

ANALYSIS

"Bad Characters" (1954)



Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"When Emily [Vanderpool] tells her own story as an eleven-year-old in 'Bad Characters,' she is contrite. As a result of just such a rage as her sister describes, she is bereft at the moment of any friends. She has just called Virgil Meade 'a son of a sea cook, said it was common knowledge that his mother had bedbugs and that his father, a dentist and the deputy marshal, was a bootlegger on the side.' In this position, she encounters Lottie Jump, a hardened eleven-year-old criminal, whom Emily surprises in the theft of a cake from the Vanderpool home.

It is Lottie's 'gaudy, cynical talk' that first captivates Emily. She calls Adams 'a slow poke town...a one-horse burg' and calls Emily herself, 'kid.' She makes Emily 'think of one of those self-contained dogs whose home is where his handout is and who travels alone but, if it suits him to, will become the leader of a pack.' When Emily does not understand Lottie's use of the term *lift*, Lottie replies, 'Steal, for crying in the beer,' and retorts 'Ish ka bibble!' when Emily cautions that stealing is a sin and a crime. Despite her misgivings, Emily agrees to join Lottie in a shoplifting spree: '[In] our short meeting she had mesmerized me; I would think about her style of talking and the expert way she had made off with the perfume flask and the cake...and be bowled over, for the part of me that did not love God was a black-hearted villain.' Besides, she fears that Lottie will avenge any disloyalty. In the end, it is Emily, not Lottie, who is punished for their crime."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh
Jean Stafford
(Twayne 1985) 20-21

"In her short story 'Bad Characters,' she would...describe a volatile young girl who resembles what she herself was like at that age: 'Up until my lesson in a very bitter way, I never had more than one friend at a time, and my friendships, though ardent, were short. When they ended and I was sent packing in unforgetting indignation, it was always my fault; I would swear vilely in front of a girl I knew to be pious and prim (by the time I was eight, the most grandiloquent gangster could have added nothing to my vocabulary--I had an awful tongue), or I would call a Tenderfoot Scout a sissy or make fun of athletics to the daughter of the high school coach.'...

'Bad Characters' [is] a humorous story about a childhood escapade in Colorado that is narrated by Emily Vanderpool... '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'...Emily becomes the companion of an eleven-year-old petty thief named Lottie Jump... In

October of 1964, her latest collection of short stories, *Bad Characters*, garnered a host of laudatory reviews from the critics.

Calling her 'one of our best writers,' Gene Baro observed in the *New York Times*: 'She makes the English language a weapon or a wand. She can build solidly in the tradition of Hawthorne or Janes. She can manage the deceptive simplicities and sleight-of-hand of colloquial style. Dry wit or zany humor are well within her range. She is an impeccable social observer, with a sense of telling detail.' And Joyce Carol Oates described this collection as 'a triumph of style and imagination.' A few critics commented on Stafford's rather narrow range, but even the most severe critics applauded the brilliance of her prose, her wit, her irony, and her ability to create memorable characters. Another tribute to her work was the fact that Louis Auchincloss included her in a study of nine major American women writers that was published in 1965...*Pioneers and Caretakers*."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman
Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart
(U Texas 1990) 25, 249, 284-85

"As Stafford depicted her predicament in the two best Vanderpool stories, 'Bad Characters' (1954) and 'A Reading Problem' (1956), Emily stumbled on inadequate substitutes--outcasts who were indeed gaudy, but who were not the seriously subversive influence that Huck was. Emily's brushes with the unwashed--in 'Bad Characters' she mixed up with Lottie Jump, an eleven-year-old shoplifter from the wrong side of the tracks... As in her youthful fictional efforts, Stafford was busy experimenting with dialects, again in Twainian style. In 'Bad Characters,' it was Lottie Jump's tongue that especially enthralled Emily. 'I had never heard such gaudy, cynical talk and was trying to memorize it all.' Equally enthralled herself, Stafford devoted a great deal of attention to capturing accurately the telltale vernacular of her low characters....

