

## ANALYSIS

"A Reading Problem" (1956)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"Emily encounters similar unsavory characters in 'A Reading Problem.' Forced by circumstances into leaving the jail--her favorite reading spot, where her friend Sheriff Starbird reads Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu novels--Emily walks to a camp on the outskirts of town where she is apprehended and threatened by Evangelist Gerlash and his daughter Opal. Stafford displays her love for the western vernacular in the following exchange in which the father and daughter try to blackmail Emily into getting some food for them:

"'Whynt' you go get us some eats?" said Opal, cajoling. "If you get us some eats, we won't come calling. If we come calling, like as not we'll spend the night."

"Haven't slept in a bed since May," said her father snuffling.

"We don't shake easy," said Opal, with an absolutely shameless grin.'

Underlying the comedy of this situation is the reality that Emily is unable to escape from a pair of fairly rough customers. She is rescued when her friend the sheriff arrives to run the Gerlashes out of town for bootlegging, the profitable sideline of their evangelistic campaign."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh  
*Jean Stafford*  
(Twayne 1985) 21-22

"'A Reading Problem,' the third and last of the Emily Vanderpool stories to appear in the *New Yorker*, is similar to the earlier 'Bad Characters' in its humorous evocation of the trials of a solitary, spirited young girl whose own isolation in a small western town leads her to befriend an unsavory character. In 'Bad Characters,' which was published in the *New Yorker* in 1954, Emily becomes the companion of an eleven-year-old petty thief named Lottie Jump, and in 'A Reading Problem' she makes the acquaintance of a purveyor of patent medicines and evangelical preacher named Reverend Gerlash. Seeking a quiet place to read, Emily rejects the mountains in the winter because of the cold, in the spring because of the wood ticks, and in the summer because of the snakes. The public library also proves to be unsuitable, as does the lobby of the downtown hotel, and when Emily finally retreats in desperation to the visitors' waiting room of the jail, she is once again uprooted after the sheriff locks up some foul-mouthed moonshiners.

On her way home, the frustrated Emily encounters Evangelist Gerlash and his bedraggled daughter Opal. Stafford wonderfully portrays the shenanigans of the Bible-toting evangelist and his pathetic, half-starved daughter. 'I could eat a bushel of roasting ears. We ain't had a meal in a dog's age--not since that old handout in Niwot,' Opal says, hoping that Emily will get her parents to invite them to dinner. In her author's note to a volume of her short stories that she called *Bad Characters*, Stafford acknowledged that she 'often occupied' the skin of the stubborn Emily, who was 'a trial to her kin.' She said that although she herself had wanted to be a road agent when she was young, she didn't have a chance; and as was true of her protagonist, the bookish Stafford always felt unwanted. Emily is exiled from the jail, afraid of the snakes in the mountains and in the way in the living room where her mother and her aunt are forever cutting out Butterick patterns. Seeking a quiet place to read, she is finally forced to retreat to the cemetery to study for an upcoming Bible contest."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman  
*Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart*  
(U Texas 1990) 249

"Emily's brushes with the unwashed...in 'A Reading Problem,' she crossed paths with a preacher con man and his scrawny daughter--introducing excitement into her life, but they didn't really threaten her connection with the 'respectable' world of Adams and her family (a far more conventional clan than the

real-life Staffords). The willful girl whose taste for solitude had gotten her into trouble ended up somewhat chastened and more sociable. In fact, the ironic moral of the stories was that it was Emily's very anti-sociality that made her a good citizen; a high-spirited, independent girl could prosper in dull Adams after all. Not that she was going to stay there: 'Yes, sir, Emily, you're going to go places,' the local sheriff told her admiringly in 'A Reading Problem.' But in the meantime, she could happily settle for the escapades instead of true escape--as Stafford had done with her father in the mountains.

As in her youthful fictional efforts, Stafford was busy experimenting with dialects, again in Twainian style.... In 'A Reading Problem' Evangelist Gerlash and his daughter Opal spent twelve pages trying to talk Emily out of some money or food in a comical hybrid of stentorian sermonizing, huckster talk, and backwoods slang. Occasionally a hokey, inauthentic note crept in, but Stafford managed to make much of the humor--and pathos--of the stories ride on the dialogue, coupled with her flair for the perfectly placed detail."

Ann Hulbert  
*The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford*  
(Knopf 1992) 300-01

"The third and last Emily Vanderpool story to appear in the *New Yorker* was 'A Reading Problem' (1956). Like 'Bad Characters,' it depicts Emily at odds with her environment: with her family, because her mother interrupts her reading to urge her to sit near a light or to go out and play so she'll get roses in her cheeks, and with her town, because except in the fall Adams and its harsh mountain climate are not conducive to reading outside. The library is off limits, because her dog Reddy often follows her there and once scared the librarian by placing his front paws up on her high desk, so that when she turned around to help this 'customer' she nearly fainted and her wig was knocked askew, revealing some rather prominent bald spots.

