

## ANALYSIS

### THE STYLE OF JEAN STAFFORD

(1915-1979)

"They were entirely different books, those two [*Boston Adventure* and *The Mountain Lion*]...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."

Stafford  
*The New York Times Book Review*  
(20 January 1952) 18

"Digression is integral to my style. Parenthesis is my middle name. I have been assiduously at work on my style for a great many years. Style is the morality of language and I look upon myself as a moral writer."

Stafford

"From time to time there appears on the American literary scene an exceptional and original feminine talent. Several over the past few years have exhibited brilliant facets, but Jean Stafford is the first in many years to spread before our eyes a radiant stylistic network of dazzling virtuosity."

Elizabeth Bullock  
*Chicago Sun Book Week*  
(24 September 1944) 1

"Just as the artistic conscience of the twenties was sharpened by the experience of disillusionment, so was the artistic accomplishment of the fifties influenced by the encounter with nihilism...As the reaction against the formalism of the forties gained impetus, literary forms began to open themselves freely to the assaults of reality. They became more jagged and irregular; they admitted chance and resorted to improvisation. Such was the character of the work of...Allen Ginsberg and of the later work of Norman Mailer and Saul Bellow. The rift between formalist writers, usually labeled Academic, and anti-formalist writers, usually termed Beat, was widened by the controversies surrounding the so-called Beat Movement...It was...obvious that the Jamesian ideal of the well-made novel, as prescribed by academic or formalist critics of the forties, had come very close to a dead end. The novel of manners or elegant sensibility found laudable examples in such works as Jean Stafford's *Boston Adventure* (1944)."

Ihab Hassan  
*Literary History of the United States: History*, 3rd edition  
(Macmillan 1946-1963) 1413, 1421

"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 of the actual color of noon and of night. Refinement of evil, denial of drama only make the underlying truth more terrible."

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

"In each of her novels, she has begun with what her art and imagination can really create: a densely detailed, spatially narrated image of a place, some people, and their relationships, dramatizing the whole in a diffused, remembered time, rather than any too tyrannical chronological time."

Robert Phelps  
*New Republic*  
(10 March 1952) 21

"To an unusual degree, there is a significant rapport and reciprocal influence between these characters and their environments, and from this ability of Miss Stafford's to relate aspects of character with the details of scene and situation comes a major strength of these stories, their compelling believability."

Gene Baro  
*New York Herald Tribune*  
(10 May 1953) 3

"In a decade at which we still prefer to look askance, the work of Jean Stafford has rarely failed to call some attention to itself. Her incisive talent, her style so often distinguished, would indeed merit no less. Yet the attention Miss Stafford has won for her work is not all that one should like it to be: it is the kind of attention that takes her limitations for granted, that makes too much of them by accepting them too readily...."

One feels that she has allied herself with a large tradition of the novel, the tradition of Proust and James most markedly, and with a tradition certainly not less native than Willa Cather's or Katherine Anne Porter's, while others--possibly Flaubert and Jane Austen and Dostoyevsky--stand from a distance silently on guard. Large as this tradition may appear (Miss Stafford does not seem to betray the specialness of a Paul Bowles or a Peter Taylor) a rather definite, and perhaps finite, animating center is recognizable in her fiction. The center, I think, is a metaphor of age and childhood, a composite image of change and experience, caught in an ironic, elegiac, and retrospective vision. It is her attachment to this center that defines the expense of her style and the scope of her sensibility....

Two of the best stories in this collection, though they deal with adults rather than children, reveal two different attitudes in which style is transfixed with meaning, captures the acute reality of consciousness: pain and wonder, void and sensation, the magic drama of the mind inscrutably playing the role of object and subject at the same instant of perception, eternally Narcissus, though more in Valery's than in the classical sense. The import of the story--a girl undergoes a critical brain operation--is anything but clinical: it is that of pain made serviceable in the quest for identity: it is that of an outrage committed against what is most secret in man, perhaps the radical betrayal of life itself: 'The pain was a pyramid made of a diamond...'

In point of structure, the stories hold some affinities with a type we commonly associate with the *New Yorker*, though they hold more, when at their best, with the tradition of Joyce and Chekov. The intimate glimpse unresolved, the moment of sudden knowledge, the reversal of a situation, the symbolic crisis, the humor of innocence and perversity, find each some deft application in Jean Stafford's stories. The technique aims, I think, at an effect most nearly presentational: an act is largely apprehended as implication and an event as pure experience. But drama will not suffer itself to be shut out. It is present in the best of these stories under the guise of irony, a kind of irony which, in any particular conflict, is made more valuable by Miss Stafford's attitude of simultaneous criticism towards all characters engaged in that conflict. Such an attitude endows each character with a reality separate from his author's and allows the irony of one point of view to be dramatically modified by that of another--'A Country Love Story,' 'The Maiden,' and 'A Modest Proposal' are examples. The symbolic object, a prominent device in these stories, often serves to heighten the ironic development: the change to which it submits in the character's eyes is a part of the more significant change in the total situation--the sleigh, the two decanters, and the figure of Pan in the three preceding stories submit to this kind of transformation....

The expense of style and the scope of sensibility. It is perhaps time to pick up again a phrase which is intended both as judgment and summary. For to define the quality of Jean Stafford's style and sensibility, to find the scope and the expense of each, is, I believe, to grasp the substance of her achievement in contemporary letters. It is an achievement based on pattern and some internal coherence, reinforced by its distinctive motifs, and developing still towards a larger order....[allegory]

But the pattern of fiction is not of places, it is rather of words and passions. Words and passions, style and sensibility--the terms seem to follow us about....The intent of her style--which is sometimes also its expense--appears to be multiple: erudite in the substantive and the specific, it attempts to lodge her story in reality, to catch what James called 'the relief, the expression, the surface, the substance of the human spectacle,' and to justify Blake when he observed that 'The Eye sees more than the heart knows'; erudite in

irony and persiflage, it wants to criticize what it reveals and describes, to discover the ridiculous and grotesque, to put, as Berenson would say, in every remark some 'metaphysical lining or sting'; and erudite in that inner correspondence of things which reigns in the Romantic world, it aims to weld appearance with reality as Baudelaire did in his 'forests of symbols,' and to render each detail in a manner that would satisfy Elizabeth Bowen when she asks for 'the naturalistic surface, but with a kind of burning.' But in the end it is not the style's erudition in all these respects that sustains it: it is its poetry and control, and its memorable interpretation of experience--as in *The Catherine Wheel*....

