

## ANALYSIS

*The Mountain Lion* (1947)



Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"Your major change--the Ralph-Molly conflict instead of Ralph-Uncle Claude--does wonders to the book and, as I wired you the ending comes off beautifully. I see the whole book now as Ralph's struggle--the struggle to escape from the Bonney side of the family, from his mother, from Covina--all of which he manages to do when Grandpa Kenyon dies & Uncle Claude takes him to Colorado. But of course he doesn't escape from the one thing that really troubles him & which he scarcely admits or perhaps even realizes (except subconsciously)--Molly."

Robert Giroux, her editor  
Letter to Stafford (early 1946)

"In some respects it is a better book than *Boston Adventure*.... Though less ambitious and narrower in scope and invention, it is more unified, more complete and convincing as a work of art. What is particularly admirable is the density of detail, its rightness and completeness. The various motives of the story are articulated through the detail with great naturalness and ease; and the symbolic meanings come through the experience you describe without strain or distortion. The ending is wonderful, and not only for its dramatic power--it integrates plot and meaning in an extraordinary way. Here for once is a novel about childhood and early adolescence which goes beyond genre painting, overcoming the limitations of personal biographical experience and converting its theme to the larger and more fundamental uses of literary expression'."

Philip Rahv  
Letter to Stafford (8 February 1947)

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

Catherine Meredith Brown  
*Saturday Review*  
(1 March 1947) 15

"(*The Mountain Lion*) is an even finer novel than *Boston Adventure*, though less brilliant. It does not have the startling wealth of anecdote which Jean Stafford offered in her first novel; but it has a deeper richness of child-myth and child-lore--charms against the adult world, rhymes, ritualistic 'dialogues' and shared 'jokes,' intimations of mortality--and the statement it makes of good and evil, innocence and

experience, is tantalizing in its possibilities of extension. In the narrower plot, the author has found, paradoxically, greater freedom of perception and utterance: her style here is cleaner and more athletic."

Henry Rago  
*Commonweal*  
(4 April 1947) 618

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

Ihab Hassan  
"Jean Stafford: The Expense of Style and the Scope of Sensibility"  
*Western Review* 19 (Spring 1955) 185-203

"Her next novel, *The Mountain Lion* (1947), although using the rich capital of her childhood memories, is not in the least Proustian either in its methods or in the matters which it explores. It is not so much what Molly Fawcett sees or remembers that is significant; it is what Molly *is*, and, incidentally, what she stands for. Molly is a rebellious, moody, exasperating child, precocious, insulting, ugly, pathetic in her desperate rejection of the smothering sexuality of the adult world with whom everyone, even her beloved brother Ralph, even in the end herself, becomes identified. She is a symbol, like the tawny, elusive mountain lion which the men *must* kill, of that virginal, childhood, uncontaminated *something* that is inevitably lost in growing up. In the end she must die with the mountain lion, killed by the bullet that her estranged brother intended for the beast.

Molly and Ralph see the world as divided in two, into what is tiresome and approved of and what is fun and frowned upon. It is the division between the soft and proper, almost suburban, existence of Covina and the hard, bracing ranch life of Colorado, between Grandpa Bonney and Grandpa Kenyon. One of these old men is dead before the novel opens and the other dies in the beginning, yet their specters haunt the book, throughout to represent the closed and the open society. Grandpa Kenyon, the beloved, is a 'massive, slow-footed bear' of a man, stoop-shouldered, bowlegged, rough of speech and manner, with a whiskey bottle in his scanty luggage, the owner of many ranches, a millionaire, a god. It is inconceivable to Molly and Ralph that he could ever have kissed anyone. After his death his son, Claude, who resembles him, rescues the children temporarily from their stuffy home atmosphere by inviting them to the ranch summers.

Grandpa Bonney, on the other hand, is plump, bald, fatuous, the hero of the Victorian parlor, of his widowed daughter, of her Trollopian minister. Yet let it not be assumed that he lacks a lighter side. Miss Stafford has fun with Grandpa Bonney: 'What a sport he had been! How full of jokes and pranks! He had always been the merriest one of all at skating parties (to tease the girls he once wore a fascinator to a skating party!) and at wiener roasts, at formal balls and informal Sunday evening chafing-dish suppers. He had had gallant manners with ladies, preserving such customs as kissing their hands and paying them compliments which always contained a word or two of French. What young lady did not delight in having him say to her, 'Mademoiselle's frock is truly *distingue*'? Besides being chivalrous, he could play tricks that were a scream and afterward he would say, 'Forgive me, ladies and gentlemen, but I felt an uncontrollable desire to tickle my risibles.' Once he had put burnt cork all over his face and had pretended to be a darky and his imitation was so good that everyone had been taken in for at least five minutes.'

Ralph and Molly passionately elect the Kenyon world, but the tragedy of the novel is that even here, even in the free air of the ranch, the same things will be bound to separate them as in Covina. Eden has a

snake; indeed, Molly will not get into a bathtub while the tap is running for fear a snake may swim in with the water. Sex comes to Ralph; he asks Molly to tell him all the dirty words she knows. She repulses him in horror, adding his name to the secret list of people she hates which has swollen to include Uncle Claude and ultimately the whole world. The last name that she pens to it, just before the fatal accident, is 'Molly.' She dies with the mountain lion because she won't grow up.

The artistic accomplishment of this remarkable novel is that never once does Jean Stafford sentimentalize Molly, despite the fact that she must have a strong feeling of identification with her. We see Molly as unfavorably as do the other characters, biting every hand that tries to feed her, pouring her hate on the just as well as on the unjust. There are even moments when the reader yearns for Molly to behave a bit more humanely, for he has been enchanted by her conduct when she recites her poem 'Gravel' to a bored railway conductor, when she sends packages containing thousands of hibernating ladybugs to a science laboratory, when she writes Henry Ford and President Hoover to send her a typewriter. Molly is one of the memorable children of American fiction."

Louis Auchincloss  
*Pioneers & Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists*  
(U Minnesota 1961, 1964, 1965) 155-57

"*The Mountain Lion* (1947), Miss Stafford's second novel, revolves around two themes: the necessary separateness of human beings, which is achieved in the process of maturation and individuation, and the conflict between polar worlds, one inhibiting growth and life-awareness and the other free with all the dangers attendant upon freedom. Again we have the alienated personality, wandering through the uncharted territory of the inner self in search of definition. The mountain lion, used in the resolution of the novel, represents Miss Stafford's effort to introduce a symbolic level of meaning into her story; the use of a large-scale symbol is a departure from her practice in the first novel. [On the contrary, Boston is such a symbol. This critic's failure to see this weakens his authority in arguing that the mountain lion is a failed symbol.]

The attack on the maturation theme is double, since it is the growth of two children that this novel charts. They are bound together in the beginning in their mutual hostility to their mother and two older sisters. Ralph and Molly are thus estranged from their family and made into outsiders. They turn to each other in a relation of love and dependence, which for awhile satisfies a great need, especially in Molly. But such love cannot withstand the processes of growth, and Ralph in particular begins to feel the necessity for aloneness and the demands of his ego for freedom; he comes also to some dim consciousness of his sex. The more intensely introverted Molly, who wants to marry her brother, sense his disengagement. She tries to disfigure herself with acid in order to punish him.

The destructive rage generated by the tension in their relationship turns in upon itself in Molly. In the end, full of hatred for everyone in her estrangement, she comes of course to self-hatred. But the hatred that Ralph feels for Molly, mingling with his love for her, begins to lead to an unconscious wish for her death. She comes to represent for him, all unknowingly, the feminine principle that stands as the obstacle to the full expression of maleness. In the inevitable assertion of his manhood as a part of the individuation process, he kills his sister, shooting at the mountain lion, in an accident that is the unconscious expression of his wish.

This fatal act, which declares Ralph's independence and growth, is the culmination of a maturation process that Miss Stafford has carefully prepared. That process is accompanied by feelings of embarrassment and guilt as the demands of sex begin to insinuate themselves into their lives. The decisive moment in which the knowledge of good and evil comes to them, the moment when their childhood ends, is figured forth in a Freudian metaphor of a tunnel. The children are born into the world, so to speak, emerging from the railroad tunnel as from the trauma of birth. They come into the valley, where the knowledge of life awaits them.

The growth of the children, especially of Ralph, is made possible by their breaking away from the world of their mother and entering the world of their Grandfather Kenyon and Uncle Claude. The mother stands for a safe, cloistered, effete, respectable, merchant world. (Merchant, obviously, is a pejorative word in Miss Stafford's work.) Although she lives in California in a world of nature, she clings to the conventional,

urban standard of St. Louis, which her father had represented to her. The atmosphere of her home is full of moral and cultural uplift and only a little hypocritical. It is a feminine, middle-class home whose air is stultifying to the two children. They look with unclouded vision at the ugly truths in it that the older people can no longer recognize. Miss Stafford has made her critique of the artificial and the pretentious in middle-class life through the irony of giving true perception and wisdom of a superior order to the young.

Grandpa Kenyon, by contrast, has the vitality and the appetite of a god. His son Claude inherits much of his simplicity and directness. Ralph and Molly are drawn to them. Life on Claude's Colorado ranch is on a scale which at first frightens the children when they visit for a summer. The mountains overpower them, the food in its rough amplitude sickens them, and the behavior of the others, so independent of law and restriction, amazes them. But in time Ralph especially grows to love this ruggedly masculine and freely appetitive life, learning to shoot and watching the cows calve. It fosters growth in the open air. It is during the year that the children are left by their mothers on the ranch with Claude that Ralph kills Molly. In a sense, then, her death is the consequence of being deprived of parental supervision, an action on the mother's part as unconscious as Ralph's own motives in the shooting. In another sense her death is a sign of the cost of growth in an environment of undisciplined nature to which she is abandoned.

Her death is the toll exacted by the freedom of that environment. And here is where the mountain lion enters as symbol. For it must stand, in one way or another, for the random, uncontrolled forces of nature which are neither predictable nor governable but with which one must take his chances. Man must contend with them in order to win to a healthy life, but they are just as likely to take life as to give it. But I advance this interpretation of the mountain lion rather tentatively, because I feel that Miss Stafford has not sufficiently realized its symbolic meaning. This mountain lion as symbol is pretty much a failure when compared to the symbolic lion in Walter Van Tilburg Clark's *The Track of the Cat* [1949], which I shall discuss in the next chapter. Miss Stafford's lion does not make its presence felt throughout the book, and so is not prepared to carry the burden of thematic resolution that is imposed upon it. Nor does it contain a range of meanings or give rise to serried implications as the well-wrought symbol should.

If the book fails on the symbolic level, it succeeds elsewhere. In its depiction of the adolescent outsider as victim--for Molly is this, a child who can survive in neither the genteel air of her home nor the free air of the ranch--Miss Stafford has conveyed once again her sense of the tortured impasse that life can bring us to. Molly's is the tragedy of the maladjusted personality whose journey toward selfhood will never be completed. Her story is part of the maturation theme as Ralph's is. His growing up is attained at great cost, almost as though, Miss Stafford might claim, one has to exchange a partial life for a whole life. And it is that yearning toward completeness in life that Ralph represents in his urge to be a defined and whole individual. This urge links the growth-and-individuation theme in the novel to the conflict-of-two-worlds theme. For the children instinctively reject a world where the personality must maim or twist itself in order to fit properly in a proper niche. The world of freedom, even if it brings death, is better than this when one must search out the secrets of growth."

Chester E. Eisinger  
*Fiction of the Forties*  
(U Chicago 1963) 298-301

"Miss Stafford has depicted the disastrous fate awaiting the uncompromising innocent in his encounter with modern society, while pointing out that a loss of innocence and a compromise of ideals go hand in hand. Molly, the uncompromising innocent, adherent to the ideals of a vanished nineteenth-century society, fails to achieve self-realization; Ralph succeeds, but only by abandoning most of his ideals. Since Miss Stafford obviously prefers the values inherent in the earlier society, both plots are tragic, but the real tragedy implicit in *The Mountain Lion* is that, in order to achieve self-realization in a changing society, the individual must compromise or deny those very qualities which constitute the self."

Stuart L. Burns  
"Counterpoint in Jean Stafford's *The Mountain Lion*"  
*Critique* 9 (1967) 20-32

"[The novel] does not simply assume x, an adolescent resistant to initiation, and y, an adolescent accepting of initiation, and move on to other matters. Stafford is primarily concerned with portraying why

it is that one adolescent rejects what the other can accept. Why is Molly a misfit and Ralph a candidate for initiation? Although the gender of the two protagonists has been ignored, it is essential in the novel that Molly is female and Ralph male.... The action of the book would not make sense if the protagonists were two boys. Stafford shows us clearly that because Molly and Ralph are of different sexes, the conditions of their lives and the fates which they may expect are also different."

Barbara A. White

"Initiation, the West, and the Hunt in Jean Stafford's *The Mountain Lion*."

*Essays in Literature* 9 (Fall 1982) 194-210

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

In *The Mountain Lion*, Jean Stafford has structured a family, the Fawcetts, that, because of parental death and remarriage, has extended itself into several kinds of associations. In the forefront are two children, Ralph and Molly, who belong to one grandfather's tradition, while their siblings belong to another. One tradition is Eastern, cultivated, cosmopolitan; the other Western, natural, outdoors, rough. The clash between the values of the two family halves recalls the conflicts in an Ivy Compton-Burnett novel, although Stafford does not have the Englishwoman's rapierlike wit and destructiveness. Nevertheless, Stafford's novel has its own kind of doom and destructiveness, the very subtly developed theme of the mountain lion.