Even the vast lobby of the town's Goldmoor Hotel provides no shelter, for as Emily notes, the 'old duffers' who sit there all day spitting tobacco juice into cuspidors cannot stand to see anyone reading, assuming the unfortunate reader must be as bored as they are. In Twainian vernacular Emily speculates on what they must be thinking: 'I declare, here's somebody worse off than I am. The poor soul's really hard up to have to depend on a book, and it's my bounden Christian duty to help him pass the time,' and they start talking to you. If you want company on the streetcar or the bus...open a book and you're all set.' The old duffers patronize Emily unmercifully--'laughing and teasing me as if I were a monkey that had suddenly entered their precincts'--recalling Dr. Johnson's famous comment about lady preachers. Finally rejecting the train depot, the Catholic church since she is a United Presbyterian, and the women's smoking room of the library, Emily settles on the waiting room of the jail, since there are rarely any visitors--or any prisoners, for that matter.

Trying to carve out a space for herself in the distinctly anti-intellectual surroundings of Adams, Emily finds a surprising ally in the town sheriff, Mr. Starbird, who is himself a reader of Fu Manchu mysteries and whose flighty daughters, Ida and Laverne, care for nothing 'except what's got on pants.' But some rowdy moonshiners are arrested, and the sheriff thinks it best for Emily to leave this rough male environment unsuitable for an innocent young girl. As she wanders toward the trailer camp on the outskirts of town, Emily meets two characters reminiscent of Twain's shiftless, defrauding Duke and King and the inimical Lottie Jump--the evangelist Gerlash and his daughter Opal.

Throughout her descriptions of Adams's gallery of characters, Stafford calls into question Emily's judgment of the town as boring and suggests that the adventure she seeks in books might just as easily be found here. Significantly, Emily is just beginning Twain's *Tom Sawyer Abroad*, an 1894 work narrated by Huck about his travels with Tom and Jim to Egypt and Palestine. A picturesque account of an imaginary journey that borrows heavily from Jules Verne and Sit Walter Scott, Twain's work relies on the humorous dialogue and cultural naivete of its characters for effect--a situation similar to the one Emily finds herself in with the unscrupulous Reverend and his daughter.

But perhaps more importantly, the American edition of *Tom Sawyer Abroad*, which Emily was no doubt reading, had been prudishly expurgated by Mrs. Mabel Mapes Dodge before its serialization in *St. Nicholas*

*Magazine*. A Twain aficionado like Jean Stafford might well have been aware of this fact and used it to ironic advantage in 'A Reading Problem.' The irony, of course, is twofold: not only has her environment been censored for her by well-meaning guardians of Public morality like the sheriff, but the book Emily reads for adventure has also been sanitized, while real adventure awaits her in the unexpurgated pair she meets in Adams's trailer camp.

As in 'Bad Characters' and 'The Healthiest Girl in Town,' Stafford's humor results from clashes of diction: the Reverend's falsely inflated religious rhetoric undercut by Emily's colloquial narrative voice and Opal's straightforward western slang. When the Reverend exhorts Emily to 'keep to this path your youthful feet...and shun the Sodoms *and* the Gomorrahs,' she wryly counters, 'My youthful feet were so wet I was having a struggle to put on my socks.' When Gerlash mournfully exclaims, 'We have had a weary journey, sister,' Opal replies with a huge yawn, 'You said a mouthful.'

As the narrative progresses, the Gerlash story unfolds in indirect discourse within the frame device of Emily's own story, further reinforcing the linguistic disparity between the primly bourgeois Emily, who memorizes books of the Bible to get a prize at Sunday school, and the conniving Gerlashes, who similarly spout Bible verses for their nefarious purposes. In fact, the Reverend doesn't even need a Bible, because he has his own 112-page book, titled *Gerlash on the Bible*, which answers such useful questions as 'Can Wall Street run God's Business?'

Just as the Gerlashes are about to persuade Emily to go into town and buy them some groceries, Emily's tamed-down surroundings force her to stop short of a real adventure. The sheriff drives up with a deputy and arrests the pair, making Emily a hero for 'catching' them. She rides home triumphantly in a police car, clutching her Bible and *Tom Sawyer Abroad*, the putative heroine of her own text. Unfortunately, her fame has spread, and the jail where she is now free to read is full of 'copycats' who have decided it makes a good library. Rescued from a real adventure, deprived of space to read (the sheriff is afraid to give her a cell because he doesn't want to ruin her reputation), Emily ends up in the cemetery side by side with another story, 'under a shady tree, sitting beside the grave of an infant kinswoman of the sheriff, a late-nineteenth-century baby called Primrose Starbird.'

Ten years earlier Jean 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*  
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Michael Hollister (2020)