The Vanderpool stories painted a surprisingly cheery picture of childhood in Adams, and the grown-up Emily who narrated the stories seemed to have turned out to be a very witty character with a wholesome perspective on her past. There was no hint of the real trauma of Stafford's youth, or at least what she later came to see as the trauma: her strange father, whom she saw in a different light after a period of childish adulation--as a version of Huck Finn's pap, the man who kept his family forever on the margins of respectability. He was the figure who made escape imperative and yet also impossible, the character she tried to limn in *In the Snowfall*."

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

"Jean Stafford allowed Emily [Vanderpool] to tell her own story in the prizewinning 'Bad Characters' (1954). The title story of Stafford's third collection of short stories, 'Bad Characters' is the story of Emily's encounter with the incorrigible Lottie Jump, whose 'only recreations and...only gift was...stealing.' The resolutely amoral Lottie plans an excursion to the five-and-dime, where her dutiful pupil Emily is caught shoplifting. Lottie plays deaf and dumb, Emily has to take the blame, and the story ends with Emily vowing to control her lawless enthusiasms and her tongue.

Emily's avowed predilection for swearing--what she calls her 'awful tongue'--introduces the story, brings about its conclusions, and forms its thematic center. From the first paragraph Stafford foregrounds language and sets the stage for Emily's inevitable entrapment by the word-wielding Lottie. Emily first sees Lottie stealing a freshly baked chocolate cake from Mrs. Vanderpool's kitchen. Her quickly thought-out response when Emily discovers her trespassing is 'I came to see if you'd like to play with me,' an answer so blatantly false that it immediately wins over the lonely, bad-tempered Emily. Lottie laughs violently at the ridiculous name Emily Vanderpool, causing the gullible Emily to look at herself through considerably less favorable eyes. But when Lottie tells her improbably life story to the enraptured Emily, her triumph is complete.

Lottie's questionable family saga is as unsavory and anti-establishment as Emily's is staunchly bourgeois and respectable. The daughter of a tuberculosis-ridden railroad man and a half-Indian mother, Lottie lives with her parents and an illiterate brother in a shanty village; she hates school, loves snakes, and thinks

Adams is a 'slowpoke town,' a 'one-horse burg.' Seduced by her 'gaudy, cynical talk,' Emily hangs on every word and is an easy mark for Lottie's shoplifting excursion. In this classic confrontation between innocence and experience, the narrator, Emily, examines her previously staid, predictable life and realizes it has been 'deadly prim; all I'd ever done to vary the monotony of it was to swear.' Her desire for Lottie's friendship wins out over her moral sense, and she agrees to accompany Lottie on a shoplifting spree the following Saturday.

In passages reminiscent of Huck Finn's moral deliberations, Emily watches her family's reaction to her increasing nervousness as Saturday approaches: 'And because I was the cause of it all and my conscience was after me with red-hot pokers, I finally *had* to have a tantrum.' Lottie's rhetoric has seduced Emily, and even before the Saturday assignation she is forced to commit minor crimes, such as inventing an imaginary hobo who stole the chocolate cake and breaking into her Sunday school bank to get trolley fare. Midway through the story Emily confesses, 'I had a bad character, I know that, but my badness never gave me half the enjoyment Jack and Stella thought it did. A good deal of the time I wanted to eat lye.' She further castigates herself by admitting she never wanted to see Lottie Jump again, even though she had been entranced by her 'style of talking and the expert way she had made off with the perfume flask and the cake.' Contemplating the probable effects of her proposed lawless adventure, Emily concludes that 'the part of me that did not love God was a black-hearted villain.'

Like Huck Finn's irresistible attraction to Tom Sawyer, Emily's attraction to Lottie centers on her boldness and her seeming indifference to consequences. Emily is drawn to Lottie's disreputable status; but in the end, the shoplifting spree becomes as pointless as Tom's romantically conceived plot to free Jim. Seen without regard to the larger world, both Lottie and Tom seem to confer a kind of glamour on the gullible Emily and Huck. As Emily reflects near the climax of the story, 'But in another way I *was* proud to be with her; in a smaller hemisphere, in one that included only her and me, I was swaggering--I felt like Somebody, marching along beside this lofty Somebody from Oklahoma who was going to hold up the dime store.' But examined more closely, their exploits seem random acts performed without reflection--reckless and self-gratifying. [Lottie is more like Pap Finn than like Tom Sawyer, who is conventional.]