The scope of Jean Stafford's sensibility may be viewed through the heightened consciousness of childhood and senescence. It includes the magic apprehension of the first and tragic retrospect of the second, a world too closed and one too open--the realities of the future and of the past converging on the critical present. A sensibility so oriented must, and does, enlist a triple vision: a psychological insight into the internal life, a panoramic view of the changeful past, and an ironic sense of that unremitting tension between the internal and external in the life of man....Hers is a sensibility attuned to the rhythm of change, the arch drama, both in the life of her characters and in their ambient realities....And perhaps the final measure of Jean Stafford's sensibility is that still in growth, it has assumed the labor with a depth of assertiveness little-credited to our new writers."

Ihab Hassan

"Jean Stafford: The Expense of Style and the Scope of Sensibility"

*Western Review* 19 (Spring 1955) 185-203

reprinted *A Study of the Short Fiction* (1996) 109-115

"Words have always fascinated Miss Stafford as they fascinated Emily Dickinson; both could find infinite edification in reading dictionaries...Jean Stafford loves the American landscape and the American past: the Colorado desert, the coast of Maine, the old streets of Boston, Miss Pride picking her way through an ancient graveyard, Katharine Congreve wandering about her father's old mansion. Yet she always sees the relevant modern comment and fits it in exactly. She is very conscious of the deodorant in the drugstore window, the giveaway formality of the *arriviste*, the blue or pink head of the dowager. Her great gift is to be able to place the vulgar detail in the center of the picture without making the picture vulgar, making it, on the contrary, something at once more vivid, faintly humorous, accurate, and at the same time fantastic. What she does to the American scene is to show it as a landscape with a billboard in the center, a billboard that represents the human encroachment on nature, at times funny, at times sordid, at times pathetic, but at all times the reader's and the author's principal concern.

She can find salvation in a detail, a word, a patch of color. Her world is a world of closely observed minutiae. We sometimes have difficulty progressing into a story because our attention is so constantly arrested, and there are times when we may wonder if the parts do not add up to a greater sum than the whole. This may be so in *The Catherine Wheel*, possibly even in *Boston Adventure*, but it is certainly not so in that masterpiece, *The Mountain Lion*.

Miss Stafford has written as much fiction in the form of short stories as in novels, and much of it is of the highest order. Best are her character sketches of grotesques, sometimes hideous in their evil, like Persis Brooks, the Bostonian heiress in 'A Winter's Tale' who marries a German professor and becomes a Catholic bigot while threatening her Jewish lover with exposure to the Nazis if he betrays her (one must turn to Moliere for another such study of hypocrisy); sometimes comical, like Lottie Jump, the little thief in 'Bad Characters'; sometimes a pathetic and terrible combination, like Ramona Dunn, the compulsive eater in 'The Echo and the Nemesis,' whose fantasy is that her lost thin self is a mocking twin.

The themes are apt to be darker than in the novels, and there is a deep concern with pain and with the cruelty that may go into inflicting it. 'The Interior Castle' is an unforgettable picture of the anguish of a nose operation without anesthetic; 'The Home Front' tells of a brute of a father who shoots a lodger's adored cat on the suspicion that it has eaten one of his hateful little son's captured birds; 'In the Zoo' describes how a dog, brutalized by an old fiend of a woman, savagely kills its former owner's pet monkey. And in 'The Maiden' a cultivated German lawyer, happily married to a serenely beautiful woman for twenty years, tells how he had proposed to her after watching the execution of a client.

They are beautiful pieces...but they are not on the same level with the novels. This is simply because the particular aesthetic delight of the moods of the latter takes more time to create than a short story can encompass. It is surprising, too, for if one had read the short stories before reading the novels, one would probably have concluded that Miss Stafford, mistress of the brief effect, would have difficulty sustaining the longer theme. Yet that is precisely her genius. She is first and foremost a novelist."

Louis Auchincloss  
*Pioneers & Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists*  
(U Minnesota 1961, 1964, 1965) 154-55, 159-60

"She particularly excels in the rendering of the minds and speech of children, with a notable grasp of what the *New York Herald Tribune* called their 'recurrent sense of pain and apprehension.' For this reason, perhaps, her most successful book was *The Mountain Lion* (1947), a story of a brother and sister in the years between childhood and adolescence, which was commended for its brilliance of language and imagery as well as its subtlety and understanding. Her first novel, *Boston Adventure* (1944), was praised as a striking and original book which stood up 'amazingly well' to comparison with the work of Marcel Proust (*New Yorker*). *The Catherine Wheel* (1951) was described as a novel of great accomplishment' (in *The New Statesman & Nation*). In her collection of short stories, *Children Are Bored on Sunday* (1953), her gift for precise, evocative prose and impeccable form was evident."

Max J. Herzberg and staff  
*Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962) 1071

"Among contemporary writers Jean Stafford has merited considerable critical attention and received surprisingly little....Reviewers have pointed out her affinities with Proust, James, Austen, and Dostoevski and solemnly agreed that she is not their equal. But since not many novelists are, it is perhaps fairer and certainly more instructive to think of her in relation to such authors as Eudora Welty and Carson McCullers, both of whom have commanded far greater attention than Miss Stafford, if only by virtue of their connection with the currently fashionable South....

Jean Stafford is firmly committed to the ironic vision of the external world of manners and the internal world of psychological process....Like Henry James, Jean Stafford sends her characters to Europe, usually Germany, to have their illusions tested and their innocence shattered in a culture they cannot understand.... These three archetypal figures--the alien, the rebel, and the freak--serve, then, as a focus for exploring the cultural condition of the modern world. That condition is given an ethical dimension through a fusion of psychological, humanistic, and Christian terms. Moral judgment is couched in the language of Freud as well as of the Bible, and the fusion is effected through imagery. The serpent, referred to in crucial scenes of each of the novels, is equally at home in the worlds of theology and depth psychology, and possession by the devil may be construed literally or metaphorically. By seeing the eternal problem of innocence and guilt, good and knowledge, from this threefold perspective, Miss Stafford gives full scope to her ironic vision while enriching and extending her material. The use of terms, concepts, and images drawn from a variety of ideologies is the language and technique of the ironist who seeks to show both the metaphoric, incomplete character of the insights they articulate and their inability to command single-minded belief."

