

ANALYSIS

"Between the Porch and the Altar" (1945)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"A story Stafford wrote [in 1945], 'Between the Porch and the Altar,' reflects her own *ambivalent* feelings about Catholicism. It is of interest to note that Lowell wrote a poem with the same title in which he expressed a desperate need 'To cry and ask God's pardon of our sin.' Stafford's story, however, describes a female protagonist who finds going to church on Ash Wednesday *repugnant*. She is repelled when she is asked for alms by a drunken beggar; she shudders when she feels the coldness of the church steps and the holy water; she is revolted by the sight of the stubble she detects under the coif of a nun; she finds the church, with its gaudy statues and sentimental crucifixes, 'ugly and in bad taste'; and she is horrified when an old crone with 'sour gray hair' will not leave her alone until she gives the old woman her last dime.

As soon as she reaches home, Stafford's protagonist washes away the ashes with which the Jesuit priest has marked her forehead. Even her mission of lighting a candle for 'the safe-keeping of two friends, captive in China by the Japanese,' is thwarted. Obviously autobiographical, the story refers not only to Stafford but to Hightower, who had recently been detained in China by the Japanese. As she awaited Lowell's release from prison in March, Stafford realized that the difference between his religious commitment and her own was no less an impenetrable barrier between them than the plate of glass that had separated them when she had visited him in the West Street jail." [Italics added.]

Charlotte Margolis Goodman
Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart
(U Texas 1990) 137-38

"Lowell's dramatic monologue, 'Between the Porch and the Altar,' takes its title, as Stafford's story does, from a phrase in the Book of Joel [the Bible], the Ash Wednesday chapter. Without suggesting anything like an intimate parallel, it's possible to point to general links between Stafford's story of a young girl on her way to the first Ash Wednesday Mass at five-o'clock on a cold February morning in New York and Lowell's four-part poem that dwells on mother domination and adultery. Both convey the confessions and confusions of youthful believers, struggling to reconcile the flesh and the spirit, the disorder of life and the order of religion.

Stafford had shown [Allen] Tate a draft of the story in the summer of 1944. It wasn't a formal submission to the *Sewanee Review*, where he was then editor, but perhaps she hoped that he would accept it. If so, she was disappointed. Tate's response was typically to the point: 'Between the Porch and the Altar' is beautifully written, but I don't think it is successful.' His complaint was that it was too elliptical, that the reader never learned enough about the girl to 'place' the sudden conversion of feeling she experienced at the end. Her abrupt clarity of soul might work in a lyric poem, he told Stafford, but not in a story.'... Stafford evidently worked further on the story, at least she smoothed the transition to the concluding revelation.

The story was strikingly well written, a happy balance of exact description of the external world and an unexpectedly concrete evocation of her protagonist's thoughts and feelings. Throughout the story Stafford effectively counterpoised ritual and real life, both of which pulled at her protagonist, whose loneliness was made palpable. Heading for church with careful plans for distributing her alms (some for the poor box, some for candles in memory of her dead mother and two friends interned in China by the Japanese), the girl was distracted by other, grubbier demands on her money (a poor beggar, an old crone). She was disoriented: 'She was not assured in her heart and she prayed with a dry compulsion.' The story teetered toward *skepticism*, for structured piety seemed wan and irrelevant compared with clamoring life. Yet at the same time, Stafford's 'natural aestheticism,' as [Peter] Taylor had called it, prevented anything so simple as an endorsement of 'the coarseness...the grossness' of daily existence. The girl gave her dime to the crone, rather than spending it for a candle as she had planned, but she was repelled. When her trials of charity

were over, she wiped away the official ashes, 'leaving herself alone possessed of the knowledge of her penance'--a penance that brought *ambivalence*, not complacency. Catholicism was not a matter of easy motions for either Stafford or Lowell." [Italics added.]

Ann Hulbert
The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford
(Knopf 1992) 186-87

"The young woman in 'Between the Porch and the Altar' (1945) experiences a...sense of loss as she mourns the death of her mother. Though this story is really only an impressionistic vignette, focusing on a young woman's early morning church visit, Stafford chose to include it in her *Collected Stories*; for the student of Stafford's short fiction, it stands as one of the few examples of her fictional treatment of Catholicism and religious faith. Charlotte Goodman speculates that since it was written while Lowell was in a Connecticut prison for draft evasion, the story focuses on the chasm between religious fanaticism and *lapsed faith*. From what he experienced as the flesh-mortifying monasticism of prison, Lowell in fact advised his young wife not to worry about how they would live; God would provide. Indeed, throughout the story the rituals and order of religious belief are contrasted with the chaos and unpredictability of the real world as the unnamed heroine tries unsuccessfully to cloister herself within the sheltering walls of the church while forced to admit the unwelcome intrusions of the material world. [Italics added.]

