

ANALYSIS

A Winter's Tale (1954)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

'This novella is narrated by Fanny, who at thirty-seven is married, apparently happily, to a lawyer in Cambridge and has a son and a daughter with whom she is apparently on good terms. The story she tells, however, is not the story of her marriage and family. It is the story of the winter of the year she spent in Heidelberg as a student. That time is recalled to her by her finding a jacket with a seashell in the pocket, both of which had been given to her by a young man she had loved in Heidelberg. For several days, Fanny sits in the late afternoon, drinking whiskey and removing 'the winding sheets from the dead days.'

The story Fanny tells is Stafford's final version of the unpublished Gretchen Marburg novel. In it Fanny replaces Gretchen as the young American woman who falls in love with one of Hitler's aviators. Fanny's love for Max Rossler is innocent and apolitical, unlike Gretchen's for Rheinhard Rossler. Fanny, an Irish Catholic Bostonian, has been sent to Heidelberg by her father to study German, while he spends his own sabbatical in Paris. Fanny's mother had died at her birth and she is 'kithless except for Daddy and the spinster aunts and lonely all through childhood.' Consequently, she goes to Heidelberg intending to have a love affair: 'I did not mean to love, I meant to be 'in love' and to be sorry when it was all over...' She finds herself, however, loving Max Rossler.

The relationship between Fanny and Max is immensely complicated by Max's involvement with Persis Galt, the woman into whose care Fanny's father has placed her. In Persis Galt, Stafford develops the reprehensible qualities she has given Gretchen Marburg in the unpublished novel. She also uses Persis Galt as a symbol of the kind of evil that Beacon Hill can produce. Like Miss Rhoda Bellamy in 'The Hope Chest,' Persis was 'born well, born rich, presented to society by trusting parents, had been a singular failure...' She received no suitable marriage proposals.

In retaliation, she had flirted with Catholicism, married an atheist, and finally converted after she arrived in Germany. Although her husband is a Scot, she has become so thoroughly 'Teutonized' that she prefers to be addressed as Frau Professor Galt, and she dresses the role in 'good, gloomy tweeds, a stout pair of driving gloves, lisle stockings with a lavender cast and common-sense oxfords with heavy soles.' She has become equally Catholicized, to the point of surrounding herself as often as possible with Benedictines from the nearby monastery and considering one her own 'private' monk. When she dresses to entertain them, however, she wears a provocative long black velvet dress with a low neckline and tight bodice.

Despite her apparent rejection of both her country and the religion of her birth, Persis Galt retains the arrogance of her Bostonian upbringing. She tells Fanny, 'There's far more *mingling* in Europe than in Boston,' and Fanny recognizes that 'by opposing a whole continent to a single city she proclaimed herself inalienably Bostonian, however Popish her metaphysics, however Bavarian her walking shoes...' When Fanny first sees her, Persis, in her middle forties, looks to Fanny 'exactly like the purposeful matrons in black Persian lamb marching down Beacon Street on their way to lunch at the Chilton Club.' She has also re-created a Beacon Hill interior for her German house.

Fanny learns from Mellie Anderson, another young woman who has been placed in the care of Persis, that Persis uses her position to spy on and control the young woman by reporting any slight deviation in Mellie's behavior to her mother. Similarly, she controls her own family with her money, even though Persis 'loathed all her family and they all loathed her.' Finally, Fanny learns that Persis controls Max Rossler, who tells Fanny that 'sooner or later everyone who crosses that threshold gets blackmailed unless they're too disabled, in one way or another, for her to bother with.' When Fanny meets Max, Persis has been his mistress for five years, the last four of which he has hated her. Max believes Persis has seduced him 'to

make up for a lack of talent...for being good. In the absence of goodness, she had to have power, and who could be better controlled than an eighteen-year-old weakling?'