Olga W. Vickery  
"Jean Stafford and the Ironic Vision"  
*South Atlantic Quarterly* 61.4 (1962)

"Her novels suggest that the origins of the new fiction may be found in literary history and that it may be defined in terms of its literary progenitors. She is an authentic daughter of Henry James. To Miss Stafford the new fiction means a combination of the psychological novel and novel of manners in work wrought with careful attention to the craft of writing, fiction in the tradition not only of James but of Edith Wharton too....The new fiction generally...found in Flaubert and Joyce other masters of technique, from whom it learned the lessons of point of view, novelistic structure and dramatic action, stream of consciousness. It found in the work of Hawthorne and Melville models for the symbolic rendering of experience. Beyond technique, that work revealed the sharklike, ubiquitous evil that the writers of the new

fiction found peculiarly appropriate in their time. The new fiction had available, finally, the work of Kafka, the haunted mind from Central Europe, who domesticated the alienated personality...

Jean Stafford is the finest example of the Jamesian tradition in her generation. A true daughter of James, she gathers together various strands in the fictional practice of her contemporaries, writing social satire that is reminiscent of Marquand and exploring the maturation theme as Schorer and Maxwell do. But these superficial resemblances to others do not convey the quality of the exquisite sensibility that she has dedicated to the pursuit of psychological realism in her work, an approach which James showed her the way to and which Freud, as she acknowledges, both deepened and illuminated for her....

This psychological vision, which she so intensely cultivates, is one of her chief aids in drawing the fine distinctions that characterize her work and link her in still another way to James. These distinctions arise out of her concern with the interior consciousness of her characters, where much of the action in her fiction takes place, and issue in the moral relations she establishes among her people....She has had other teachers as well, to join those two, who only appear to be an odd combination. Dostoevski, whom Nietzsche regarded as a great psychologist, makes his presence felt especially in the first part of her first novel, although he has a continuing influence upon her. His special ability to summon his imaginative resources for a scene of excessive emotionalism or of erratic human behavior seemed to present Miss Stafford with a model of power in the writing of fiction...Although she did not mention Proust in a list of favorite authors she once compiled, her manipulation of time and her sharp awareness of the presentness of the past remind us readily of this writer. And finally she had drawn upon Jane Austen's accomplishments in the drawing room. She gives a more muscular and less disciplined account of life there than Miss Austen does, but it is nonetheless laced with the sharpness of wit and depth of perception that so consistently marks the writings of Jane Austen....

The uses to which she puts her mixed and celebrated literary heritage are very much her own. The prevailing pattern in her fiction is to exploit a conflict in contrasting spheres of experience; her stories emerge as the fruits of the tension thus generated and of the differences thus exposed. The process is not a dialectic, because Miss Stafford is not intent upon a synthesis. But this is not to say that her fiction is static. The movement, the development, in her stories take place independently within each sphere, and sometimes simultaneously. This pattern of conflict prevails in two major areas in her work: it may take the form of a clash of cultures, or it may be seen in the division of the self represented by the conscious and the unconscious levels of human experience....Often, as she manages the conflicts that arise from differing cultural allegiances and moral standards, she is at the same time slipping back and forth between the conscious and unconscious minds of her characters to record in depth the impact of these conflicts. It is the carefully traced and felt intricacies of this complicated procedure that give the depth and intensity to Miss Stafford's fiction....

The stories in this volume have the brilliant surface sheen that we have come to expect from the fiction that appears in the *New Yorker*, where many of them were first published. But they are not superficial. Built around the clash of two worlds, the conscious and the unconscious as well as national or regional polarities, they reach, especially in their psychological penetration, far down into the recesses of the human personality....Miss Stafford's work is the expression, in the forties, of that continuing tradition in which the moral life of the novel has centered in its symbolism. I have not been able to speak of her fiction without reference to Hawthorne and Melville. Her achievement has been to carry on what they started. Finding in James a similar morality, she might have passed him over. But he offered her a different manner, and this was decisive. It is what makes her a writer of the new fiction, a writer for whom style always counts, and counts for more than it did with Hawthorne or with Melville.

It is her style that is the enabling instrument in the fabrication of her irony and her symbols, that bares to us the truth of her psychological insights. She shows us, then, how the new fiction is in reality a continuation of a certain line in American fiction and has its roots in a past which still nourishes it. This is a different line from the one to which Capote and Bowles are attached, the one that runs from Poe. Seen together, the two lines place the new fiction in a proper perspective, confirm its Americanism, and demonstrate that its newness lies in making the old current."

Chester E. Eisinger

"The New Fiction Defined: The Triumph of Art"  
*Fiction of the Forties*  
(U Chicago 1963) 231-33, 294-307

"These stories are built by a master's hand; no detail is wasted, no irrelevance introduced. Yet they are visually rich and fast of action. At heart Miss Stafford is a psychologist, interested to trace the influence of one mind upon another, or to show the power of an idea growing in the mind."

Guy Davenport  
"Tough Characters, Solid Novels"  
Review of *Bad Characters* (1965)  
*National Review* (26 January 1965)

"The perceptions of human experience, relative to the person who perceives it and to the surroundings, the moment, and the mood, may well be applied to the fiction of Jean Stafford, who, like Proust, has the remarkable tendencies to stop time and in time's stoppage to create memorable characters. For both novelists, the ultimate units of reality are events, each of which is unique and can never occur again. In the flux of the universe, these events can only form similar patterns....Her prose style is remarkable and withstands any comparison with Henry James's prose; her grasp of situation is often flawless; and her characters, even when unimportant, emerge fully-drawn."

Jerome Mazzaro  
"Remembrance of Things Proust"  
Review of *Bad Characters* (1965)  
*Shenandoah* 16 (Summer 1965) 114-17

"Above all, she is a stylist; her sentences, abstracted from the whole, are beautiful in a way that has almost become passe....Her brooding words hold no brief for the world as it is, but neither do they indicate a hope for improvement. There is both acceptance and regret of its imperfections, with the added corollary that it is the business of the artist to depict them."

Mary Hegel Wagner  
Review of *The Collected Stories of Jean Stafford*  
*America* (April 1969) 426-27

"In some writers the style is a leading character, as in Jean Stafford's elaborately written *Boston Adventure* and those brilliantly unifying stories whose tightness of structure is at such variance with the usual theme of a young woman's inability to sustain relationships."

Alfred Kazin  
*Bright Book of Life: American Novelists and Story Tellers from Hemingway to Mailer*  
(Little Brown, 1971) 174-75

"Marked speech frustration experienced by patient along with marked inclination to search...for polysyllabic word rather than common colloquial word which is easily within patient's linguistic grasp."