The focus is on Ralph and Molly, first on the boy then on the girl. He is two years older, a brother-father-husband figure for Molly. But the most remarkable feature of the novel besides their relationship and their association with their mother and family is Stafford's ability to chart Molly's development. For here better than anywhere else in postwar American fiction we have a child groping and developing toward becoming a writer. In the eyes of her family and even in Ralph's, Molly becomes 'crazier and crazier.' But her craziness is an acquisition of an angle of vision as well as a ruthless honesty which clears away veils. She maintains a list of those who fail to meet her standard, an ever-enlarging list, and it finally includes her. This is tantamount to a suicide pact. She sees herself as a 'long wooden box with a mind inside,' an image that fits rather well the way others see her. Her last anchor in the external world had been Ralph, but he has undergone his own transformation.

In a tunnel on their way to Uncle Claude's ranch, Ralph grows into self-knowledge and knowledge about the world. He admits to terrible things within himself and, by extension, in those outside him. 'His mouth tasted foully of sulphur,' from the tunnel air. This was a part of the journey he said and Molly had always looked forward to, but now it takes on the nature of an ordeal, a nightmarish journey toward a hell he cannot fathom. Stafford is uncanny about finding natural images and symbols for modes of passage in the children's development. She recognizes that children observe details and that these details become for them the entire fabric of the universe. Yet she does not sentimentalize, having none of the cute mannerisms that make *The Catcher in the Rye* a young person's rather than an adult's book.

In that tunnel, Ralph sees into blackness, sulphur, coal smoke, and sees particularly a vile female passenger with children but no wedding ring; and what he observes is an urge to plunge downward. '...it would be so easy to lose his footing, relax his fingernails, and plunge downward to wedge his bones in a socket of rocks.' Surrounded by vileness, he looks to Molly as his sole shield against corruption. The tunnel experience becomes the apotheosis of his own sense of corruption, his passing feelings of incest toward an older sister, Leah, his passion for Winifrew, who lives in his uncle's house, his pleasure at the degradation of the woman without a ring. Molly is his anchor in a pure world, but he cannot let her be. In a moment of uncontrollable weakness, he turns to her and says, 'Molly, tell me all the dirty words you know.' It is just a moment, during which the train emerges into the light, but the words, thoughts, intent move both children from childhood; they have acquired knowledge.

Once Molly crosses Ralph off her list, her course is set. She is, somehow, connected to the mountain lion observed in the hills above Uncle Claude's ranch. The mountain lion is part of the terrain, the most 'natural' object in a world of nature, in a sense superior to what is around it. It is always observed in an imperious pose, on top of a rock or loping away out of sight, like a golden god. For Ralph it becomes what he must overcome in order to attain that next phase of development; an initiation that is a more deadly version of Faulkner's bear hunt. 'His passion for Goldilocks [their name for the lion] went over him like an ocean wave,' and he is determined to kill her 'out of his love for her golden hide.' She is his Golden Fleece, his passage into adulthood. And as soon as he determines to kill the lion before Claude arrives, Molly, by extension, is doomed. For to kill the lion is for Ralph to put final distance between himself and Molly, to deny her completely, just as she has turned against him. The games of childhood, as Ivy Compton-Burnett also demonstrated, are deadly; not fun, not play.

Ralph shoots at the lion just as Claude appears and also shoots. But from the placement of the one wound, it is clear Claude's shot struck the lion and Ralph's struck Molly, the wound 'like a burst of fruit in her forehead.' It is, of course, the kind of accident that has within it intent and motive. Molly in her role as outsider and commentator becomes the scapegoat by whom Ralph can move, through tragedy, into self-awareness. Molly is supersensitive, a poet, a writer, an unattractive marginal adolescent, a female--elements which, like the lion can be sacrificed to male experience and knowledge. Only in death does the mountain lion signify to the killers what they might know; and this knowledge is too late, for the lion is gone, and by extension so is what Molly represented.

Stafford's development of the children's lives with Mrs. Fawcett and then with Claude is full of sudden insights, most of them developed seamlessly. They are part of natural phenomena, whether a sick bull, or a skittish horse, or the black tunnel already cited. There is also a closely controlled wit, in the nosebleeds the children suffer together as though timed, in their extreme gawkins and ugliness, their ruthless observation of the counterfeit. But wit never undermines the vision, for people and events are allowed to exist for themselves, and the children are not so witty that they become special in order to create a scene or event. Stafford works quite differently from Salinger, in that she does not caricature others in order to establish Ralph's and Molly's singularity. The outside simply reinforces what they already know and are.

Although there is movement--especially in the travel back and forth to the ranch, then on the ranch itself--motion is encapsulated, spatially removed or lessened. Stafford's method licks at the margins of enervation, but does not turn into ennui. Spirit is there, although contained. She seeks the unnatural in the natural, or reverses it and tries to discover the natural in the unnatural, in the process working toward the center of things. The man the children love, and their mother cannot tolerate, is grandfather Kenyon, a rough-hewn outdoorsman who has made millions from ranching. He dresses queerly, drinks at odd times, lacks cultivated conversation; and yet he travels widely and brings back sophisticated gifts. He never descends into oddity, but remains what he is, a foil for Mrs. Fawcett's gentility. Similarly, his son Claude is no oddball, nor is he a country bumpkin. He is intense about his life, with animals more important to him than people; his decency is in the way he holds himself together, in remaining what he is.

The natural world reveals its secrets as the rituals and lore of children and of adults who still have some child within them. What gives the rituals of childhood and adolescence their particular power is their connection to matters of class: not wide swings but subtle modulations. Normally, questions of class in the postwar novel come in naturalistic settings, in the gap between officers and men in the service, or in distinctions established by educational opportunities or fortunes of birth. But Stafford has created a class system based on taste, manners, speech, choice of dress, living styles, assumptions about family life, children, education. These are Jamesian rather than Dickensian factors, for Stafford sees them as miniature instead of huge, minor elements rather than major transfigurations. And yet they add up to class distinctions of the most vibrant and vital sort, placing grandfather Kenyon, consciously or not, in opposition to everything Mrs. Fawcett stands for."

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

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

Molly and Emily, Stafford has hinted, possess much of her own childhood characters. Like their creator, the two girls are raised in the West, the setting for the masculine themes of escape and rebellion which have dominated the American literary canon from Cooper to Fiedler [earlier: since Irving's "Rip Van Winkle," 1819], where masculinity and femininity have become so stripped down and antithetical that they are reduced, depending on one's point of view, to myths or to clichés: the never-changing book jacket image of the freedom-loving, identity-seeking man and his sidekick leaving behind the fences, and churches of the dogma-spouting, civilizing woman. Stafford makes the West a major theme in both fictions in order to explore the pressures of growing up in a world dominated by such myths, and her stories' autobiographical nature helps illuminate her struggles as a woman writer using male conventions and writing within a male tradition."

Melody Graulich

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

"*The Mountain Lion*, the best of Stafford's novels, records four years in the lives of Ralph and Molly Fawcett, ending with Molly's death at thirteen from a rifle shot fired by Ralph, two years her senior. In the course of the four years, the children, whose father had died before Molly was born, transfer their loyalties, which were never very strong, from their mother and two older sisters and life in Covina, California, to life as it is lived on the Colorado ranch of their Uncle Claude, their mother's half-brother and the son of their beloved Grandpa Kenyon, who dies early in the novel on his annual visit to Covina.

Ralph and Molly are misfits in their own family. Their mother and their beautiful sisters are completely at home with the 'Eastern' values that Mrs. Fawcett has transported to Covina from St. Louis and which provide a superficial patina on their lives there. Mrs. Fawcett is embarrassed by her stepfather Kenyon and has, instead, made her living room a monument to her own father, the children's Grandfather Bonney, a merchant in Missouri, who had been born in Boston. Beneath the portrait 'on the mantle which was black marble and had been taken from the house in St. Louis, stood [his] christening cup and the Florentine urn which held his ashes.' On this altar stood other mementos--a silver snuff box, a miniature Venus de Milo, a gold stamp box, and a jewel case containing the trinkets that Ralph, Grandfather Bonney's namesake, would eventually inherit.

Everything about Grandpa Kenyon, on the other hand, dismays Mrs. Fawcett and the older girls--his table manners, his rough and ungrammatical speech, his clothes, and his profession'--despite the fact that his four cattle ranches have made him a multimillionaire. By contrast, Ralph and Molly are enchanted by Grandpa Kenyon and chafe under the forced gentility of occasions like the visits by the Reverend Follansbee and his wife, which become paeans to their Grandfather Bonney's life. Stafford based her description of Kenyon on her own paternal grandfather, and her own fondness for the character as well as her ear for the language of the West is demonstrated in the speech with which she helps to characterize Kenyon.

When the children take him to see a dry wash near their house in Covina, he responds, 'Well, now, that's something like it. There's too damn much green in this here California. But that dried-up little old crick bed down there makes me think of a place that is a place. He swept his black eyes round the scene and breathed shallowly as if the sweetness of the orange blossoms offended him and he said, 'To think there ain't any winter here! Why, I'd as lief go to hell in a handbasket as not see the first snow fly.'

Ralph and Molly's emotional distance from their mother and their sisters is further captured in the difference of their physical selves from the others. As eight- and ten-year-olds, Molly and Ralph are physically ugly. A bout of scarlet fever lingers with them as a glandular disorder causing frequent bad nosebleeds. They are 'thin, pallid, and runny-nosed. From some obscure ancestor they had inherited bad, uneven teeth and nearsighted eyes so that they had to wear braces and spectacles. Their skin and hair and eyes were dark and the truth of it was they always looked a little dirty. They were small for their age but they had large bones....' In their ugliness and in their precocity, they are friendless, except for each other.

Ralph wishes to escape California and 'go out West' to Colorado, because both he and Molly accept Grandpa Kenyon's observation that 'California was not the West but was a separate thing like Florida and Washington D.C.' This wish is finally realized after Grandpa Kenyon's death. When Molly and Ralph arrive at the ranch, however, they find that 'the landscape itself was frightening. Above timberline the snow was thick in the deep gashes; to the north were two long glaciers which sometimes shone pink through the haze.... Below timberline and above the dry sagebrush of the foothills, the forests of conifers were dense....here and there interrupted by a small grove of golden aspens or a bright upland meadow.... The mountains were at once remote...and oppressively confining.... [They] wore peril conspicuously on their horny faces.' Against this frightening and quintessentially Western landscape, Ralph and Molly begin their transition from childhood to adolescence, a transition that takes them down separate paths, destroys their childhood intimacy, and reenacts, as Blanche Gelfant has pointed out, the classic American myth of growth to manhood, with its resultant tragedies.

Events that take place their first summer at the ranch cause an estrangement between Molly and Ralph, so that for subsequent summers there 'they all but ignored one another,' although in Covina they remain close, in opposition to the others. The first event occurs on a day that the two go mountain climbing with Claude and Winifred, the housekeeper's daughter, the day that Ralph later remembers as 'the day his friendship with Uncle Claude had begun and the day on which he had abandoned Molly.' On that day, Claude asks Ralph why he does not quit wearing his glasses. Ralph does quit. This step begins the breach between him and Molly, because, although she tries, Molly cannot abandon hers. It is Ralph's first step away from his childhood ugliness and weakness, but Molly's near blindness prevents her from following him.

The second event is Ralph's watching a cow give birth. He accepts this occurrence without embarrassment, but with wonder. When he tries to tell Molly about his first experience with the realities of sexuality, Molly rebels at the notion, calls him a 'dirty liar,' and brings on a nosebleed. Ralph's accommodation to the event takes him one step further from Molly. He can, as a result, accept with some equanimity the belief that Uncle Claude visits prostitutes in the nearby town. Molly, on the other hand, denies sexuality to the point of deliberately misunderstanding the concept of marriage. She wants to marry a horse during the first summer at the ranch. She once declared she was engaged to a dog. Even at twelve, she insists that she and Ralph will marry and stay in Covina rather than go to Connecticut when Mrs. Fawcett sells the house and moves there.

While Molly clings to the safety (and ugliness) of her childhood, Ralph has begun to feel the result of Grandpa Kenyon's desire that they be sent to Colorado so that Ralph can learn 'the ways of a man.' He starts that learning, and as the years pass his childhood awkwardness begins to disappear. By the time he is fourteen, he has begun to fill out: 'he had lost his pallor and his eyes, quite strong, were clear.' In contrast, Molly retains 'her ugly face and her lankiness and the slouching, round-shouldered gait which she had developed and which caused her enemies to call her 'the crab.'

During the winter before they return to the ranch for their final year-long stay--while Mrs. Fawcett tours the world with their sisters--Ralph decides 'that the world was made up of two groups of people. The first he called 'Kenyon men' and this included those who, like Uncle Claude, knew the habits of animals and subjected themselves to the government of the seasons. The other group he called 'Bonney merchants' and this included everyone he had ever known with the exception of the people at the Bar K, Grandpa, and Molly.' In returning to the ranch, Ralph intends to become one of the 'Kenyon men.'