The story reads almost like a fable: the nameless young woman travels through the bitterly cold New York streets to an Ash Wednesday service where secular thoughts overpower her spiritual reflections. Throughout the text, Stafford carefully juxtaposes both dimensions as she depicts a series of all too human encounters on this young woman's *quest for religious faith*: making her way to church, she meets 'a drunken beggar sprawled like a lumpy rug, his feet in ruptured tennis shoes,' trying to concentrate on her prayers, she recoils at the sight of black stubble under one of the nuns' coifs; the words of the Gospel ring ironically in her ears--'Lay up to yourselves treasures in heaven...where thieves do not break through nor steal'; even her intention to light a candle for her friends in China is thwarted by an ugly old crone who asks for her last dime. Reluctantly, she succumbs to this scene of 'squalid commerce' at the altar, placing the money in the 'clever, metropolitan fingers' of the beggar woman. Through this young woman's eyes, the text unflinchingly examines the *externals* of the faith and *finds them wanting*; correspondingly, it reveals the heroine's own *spiritual emptiness* and *inability to see beyond the literal*." [Italics added.]

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 62-63

This Catholic girl evokes the woman in the Bible who is praised by Jesus for giving the little money she has in her church offering, which is worth more to him than the larger offerings of the affluent who can afford to give much more. She sees a star that "inexplicably gives her resolution." In the Christian context a star evokes the birth of Jesus. "Although the star...had had a decisive effect on her, it had not dispelled her apprehension and her distrust of the unfamiliar streets." Christianity does not eliminate the evil effects of the fallen world, represented by the possibility of violence and in particular by the deceptive old crone to whom she gives her last dime. Later her own face reflected in a bedwarmer "had the power, as the star had done this morning, to make her suddenly purposeful." At the end of the story, as ordinary secular life revives in the morning, "the big star had begun to pale." The influence of Jesus, who is called "the morning star," diminishes in the secular world.

The girl is "still bedewed with baptism," which united her with Jesus. As a new Catholic, she naturally questions some of its rituals and struggles with moral issues such as which charity to favor over others, a matter that can and probably will be resolved by a priest. Her submission to Catholic beliefs and practices is symbolized by the motif of nuns ahead of her: On the street, "two nuns walked slowly ahead of her." And in church "four nuns were in the pew ahead of her." The nuns intensify her spiritual "hunger" with "savage force." Since the Feminist critics are inclined to deny that the girl is a believer, though she has just recently been baptized, and despite the obvious religious symbol of the star, it should be pointed out that, in addition to the star, there are other evidences of her faith: "She took a certain pleasure in her uneasiness, feeling that even the most accidental castigation was excellent at the beginning of Lent." She "said her prayers" and

also prays to St. Xavier. "She controlled herself stiffly like a soldier"--evoking the hymn line "Onward Christian soldiers." Her actions and statements prove that she believes in Lent, in the efficacy of prayer, in charity to the poor, in the meaning of Ash Wednesday, in "willful sacrifice," in sin, in repentance, and in Purgatory: "All through the mass, while she fixed her attention on her mother--imagining her face, disembodied, hovering in a crowd of other faces in Purgatory." For her mother's sake, the girl's belief in Purgatory alone could have made her become a Catholic.

Most of her negative reactions in the church are matters of taste, external and merely aesthetic--poor artwork and the black stubble under the coif of one nun. All humans are imperfect, even nuns. The girl knows her reaction is external, hence irrelevant, and repents of it: "she closed her eyes to the nun's neck and begged forgiveness for her fault-finding." A truly important fault is her own "imperfect heart." She must also reject her recoil from the beggar on the street: "Lout, wastrel that he was, he was poor and it was not the duty, nor even the right, of the almsgiver to distinguish between degrees of poverty." Furthermore, she is Christian in believing that "she should not presume to judge" other people but should leave judgments up to God. When she sees a nun's wedding ring she expresses her own spiritual hunger, wondering if nuns "really did feel unity with God...or felt, instead hushed isolation." The story dramatizes the girl's desire for unity with God and her feelings of isolation despite her faith. "The words of the Gospel today were: '*Lay up to yourselves treasures in heaven... For where thy treasure is, there is thy heart also.*' The words, now that she had seen the wedding ring, seemed richer and more profoundly exciting than they had done before." She is excited by the treasure of her relationship to Jesus.

CRITICS

All three of the Feminist critics above believe that this story is autobiographical. Goodman depicts the Catholic girl's feelings about Catholicism as entirely negative--not just "ambivalent" but "repugnant." In this, Goodman does not differentiate between Catholicism and Christianity, implying that Stafford rejected both. Wilson argues that despite her religious behavior, despite all her praying and charity and need for penance, the girl has no religious faith at all, that she is on a "quest" that fails, for the girl is suffering from "spiritual emptiness"! In their atheism Feminist critics project their own spiritual emptiness. Ironically, the literal-minded Wilson accuses the girl of "inability to see beyond the literal." Hulbert admits that the girl is a "believer" in her first paragraph, but further on she claims that this story "teetered toward skepticism" and that Stafford is "ambivalent" toward religion. Yet in her analysis of "The Interior Castle," Hulbert claims that Stafford is an atheist: "Faith eluded her."

The girl "prayed that nothing would mar the spirit of penance which she carried like a fragile light," like Jesus, who is the Light. At the same time the last sentence of this story indicates that the girl is aware that ultimately her penance is *her* responsibility. In the end she is alone "possessed of the knowledge of her penance." If she had no religious faith she would feel no need for penance.

Michael Hollister (2021)