Sonia Keahon, speech therapist for aphasia  
Suffolk County Department of Health Services (May 1977)

"Certainly the stories are exquisitely wrought, sensitively imagined: like glass flowers, or arabesques, or the 'interior castle' of Pansy Vanneman's brain ('Not only the brain as the seat of consciousness, but the physical organ itself which she envisioned, romantically, now as a jewel, now as a flower, now as a light in a glass, now as an envelope of rosy vellum containing other envelopes, one within the other, diminishing infinitely'). Dramatic tension is subdued, in a sense forced underground, so that while narrative conflict between individuals is rare, an extraordinary pressure is built up within the protagonists, who appear trapped inside their own heads...

This is an art that curves inward toward the meditative, the reminiscent, given life not by bold gestures or strokes but by a patient accumulation of sharply-observed impressions; the wealth of a poet's eye, or a painter's....One cannot quarrel with the prevailing critical assessment that finds Jean Stafford's art 'poised,'

'highly reflective,' 'fastidious,' 'feminine.' And certainly she worked within the dominant fictional mode or consciousness of her time--there are no experimental tales in the *Collected Stories* (which cover the years 1944-1969); no explorations beyond the Jamesian-Chekhovian-Joycean model in which most 'literary' writers wrote during those years. (Joycean, that is, in terms of *Dubliners* alone.) Each story remains within the consciousness of an intelligent and highly sensitive observer who assembles details from the present and summons forth details from the past, usually with a graceful, urbane irony; each story moves toward an 'epiphany,' usually in the very last sentence. There is very little that remains mysterious in Stafford's stories, little that is perplexing or disturbing in terms of technique, structure, or style....

When one considers the finest of the stories...one is impressed by the rigorous structure that underlies the 'beautiful' prose. And there are of course sudden jarring images, sudden reversals, that brilliantly challenge the sensibility evoked by the fiction's near-constant authorial voice--which is, for the most part, reflective, obsessively analytical, compulsively self-conscious....Subdued and analytical and beautifully-constructed stories, then, in what might be called a 'conventional' fictional mode: but they are not to be too quickly grasped, too glibly assessed. The 'interior castle' of Stafford's art is one which will repay close scrutiny for its meanings open slowly outward, and each phrase, each word, is deliberately chosen."

Joyce Carol Oates  
"The Interior Castle: The Art of Jean Stafford's Short Fiction"  
*Shenandoah* 30 (Winter 1979) 61-64

"I begin with a passage obviously intended to be dense, rich, and evocative, carefully made, self-conscious, but solidly of the late modernist period, unmistakably before the work of the postrealist, postmodernist writers who are my subject. Jean Stafford's 'A Country Love Story' begins in this way: 'An antique sleigh stood in the yard.'"

Philip Stevick  
*Alternative Pleasures: Postrealist Fiction and Tradition*  
(U Illinois 1981)

"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. It is included 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."

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

"Stafford inherited and merged in her work the Gothic symbolic tradition of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville; the social criticism and novel of manners of Henry James and Edith Wharton; and the comic frontier tradition of Mark Twain and the early local colorists....Jean Stafford is interested in discovery, in the revelatory moment, in the burgeoning of awareness."

Maureen Ryan  
*Innocence and Estrangement in the Fiction of Jean Stafford*  
(Louisiana State U 1987)

"Stafford's short fiction, most of which was assembled in various volumes during the Fifties and Sixties and brought together in the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Collected Stories* (1969), represents one of the finest moments of the American short story....Witty, luminous, and impeccably crafted...Extremely long sentences abound, and the vocabulary is unusually rich: a single page of the story 'A Modest Proposal' contains the words *concupiscently*, *nares*, *sybarite*, *mufti*, and *cereus*. Yet Stafford succeeds in fashioning a lucid, well-upholstered style into which such words fit very gracefully...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 any a fiction writer associated with that illustrious magazine, Stafford places a good deal less emphasis on

plot than on character...Her sarcasms toward a character sometimes overwhelm her sympathy...To compare [her stories] to the short fiction of John Cheever--and especially to that of Eudora Welty and Peter Taylor--is to notice, on Stafford's part, a relative want of sympathy and narrowness of range....Yet the very fact that one is compelled to speak of Stafford in the company of such masters is to acknowledge that her achievement in the genre is of a very high order indeed."

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

"[The] encounter with Stafford's two short stories set in Maine, 'A Country Love Story' and 'Polite Conversation,' introduced me to a writer whose command of English prose--and of the human heart--left me dumb with admiration...It was odd that I had never read Stafford before, for she had lived from age ten to age twenty-one in Boulder, Colorado, the town in which I had grown up. In part because of her caustic ambivalence toward the West, the best writer ever to come out of Colorado is not honored in her own land....

Her style, which so many other writers envied, is sui generis, with its exquisitely qualified, complexly subordinated sentences spiced so oddly with the vivid colloquialisms she scavenged from her childhood. If in her weakest fictions the style seems to be an end in itself, in her best work all the technical skill serves, in Wolcott's phrase, 'to crack the vault of our most protected feelings'....Archie Ogden [editor, *Atlantic Monthly Press*] had read the Stephens [college] novel with great care. To his colleagues he reported that Stafford had written 'a perfectly good book.' He went on to praise her stylistic virtues: 'Here is a young author who can handle the English language as a skilled carpenter handles a chisel....A situation is summed up in a line of conversation; a character delineated by one fatuous remark that tells the whole story'....

It is not surprising that the writing came painfully and slowly, for Stafford was in the throes of the most important artistic advance of her career. She was indeed 'sick of the way I write.' After the middle of 1945 the stylized, old-fashioned, wan-humored prose of *Boston Adventure* was banished for good. In its place came a supple, lively style, full of concrete diction and startling colloquial juxtapositions, in its own way as well wrought syntactically as the earlier Proustian cadences but with all the labor of the craft disguised.... To tell this story [*The Mountain Lion*], Stafford shucked off the mannerisms of *Boston Adventure* and discovered a tone and diction almost entirely new for her....

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....'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'....

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....