Molly, however, remains on a course that isolates her further and further from everybody, including Ralph. The train trip from Denver to the ranch decides their directions. During the trip, Ralph fights against incestuous thoughts of his sister Leah, finally turning mutely to Molly as his salvation; she alone did not 'urge him to corruption.' He destroys that safehold, however, by whispering to her as the train travels through the darkness of a tunnel, 'Molly, tell me all the dirty words you know.' Although Molly is too startled to respond, 'Ralph's childhood and his sister's expired at that moment of the train's entrance into the surcharged valley. It was a paradox, for now they should be going into a tunnel with no end, now that they had heard the devil speak.'

As emotionally close as Ralph and Molly have been as children--almost two sides of the same coin--Molly's strangeness and possessiveness trouble Ralph increasingly as they grow older. In his tenth year, he expresses his reservations about her in a way that signals his own sense of superiority. He does not like the way she copies him, although he finds it 'natural' that she would like to be a boy. He scolds her for wearing his Boy Scout shirt, saying, 'Having that on a girl is like dragging the American flag in the dirt.' When he is baffled by Molly's poem 'Gravel' and by a letter she writes, he expresses his view to his Uncle Claude that Molly is crazy. At the ranch the first summer, Ralph softens this view and decides that Molly is 'just different from other people.... He liked her when they were alone, but she embarrassed him in public because she said such peculiar things.' But when Molly looks at him with 'her large humble eyes fondling his face with lonely love, he wanted to cry out with despair because hers was really the only love he had and he found it nothing but a trial and tribulation.'

By the time Ralph is fourteen, his perplexity with Molly makes him wish 'oftener and oftener that she did not exist.' Molly, in her isolation and estrangement from him, shares his wish. In the closing days of their last year in Covina, Molly expresses her own self-hatred, saying to Ralph, 'in a cold, level voice, "I know I'm ugly. I know everybody hates me. I wish I were dead.' She knows her appearance justifies her statement, because not only is she ugly, but she has 'a homemade look, a look of having been put together by an inexperienced hand.' Ralph finally wishes Molly 'had never been born.'

Molly's strangeness takes on a darker coloration during their final year at the Bar K. On their first evening there, Uncle Claude warns her: 'If you don't watch out, they're going to put you in the booby hatch. I never seen anybody in my life with such damn crazy ideas.' In her fierce denial of sexuality, Molly performs a bathtub ritual that is designed to prevent herself and everyone else from seeing her body. She, in fact, avoids even using the word *body* and is horrified when anyone else does. Instead, she 'thought of herself as a long wooden box with a mind inside.' As a record of her isolation, Molly keeps a list of unforgivable people. The only two people she finds completely forgivable are her father and Grandpa Kenyon. This year, walking in the mountains, she feels as if she 'had been by herself' since Kenyon's death. Lying in the tub that first evening, reflecting on her new hatred of Ralph, she decides to add his name to the list, which already includes Grandfather Bonney, her mother and sisters, the Follanbees, and various former friends. By Christmas, she has added Winifred's and Claude's names. And, finally, in an act that echoes her earlier wish that she was dead, she adds her own.

While Molly's rejection of the people who form her world thus progresses, Ralph's identification with those people, and particularly with Claude, intensifies. On the same evening on which Molly ritually purifies herself, Ralph embarks fully on that journey to manhood, foreseen by Grandpa Kenyon, that is made possible by his having gone 'out West.' Claude shows Ralph a bull with a hairball in his jaw, rolling in pain in a small pasture near the ranchhouse. As them an and the boy watch in 'brutal preoccupation, their companionship was so complete that it almost frightened Ralph; it was as though he had set forth on an adventure whose terms were so inexorable that he could not possibly change his mind and go back, as if they were on a boat in the middle of a landless sea.' The adventure on which Ralph sets out with his uncle is figuratively the search for his manhood. Literally, from this evening, the adventure is a hunt for a mountain lion Claude has named Goldilocks, and the hunt is one he refuses to share with anyone but Ralph.

The mountain lion has formed a leitmotiv in Ralph and Claude's relationship from the time of Claude's trip to Covina for Grandpa Kenyon's funeral, when Claude tells Ralph he has never seen one. At the end of their first summer on the ranch, Claude again tells Ralph he has never seen one. Ralph's fantasy of killing a mountain lion begins that day: "He wished he would be hiking by himself in the mountains one day and

suddenly come on a lion's den. He would shoot the mother and the cubs and then take Uncle Claude up to see. He could just hear Uncle Claude suck in his breath and say, 'Well, I'll be a son-of-a-gun.' The competitive desire to prove his manhood that this fantasy incorporates continues four years later when Ralph learns that Claude has finally sighted a lion. Ralph remains 'enraptured' with the thought of the lion while he and Claude fruitlessly search for her.

As the year develops, Ralph grows ambivalent about his relationship to Claude, caused in part by his troubled state of mind about his own growing sexuality. He nonetheless remains absorbed with the idea of killing the mountain lion and determines that it will be he, and not Claude, who succeeds in the hunt. After their first sighting of the lion, Ralph dreams of her and thinks, 'Oh, if I don't get her, I will die!'... [He] wanted her because he loved her, but Uncle Claude wanted her only because she was something rare. Besides, Uncle Claude would be here forever and could get another, but this was Ralph's last chance.' Ralph's urgency to succeed at this 'last chance' emphasizes his subconscious awareness that this act will fulfill his Grandpa Kenyon's prophecy and he will become the man he wishes to be. Their sighting of the lion at Christmas and at Easter underscores the ritual nature that the hunt has taken on for Ralph.

On Garland Peak, where Ralph's friendship with Claude had begun on a similar late day in spring, he completes his identification with Claude's manhood and he finally rids himself forever of Molly. In the glade that Molly had considered her private study, the place where she had gone all fall and winter to escape from the others and to do her writing, Ralph sights Goldilocks, the lion. Without waiting for Claude, he fires his rifle, only to be stunned by Claude's shot from another direction a split second later. When they enter the glade, it is clear that it is Claude's shot that has downed the lion. Equally clear, it is Ralph's that has pierced Molly's forehead, where it has found her on her way to 'her' glade. After the Christmas sighting, Molly had been afraid and she felt she would not feel safe in the mountains again until the lion had been shot. Finally, it is Ralph who is safe. In attempting to kill the lion, he has symbolically killed his childhood by actually killing the person who is a concrete reminder to him of his lost innocence.

Molly's death is the inevitable conclusion for a young girl in the West who cannot accept the limited 'normality' possible to her. She is unable to join the feminine world of her mother and her sisters, with its emphasis on female beauty, superficial feelings, charming games, and the pursuit of 'beaux.' Her mother, in fact, sees to it that Molly is excluded, is sent to Colorado, while Leah and Rachel are sent to Eastern finishing schools and finally are presented to 'society' on a world tour. Molly is prevented from entering this world not only because she is not pretty, but also because she has a tough, eccentric mind: 'Everyone said that she had the brains of the family, but as Mrs. Fawcett was not interested in brains, she thought this a handicap rather than otherwise and often told Molly that there were other things in life besides books.'

Molly does use books to fence out what she abhors, both in Covina and in Colorado. Furthermore, she considers writing her vocation and plans to write her own books. At eight she writes 'Gravel,' the poem that makes Ralph question her sanity:

Gravel, gravel on the ground.  
Lying there so sage and sound,  
Why is it you look so dead?  
Is it because you have no head?

In her last year in Colorado, she writes a long ballad, a short detective novel, and a short story about a leper colony. The poem and the story of the leper colony, which has one character with a 'spitcurl of oleaginous hair,' reveal both Molly's precociousness and her distaste for close human contact, with its implied sexuality.

Molly's tough, eccentric mind will not accommodate her own sexuality or anyone else's. She wills herself into a state of arrested development, rejecting not only the female model represented by her mother and sisters, but also the model represented by Winifred Brotherman, who changes from a sexually neutral young ranch hand into a very attractive young college woman and thereby becomes 'unforgivable' to Molly. Molly cannot participate in the ritual that leads Ralph away from her and their former closeness. Part of Ralph's mission is necessarily to free himself from this entanglement. Molly is left, finally, with no choice that is acceptable to her. When she adds her own name to her list of unforgivable people, she signals her

inability to live in the world as it exists for her. She cannot reenter the 'Bonny Bourgeois' world her mother plans for them in Connecticut. She cannot, by definition, become a Kenyon *man* of the western myth. She must, then, die, because she is incapable of making herself fit. There is no place for her--West or East. Unlike her creator, she cannot 'hotfoot' it to a place more agreeable to her. No doors are open.

*The Mountain Lion* has a strong autobiographical basis. The Fawcett family is recognizably based on Stafford's own, with the significant differences that the father is dead and that the family has some money and position. The four children re-create the four Stafford children--the older girls, the younger boy, and the younger girl who is devoted to her brother. The Fawcetts live, as the Staffords did, in Covina, California, in a house with a lippia lawn, next to a walnut grove. The mother is from Missouri, as Mrs. Stafford was. Grandpa Kenyon, like Stafford's paternal grandfather, has cattle ranches in Texas and Missouri (but unlike his prototype also has ranches in Oklahoma and Colorado). One night the Jesse James gang had ridden into his Missouri ranch asking for shelter, just as Stafford's father, in a perhaps apocryphal story, had told her the James gang had come to his father's ranch. Grandfather Bonney is given some of the history of Stafford's maternal grandfather. The scenes in Colorado are re-created from Stafford's own perceptions of the Rocky Mountains when she was a child. Doubtless, the mountain lion was suggested by the real lion Stafford and her college friends had seen in the hills above Boulder.

Most significantly, however, Stafford closely identifies Molly with herself. Molly writes 'Gravel' and the stories that Stafford had actually written as a child. She is fiercely devoted to her brother, as Stafford was to hers. She performs the kind of ritual bath that Stafford herself performed as a child from an overwhelming fear of water. Finally, she feels the deep isolation from her family that Stafford apparently felt from her own. Stafford's attachment to the character is apparent in the author's note to the 1972 reissue of the novel: 'Poor old Molly. I loved her dearly and I hope, she rests in peace.'

When Stafford wrote *The Mountain Lion*, her own brother had recently been killed in World War II. One can speculate that in writing the novel she was coming to terms with her feelings about her relationship to her brother. Perhaps in the ending of the novel, she was expressing a subconscious wish that it had been he, rather than she, who had survived. To Stafford's fury, only a week before *The Mountain Lion* was published, Robert Lowell published 'Her Dead Brother,' which, according to C. David Heymann, 'represents a response in part' to the novel. In the poem, the brother is killed and the sister survives. Stressing the theme of latent incest, a theme suggested in the novel, the poem seemed to Stafford 'an act so dishonorable that it was almost insane'."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh  
*Jean Stafford*  
(Twayne 1985) 29-37

"Even her weakest stories are a joy to read, if only because their prose is so lovely. The deficiencies that they do manifest are, for the most part, those which are notoriously characteristic of *New Yorker* short stories in general. For instance, like many a fiction writer associated with that illustrious magazine, Stafford places a good deal less emphasis on plot than on character. This is, to be sure, not always a weakness, but it is hard to read the *Collected Stories* in sequence without eventually becoming irritated by their mostly ambiguous, well-nigh pretentious endings; one has the feeling that the author doesn't want to push too far, doesn't want to face the difficult choices attendant upon reaching the conclusion of a story, doesn't want to risk sentimentality or conventionality or melodrama. The contrast with the emphatic sense of closure achieved in *The Mountain Lion* and *The Catherine Wheel* is striking."

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

"*The Mountain Lion* is...barely a third the length of *Boston Adventure*.... Stafford...finished the novel...in 1946, shortly before the 'influx of poets' to Damariscotta Mills and possibly at about the time of Lowell's attempt to strangle her.

The novel is in two parts. Chapters One through Three take place in Covina, California, in a house and neighborhood modeled exactly on those of Stafford's first six years. Chapters Four through Nine move the

story to the mountains of Colorado; the locale is a cattle ranch patterned, down to the hopvines on the west window, on Harry and Mary Lee's ranch in Hayden. The protagonist, Molly Fawcett, is probably the most memorable fictional character of Stafford's oeuvre, as well as (with Joyce Bartholomew of 'In the Snowfall') one of the two most deeply autobiographical. In the California chapters Molly is eight years old; in Colorado she is twelve. Her closest companion is her brother Ralph, two years her senior. Their much older sisters, Leah and Rachel, are would-be debutantes. Ralph is based directly on Stafford's brother, Dick; Leah and Rachel represent what Stafford saw as the affected, pretentious sides of Mary Lee and Marjorie. Many episodes and anecdotes, from Molly's poem 'Gravel' to Ralph's disgust at his sister's wearing his Boy Scout shirt, are taken straight from life.

The novel's binding tension lies in the conflict between the two ancestral strains of the Fawcett family--a deft dramatization of Jean's own preference for the forthright Staffords over the effete and huffy McKillops. Grandpa Kenyon (based on Jean's fantasy of her Grandpa Stafford) is a plain-talking, hard-drinking cattleman whose visits are the high points of Ralph and Molly's life. The children's father is dead--a narrative gambit that was, Stafford admitted to Lowell, an evasion of the challenge of dealing with her own father. Bereft of him, Mrs. Fawcett rules the roost with timorous hypochondria and Presbyterian piety.