Within these terms, Fanny and Max conduct their own love affair. Emily recalls, 'There was no pleasure in it. I suffered perpetually, it was monstrous to live through, but I could not have escaped it, not possibly.' At Christmas in Freiburg, when Fanny last sees him, she finally learns the hold Persis has on Max. He is a Jew. The hopelessness that Max feels leads him to decide to die when he leaves Fanny in Freiburg to go to fight in Spain. Fanny perceives his determination to die as also a rejection of her. She acts out her own rejection by having 'a wonderful time' on the day she receives the notice of his death. But she spends her last months in Heidelberg in a 'heavy stupefaction.' Seventeen years later, as she muses for the last time on that winter love, she finally lays her lingering guilt to rest: 'I think, my God, Jew or not he was a Nazi; and then I think, what did Nazi mean when I was twenty?'

In 'A Winter's Tale' Stafford makes the substance of the Gretchen Marburg novel not only palpable but powerful. She creates in Persis Galt perhaps the most evil character in her fiction. She assigns to her the feelings of rejection and the need for revenge that are found in a number of her other characters. But she allows Persis, the hypocritical Bostonian, actually to carry out that revenge, to the point of causing her unwilling lover's death. By clothing Fanny's love for Max in a naive innocence, she creates a different response to Fanny's last question than she does to Gretchen Marburg's piteous plea. When Fanny tosses the seashell through her bedroom window, the ghosts of her past are expunged."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh
Jean Stafford
(Twayne 1985) 76-78

"Despite Stafford's low opinion of it, 'A Winter's Tale' is a skillful, wistful work."

David Roberts
Jean Stafford: A Biography
(Little, Brown 1988) 315

"This novella, *A Winter's Tale*, was an abbreviated version of her early unpublished novel *Autumn Festival* rather than a new work... The Jamesian *A Winter's Tale*, a retrospective account of a young woman's loss of innocence in prewar Heidelberg, was included in *New Short Novels*, edited by Mary Louise Aswell."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman
Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart
(U Texas 1990) 236, 244

"She was dismissive of her novella, *A Winter's Tale*--which she had reworked from a story that in turn harked all the way back to *Autumn Festival* and to the sequel, featuring a monk named Dom Paternus, that she had once envisaged for *Boston Adventure*. 'I only refurbished the dull thing to help Mary Lou [Aswell, at *Harper's Bazaar*] get a collection together [it appeared in *New Short Novels* in 1954], since it's far from my favorite story,' she wrote to Jensen [second husband], who had praised it. And to Lowell, who had evidently mentioned hearing about something she had written, she was even more self-effacing (after saying how proud she was of Peter Taylor and Randall Jarrell for their recent successes): 'I don't know what new novel you mean unless it's a nasty little rent-payer in a paper back. I'm not going to send you a copy because I don't want you or anybody else to read it.' By the time she wrote that, toward the middle of the decade, she had reason to wonder whether her promise to Mary Lee that she would write a better novel had been in vain....

This time, too, she was 'writing like crazy,' working on (among other things) *A Winter's Tale*. As Mary Louise Aswell noted in her introduction to the collection of *New Short Novels* in which the novella first appeared, it was 'an example of emotion recollected in tranquility, a supreme example.' That was the plot and structure of *A Winter's Tale*: a middle-aged woman reflecting back on a youthful love affair in Heidelberg from the vantage point of a barren life in Boston. But the emergence of the novella was itself also an example of retrospective revision: Stafford was turning back to a piece of youthful fiction, *Autumn Festival*, in which she had been unable to establish the right distance, and she was trying to tame it in her

reworking of the material. On both levels, the result was not a Wordsworthian synthesis of passion and reason, but rather an unsettling display of a deep tension between the two.

A Winter's Tale started out as another of Stafford's portraits in petrification. Her infinitely resigned first-person narrator, Fanny, sounded like a close relative of the narrator of 'I Love Someone' as she introduced herself in the framing episode that opened the story. Though this wan woman was married and a mother, she was as isolated as a spinster: 'I am at peace with my beyondness and the melancholy that it implies...but there do come moments when I wonder if ever again I will prefer the sum of summer to this weary light.' It seemed at first as though recollecting her passionate past would help cure her detachment and reconcile her to her present. But the story did not turn out to be such a conventional tale of middle-aged accommodation. It was a bleak account of disenchantment at the core, as the narrator turned to face the sources of her cynical aloofness.