It seems probable...that in general Stafford composed directly on the typewriter. More surprisingly, Stafford's rough copy almost never shows signs of any extensive revision. Most writers scratch out and scribble over wantonly, but when Stafford rejected a paragraph or even a sentence, she seems to have



retyped the whole page from the top. Because she sometimes kept her variant sheets, we occasionally find as many as twenty discrete typed versions of the same page, some differing from others by only a word or a phrase. Her drafts are in this sense exceptionally 'clean.' It seems likely that just as in conversation Stafford 'always planned her way from the beginning of a sentence to the end,' so in her written prose all the work of constructing was done in her head."

David Roberts

*Jean Stafford: A Biography*

(Little, Brown 1988) ix-x, 134, 149, 205, 227-28, 233, 262-63, 417-18

"Jean Stafford was a novelist and short-story writer of considerable distinction...At age six, Jean began to write poems and stories, and she completed her first novel by age eleven. She also began to read the dictionary for pleasure and, even as a child, displayed an incredible command of language....Stafford's first novel, published in 1944, was a best-seller and was praised by reviewers for its traces of Marcel Proust and Henry James....In 1947, Stafford's masterpiece second novel was published. Unlike the first, *The Mountain Lion* was written out of her own experience in the West rather than her imaginings of an East she hardly knew. It explored this geographical dichotomy as well as the complexities of childhood, themes that appear in many of Stafford's stories. The style was also more naturally her own in this work, reflecting her ability to find the most appropriate word for her creative expression, no matter how unusual it might be.

Critics have suggested that Stafford's ironic vision allows for no clear-cut perspective on her work. Her preoccupation with language is reflected in a rich and complex style, rooted both in the formal, rhetorical tradition of Henry James and the more informal and colloquial of Mark Twain, and she has been compared with both. Stafford has been praised for her nonsentimental approach but perhaps more often criticized for emotional detachment from her characters, who are seldom able to resolve feelings of alienation. Ironically, this same detachment seems to suggest that the objective, intellectual viewpoint is the only way for individuals to rise above the inevitable difficulties of life to experience realization or knowledge, however short-lived."

William S. Haney II

*Cyclopedia of World Authors II*, Vol. IV

ed. Frank N. Magill

(Salem 1989) 1403-05

"[Stafford sent] a draft of a long short story to Caroline Gordon [1941]....Twenty years older than Stafford, Gordon liked to play the role of mentor to younger writers. She would soon promote the writing career of one of Stafford's contemporaries, the extraordinary writer from Milledgeville, Georgia, Flannery O'Connor. In a letter to Stafford, Gordon first praised the story Stafford had sent her....Gordon then went on to discuss specific matters of diction and form. Critical of Stafford's predilection for using long words when shorter ones would suffice, she said, 'I balk at "dulcified." I think I have reason for balking. A high-falutin word like that ought to be *forced* from you. It isn't here, it's rather poured on from the top.' In view of the fact that Stafford's use of 'high-falutin' words would become a noteworthy characteristic of her writing style, it is obvious that this bit of advice was later discounted by her. Another of Gordon's suggestions was that the dialogue should sound less artificial and more 'like talk--a sentence can ring in the memory'....

Robert Giroux...said she brought to American letters what he considered potentially the greatest new talent in a decade,' and he mentioned that the style of her new novel would be a fusion of the baroque style of *Boston Adventure* and the sparer style of *The Mountain Lion*....Why, I wondered, was her fiction far less renowned than that of some other women writers of her generation, despite the fact that she had been awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1970?...In the forties, when her first two novels, *Boston Adventure* (1944) and *The Mountain Lion* (1947), were published, she was considered one of this country's most promising fiction writers. In the fifties she published a well-received third novel, *The Catherine Wheel* (1952), and she regularly contributed short stories to the *New Yorker*. Yet only recently has Jean Stafford's work begun to receive the sustained critical attention it merits....Until recently much of her fiction was out of print....Adept at writing in both the elegant manner of a Wharton or a James and in the colloquial style of a Twain or a Welty, she sensitively and poignantly portrays the entrapment, alienation, and despair of her characters in beautifully crafted works notable for their subtlety, their wit, and their irony."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman  
*Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart*  
(U Texas 1990) ix-xi, 90-91, 157, 190, 231, 293-94, 300-03, 310

"Under her father's influence, she developed the taste for the incongruous textures of language that became a hallmark of her virtuosic style. She learned some Latin, read his favorite highbrow and lowbrow authors, and pored over the dictionary, cultivating a vocabulary as exotic and as colloquial as his. By high school she had also cultivated a tone of arch irony and a prose of strident individualism rather like her father's. (Even in elementary school, she apparently took pains to stand out, and John Stafford was the inspiration)...Writing about her recent past--her college and German adventures--she had found herself struggling unsuccessfully to overcome a solipsistic self-loathing....

That division [oppositions in irony] was reflected in Stafford's style as well as her themes. In the course of the story ["The Interior Castle"], her prose underwent a striking transformation. She opened in an abstract, discursive, rather mandarin style, but by the second section, she had shifted to concrete, imagistic language and was inclining toward a colloquial tone. It was an evolution entailed by the shifting focus of her subject matter. The first section, as the patient lay undisturbed in her bed, was introspective and meditative. The second, when she was ambushed by the doctor and his knives, was interactive and dramatic. But the shift was itself also part of the subject matter, for in probing the place of the self in the world, the story also probed the role of language in linking the mind to physical and metaphysical reality.

The Latinate discursiveness of the first half ["The Interior Castle"] conveyed a *mistrust of metaphor* [?], an insecurity about how to relate the subjective and the objective, the abstract and the concrete [Give an example. Italics added.] The ungainly grasping after, yet holding back from, analogy or allegory often resulted in heavy obscurity--the 'words, merely' problem that was all too familiar to Stafford: 'The steadfast plant was like an allegory of her body in which comfort followed pain in progression syncopated with retrogression. [It is the critic, not the author, who is obscure, ungainly and grasping, because she discerns *none* of Stafford's allegories.] The sameness of her occupation was, indeed, as unrelieved as the winter sky, yet she was not so mournful as the scene, nor was the protracted interruption of her activity suitable to arbitrary categorizing.'

Stafford's discovery in the second half of the story was an increasing confidence in concrete detail as a vehicle for metaphysical meaning. She had set herself perhaps the most difficult challenge of all in the use of metaphor: to give expression to pain--that is, to find for the most subjective of experiences some objective form. It meant venturing out onto the poetic verges of metaphor, as she did in her geometric allusions. As important, it meant creating a more solid, prosaic, context to set off those poetic excursions. Stafford was inspired to a mixture of the mandarin and the mundane, of elevated and lowly diction and imagery, which came to be a staple of her style....In 'The Interior Castle' Stafford took the advice that Evelyn Scott had offered years earlier, dispensing with much of the Latinate abstraction and refining the concrete description of the protagonist's ordeal. It was the author of *The Mountain Lion* at work, letting symbols emerge naturally from specifics, making an abstraction like pain speak through physical details; with unerring intensity, she worked metaphor and simile hard....