After Grandpa Kenyon dies suddenly during a visit, Ralph and Molly are packed off to live with their uncle Claude (based on Harry Frichtel) on the Colorado ranch. Against the invigorating background of the Rocky Mountains, immersed in the laconic world of cowhands and ranch work, Ralph and Molly struggle to become adolescents. Molly is a vivid transmogrification of Jean's image of herself: she is round-shouldered, bespectacled, gawky, too tall, and scrawny. Brainy and alienated, an aspiring writer who finds secret groves in the mountains in which to ruminate and compose, Molly longs for other existences: 'When she was not unhappy, she was bored.' As children, Ralph and Molly form a deep alliance against their 'superior' older sisters and the stifling regime of their mother. Most fundamentally, *The Mountain Lion* is about what happens to that alliance as Ralph and Molly come of age.

To tell this story, Stafford shucked off the mannerisms of *Boston Adventure* and discovered a tone and diction almost entirely new for her. The extent of this stylistic transformation can best be gauged by a side-by-side comparison of passages from the two novels. Here is young Sonie Marburg in *Boston Adventure*, trying to imagine a utopian life in the company of Miss Pride: 'But tonight, in this cold nakedness, I was cheated out of my solace for I could not, with my eyes, burn a way to her in Boston. The uproar in me was brought on partly by the discrepancy between the placid vagary that was holding my mother's attention downstairs and my own tempestuous one upstairs, for, although they were equally profitless, mine had a kind of direction, and it seemed consistent with my bad luck that she was happy while I was so miserable, that she could sustain herself indefinitely on follies and unreal pageants and old woes.'

And here is young Molly Fawcett in *The Mountain Lion*, imagining a utopian existence in solitary confinement: 'If she ever got fat, she thought, or ever said anything fat, she would lock herself in a bathroom and stay there until she died. Often she thought how comfortably you could live in a bathroom. You could put a piece of beaver board on top of the tub and use it as a bed. In the daytime you could have a cretonne spread on it so that it would look like a divan. You could use the you-know-what as a chair and the lavatory as a table. You wouldn't have to have anything else but some canned corn and marshmallows, and if you got tired of those, you could let a basket out of the window with a slip of paper saying, "Send up some hot tamales" or some hard-boiled eggs or whatever you particularly wanted at the time.'

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

The transformation, however, is more than a matter of simple mimicry. When asked about the startling change in prose style from her first published novel to her second, Stafford tended to minimize the shift. But her philosophical attitude toward life--in fictional terms, her tone--had undergone its own revision. She had discovered an irony appropriate to her surest subject, childhood and adolescence. As Stafford claimed in a seemingly offhand interview in 1952, 'My theory about children is my theory about writing. The most

important thing in writing is irony, and we find irony most clearly in children. The very innocence of a child is irony. Irony, I feel, is a very high form of morality.'

It was not as if Stafford had never before tried to write ironically. Her Stephens novel had been awash in facile satire. The great stride forward that *The Mountain Lion* embodies is rather a matter of her having learned (as Twain may have taught her) that the most solemn human predicaments are most effectively rendered not in a melodramatic plot (as in her Heidelberg novel), not even in the sort of quasi-omniscient periphrases of Sonie's voice in *Boston Adventure*, but in a plain American prose whose tone itself bridges the gap between the protagonist's earnest attack on the world and the author's rich and distant understanding. In that tension--the gulf that separates Molly Fawcett from Jean Stafford--lies all the pleasure and wisdom of a great novel.

As many reviewers noted, the bond between Ralph and Molly verges on the 'unnatural.' The eight-year-old girl remarks that 'today she did not cry: Ralph was too gay, she knew, to comfort her and that was the only pleasure in crying, to be embraced by him and breathe in his acrid smell of leather braces and serge and to feel, shuddering, the touch of his warty hands on her face.' When Grandpa Kenyon dies, Ralph and Molly lie on the floor beside his coffin, sobbing in one another's arms.

On the ranch, however, now that Ralph is fourteen, he begins to pull away from his clinging sister. Simply put, Ralph is on the threshold of puberty. For him a sexual interest in other girls is linked with a wish that 'Molly had never been born'; daydreaming about his older sister Leah, who he learns is engaged, Ralph feels 'a terrified guilt as though he had despoiled [her].' Molly, at twelve, cannot countenance her own coming-of-age. When Ralph tells her about the birth of a calf, Molly sticks her fingers in her ears and screams, 'You're a dirty liar!'--'savagely refusing the knowledge of such things.'

The turning point of the novel is a powerfully ambiguous scene in which Molly and Ralph are taking a train up to the ranch. As the train enters a tunnel (Stafford, of course, knew her Freud), Ralph's crisis peaks: 'He urged the train to make haste. Once out in the bright green meadows of the valley he thought he would be safe from the thoughts that swarmed about him like a dream of reptiles. As long as Molly was here beside him, though, he could hang on.' And then he knew he had been wrong, that he was not safe; he was weakening and ready to fall, and how he actually slumped down in the seat so that his shoulders were on a level with Molly's and he said, in the lowest voice, "Molly, tell me all the dirty words you know." He heard himself almost with relief. Before there was time for Molly to move away or to utter a cry, they had emerged into the light which streamed like glory through the dirty window panes. The sun was high and the fields shimmered. Round them, for miles, as far as the eye could see, were the violet mountains, clean-lined, clear of haze. The eye could not detect a single impurity in all the scene. Ralph's childhood and his sister's expired at that moment of the train's entrance into the surcharged valley. It was a paradox, for now they should be going into a tunnel with no end, now that they had heard the devil speak.'

After the tunnel episode, Molly and Ralph are enemies. Ralph thinks that his sister is going crazy, and her behavior does in fact become very strange. While she was writing *The Mountain Lion*, Stafford was beginning to fear that she was losing her own sanity. In the spring of 1947 she wrote Lowell, 'Gradually I became Molly. I was so much Molly that finally I had to write her book.... All the self-mutilations came back; for I had mutilated myself constantly when I was a little girl in order to gain pity and love.' The psychological similarities between the author and her protagonist are telling: Molly, an aquaphobe, must perform an elaborate ritual before she can take a bath, which she does with a bathing suit on; according to Lowell, Stafford at that time could dress and undress only in a closet. Molly dreams of spending the rest of her life in the bathroom; Stafford dreamed of hiding in her Red Room.

The denouement of the novel comes when Ralph, hunting the elusive mountain lion with Uncle Claude (a deed linked in Ralph's mind with becoming a man) fires at it in a clearing but accidentally kills Molly, who has slipped off alone to her secret grove [glade]. In naturalistic terms the ending is preposterous, a *deus ex machina* of a type for which Stafford had an unfortunate weakness (in her Heidelberg novel the death of the German pilot on maneuvers resolves the love story; in *Boston Adventure* Hopetill Mather's death resolves Sonie's rivalry with her). In symbolic terms, though, the killing seems almost inevitable.

*The Mountain Lion* was published around March 1, 1947. Confined to Payne Whitney, Stafford could not even browse the newsstands for reviews; she had to wait for Robert Giroux to send or bring them to her. The notices themselves were, however, extremely gratifying. *The New Yorker* called the book 'a second novel that is hard to match these days for subtlety and understanding.' Robert Fitzgerald, in the *Nation*, observed that Ralph and Molly 'suffer from the burden and scariness of being themselves and from the hopelessness of their being inseparable, and beneath the local and satiric pleasure of the story this is put so strongly that, though you read it with amusement, you will feel it aching in you like a tooth for days.' Howard Mumford Jones, who had championed *Boston Adventure*, found *The Mountain Lion* fully its equal and said so in the *New York Times Book Review*. The English poet John Betjeman, commenting in the *London Daily Herald*, declared, 'It is written with the merciless detachment of a woman picking characters to pieces. Like gossip, it fascinates. Like life, its end is mysterious.'

The only major magazine to pan the book was *Time*, whose critic complained of 'dank symbolism' and 'desperately contrived coincidence.' In its inimitable fashion *Time* adapted the latter stricture in a one-word caption under a photo of Stafford: 'Desperate.'

Many reviewers commented on the disturbing relationship between Molly and Ralph. The less sophisticated warned their readers, as *Parents Magazine* saw fit to, that *The Mountain Lion* ought not 'to be left on the living-room table where the young people in the family may pick [it] up.' Howard Mumford Jones, on the other hand, praised as the novel's great strength its 'theme of family feud, of deep-buried feelings of incest and guilt, of dark ambivalences of brother-sister, child-mother relationships.'

With her second book Stafford began to win recognition as one of the important novelists of her generation. In a *Life* roundup in June, John Chamberlain called Stafford the 'most brilliant of the new fiction writers.' Four months later, surveying the rat race of American letters from the other side of the Atlantic, the all-knowing critic Cyril Connolly said, 'Last year's authors (most of the names that have just reached England) are pushed aside and this year's--the novelist Jean Stafford, her poet husband Robert Lowell or the dark horse, Truman Capote--are invariably mentioned.' Despite this acclaim, *The Mountain Lion* was no best-seller."

David Roberts  
*Jean Stafford: A Biography*  
(Little, Brown 1988) 260-66

"A *Bildungsroman* like *Boston Adventure*, *The Mountain Lion* is written more in the vernacular mode of Mark Twain than the Jamesian mode that Stafford had adopted for her first novel. It describes the childhood and adolescence of Ralph Fawcett and his younger sister, Molly, who spend their earliest years in California and subsequently go to live on their uncle's ranch in Colorado. Both children are sickly and unsociable, and Ralph sometimes fears that his younger sister--a thin, freckled girl with 'an ugly little face framed by black hair'--is going crazy because she says and does peculiar things such as wearing a Halloween mask on the school bus because she fears she is going to be kidnapped.

Fatherless, the two small children rebel against the values of their genteel mother and their two older sisters, Leah and Rachel. They identify not with their deceased maternal grandfather, a successful button manufacturer from St. Louis, but with their mother's stepfather, Grandpa Kenyon, an adventurer who swears and drinks bourbon from a bottle he stows away in his valise. Jean Stafford writes about Grandpa Kenyon: 'He had been everywhere in the world and hunted every animal indigenous to the North American continent: deer, antelope, moose, caribou, big-horn, and every game bird you could name. He had caught wild horses in Nevada and had tamed them 'into the gentlest little benches a man ever saw.' He had killed rattlers as long as a man is tall; he had eaten alligator and said it tasted like chicken.'

During his annual summer visit to the Fawcetts in California, Grandpa Kenyon collapses and dies, and after his funeral, Ralph and Molly are sent to spend the summer at the Colorado ranch of Grandpa Kenyon's son, Uncle Claude. At first, the children are afraid most of the time, finding the mountainous landscape forbidding. Gradually, however, Ralph begins to enjoy the masculine, rugged, outdoor world of Uncle Claude. He learns to ride a horse, and he becomes interested in hunting: 'He wished he would be hiking by himself in the mountains one day and suddenly come on a lion's den. He would shoot the mother and the

cubs and then take Uncle Claude up to see. He could just hear Uncle Claude suck in his breath and say, "Well, I'll be a son-of-a-gun". Uncle Claude is eager to initiate his nephew into the male rituals of hunting and riding but is so mean to Molly that she seldom joins him and Ralph in their escapades. Instead, she stays at home to write or to help the housekeeper in the garden.

The remainder of *The Mountain Lion*, like Carson McCullers's *Member of the Wedding* or J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, focuses on the theme, so prevalent in twentieth-century American novels, of the coming of age of a troubled adolescent protagonist. Stafford's novel, however, has not one but two protagonists, one male and the other female. Like other male-female double *Bildungsromane* by women writers, such as George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, and Joyce Carol Oates's *Them*, *The Mountain Lion* contrasts the coming of age of a male and a female character in a patriarchal society. As Ralph and Molly enter adolescence, they become more and more estranged from one another. Sent to spend the year at Uncle Claude's ranch while their mother goes abroad with their older sisters, Ralph and Molly follow very different paths.

Ralph's life expands to encompass the outdoor world while Molly retreats more and more into herself. One of the most significant moments in the novel occurs when Ralph and Molly are traveling to Colorado by train. Like most fourteen-year-old boys, Ralph is preoccupied with sex, and as the train enters a tunnel, he whispers to his sister, 'Molly, tell me all the dirty words you know.' Emphasizing the significance of this moment, Stafford writes, 'Ralph's childhood and his sister's expired at that moment of the train's entrance into the surcharged valley.' Desperately clinging to the innocence of childhood, Molly has tried to deny the realities of sexuality. Embarrassed by her body, she wears a bathing suit in the bathtub and prefers to think of herself not as flesh and blood but as 'a long wooden box with a mind inside.' In describing Molly's fear that a 'slender snake might come right through the faucet,' Stafford also suggests Molly's morbid fears of being sexually violated. Although Ralph's licentious thoughts arouse in him feelings of guilt, sexuality nevertheless represents intriguing possibilities to him. But for Molly, sexuality is threatening. Dreaming of being a writer like Mark Twain or one of the other male writers from whose works she frequently quotes, Molly rejects her own femaleness. She does not identify either with her mother or with her two older sisters, whose only mission in life seems to be to attract suitable beaux, and she is disappointed when the housekeeper's daughter, a tomboy like Molly, suddenly becomes a flirtatious young woman who exchanges her dung-stained jeans for a dress and begins to talk about her beaux just as Molly's sisters do. After Ralph whispers to her in the tunnel, Molly adds his name to her long list of unforgivable people, 'a list that included almost everyone.'