Throughout Stafford's narrative, the comic voice of Emily Vanderpool alternates with the mature, reflective comments of the older, wiser Emily; the result is a wry, ironic fable with a clearly recognizable villain and an innocent victim. As Emily remembers her childhood nemesis, she reflects on her probably whereabouts: 'I don't know where Lottie is now--whether she is on the stage or in jail. If her performance after our arrest meant anything, the first is quite as likely as the second.' Subjected to a sermon by her father's friend Judge Bay, to her mother's tearful remarks that she had 'nurtured an outlaw,' and to numerous goading comments from Jack and Stella, Emily repents and reforms if for no other reason than a pragmatic one. She is ultimately welcomed into the Camp Fire Girls, sheds her outlaw status, and becomes thoroughly civilized and respectable."

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 40-42

This is perhaps Stafford's funniest story and the one most obviously influenced by Mark Twain, though she invites comparison with Dickens when she calls Lottie "Miss Fagin" after the old thief in *Oliver Twist* who exploits poor street boys to steal for him. Lottie Jump is also like an illegitimate daughter of the Duke in *Huckleberry Finn* when she pretends to be deaf and dumb like the Duke in his ploy with the King to steal the inheritance of the Wilks girls. Another echo of Huck is of his hiding the stolen butter from Aunt Sally under his hat: "For the land's sake, what *is* the matter with the child!--he's got the brain fever as shore as you're born and they're oozing out!" Lottie is caught hiding a string of pearls under her hat and "it looked as if her brains were leaking out."

One device Stafford uses to great effect is Emily's propensity to leap to preposterous conclusions, as when at age eleven she is playing with Virgil Meade and abruptly insults him: "Virgil was too aghast to speak--a little earlier we had agreed to marry someday and become millionaires." Another effective device is comical exaggeration, as when referring to Lottie's teacher "Miss Cudahy, who had a head shaped like a pine cone and who had killed several people with her ruler." And, "I suppose you wish I had gone out in the kitchen and let the robber cut me up into a million little tiny pieces with his sword." Muff the cat grew up

and "started having literally millions of kittens." The story also includes Stafford's deliberate use of the "pathetic fallacy," a characteristic of her style considered a fault in sentimental poets, to express the feelings of Emily: "the alarm clock ticked smugly."

Since critics deny or try to ignore the religious content of Stafford's fiction it should be pointed out that this story could be used for lessons in a Sunday School. To get the money they need for trolley fare to go rob a store, Emily takes twenty cents from the box holding her Christmas Sunday School offering--"the one in the shape of a church" and "I tore the paper church into bits." At one point Emily says "the part of me that did not love God was a black-hearted villain." The part of her that *does* love God is educated by her experiences with Lottie Jump, a devil figure: "It is not true that you don't learn by experience." Of course, she does not become perfect: "Why, listen, if I'd rooted out all the badness in me, there wouldn't have been anything left of me. My mother cried for days because she had nurtured an outlaw." She still tells white lies to friends "when that terrible need to be alone arose."

As in such fictions as "The Interior Castle" and *The Catherine Wheel*, there is a thematic motif of Christ in this story, since it is "Christmastime." The things Lottie has stolen include "a white satin prayer book (think of it!)." The chocolate cake that Lottie steals is "devil's food." When she is given a stern moral lecture by the Judge--"I want you to search and seek in the innermost corners of your conscience and root out every bit of badness"--Emily thinks of the Devil: "Oh, *him!*" Her sister Stella says, "And to think you did it at *Christmastime!*" In religious terms, the story has a happy ending, as Emily learns to control her impulses and becomes tolerant enough to be accepted into the Camp Fire Girls.

Michael Hollister (2020)