Stafford may well have conceived of [*In the Snowfall*] as the fulfillment of the aim she announced in an interview not long after it was published. Her ultimate goal, she said, was to 'fuse the two manners' of her first two very different novels--that is, to blend the 'leisurely...embroidered, contemplative, old-fashioned' style of *Boston Adventure* and the more symbolic approach of *The Mountain Lion* [Stafford is *consistently* symbolic]. On the surface she did just that. Stafford's serpentine introspective prose, which had become even more elaborate than in her first novel, wound its way to a symbolic ending, which was even more freighted than Molly's end in *The Mountain Lion*. The refined diction of the elegant Katharine, more arch than the Bostonian argot, was juxtaposed with the almost caricatured rustic talk of the local folk....

Her strategy in the Colorado stories is a stark contrast to *The Catherine Wheel*. Where her baroque manner predominated in that book in almost exaggerated form [example?], she drew on her *Mountain Lion* style for the central group of stories she wrote during the 1950s....Her virtuosic style was ideally suited to capturing the nuances of speech, and in these stories she found a way to make language itself one of her

main subjects, without succumbing to mere surface preoccupation with style....[Give us an example of a "mere surface preoccupation with style."] By then ["Maggie Meriwether's Rich Experience," 1955] Stafford had already shown how to tell the tale with a display of her stylistic repertoire. She mocked the varieties of vacuous chatter, relishing the occasion for exotic words, serpentine sentences (she opened with a ten-line extravaganza, colloquialisms, and daringly manipulated similes and metaphors....Twain's spirit and his satiric, colloquial American voice preside over her juvenilia, the short stories about Adams, Colorado, of her middle career, and some of the journalism of her last years....

To demonstrate a new stylistic austerity, she sent on some fragments from a story about a cat run over by a car: 'Well, I don't know if you can get any idea about what it's about, but that's the style I'm using which in comparison to the rest of my stuff is as pristine as Hemingway'....I realize that...words, merely, unsupported by thought or action are utterly dull....It is funny and insofar as possible I am going to keep it on the comic side as I feel that is healthier and probably a more effective vehicle for satire....She had been reading Joyce almost obsessively, and this influence lay behind some of the 'genuine merits' of the manuscript as well as its excesses [unpublished *Autumn Festival*]. Stafford was still readily carried away by abstract 'words merely,' seduced by their sound as much as by their meaning, but she was also striving for greater concreteness and often attaining it.

Working her way out of the old loose introspection, she displayed a new, if sometimes less-than-nuanced, concern for form....I worked 7 months on the suicide story and it, I was proud of, but although the style was sustained and the rhythm carried, it lacked, still, much precision and all imagery. But the present one--you remember my queer room daydream--is almost successful, though it is awkward. It is obscure, allegorical, and the prose is loaded'...

By setting up a doppelganger relation between Sonie and Hope--two black sheep, one the insider, one the outsider--she found a way to have both drama and detachment in her story's plot and in her protagonist's psyche. It was a structural and thematic strategy she used again in her fiction after *Boston Adventure*...The successful balance between carefully structured patterns of symbolic imagery and density of specific detail was doubtless the product of Stafford's endless revisions, begun under the auspices of the Tates....In 'The Darkening Moon,' Stafford turned to a dramatically different terrain and style, harbingers of the texture of *The Mountain Lion* and of Stafford's subsequent Colorado stories....Stafford's progress...had been steadily away from the 'words, merely' difficulty of her early unpublished efforts. In her stories of 1944 and 1945, which introduced her major protagonists--disoriented old women, lonely young women, sensitive but stalwart children, uneasy expatriates--she was taming some of the Proustian ornamentation that had cluttered parts of *Boston Adventure*. [Example of "clutter"? Italics added.] She was perfecting her gift for the well-selected detail with symbolic resonance, and she was working at mixing more colloquial cadences into her Jamesian style...

Though she emphasized the contrast, Stafford recognized that her second novel did not represent 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, 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 she had favored in *Boston Adventure*. She was 'less inclined...towards some of those baroque effects that we talked about in connection with the first book.'...'Digression is integral to my style. Parenthesis is my middle name,' she lectured Shana Alexander at *McCall's*. 'I have been assiduously at work on my style for a great many years. Style is the morality of language, and I look upon myself as a moral writer.'...

[*The Mountain Lion*] is a 'double bildungsroman'--the intertwining 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 was fulfilled--by her own marginal status....Doubling was the principle of the entire, studiously symmetrical novel--which itself was a curiously inverted reflection of her first novel....[In "The Echo and the Nemesis"] 'Sue and Ramona are mirror images, through a glass darkly, indeed very darkly, a dual person and so of course also one'....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...The novel traced their troubled shuttling between two poles--between their tame California home and the Colorado ranch....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....

Toward the end of 1947, Stafford began her decade long close association with *The New Yorker*, a world away in sensibility from the *Partisan Review* and the quarterlies....Her specialty became meticulously crafted short stories, renowned for their stylistic and structural polish, for their mercilessly ironic, detached treatment of states of alienation. She was moving further and further from *Boston Adventure*, her sprawling debut....*A Winter's Tale* is high historical drama. Yet the prose was in the cool style of Stafford's maturity... It showed how she had modulated the paired themes of the sadistic tyrant and the masochistic outsider, desperate to belong and seeking in vain for real love....[In drafts of the unpublished *The State of Grace*] Stafford let loose with language that mixed the baroque convolution of her earliest style and the intense, symbolic concreteness of her later prose....

Stafford relished incongruity in these stories, turning it into comedy that was mirthful precisely because it wasn't reflexive. She had the distance to make the most of juxtapositions and tensions that had once seemed threatening. And in writing about language, she was in a sense commenting on her own stylistic experiments, her effort to intermix the polished and the colloquial, to avoid precious refinement in the first and facile contrivance in the second. Her stories reflect an appreciation of the ways in which style can betray its supposed masters. Pretensions don't last long: appearances can be deceiving, but the way people sound tells more than they may want others to know--or than others may want to know....

