worth it." Feminists advocate revenge against men and Walsh is so vindictive she denies that there is anything virtuous in Katharine's sacrifice of her life in trying to save a boy's life: "She is finally not an admirable person at all... Katherine is responsible for a terrible legacy, mirrored in the child Andrew, who worships her." Walsh misses the redemption of *both* protagonists, Andrew's salvation as implied by his burning Katharine's diary without reading a word of it and by his vision of Katharine "perishing in glory." This vision of her salvation replaces his desire that the brother of Victor die: "The voice in Andrew was silenced now."

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

organic preparations for the ending and does not understand the novel. Furthermore, to non-believers, any influence of God in a work is a *deus ex machina*--a fault. Again, Stafford suggests through the killing of the cat as a parallel that the death of Katharine is God's mercy.

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

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

In the fattest book on Stafford, *The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford* (1992), Ann Hulbert, the literary editor of *The Atlantic*, cites not one but "two interwoven plots" in *The Catherine Wheel*, but then she claims the novel is "all but plotless." She reduces the book as much as she can, arguing that "given the absence of *real* plot, portraiture was what the book essentially consisted of: alternating tableaux of her two protagonists." [Italics added.] Goodman had disagreed, calling the plot "complicated." Hulbert refers to the symbol of the Catherine wheel but does not explain it, she just summarizes the literal ending in a *parenthesis!* as if the spectacular climax of the novel is merely incidental.

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

Hulbert claims that *The Catherine Wheel* "is an illustration of literary entrapment, of the encroachments of style on substance." But she herself does more than merely encroach upon the substance, the religious content, of the novel--she tries to bury it. She fails to specify how somehow the style "encroaches" on the substance. Or how the style "traps" the substance: "Rather than achieving a successful synthesis of the two manners, or a conjunction of the characters, Stafford ended up succumbing to style." Hulbert does not give any examples or explain *how* the author "succumbed." What does this mean? More importantly, Hulbert fails to see the "conjunction of the characters" in the mutual redemption of Katharine and Andrew. Her final insult is a quote out of context applied by Stafford to a character in a *different* story: "She had laid out

an expensive banquet at which there was nothing to eat." After granting that the novel has *some* virtue, as in the language, Hulbert ends by implying that there is *no* substance to it--there is "nothing to eat." What Hulbert serves us to eat induces moral vomiting. She even cooks up the rancid old complaint of critics with imaginations deadened by prejudice that the novel did not "come to life." She does not try to understand the novel, she tries to bury it under bullshit. She does not cite the pertinent analyses by either Auchincloss or Eisinger in her study, illustrating the "women's studies" policy of not reading males. If she had consulted them, as a true scholar would, she might not have made such a disgrace of herself. In ignoring previous scholarship because it is by males, Feminists choose to be stupid out of spite.

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

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

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

Michael Hollister (2021)