Recalling her own unhappiness as she was about to begin writing *The Mountain Lion* in 1945, Stafford wrote to Lowell from Payne Whitney, 'Gradually I became Molly. I was so much Molly that finally I had to write her book...' In light of Stafford's identification with Molly Fawcett, it is significant that the novel concludes with Molly's death, though in real life it was Stafford's brother who was killed and his sister who survived. Earlier in the novel, Molly had expressed the wish that she 'had yellow hair like Leah's and Rachel's and the lion's.' She also wished that 'she could go to London and become a famous writer. She wished she did not have to wear glasses. She wished she were only four feet five.' But her wish to go to London and become a writer is as futile as her wish to alter her appearance, for at the end of the novel Ralph accidentally shoots Molly instead of the golden-haired mountain lion. 'A friend loveth at all times, and a brother is born for adversity'--this is the passage from Proverbs that Stafford chose as the epigraph for *The Mountain Lion*. But it is the sister rather than the brother who appears to have been 'born for adversity' in the novel, for Molly, who wished to have golden hair like that of Goldilocks, is killed by her brother. The violent ending of this novel, which concludes with the death of Stafford's surrogate, Molly, suggests that she wished it had been she who had been killed and her brother Dick who had survived.

To date, *The Mountain Lion* has received more critical attention than any other volume of fiction that Stafford published. When it appeared in 1947, Howard Mumford Jones described it as a 'beautifully modeled tale,' and the reviewer in the *New Yorker* said that it was 'written wittily, lucidly, and with great respect for the resources of language.' Even that formidable critic Philip Rahv commended Stafford for her achievement. 'Here for once is a novel about childhood and early adolescence which goes beyond genre painting, overcoming the limitations of personal biographical experience and converting its theme to the larger and more fundamental uses of literary expression,' he wrote to her after the novel was published. In

his discussion of *The Mountain Lion* in *Pioneers and Caretakers*, a study of American women writers, Louis Auchincloss describes Molly as 'one of the memorable children of American fiction.' And when the novel was recently reissued, Maureen Howard wrote that she was delighted by Stafford's uncanny ability to render convincingly the playful discourse of the children in the book, as well as the sparse, direct speech of the laconic rancher, Uncle Claude.

Blanche Gelfant, Barbara White, Melody Graulich, Mary Ellen Williams Walsh, and I have all focused on gender issues in this novel whose setting is the West but whose plot is very different from that of the archetypal Western novel as conceived by male writers like James Fenimore Cooper and Zane Grey. As Blanche Gelfant has pointed out, in Stafford's novel, gone is the mythical West that once accommodated the figure of a roving hero intent on leaving corrupt civilization behind and escaping to the territory ahead. Molly's death shatters Ralph's dream of the innocent life. But if Ralph fails to emerge as the archetypal Western hero, what Gelfant calls 'the great masculine myth of the West' excludes Molly completely. She points out that a girl like Molly--intellectual, physically unattractive, 'wedged between the cult of violence and the cult of virginity'--must be destroyed, for she is not merely extraneous or intrusive but 'actively threatening to the ritual of male initiation'."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman  
*Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart*  
(U Texas 1990) 173-76

"As Stafford herself later said of her first and second novels, 'They were entirely different books, those two.' She could hardly have strayed further from the sequel to *Boston Adventure* she had initially planned. As she explained it, 'There wasn't any basic change in me; the material was so different in each and required different treatment.... The first one is leisurely, a good deal more embroidered. It's contemplative. I think *Boston Adventure* is old-fashioned; it's filled with digressions, for example. *The Mountain Lion* is a more symbolic book. The symbols are apparent, though I didn't know what they meant at the time I wrote.' Though she emphasized the contrast, Stafford recognized that her second novel did not represent a radical transformation in her as a writer. On the contrary, she felt that the two books expressed two poles of her imagination, equally important. 'What I would like eventually to do,' she said, 'is to fuse the two manners.' From James she had traveled to Twain, an incongruous pair of models who had seen nothing in each other but in both of whom Stafford found a great deal.

*The Mountain Lion* was Stafford's emphatically American book. She had discovered a colloquial voice that could barely be glimpsed in the elegance of her earlier prose, and she had perfected her gift for staging small epiphanies in her choice of concrete details. In her trim new novel she let those details do their work and dispensed with the discursive integuments [natural coverings] she had favored in *Boston Adventure*. She was 'less inclined,' as Lambert Davis at Harcourt, Brace praised her, 'towards some of those baroque effects that we talked about in connection with the first book.'

At the end of that book, she had left Sonie on the brink of maturity after what amounted to a protracted adolescence, in which Sonie watched but did not participate in a decadent drama of another woman's coming-of-age. In fact, each fateful step Hope took toward sex and marriage meant greater passivity for Sonie, who was deprived of Philip and exiled to the periphery. Hope's death left her facing adulthood, disillusioned and disoriented. Sonie's future seemed to require some form of transcendence, but Stafford left it far from clear that art was the answer. Her subsequent plans suggested that she had decided religion might hold out hope for her [Following Jesus is prefigured at the end of Chapter 1.]....

Stafford...ended up replaying the past, with a new set of characters, in *The Mountain Lion*. It was a novel about childhood, and about the death of childhood. In a sense, it was a radically revised version of Book One of *Boston Adventure*, with a denouement that solved the larger question: for Stafford's new heroine, there would be no maturity. The key to the revision of Sonie's childhood was Stafford's shift from a mythic rendition of the ordeals of childhood to a much more directly autobiographical treatment. Set in California and Colorado and drawing on her own family lore, the novel was nonetheless far from nakedly confessional: she did not abandon the edict of impersonality.

But like Lowell, who was beginning in some of the poems of *Lord Weary's Castle* to attempt more personal themes, Stafford now seemed more prepared to consult her own experience. Still, it had to be experience at some remove, and her childhood proved to be an accessible subject. By contrast, she evidently had difficulty drawing from her more immediate, mature life of religious and marital turmoil--and of artistic success--as she contemplated her original sequel. It was a problem that had first presented itself years before in her initial unpublished efforts, *Which No Vicissitude* and *Autumn Festival*. Writing about her recent past--her college and German adventures--she had found herself struggling unsuccessfully to overcome a solipsistic self-loathing.

In *The Mountain Lion* Stafford discovered a new comic and symbolic clarity with which to tell a tragic story. The shaping vision, as she said more than once, came almost unbidden. The novel does seem to have been written more directly from the subconscious than Stafford was used to, certainly more than her first book was. Begun in the summer of 1945, it was finished roughly nine months later, in April of 1946--remarkably rapid progress, especially given the many distractions of that fall and winter. To be sure, it was not half the length of *Boston Adventure*, but it was written with a degree of polish that suggests longer labors, particularly for as dogged a reviser as Stafford. When she wrote to Cecile Starr in March about its loose jointedness, she gave no hint of arduous readjustments she had already made--and made with astonishing swiftness.... She apparently reconceived the basic structure and dynamic of the novel in a radical way. This time, the transformation was definitely not to tame her story--as she had needed to do with *Boston Adventure*, correcting for its melodramatic tendencies. Instead, she reworked the novel so that it addressed even more directly a theme that had lately surfaced as an especially fraught one: her relationship with her brother, whose death had evidently roused powerful memories....

Ralph's story was really in the foreground, rather than Molly's. At least that was the way Stafford had originally structured the novel, as Giroux's letter indicated. And in fact, it was true of the finished novel as well, in which Molly's character emerged largely through Ralph's perceptions of her. Yet as Stafford revised and Molly loomed larger, it was that 'creature of funny precocity and awful pathos,' as the poet Robert Fitzgerald characterized Molly in a review, who gradually usurped the more memorable place in the novel. Much of her power derived, in fact, from her peripheral and passive position. And Molly's pathos was awful rather than sentimental because Stafford successfully distanced her, even as she granted her a growing role. It was a difficult feat. As Stafford revealed in a distraught letter to Lowell written a year later from the hospital, where she had gone in a state of nervous collapse. Molly was a creature far too close for comfort. In the midst of psychological turmoil, Stafford saw the book, that girl, and her own life as inextricably and tragically connected:

'Gradually I became Molly. I was so much Molly that finally I had to write her book (in which it was my brother, you will note, that destroyed me--the guilt was still operating so strongly that I left the father out. In almost all my stories the father is either dead or is cruelly driven away; only in that little story 'Reunion' is there a blameworthy father and even he is exonerated by detesting his daughter because she caused her mother's death). All the self-mutilations came back; for I had mutilated myself constantly when I was a little girl in order to gain pity and love. My father was too cold and awkward to give me affection; my brother soon resented me because I tagged along everywhere; my mother was too busy; my sisters found me too young; is it any wonder that I wanted to marry Laddy [the Stafford's dog]? And on one of those last nights in Maine, you will remember that I ground out a cigarette on the back of my hand: I was then completely Molly. I had gone all the way back, I was an angry, wounded child again.'

Precisely that agonized identification was what Stafford avoided in the novel itself, where a kind of merciless sympathy was at work. As one critic has noted, it is a 'double bildungsroman'--the intertwined stories of siblings who journey from childhood union to adolescent conflict to a final resolution, in this case tragic. For Stafford, this pairing was a variation on the device of doubling that already in her first novel had been a key to dramatizing the idiosyncratic development of her autobiographical protagonist. Both Nathan and Hope served as foils to Sonie, characters who lived out alternate fates while she watched from the sidelines, frustrated--and yet also in her peculiar, self-punishing way fulfilled--by her own marginal status.

Using these second selves, Stafford had found a way to avoid the monstrous solipsism of Sonie's predecessor, Gretchen Marburg.

In *The Mountain Lion* the doubling was much more explicit. These two bespectacled misfits were equally sickly, ugly, precocious and unconventional, and they shared pride in their pariah status, defiantly scornful of their conformist mother and two older sisters (Mr. Fawcett had died years before). But Ralph, two years older, was beginning to feel the pull of a world beyond their idyll of estrangement, whereas Molly was unable to imagine any other life. Her devoted solidarity with Ralph increasingly seemed to him an imposition rather than a gift, and he felt guilty for his apostasy: 'He looked at his weedy sister with dislike as she crouched on her heels, plucking the lilies all around her, and when she looked up at him, her large humble eyes fondling his face with lonely love, he wanted to cry out with despair because hers was really the only love he had and he found it nothing but a burden and a tribulation.'

Through Ralph's ambivalent vision--he was disoriented by the distance he felt opening between him and his sister--Molly's hopeless loyalty emerged as a moving mixture of the noble and the neurotic. As the novel progressed and Molly slipped further into her own isolated world, Stafford used the peculiar pair to offer different perspectives on her alienation, the view from the outside and from the inside. Ralph, growing into a newly vigorous body and strong desires, watched his sister barricade herself within her eccentric mind, denying maturity. If Stafford had wanted to test that quality she feared she didn't have, compassion, she couldn't have set more exacting conditions for herself. She succeeded in making Molly--'this scrawny, round-shouldered tall thing, misanthropic at the age of twelve,' saddled with brains and bitterness and 'a savagely satiric nature'--a tragic figure. In Stafford's pages, the suffering of children could not be more serious.

Doubling was the principle of the entire, studiously symmetrical novel--which itself was a curiously inverted reflection of her first novel. As Giroux's letter indicated, the basic dichotomy of *The Mountain Lion* was between the Bonney merchants and the Kenyon men, between effete California and rugged Colorado. The division oriented the world for Ralph and Molly, who started out the novel eagerly awaiting the annual visit of their favorite relative, Grandpa Kenyon--and who were devastated when he collapsed, dead, on the front porch. The rest of the novel traced their troubled shuttling between the two poles--between their tame California home and the Colorado ranch where they began to spend summers with Grandpa Kenyon's son, Uncle Claude.

It was the redskin-paleface distinction of *Boston Adventure* viewed this time from the Twainian, rather than the Jamesian, perspective. And this time the raw frontier won out over the cultivated city. Sonie yearned for an escape to the orderly capital; Ralph and Molly dreamed of escaping from the 'sissy life' presided over by their mother and sisters and their ancestors on the Bonney side of the family, about whom they had heard much moralizing lore. To them, Grandfather Bonney, their mother's father, represented all that was hypocritically genteel. Their bond with Grandpa Kenyon, their mother's stepfather (Grandfather Bonney died young and Mrs. Bonney made an 'unseemly second marriage'), was an incongruous one: two gawky, sickly children smitten with a leathery old man--a rough rancher from Colorado who was for them 'half legendary,' ruddy like an Indian and imposing like a 'massive, slow-footed bear.'

The echo of Hermann Marburg, who entranced Sonie with tall tales of the West he had never seen but yearned after, was clear. But Stafford thoroughly revised the scene of childhood. An almost too idyllic walnut farm in California supplanted the hell of Chichester. In place of Shura Marburg stood fussy Mrs. Fawcett, her clucking no comparison to her predecessor's manias. And this time the father was gone from the start. Stafford commented on the omission, but in fact, *The Mountain Lion* marked a step closer to the charged subject, for Ralph and Molly were looking for a father--unlike Sonie, who found a mother substitute in Miss Pride. Once again, Stafford's Twainian style allowed her to address, however indirectly, her own search for some accommodation with her father.