She continued to write about language and commented intermittently on the women's movement. (Her most celebrated pieces were a little diatribe against the use of 'Ms.' for the *New York Times* and an article for the same paper entitled 'Women as Chattels, Men as Chumps,' in which she declared that 'the fustian and the hollering...the strident jokelessness attendant on the movement are woefully unpropitious because they obfuscate a good many justified grievances,' such as unequal pay.)....

During the 1950s she wrote one more novel, *The Catherine Wheel*, a circumscribed exploration of mental and emotional isolation, but her specialty became meticulously crafted short stories, renowned for their stylistic and structural polish, for their mercilessly ironic, detached treatment of states of alienation. She was moving further and further from *Boston Adventure*, her sprawling debut. By the last third of the 1950s, she had encountered a block and all but stopped publishing fiction."

Ann Hulbert

*The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford*  
(Knopf 1992) 13, 19, 59, 96-7, 118-19, 128-9, 140, 156, 163, 190, 197-8, 200-01,  
240, 251, 276, 286, 293, 296, 303-04, 333, 361, 365-66

"When one settles down to read Jean Stafford's novels and stories one advisedly has a dictionary--a big dictionary--close by. For she was a literary artist in the most literal sense. Her most profound and her wittiest effects alike are got through words, themselves. And her remarkable diction, her complicated syntax, her elaborate sentence structure all spilled over into her conversation (if it wasn't, as a matter of fact, the other way around) and were to some degree responsible for making her conversation the delight it was. In life--as a conversationalist, that is--she sometimes seemed at once the most articulate and the most inarticulate person one can imagine.

She seemed to talk, as she sometimes seemed to write (in retrospect it is often difficult to distinguish between the two)--seemed to talk or write round and round a subject, dazzling you with her diction; but finally when she stopped (and it was hard to stop her) you realized that somewhere back there in her discourse she had penetrated the tough integument (as she might have put it) and touched the core of truth

she had been probing for, had done so without your ever having realized that she had got to the heart of the matter. It was as though she wished always to conceal anything in her narrative so vulgar as mere purposefulness--her narrative spoken or written. Sometimes it was only in retrospect, and long after the conversation or the story was finished, that you saw what she had been saying. And somehow her statement was the more effective because of that."

Peter Taylor

*Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction*  
ed. Mary Ann Wilson (Twayne 1996) 153-54

"Without exception, critics praised Stafford's searingly honest portrayals of human nature, her deft and sensitive use of language, her incisive wit....Like her early mentor James Joyce--and his literary descendants the New Critics--Stafford came to believe in the value and necessity of form as a way of harnessing inchoate experience. Stafford criticism consistently notes that she imposes on her fiction an order and structure--a timelessness--gratefully at odds with her shifting fortunes. Her own troubled life perhaps strengthened her belief in another major tenet of New Criticism, the impersonality of the writer. Having been cautioned by Ford Madox Ford about the dangers of writing too close to life, Stafford would struggle with this autobiographical impulse throughout her life....Clearly, her best stories evidence an ironic detachment from the merely personal and contain instead a healthy dose of the aesthetic distance the New Critics counseled....

It is perhaps fitting that the magazine the young Jean Stafford wrote so earnestly about in her journals as the epitome of eastern sophistication should, by 1978, have published 22 of her short stories....What has since become known as the typical *New Yorker* story: one that de-emphasizes plot and focuses instead on nuances of character and situation....But the range and variety of writers and stories appearing in the magazine, as well as the variety of writers and stories appearing in the magazine, as well as the variety of Stafford's *New Yorker* pieces, belie such a formulaic label. As Stafford would attest...there is not such thing as a *New Yorker* story. She went on to enumerate such diverse writers as John Cheever, J. D. Salinger, Isaac Singer, William Faulkner, and Flannery O'Connor--maintaining that such distinctive voices make it ridiculous to speak of a generic *New Yorker* story."

Mary Ann Wilson

*Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction*  
(Twayne 1996) 3-7, 107-08

In her first novel *Boston Adventure* the versatile Jean Stafford blended all six of the primary aesthetic *modes* of literary American fiction, which emerged historically in the following order: symbolic allegory (as distinct from sign allegory), Realism, Naturalism, Impressionism, Expressionism, and Modernism. She adapted and blended her *styles* as appropriate to each *mode* and each narrative situation. Often satiric, her usual tone is either erudite, with apt thematic allusions to literature and writers and history as in *Boston Adventure*, or lowbrow, colloquial and comic, as in "Bad Characters" and "A Reading Problem." One of her most consistent characteristics of style is irony, the recognition of contradictions.

The first aesthetic mode is the oldest, beginning with pagan myths, the Bible and the parables of Jesus. Symbolic allegory--a pattern of correspondences between *images* and *ideas*--is a tradition especially in Christianity, as represented by Dante, Spenser, Bunyan, and Hawthorne. Symbolic allegory is the most comprehensive of the six modes because it determines the structure, plot, and vision of a narrative. It expresses the dualism of reality--the material in relation to the spiritual, the concrete to the abstract. Yes, Stafford is a great stylist, but she is even more exceptional as an allegorist. Only an elite minority of American novelists have been able to achieve a realistic allegory of symbols, the most difficult form of fiction to write. All three of Stafford's novels and a number of her short stories, most obviously "The Interior Castle," are realistic Christian allegories of salvation. Yet no critic has explicated these allegories, despite the obvious evidence of allegory, such as characters named Miss Pride, Hope, Dr. [St.] Nicholas, Pansy, and Magdalene; despite the influence of the Christian mystic St. Teresa on "The Interior Castle," despite the Christian title and parallelism in *The Catherine Wheel*, and despite its setting named after Hawthorne the Christian allegorist.

Feminists took over English departments beginning in 1970 and replaced literary merit with identity and political beliefs as criteria of value, devaluing the best women writers. As political advocates rather than objective scholars, Feminist critics are subjective, literal-minded, and biased. Many ignore, deny, belittle, misread or simply do not see the spiritual dimension of literature. As atheists, they do not want to acknowledge the existence of a male God. All the protagonists of Stafford's three novels have a "devil" inside them and all seek redemption: Sonie Marburg sees herself following Jesus walking on water at the end of the first section of chapter one of *Boston Adventure* and eventually decides to start attending church; *The Mountain Lion* evokes Jesus as the returning Lion of Judea; and *The Catherine Wheel* ironically parallels Katharine Congreve to the Christian saint and ends with Andrew's vision of her ascending to "glory" in Heaven. Pansy is on the path to God in "The Interior Castle" when her brain discovers her soul in a vision of the spiritual dimension. Stafford's fiction is like a mountain range with its peaks enveloped in clouds of false interpretation that have made them invisible to critics.