The love story Fanny conjured up was far from a happy, healthy affair. Though Stafford had seen to it that young Fanny was not the extreme self-hating specimen Gretchen Marburg was, once again Germany served as the setting for a punishing mixture of decadence and discipline. Instead of the religious conversion that she planned in the original Dom Paternus story, Stafford staged a revelation in human faithlessness. An unfocused college girl whose loneliness had lately been assuaged by lots of beaux and whiskey, Fanny had been sent by her widower father, 'an ascetic Boston Irishman,' to Germany for a term to be supervised by an ex-Bostonian and zealous Catholic convert named Persis Galt--a woman who it turned out, was having an affair with a young Nazi, Max Rossler. They were a loveless pair, Max long since disillusioned but still entrapped, fearing exposure by Persis, who knew he was a Jew. Fascinated by Max, Fanny was drawn into a secret affair with him, not exactly the careless fling she had planned for her year. 'It was not love; it was another thing. I don't know what,' Fanny reflected, as she and Max tormented themselves before he ultimately left on maneuvers in Spain, only to die on the way.

Compared with the subdued suffering in *The Catherine Wheel*, *A Winter's Tale* is high historical drama. Yet the prose was in the cool style of Stafford's maturity, far from the fervent overwriting of her first German effort. 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. Frau Galt was a portrait in twisted power lust, with 'a lack of talent which she had deceived herself into thinking was a talent for writing poetry or painting water colors or marrying a Bostonian but was really a lack of talent for being good. In the absence of goodness, she had to have power.' She was Miss Pride, with an admixture of Hopestill, yet the old imposing fire was gone....

Fanny and Max, the lost souls, were similarly dampened; there was a world-weariness to their alienated agony. 'I haven't any politics and I haven't any ideals,' Max told Fanny, and then outlined the barrenness of his life with unsettling resignation: 'It would be wonderful to be a Christian or entirely to love one's country. Entirely loving oneself would be the best of all.' The young Fanny made the motions of rebelling against his fatalism, but as recounted by her older sister, her protestations of hope and love rang hollow. When he died, she studiously insulated herself against any real feeling: 'There had always been the danger that I would mourn Max, that I would miss him, would become inward about him. It had been necessary to get back to America to return to the exterior.'

It was a bloodless portrait in disengagement, and yet Stafford ostensibly granted the middle-aged Fanny a kind of liberation in the novella's conclusion, which returned to the framing story. Her survey of memory accomplished, the past was erased--and Fanny announced: 'I am exalted; I believe that I am altogether purged.' Yet it was an eerie purgation, which left a woman who still seemed detached from her present detached now from her past as well. At least that Heidelberg memory had once kept alive a sense of conflict in her life. As Fanny and her husband looked forward to a trip to Bermuda, that 'sun of summer' she was escaping to seemed as bleached as the 'weary light' she claimed she had escaped from.

The novella suggested that for Stafford, too, the resurrection of that German memory and plot was not the creative inspiration she might have hoped. Doubtless she was pleased to be encouraged by Mary Louise Aswell, but a sense of her own disengagement pervades the story. Though rewritten into the first person, it was studiously constructed so that the narrator was as aloof as possible. And though Stafford had clearly

worked at including more dramatized action, the scenes in *A Winter's Tale* were stagy rather than immediately moving. Finally, she had expanded the original story, but it was evident from the result how far Stafford was from a theme and characters adequate to a novel, which was once again the challenge facing her."