Not surprisingly, there was no easy resolution to the quest, particularly for Molly. The most fundamental alteration in Stafford's revised version of childhood lay in the fates of the siblings. In *Boston Adventure* it was the brother, poor Ivan, who was sacrificed so that Sonie could go on and confront maturity. He was the victim Sonie might have been, and though she couldn't protect him (as a male he was for Shura a devil by

definition), she herself could and did weather the turmoils of their childhood. In *The Mountain Lion* it was Molly who was sacrificed so that Ralph might emerge into the wider world. This time it was femaleness that was at least part of the handicap, for the world to which Ralph awakened was masculine terrain--the rugged West of ranching and hunting. It was not a place where women thrived, especially odd creatures like Molly, who became more weedlike and solitary as Ralph grew more fit and handsome. Haunted by his innocent, fiercely asexual sister, Ralph couldn't resist trying to corrupt, and ultimately destroy, her. The end of the novel, at once contrived and compelling, had a mythic western setting: during a hunt for the golden mountain lion that had become his own and Uncle Claude's grail, Ralph accidentally shot his sister instead.

But it is a mistake to read the novel in programmatically feminist terms, as critics have been increasingly inclined to do (to Stafford's evident impatience, judging from her marginal comments on one such reading--a reconsideration of the novel in *The New Republic* in 1975). To be sure, Stafford was interested in the broader social and sexual implications of her story. The setting was carefully chosen. In developing the contrast between the rough hewn West and the refined East (which included California on Stafford's map), Stafford was commenting on a disunity in the American identity, a conflict of social values that warps personal identity. Molly and Ralph were caught between a masculine ideal of the frontier that entailed a destructive crudity--a 'virile opacity' Stafford called it at one point--and a feminine ideal of the civilized establishment that implied hypocrisy and an absence of real culture. The time, too, was subtly but constantly emphasized: this was the mid-1920s, prewar America, a country that didn't quite realize it was on the brink of maturity. Old traditions were vanishing, and there was a sense of drift. Uncle Claude's immature pastime was stalking the mountain lion, an animal then almost extinct; Mrs. Fawcett's plan for a grand tour with her eldest daughters was an effete farce. Growing up for Ralph and Molly meant a struggle to find a path amid inadequate possibilities.

On one level, their fates fit the patriarchal paradigm. Molly died in an accident that was also, as critics have pointed out, an initiation ritual for Ralph. She was a symbolic element in his life--the feminine side of his nature that he had to suppress if he was to come of age in the world, the childhood that he had to destroy in order to enter maturity. The tragic ending marked a kind of fulfillment for him, while it sealed Molly's decline. Unlike Ralph, who found consolation for his estrangement from Molly in comradeship with Claude, she had nowhere to turn after their breach. The only kinship she could feel was with Magdalene, the blasphemous old black cook at the ranch, 'always smoldering with an inward rage or a vile amusement over something sexual or something unfortunate,' who she decided must be her mother. Full of rage herself, Molly added name after name (including Ralph's) to her 'list of unforgivable people: 'She hated them all for the same reason, but she could not decide what the reason was. You could say, Because they were all fat.' Molly was determined to deny the corrupt world of the flesh.

Finally she added her own name. "She burst into tears and cried until she was hungry, and all the time she cried she watched herself in the mirror, getting uglier and uglier until she looked like an Airedale." The self-loathing that had always lurked beneath her contempt for others surfaced in a death wish, which the novel proceeded to fulfill. Molly could thus be cast as the perfect prototype of the female protagonist who was rejected by the world, and then rejected herself, 'bereft in an unadulterated masculine environment and denied the guidance and example of acceptable female models,' as one critic has put it.

Yet Ralph and Molly's story was more complicated. In bringing Molly toward the center of the novel, Stafford was not merely filling in the hopeless half of a double bildungsroman and clarifying a message about gender. She was trying out another portrait of the artist, a variation on Sonie's strangely frustrated career. To consider Ralph's and Molly's aspirations, as opposed to their fates, is to see the novel in a rather different light. In fact, Ralph was far from the conventional hero whose path into the active world was clearly marked out for him by society and family. He was not like George Eliot's assertive Tom Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*, who expected and received the entree into the wider world that his sister, Maggie, vainly dreamed of. On the contrary, Ralph's view of himself and of his relations with Molly and with the world was notable for its unaggressive ambivalence.

Ralph's situation was, unexpectedly, closer to the predicament of an undirected female. He was acutely aware of a division within himself, a desire for independence alongside a continued yearning for a deep, dependent bond with his sister. His consciousness, the reigning one of the novel, was highly other-directed,

empathetic rather than assertive: caught between his conventional family and his eccentric sister, he was painfully aware of (and confused by) their opposing perspectives. Nor could he easily accept Uncle Claude as his alternate model. The more time Ralph spent with him, the more reservations he had about the rough maleness that defined his uncle's circumscribed world: 'Ralph was troubled by the loss of his desire to enter Uncle Claude's world completely.' Male bonding became even less appealing when sexual maturity crept up on Ralph: 'Because his own masculinity was, in its articulation, so ugly, and he could therefore take no pleasure in himself, neither could he respect it in anyone else.' Ralph was oppressed by his lack of clear direction and drive, felt there was something wrong with him--not least because Molly had in abundance the ambition he lacked, when it should have been the other way around. 'If he did not become Uncle Claude's partner, what would happen to him?' he wondered at one point. 'He had no variety of ambitions as had Molly who, in the course of a week, would plan to be a salesman for the *Book of Knowledge*, a grocer, a government walnut inspector, a trolley conductor in Tia Juana; of course, her real vocation was writing and these were to be only sidelines.'

Molly was not simply a victimized female, a misfit crushed by society's narrow expectations of feminine development. This was a portrait of the artist as a young girl, whose alienation transcended the defensive aloofness of a precocious, unpopular female child. She was the inner-directed rebel who was ready to proclaim her independence with a brutal finality Ralph could rarely manage: 'My literature is more important to me than you are, Ralph Fawcett,' she said coldly and left the room, pausing in the doorway to make donkey's ears and say 'Hee haw.' The literary vocation exacted a high price, and Stafford was inclined to emphasize the burdens of art more than of gender, though she acknowledged those too. Molly's obsession with reading and composing strange stories and old poems (on that favorite theme of Stafford's, heads: 'Gravel, gravel on the ground / Lying there so safe and sound, / Why is it you look so dead? / Is it because you have no head?') was considered inappropriate behavior for a dutiful daughter. 'Everyone said she had the brains of the family, but as Mrs. Fawcett was not interested in brains, she thought this a handicap rather than otherwise and often told Molly there were other things in life besides books.' But it was not clear that Ralph would have met with much more approval had he displayed a similarly idiosyncratic imagination and vocational obsession.

The artistic temperament, as Stafford told it, was necessarily in tension with conventional society. It had its source in a sense of ostracism, and as it developed, the distance only increased. If the novel had a message, it was that the cost of growing up female and artistic was far greater than the cost of being a boy ready to make his peace with a conventional future. As in *Boston Adventure*, Stafford emphasized that self-destructiveness, a readiness to forsake ordinary comforts and calm, seemed to be an inextricable part of artistic aspiration. Where Sonie admired but shrank from the disorderly bohemian life, tempted instead by Pinckney Street propriety, Molly took the high, hard road. The child's uncompromising desires--to love and be utterly loved, and to be utterly devoted to her writing--spelled lonely unhappiness. Disappointment in love fueled her literary ambition, and her literary zeal alienated her further from Ralph, from everybody.

The painful cycle seemed to be especially destructive because Molly was a girl, more dependent on love and more suspect for her unconventional ambitions. Yet Stafford gave plenty of evidence that had Ralph been the poetic one of the pair, the predicament would not necessarily have been any easier. A creative, reclusive boy on Uncle Claude's ranch would have violated expectations even more dramatically than Molly did. It would have been, if anything, less acceptable for Ralph to cling to the imaginative purity of childhood--as the artistic temperament so often dictates. Thus although Ralph succeeded in growing up and Molly was defeated, Stafford suggested an unconventional reading. Of the two children who started out in search of integrity in a hypocritical world, one, Ralph, faced a future of terrible guilt at the end and the other, Molly, had been liberated.

Liberation by death is not a triumph by worldly standards, of course. But Molly was not a worldly creature. Her vocational rigor, as Stafford emphasized in Molly's central and exceptional scene--her bathing ritual--was religious in spirit. The detachment that art required, Stafford implied here as she did with Sonie, was near not only to neurotic isolation (Ralph worried that Molly was going crazy) but also in religious retreat. Molly's bath was her refuge from the eyes of the rest of the world--she carefully pulled the shade 'though there was nothing outside but night' and blocked the keyhole though no one would come peeping at the ranch--and also from her own eyes. Her regimen was straight from a medieval nunnery (though Freud

clearly hovered over Molly's rites). She cloaked herself in a wrap while she undressed, then slipped on a maroon bathing suit, and when she finished bathing, 'she dried herself and bound her stomach with a piece of outing flannel. She wrapped it so hard and pinned it so tight that it gave her a pain and she had to lie down on the floor to get her slippers because she could not bend over. Then she put on her long-sleeved, high-necked pajamas, and the nightcap she had made over her drenched hair. It was her desire to have tuberculosis.' Molly's self-mortification could also be more public and dramatic. When Ralph punctured her dream of marrying him someday, she poured acid on her hand. 'The pain was not severe; it was the knowledge that the pain was *eating* her' that revolted this child whose body was so ill at ease in the world.

Molly, repulsed by the physical world in all its corruption--its 'fatness,' as she named it--wanted to waste away to spirit. Stafford once again blended religious and psychological perspectives on her character's spiritual, social, and sexual alienation. Molly was the austere novice and the incipient anorexic, the fanatic creative soul and the confused preadolescent. Stafford's skill in this colloquial novel was to evoke Molly's metaphysical dilemma in idiosyncratic detail, to seize on the comic particulars of her tragedy: 'For the most part, [Molly] was not conscious of her body (she was never conscious of it as a *body* and had never spoken this word aloud and almost died when one of the sisters would jokingly say, 'Don't touch my body'; Molly thought of herself as a long wooden box with a mind inside).'

Similarly, Molly's category of 'fatness,' which applied to the rest of the world--all body and no mind--was at once her own droll childish curse and a metaphor with well-established religious and psychological associations. St. Teresa's style and teachings seemed to lurk behind Stafford's portrait of asceticism. In the ongoing war between the flesh and the spirit, the world and the word, the concrete and the abstract, Stafford, like Teresa, was a committed materialist as she wielded her pen. The flesh must be acknowledged in all its grossness and weakness. Concreteness was crucial in her account, and the strength of a symbol lay in its specificity. However archetypal their journey might be, Molly and Ralph were two children whose souls and paths were imagined by someone who had never forgotten what the loss of childhood felt like.

'In some respects it is a better book than *Boston Adventure*,' Philip Rahv wrote to her after he had read *The Mountain Lion*, and his praise called attention to what a model of New Critical tautness the novel was: 'Though less ambitious and narrower in scope and invention, it is more unified, more complete and convincing as a work of art. What is particularly admirable is the density of detail, its rightness and completeness. The various motives of the story are articulated through the detail with great naturalness and ease; and the symbolic meanings come through the experience you describe without strain or distortion. The ending is wonderful, and not only for its dramatic power--it integrates plot and meaning in an extraordinary way. Here for once is a novel about childhood and early adolescence which goes beyond genre painting, overcoming the limitations of personal biographical experience and converting its theme to the larger and more fundamental uses of literary expression.'

Stafford 'had gone all the way back,' but what is remarkable is the distance she maintained from the 'angry, wounded child.' As the first part of *Boston Adventure* had shown, childhood was a subject that liberated Stafford's great gift: irony. She told an interviewer years later that 'My theory about children is my theory about writing. The most important thing in writing is irony, and we find irony most clearly in children. The very innocence of children is irony.' And echoing her New Critical teachers, she added, 'Irony, I feel, is a very high form of morality.' In *The Mountain Lion* Stafford had mastered a wide range of irony, from the broad social satire with which she developed the Bonney/Kenyon dichotomy to the self-irony she granted Molly. As a child writer, Molly was blessed, or rather burdened, with a double dose of alienation--from the world and from herself. 'I know I'm ugly. I know everybody hates me. I wish I were dead,' Molly told Ralph not histrionically but 'in a cold, level voice.' That moment of awful self-condemning clarity culminated in the proclamation that echoed throughout Stafford's fiction: 'I haven't got a home.'

Stafford's return to the Covina and Colorado of her childhood was another exploration, as *Boston Adventure* had been, of her sense of homelessness--written, very quickly, in the midst of arduous homesteading. Later in life, far smaller bouts of energetic housekeeping served as lengthy distractions from her work, but the whirlwind of restructuring and redecorating at Damariscotta Mills seemed to carry over into her creative life, not to detract from it. That's not to say that the writing was easy--or, for that matter,

that the renovations went smoothly. *The Mountain Lion* was the product of considerable tumult, but it seems that the exploration of her past and the construction of her present and future in Maine were linked in an important way for her.