Stafford grounds her spiritual fiction in Realism and is known for her brilliance in the selection of realistic details that bring her narratives to life--clothes, furniture, landscape, food, weather, mannerisms, gestures, and authentic dialogue. She excels at believability. The very wide spectrum of Realistic styles is represented by opposites, Mark Twain at the colloquial extreme and Henry James at the cultured extreme. Critics refer to their influence on Stafford's differing styles as "Twainian," especially in the story "Bad Characters," and "Jamesian," especially in *Boston Adventure*. Her frequent digressions and uses of memory are "Proustian." In her style of commonplace deceptively simple Realism she also resembles Chekhov. At her most complex she shows the influence of Joyce. If critics discerned the allegorical dimension of her major fictions, they would also refer to her "Hawthornean" style. Through artful narration Stafford is able to be concrete in imagery, abstract in allegories and subjective in thoughts, fantasies, dreams, visions, and incongruous similes, while sustaining the illusion of objective reality.

The Realist movement in the late nineteenth century gave rise to two other modes, Naturalism and Impressionism, both involving techniques intended to increase Realism. Naturalism is deterministic, scientific, and atheist, denying free will. It was preceded by deterministic atheist Gothicism in the late 18th century, the mode that mostly devolved into the horror genre. Stafford is most obviously Naturalistic in the first chapters of *Boston Adventure* where she renders the squalid poverty, misery, degradation, and apparent entrapment of young Sonie Marburg. Throughout her work she is Naturalistic in comparing humans to animals, as in "giggling old geezers who looked like a flock of turkey gobblers" and "She shrieked again, quivering pitifully like a baffled mole dislodged from his safe tunnel." The signature metaphor of Naturalism is life as a trap. Sonie says she "had been caught in a trap." Stafford is also Naturalistic in her fiction when drawing upon her own experiences of being trapped--by her family, by her marriage to Robert Lowell, by her horrendous facial injury, by her illnesses, and by her alcoholism.

There is Gothic horror in Stafford, but it is often possible to transcend and escape it, as Sonie does. Grotesques like her parents are metaphors of spiritual deformity, as in Hawthorne and O'Connor. In the context of Stafford's whole canon, especially in the allegories, her religious faith is consistently implied. Allegorical readings demonstrate that some events in Stafford that seem to be Gothic, matters of chance that make life seem meaningless--such as Ralph shooting Molly and Katharine Congreve catching fire--are actually mercy killings by God that prove life is meaningful. Stafford's characters such as Sonie, Pansy and Katharine Congreve transcend their traps through religious faith and their own efforts, while others are victims trapped by atheism or lack of the capacity or opportunity for love, such as the old women in "Life Is No Abyss," "The Hope Chest," and "I Love Someone." Stafford is also the opposite of the Naturalists in being a talented stylist, whereas the Naturalists as represented in particular by Norris and Dreiser are known for clumsy and redundant prose.

Impressionism enhances Realism with greater vividness, economy, psychological accuracy, and poetic language--especially similes--increasing visual imagery, movement, color, and authenticity of speech. The pioneers of Impressionism in 19th century American fiction were Stephen Crane, Henry James, Wharton, and Chopin. Later came Fitzgerald, Porter, Gordon, O'Connor, Hardwick, and Stafford, as here: "As independent as a hog on ice"; "As spiritless as city light"; "The warm tears welled up as freely as water from a drinking fountain"; "His smile went off like a street light"; "He paused once to point his spoon at Mme. Floquet as if he were going to shoot her"; "The chauffeur shot past me like someone on a surfboard";

"My heart was plucked quickly like a taut gut." Similes became proof of talent on campuses around the country, where students in fiction writing classes compete for status by producing the greatest number of similes and metaphors. Impressionism is meant to intensify the consensus view of reality, whereas Expressionism deliberately distorts the consensus view of reality in order to dramatize individual subjectivity. Expressionism is the opposite of Realism, yet paradoxically it is used to evoke reality more comprehensively. "The Interior Castle," rendering the consciousness of a horribly injured patient confined to a hospital bed, is Stafford's masterpiece of Expressionism, to be set alongside the major American examples of this mode by Eugene O'Neill and Faulkner.

Modernism in the early 20th century evolved from Realism, Impressionism and the symbolic allegories of Hawthorne and Melville. It was the culmination of aesthetic developments from the late 19th century and in fiction a synthesis of all the primary aesthetic modes. Expressionism was largely invented by the Modernists, whose work is often easy to identify as Modernist by the Expressionist technique called stream-of-consciousness. As a rule, Expressionism is disliked by common readers because they do not understand it. And because most Expressionism in the 20th century is a cover for mediocre or bad art. Modernists hope to be understood but they give a higher priority to the values of art, and to appreciation by educated readers and fellow artists, than to the limitations of common readers, including most critics since 1970. This is perhaps Stafford's most extreme Expressionist image: "The doctor wiped his shining lips with a purple handkerchief...as if he had been eating the face before him and its flavor had been so delicious that in his gorging he had been too enthusiastic to mind his lips."

Stafford does not use stream-of-consciousness in the way of Joyce or Faulkner, she retains conventions of grammar, but she is occasionally a challenge to the common reader in her erudite diction. However, her unfamiliar words are infrequent and much less disruptive to a reader than stream-of-consciousness without grammar. Her obscure words are more precise to her than alternatives and they elevate the intellectual tone of her narrative, words such as *entrepot*, *integument*, *embonpoint*, *ptarmigan*, *siccative*, *cerulean*, *athelings*, and *scarabeus*. In *Boston Adventure* the occasional obscure words reflect the increased maturity and culture of Sonie as narrator. Cormac McCarthy and Thomas Pynchon have admitted that they spent a lot of time searching in manuals and dictionaries for obscure words and technical terms that would add to the realistic authenticity of their fictions. Stafford seems to have known the obscure words already, in particular unfamiliar names of fabrics and furniture and plants. The reader need not know them nor even need to look them up in a dictionary because ignorance of such words does not reduce understanding of the narrative. Jean Stafford may have had the largest vocabulary of any fiction writer in American literature.

Michael Hollister (2021)