Ann Hulbert
The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford
(Knopf 1992) 284, 292-94

"Another Heidelberg story with an impressionable young woman as its focus is Stafford's 1954 novella, *A Winter's Tale*. A bittersweet, first-person reminiscence by the 37-year-old Fanny about her student days in Heidelberg 20 years earlier, the story is unique in Stafford's canon for several reasons. First, its protagonist is a woman writer--scarce in Stafford's fiction--whose husband finds her writing threatening. Second, she has a history of alcohol abuse. Third, there is an actual father figure--albeit absent--hovering over the narrative. Last, the character of Persis Galt represents Stafford's most trenchant expose of hypocritical religious fanaticism.

This multilayered narrative ultimately evokes the fictions we create about our lives and the fictions we live. Fanny reminisces about her student days in Heidelberg and her brief love affair with the Nazi soldier Max Rossler, who will tell his own story near the end of Stafford's tale; framing both these interior texts is Stafford's meticulous rendering of Fanny's comfortable yet sterile upper-middle-class life with her lawyer-husband and two children. But an added layer emerges when we realize that the story is Stafford's reworking of earlier material from her unpublished novel *Autumn Festival*, a Joycean portrait of the artist as a young woman that was rejected by the Atlantic Monthly Press in 1939. Then Stafford was searching for an authentic voice and narrative stance from which to tell her story of youthful exile and displacement. She seems to have found both more than 10 years later in this Jamesian retrospective.

The mature, detached, first-person narrator of *A Winter's Tale*, child of a stern Boston Catholic father, tells the story of her affair with Rossler and of their mutual enslavement by Persis Galt, the wealthy Catholic convert Fanny's father has chosen to watch over her year abroad. Stafford ironically refers to the tyrannical Persis as 'inalienably Bostonian, however Popish her metaphysics.' Persis, despite her self-conscious Catholicism, is later revealed as Max's mistress, but not until the youthful Fanny has had her own affair with the tortured young Nazi. Stafford's irony is unsparing as she documents Persis's attempts to impose her stern Catholic regimen on unsuspecting friends; her tendency to surround herself with the comforting presences of the church, such as her 'own personal monk' Dom Paternus; and her solemn statement that '[she] should have been born in the middle ages.' Transplanted from Boston, alienated from her own family, Persis serves as a chilling example of what the youthful Fanny could--and does--become: a lonely, cynical woman leading a false life that she herself sees as stylized, like the elegant French windows framing her bedroom.

A Winter's Tale documents a painful loss of innocence for its narrator as she discovers the duplicity of both Max Rossler--he is a Jew--and Persis Galt, the hypocritical Catholic who wields her sexual power on innocent young men. A Jamesian tale of psychological realism built up by a careful accretion of detail--the furnishings of Persis's replica of a Boston sitting room, the seductive black velvet dress she dons when she discards her Boston tweeds and brogans, the external trappings of Catholicism such as altar cloths, indulgences, matins, and lauds--the story rises to a typical Stafford epiphanic conclusion when the young Fanny realizes the truth about both Max and Persis, and the mature Fanny sees the emptiness of her present life lived always in the shadow of that Heidelberg winter.

Stylistically, Stafford's 1954 novella is also characteristic Jamesian in its long, leisurely sentences; its frequent use of foreign terms such as *chinoiserie* and *sous cloche*; and its often obscure diction. But Stafford had by this time in her career discovered how to manipulate the self-conscious verbiage cluttering up her youthful unpublished manuscripts. Undercutting her often elevated diction are phrases and sentences so clear and direct that they serve as an ironic subtext to her more elaborate passages.... Verbal adroitness on Stafford's part shows a command of the rhythms and pacing of language--a command she would put to brilliant use in her childhood narrators' tales of growing up in the West....

Stafford's use of a foreign locale--Heidelberg--serves to emphasize the theme of radical alienation and loneliness these stories embody, while her obvious avoidance of the deeper implications of the Nazi theme perhaps stems from the rejection of her earlier novel, *Autumn Festival*, in which the heroine is a bitter, self-hating Nazi who thus forfeits the sympathy of her readers. Issues of power, dominance, and fanaticism find other forms closer to home in Jean Stafford's mature fiction."

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 12-14, 16

Michael Hollister (2020)