In a letter to Lowell from the hospital a year later, the same letter in which she poured out her feelings about Molly, Stafford ruminated far more explicitly and darkly on the connection between her writing and her home--and her marriage and her father: 'For ages (and indeed until now) I have not known what you meant by saying that my success was bad for me. I am not sure that you know exactly how it was, but I see it in this way: that suddenly, having got money and comfort, I remembered with all the bitterness and hatred of my childhood my early poverty which had been needless; I remembered all the humiliation, the half-hunger, the shabby, embarrassing clothes, the continual oppression, my mother's tears and my father's dreadful laugh. And when you cautioned me to be prudent in my spending, I whipped around as if you had insulted me; I thought that you were trying to deprive me of all pleasure just as my father had one when I was a child and out of defiance of my father, I spent the money wildly and I began to drink more and more, still paying *him* back.'

The absent father haunted, and inspired, both her book and her house frenzy. She was writing the story of children in search of a father figure, of a force to mediate between effete Bonney values--the McKillop side of Jean's family--and harsh Kenyon standards, the Stafford side. Molly's idiosyncratic choice of a misanthropic, literary course was in fact the childish version of the course embraced by John Stafford. The role model Molly didn't have was the model that Jean herself did have, and far from clarifying her life, he profoundly confused it. Admiration for her father's uncompromising, cantankerous path continued to be mixed for Stafford with ever greater doses of bitterness, and even hatred. He had perversely chosen to abandon the responsibilities of maturity, leaving his family to suffer the consequences. Molly's fate was in a sense a comment on his failures: the young writer died on the brink of maturity, prevented from repeating them.

But Jean Stafford's own fate was quite different. She had grown up and written a best-selling book, and she found herself, as her letter to Lowell acknowledged, reacting quite differently to her father's failures. She threw herself into establishing a home, precisely what John Stafford had never been able to do once he had embarked on his writing career, consigning his family instead to a succession of boardinghouses. It was her McKillop moment, her gesture of solidarity with the feminine world of stability and domesticity. And it was her replacement of the Covina idyll that her father had squandered.... Shortly after she finished *The Mountain Lion*, there seems to have been a violent scene between her and Lowell, who had just returned from a Trappist retreat. She called it 'the incident,' as distinct from 'the accident,' the other memorable shake-up at the hands of her husband (the New Orleans episode, when Lowell broke her nose, never seemed to figure in her memories): she claimed that Lowell beat her up and threatened to kill her."

Ann Hulbert  
*The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford*  
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"After hearing Randall Jarrell's praise for her second novel, *The Mountain Lion*, Stafford wrote to Lowell, 'Why should it console me to be praised as a good writer?... [T]here is no thing worse for a woman than to be deprived of her womanliness. For me, there is nothing worse than the knowledge that life holds nothing for me but being a writer.' Such painfully self-effacing statements reveal a profound ambivalence about her literary vocation on both the personal and the professional levels. If topics concerning women emerge from Stafford's fiction--and they do--they were always secondary in her mind to both the human dilemma the works dramatize and the aesthetic problems such as character consistency a particular story poses....

Stafford's women rarely triumph. Instead, they compromise, fall prey to illusion, or resign themselves to a life of loneliness and alienation.... Stafford kills off her intellectually precocious young Molly in *The Mountain Lion*, unable to envision a future for the budding writer. Permeating all of Stafford's works is the lingering question of identity or self-authentication in a largely inhospitable, unloving world. That the forms this self-authentication takes are invariably grounded in the female experience demonstrates Jean

Stafford's concern with issues contemporary feminist theory has yet to resolve. As Maureen Ryan aptly notes, Stafford uses woman as a vehicle or symbol for the universal angst she dramatizes....

Eerily premonitory of Stafford's young heroine Molly in the novel *The Mountain Lion* (published a year later, in 1947), who denies her sexuality and inflicts deliberate harm on herself, Pansy ["The Interior Castle"] likewise seems to desire complete self-effacement as she prepares to subject herself to the surgeon's invasive knife"....

In *The Mountain Lion*, her most extended treatment of the western theme, Stafford demythologizes the West by making it the locus of distinctly unheroic actions and frequently comparing it to the East, that other frontier of the American consciousness--to the detriment of both. In Stafford's fiction, then, the West emerges not just as a geographic region but perhaps more importantly as a complex of attitudes and assumptions that gave her a way of mocking not only the East of her childhood dreams but also the West itself. Jean's later comments on the rugged contours of the West illuminate a landscape she often found threatening and alien. In a 1950 essay called 'Enchanted Island,' she contrasts the island topography to the mountainous terrain she knew as a child, asserting that she found the Rocky Mountains 'too big to take in, too high to understand, too domineering to love.' She goes on to articulate her impassioned attempt to tame this landscape and 'to reduce the world to a rational arena where I knew, at all times, what was going on.' Because Stafford is intimidated by the stark, forbidding mountains and prairies, she must, like her heroine Molly in *The Mountain Lion*, find a way to tame and domesticate what is so frightening and inhospitable. The comic voice of her childhood narrators and her skillful manipulation of both formal and colloquial diction in some of the western stories represent Stafford's way of taming the difficult terrain of her past....

Jean Stafford's second published story, 'The Darkening Moon' (1944), treats a...bleak theme but seen through the eyes of a younger heroine [than in *Boston Adventure*]. Here Stafford introduces the innocent child figure that would appear in many of her best stories and foregrounds the western landscape she would use so brilliantly three years later in *The Mountain Lion*. Mary Ellen Williams Walsh sees this story as 'emblematic of Stafford's portrayal of the young girl in the West' in its pointed divergence from a typical male questing journey.... In 'The Darkening Moon' Stafford in fact seems to be establishing the paradigm of female development that would figure in most of her works: a growth into disillusionment, constriction, and uncertainty....

Like Molly in *The Mountain Lion*, Emily ["The Violet Rock"] is often a creature possessed, and her possession always involves language.... Her novel *The Mountain Lion* treats a similar family dynamic, when Ralph and Molly feel they must choose between Grandfather Bonney's aristocratic pretensions and Granpa Kenyon's tales of meeting Jesse James.... Stafford had envisioned a tragic fate for Emily's forerunner Molly in *The Mountain Lion*. Molly too has a private space to read, up in a mountain glade, but this glade is violated at the end of the book when her brother Ralph mistakenly shoots her as he hunts the golden mountain lion. Perhaps the leavening distance of time and the comic tone of the Emily Vanderpool stories allowed Stafford to avoid the painful resolution of her earlier novel."

Mary Ann Wilson  
*Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction*  
(Twayne 1996) 6-7, 26, 31-33, 39-40, 45

"[Stafford's] familiar details reassure us. They are solid, they are real. There are enough like them in *The Mountain Lion* to bear out the prevailing critical appraisal of Jean Stafford as a realist [and Modernist]. She is acknowledged to have written both in the mandarin, elevated style of Henry James, as well as in the mundane, colloquial style of Mark Twain.... In *The Mountain Lion* the two styles intertwine and fuse, much like Ralph's and Molly's identities, or like the two sets of deer antlers Ralph finds that are attached to their skulls 'so tightly interlocked he could not get them apart.' The effect of this is to make the book, for all its seemingly straightforward depiction of reality, persistently unnerving....

Why would any author choose to all but give away the ending to her book when the reader has barely begun to read it? The end of the book is shocking, devastating--you'd think that its power would derive from its being unforeseen. And of course it is, to a degree, while at the same time it's been clear that the ending and the inevitability of the ending have been implicit from the outset. They've been predicted by the

sound of every sentence, the pitch of Stafford's voice. The message remains the same: it had to come to this.

The story itself is not so very unusual. Molly and Ralph Fawcett divide their time between the family home in Covina, California, and their uncle Claude's ranch in Colorado. The geographic division echoes a more profound disjunction in their genetic material, its composition part Bonney on the mother's side and part Kenyon on the father's--part Henry James, you might say, and part Mark Twain--or as Molly and Ralph would have put it, part effete and disingenuous, part artless and wild. In the beginning the bond between the two children is apparently unassailable, founded on a shared sense of superiority having its basis in their bad eyesight and nosebleeds and stand-offish, judgmental natures. Six years elapse in the course of the novel, during which Stafford charts the stages of the bond's dissolution; by the end of the book Ralph has been transformed into a strapping young man of sixteen, whereas Molly has merely gotten longer and stranger, appearing, finally, 'like a tall, slim monkey.'

*The Mountain Lion* is often characterized as a coming-of-age story, but it is not a conventional coming-of-age story. This book is not a conventional anything. It is one of a kind. It is freakish--like the girl at its heart--a marvel. Immediately after Ralph and Molly have been sent home from school, the 'clear small ditches' on either side of the country road they walk along, their noses bleeding, made 'a mouth-like sound.' The two children skirt the Wash, the source of all mystery and evil. Molly, 'looking up into the blank blue sky,' remembers 'a feeling of queer and somehow pleasant horror when once a gull had winked at her and she had seen that his lower eyelid moved and not the upper one.' These details--not so much realistic as *unreal*--accumulate and grow in intensity as the novel unfolds, the world they limn increasingly disturbing, creating in the reader a similarly queer and horrible feeling.

This is due at least in part to the way the book talks to you, its point of view a strange intertwining of the sensibilities of the two children, as hard to disentangle as the antlers of the deer, an effect Stafford takes to a startling extreme. In the penultimate scene on Garland Mountain 'Ralph did not say a word but continued to look at the place where she had been, smiling a secret smile. She was afraid and thought she could never come here again. The lion grew to huge proportions in her reflection. She imagined its claws, its teeth, the way it would hiss.' This chilling confusion of pronouns--the first 'she' clearly referring to the mountain lion, the next 'she' to Molly, the entire point of view shifting in that moment from Ralph's to his sister's--prefigures the ultimate deadly conflation of Molly with the animal.

One of Stafford's favorite photographs shows her as a very small girl, smiling joyfully, blissfully even (a rare expression for her), as she rides on the back of her brother Dick's bicycle, 'confidently, holding onto him.' Despite her lifelong aversion to the confessional mode, her conviction that 'writing is a private, an almost secret enterprise carried on within the heart and minds in a room whose doors are closed.' It's impossible to avoid noting that not long before she began work on *The Mountain Lion* Dick Stafford was killed in an ambulance accident in France. Though they had grown apart as adults, Jean and Dick Stafford shared a bond as children that was as close as Ralph and Molly Fawcett's; in writing the book she poached heavily on events from their childhood, including the time she wore Dick's Boy Scout shirt with the 'Be Prepared' insignia on the pocket, and he told her that for a girl to do that was like "dragging the American flag through the dirt." What she left out is how she ended up cutting the insignia off the pocket of Dick's shirt with a razor blade, badly--and purposely--mutilating herself in the process.

Jean Stafford completed *The Mountain Lion* with uncharacteristic speed; it was composed in nine months during the period of her miserable marriage to the poet Robert Lowell, the habit of self-mutilation she visits on Molly having turned out to be a lifelong affliction. 'I was then completely Molly,' Stafford wrote of herself, meaning the Molly who 'thought of herself as a long wooden box with a mind inside.' The flesh can only betray you; the flesh will make you *fat*--like Stafford's own mother who had been so overweight no one could tell she was pregnant, leading Dick to think the big surprise she promised was going to be a dog and not a baby sister. In Molly's lexicon--one that the author shares--to be fat is to be everything the flesh is heir to, the mental and moral equivalent of the despised pastor's equally despised wife, Mrs. Follansbee, in a bathing suit, 'her thin, knock-kneed legs...traced with thickened varicose veins; her stomach...soft and pendulous...' like 'a cake that had run over the side of the pan.' To be fat--and here it's useful to remember that Stafford was an ardent, if irritable, Catholic convert--is to have given oneself over to the carnal, to be inexcusable. For Molly, Ralph commits the ultimate, unforgivable sin when the train

carrying the two of them to Colorado for what turns out to be their final visit enters the tunnel and 'in the lowest voice' he says to her, 'Molly, tell me all the dirty words you know.'

This is the moment the bond between brother and sister is irreparably broken, the book's governing psyche split in two.... The adult world often manifests itself in the book as an accumulation of precisely observed detail, but this time you know it is Ralph and Ralph alone whose sensibility provides the objective correlative. 'He saw the tunnel as an apotheosis of his own black, sinful mind...the mind that had observed with delight that the mother of the seedy children [who just boarded the train] had no wedding ring.

Earlier the children have spoken of marriage quite differently. When Mr. Follansbee asks Molly and Ralph what they intend to do if they don't go to college, Molly tells him, 'We will get married and stay right here with Grandpa.' They've seen marriage as romantic or as a means of staving off abject loneliness. But after Ralph speaks, after the train has passed into and out of the tunnel, for both children marriage, and their own relationship, is indissolubly linked with sex. From that moment on, everything that was previously latent is exposed. Ralph thinks he has gotten what he wanted years earlier when, in a desperation born of love, he wished Molly out of existence. He is on his own now, but it is Molly for whom he has ceased to exist. She has ruled him out of her life forever, and the only way to accomplish this has been to annihilate herself in the process. Her death may seem too much, a contrivance of the plotting writer, but then it is Molly who is, or wanted to be, a writer. She is the writer Stafford at last became [dead?]-it is Stafford's contrivance, her fate.

This is not a coming-of-age story. It is, if anything, a not-coming-of-age story. It is a story about the impossibility of growing up and the impossibility of remaining a child. By the time Ralph finds himself in the car on the way home to the ranch with his dead sister on the seat beside him, it is clear that whatever world this is, it isn't the one represented by that elementary-school hallway the book first seemed to be luring the reader into. 'Uncle Claude and Winifred sat in the front and Ralph sat in the back beside Molly, who they had propped up like a person. He looked straight ahead, watching the road being devoured by the car like an endless red noodle.' Molly is dead, the final stage in her withdrawal from human life. A final metamorphosis has been effected, the queer view of the road 'like an endless red noodle' being one with the same sensibility that wrote the poem 'Gravel' so many years earlier--

Gravel, gravel on the ground  
Lying there so safe and sound,  
Why is it you look so dead?  
Is it because you have no head?

In the book Stafford grants Molly authorship of the poem, but she wrote it herself when she was the same age as Molly--in the early years of her own girlhood, to be precise, when her brother Dick was still alive and the two of them would become as convulsed with laughter as Ralph and Molly over a not very funny joke about a cow.

The author of this novel is no more a realist, no easier to categorize than the author [Kafka] of that other famous story of metamorphosis, the one in which a charwoman regards the dry husk of what had once been a commercial travel turned insect and remarks, 'Just look at his, it's dead; it's lying there dead and done for.' It is possible to be too harsh in your judgment. It is possible to be too harsh in your judgment to be a sister or a brother, to be a human being--it is possible to be too harsh in your judgment to make art. This is the moral vision the book affords; this is the true ending of the novel, the one no author's note could give away. 'Lord Jesus,' says Magdalene, betraying her kinship with Kafka's charwoman. 'The pore little old piece of white trash.' It is fitting that Jean Stafford gives her the last word."

Kathryn Davis  
Afterward (2010)  
*The Mountain Lion* (1947)  
(The New York Review of Books 2010) 233-40

## ANALYSIS IN DETAIL

Once again the prevailing atheism of critics has blinded them to the most significant meanings of a novel. Of the 17 critics quoted in this document, *not one* explains the Christian implications. Not one. Yet all three of Stafford's novels are realistic Christian allegories, all ending with the deaths of tragic females--one adolescent, one young and one older: Hopestill Mather dies unredeemed, Katharine Congreve redeems herself, and poor Molly Fawcett is a child very likely to be forgiven by a merciful God.

In *The Mountain Lion* there are multiple potential allegories evoked by Ralph's list of gold objects that represent supreme values to different people: gold bricks, gold-plated bathtubs, champagne, palm bark, whisky, book clasps, hair, broach, locket, fine chain, and "Jesus' halo on the cards given out at Sunday school, the gilt star of Bethlehem on the Christmas tree"--Ralph ends his list with an item that reminds us that he is just an inexperienced boy--"his Tenderfoot pin." Grandpa Kenyon "was a sort of god of September, surrounded by the gold, autumnal light." In *Boston Adventure* the gold dome of the State House in Boston is to poor young Sonie the symbol of a secular Heaven. And to Ralph and Uncle Claude the gold mountain lion has the numinous power of a Holy Grail.

They call the mountain lion Goldilocks, the name of the girl in the fairy tale who wants soup to be neither too hot nor too cold and a term in astrobiology referring to balanced conditions ideal for life, as on Earth--the balance of Nature, in contrast to disordered human society. Molly runs both too hot and too cold. She is out of balance, a wild child, a rebel unable to adapt to society in any form. She is not blonde or beautiful like the mountain lion but she is wild, solitary and dangerous like the lion. Early in the novel she has no memories of her dead father "but only the knowledge that he was up in the sky with Jesus and would miraculously recognize her when she came to heaven." Increasingly, however, she associates Christianity with the middle-class hypocrisy of her mother and Reverend Follansbee. Ralph comes to dislike clergymen because "he was sure they were all like Mr. Follansbee." It is at Christmas that Molly thinks celebrating the birth of Jesus is "bourgeois." And anyway "she had never got anything she wanted." She sounds like Huck Finn. "Molly had not decided yet whether she would be a Catholic or a Buddhist." Her spiritual education has been neglected by adults incapable of providing it. There is a motif in the novel of eating apples, symbolizing the acquisition of knowledge--Molly's prolific reading of books--and the biblical Fall. Molly is also linked to the Fall by her pride and her fear of snakes.

From experience Molly has an unconsciously Christian view of the fallen world as an unjust nasty place ruled by "the devil" who speaks through Ralph in the tunnel, she is a passionate advocate of the Spirit and fears and scorns the Flesh--figuratively "fatness" in all its forms--but she is unforgiving and destructive. Belief in Jesus, the supreme incarnation of Spirit--could have helped Molly transcend her misery. The *first* words uttered by Uncle Claude after he has shot the lion are, "By God, we done it! By Jesus Christ, we both done it." "By God" and "by Jesus Christ" imply that these events are the will of God. The *last* words of the novel are spoken by the black servant Magdalene, named after one of the witnesses to Christ's resurrection: "Lord Jesus. The pore little old piece of white trash." In one of her wildest notions, "Molly got the idea that she looked like Magdalene and for some time thought that she was probably her daughter." She identifies with the bitter old black servant because she too feels ugly and alien in the dominant white culture. This identification also links her to the biblical Mary Magdalene, likewise an outcast, a sinner forgiven by Jesus who became one of his closest followers.

At the end of the novel the coinciding deaths of wild Molly and the mountain lion clearly associate her with the lion. Both their deaths are associated with the resurrection of Jesus Christ by happening on Easter. Before the coming of Jesus, the Israelites sacrificed animals to God, lambs in particular. Jesus became the "Lamb of God," sacrificing himself to gain eternal life for believers and ending the need for sacrificing animals. According to Christian tradition, when Jesus returns to judge humans at the end of time, he will come not as a gentle lamb but as a *lion*: "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" (*Revelation 5.5*). Stafford's and Molly's fierce judging of people is consistent with the ferocious nature of the lion and with the Christian view that all humans are sinners who deserve punishment and must repent and accept Jesus or die forever. "The lion grew to huge proportions in [Molly's] reflection." Uncle Claude and Ralph have made an idol out of the gold mountain lion, in effect replacing God. Ralph has "the devil" inside him, as revealed in the tunnel, and wishes Molly were dead. Poor Molly herself has condemned almost everyone including herself

and has become a suicidal killer (drowning the wood mouse). "Molly did not want to be happy and she wanted [Ralph] to be as wretched as she." Her death is merciful, like the accidental death of Katharine Congreve in *The Catherine Wheel*. Ralph will no doubt suffer from terrible guilt for the rest of his life, but his remorse may save his soul--thanks to the coming of the lion.

Molly is so consistently rude, unkind and hostile that the reader is made to feel disapproving of her like most of the other characters do, especially her mother, tending to forget that she is a severely troubled child who mutilates herself and pours acid on her body, almost losing her arm. "Everyone ignored the impossible child." Molly is a test of one's humanity and a measure of one's charity, just as rebellious Bartleby is a test of his employer's professed Christianity in the story by Melville. The tension generated by this challenge to the reader is skillfully maintained and gradually drawn tighter throughout the novel. Some of the remarks made by "the wicked, witty little girl" are actually quite funny, in the tradition of Mark Twain, as when the Reverend Follansbee asks her sister Rachel why she wishes he was a fairy and "Molly whispered with deadly hatred, 'So you'd vanish'." The reader is also influenced by young Ralph's growing resentment of Molly. Stafford is a master of narrative timing when halfway through the novel she completely redeems Molly for one sad moment while she is picking lilies, a flower traditionally associated with rebirth and Jesus: Ralph "looked at his weedy sister with dislike as she crouched on her heels, plucking the lilies all around her, and when she looked up at him, her large humble eyes fondling his face with lonely love, he wanted to cry out with despair because hers was really the only love he had and he found it nothing but a burden and a tribulation." Molly is briefly redeemed by her love.

Adapt or die is a rule of Nature. Molly refuses to adapt, whereas Ralph, with fewer problems in part because he is a boy, is equipped and willing to adapt. Symbolically apt, as he becomes less rebellious Ralph is able to stop wearing glasses. "Her eyes were much worse than his and without her glasses she was as blind as a mole." Working on the ranch, Ralph grows able to accept reality, the ugly facts of Nature that Molly hates, as represented for example by his helping Uncle Claude with the necessary killing of animals, which Stafford renders in realistic detail. "Before he had seen the birth of the calf, he had been like Molly, savagely refusing the knowledge of such things, but now, bad as he knew it all to be, it sometimes gave him a warm feeling like cocoa on a cold night." At times, "he pretended that he was an Indian." Meanwhile, Molly only gets worse: "Once to prove to herself that she was not a crybaby, she took a still live wood mouse from a trap and drowned it in a milk bottle half full of water, rejoicing brutishly in the swimming and the squealing which became slower and fainter." Molly has become a killer.

At first Molly says naively, "Oh, a mountain lion isn't dangerous." But the ranch housekeeper Mrs. Brotherman says "I will feel safer when it is dead. I hope you will not go back there. If the men must go, they must, but it's not right for a girl to be alone in the mountains with a lion loose.' Molly threw her apple core into the fire and heard it hiss briefly. She, too, would not feel safe until the beautiful animal was dead." On Easter, the day of the hunt, Ralph "found the skulls of two deer with horns so tightly interlocked that he could not get them apart"--a vivid metaphor that perfectly explains the final relationship of Ralph and Molly: "the two bucks charging one another and then, by lunatic accident, being joined as one, toppling into the water to drown, still struggling to get free."

As the only adult present, and the only experienced hunter, Uncle Claude is most to blame for the situation that causes the death of Molly. He is supposed to be her guardian. He should not have allowed the three young people, one of them armed but inexperienced, to wander around in the forest where the lion has been sighted. Normally, hunters in the forests of the West wear bright orange jackets or vests marked with strips of reflective tape. They are careful to maintain awareness of the locations of fellow hunters. Even so, every hunting season there are fatal shooting accidents. In *The Mountain Lion* the ranch hands do not hunt during the open season because "there was too much danger of getting shot at by them dudes from Denver." Both Ralph and Uncle Claude are too eager to be the one to kill the lion to take the right precautions. Ralph is to blame for being selfish and taking the shot rather than waiting for Uncle Claude. Molly is at fault for being such a rebel and so self-absorbed she heeds no warnings and goes out wandering around unarmed--she will not even touch a gun--in a forest where a mountain lion has been sighted.

The ending of *The Mountain Lion* has been criticized as too coincidental. Hawthorne's story "Roger Malvin's Burial" has a similar ending, as Reuben Bourne, a lapsed Christian out hunting with his son,

mistakes him for a deer and shoots him accidentally. In his grief and guilt Reuben turns back to God. The coincidence of the boy being in precisely the most symbolic place in the story at the time he is shot is to be understood as due to divine influence, or Providence. The ending of Stafford's next and last novel, *The Catherine Wheel*, set in the village of Hawthorne, also has been criticized as too coincidental, but there too, the accidental death is implied to be a merciful act of God.

## CRITICS

Chester E. Eisinger is the only critic to think the "mountain lion as symbol is pretty much a failure... Miss Stafford's lion does not make its presence felt throughout the book... Nor does it contain a range of meanings or give rise to serried [compacted] implications as the well-wrought symbol should." On the contrary, Mary Ellen Williams Walsh sees that "the mountain lion has formed a leitmotiv in Ralph and Claude's relationship from the time of Claude's trip to Covina for Grandpa Kenyon's funeral, when Claude tells Ralph he has never seen one. At the end of their first summer on the ranch, Claude again tells Ralph he has never seen one. Ralph's fantasy of killing the lion begins that day: 'He wished he would be hiking by himself in the mountains one day and suddenly come upon a lion's den.' The competitive desire to prove his manhood that this fantasy incorporates continues four years later when Ralph learns that Claude has finally sighted a lion. Ralph remains 'enraptured' with the thought of the lion while he and Claude fruitlessly search for her." Half a page at the end of Chapter 4 is devoted to discussing mountain lions. Afterward, "There was always the possibility that they might see a mountain lion." The other critics--except for an illiterate one in *Time* who complained vaguely of "dank symbolism"--accept the lion as a natural and convincing symbol. And the name Goldilocks alone generates a number of thematic implications while adding to realism the dimension of a fairy tale.

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

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

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

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

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

Hulbert recognizes that "Molly was determined to deny the corrupt world of the flesh" and that "her bathing ritual...was religious in spirit." It was a "religious retreat".... "Her regimen was straight from a medieval nunnery"... She "wanted to waste away to spirit. Stafford once again blended religious and psychological perspectives on her character's spiritual, social, and sexual alienation. Molly was the austere novice...the fanatic creative soul and the confused adolescent.... Molly's category of 'fatness,' which applied to the rest of the world--all body and no mind--was...a metaphor with well-established religious and psychological associations. St. Teresa's style and teachings seemed to lurk behind Stafford's portrait of asceticism. *In the ongoing war between the flesh and the spirit, the world and the word, the concrete and the abstract, Stafford, like Teresa, was a committed materialist* as she wielded her pen. The flesh must be acknowledged in all its grossness and weakness." [acknowledged, not preferred] St. Teresa was a Christian mystic, not a "materialist." Nor was Stafford. Here the critic imposes her atheism and reverses the meaning of the novel, denying that Stafford is religious, claiming that she affirms the Flesh over the Spirit. Hulbert is guilty of the "fatness"--lack of soul--that Molly and Stafford detest. [Italics added]

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

Michael Hollister (2021)