

ANALYSIS

"Children Are Bored on Sunday" (1948)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"When Emma, in 'Children Are Bored on Sunday' (1946), ventures into the Metropolitan Museum one winter Sunday, she is ending a year of self-imposed solitude that is the result of a severe depression caused by her feeling of complete rejection by the 'Olympian' intellectuals whose cocktail parties are jousting matches for the egos of artists, composers, and writers. Her insecurity as a newcomer to New York convinces her that in that crowd 'she was thought to be an intellectual who, however, had not made the grade.... She knew, deeply and with horror, that she was thought merely stupid.' She internalizes what she perceives as their assessment and considers herself a 'rube.'

On this day, after a year of trying to walk and drink herself to exhaustion and sleep, she is terrified of meeting face to face a member of the intellectual crowd whom she sights in the museum: 'In so many words, she wasn't fit to be seen. Although she was no longer mutilated, she was still unkempt; her pretensions needed to be cleaned; her evasions would have to be completely overhauled...' Excellent satire though this is of intellectual snobbery, the effect of it on Emma has been real and intense. As she tries to continue her tour of the museum, before the canvases 'swam the months of spreading, cancerous distrust, of anger that made her seasick, of grief that shook her like an influenza chill, of the physical afflictions by which the poor victimized spirit sought vainly to wreck the arrogant healthy flesh.'

The intensity of Emma's emotional pain corresponds to the intensity of Pansy Vanneman's physical pain. Her year of solitude is an severe a rejection of herself as is Pansy's escape into the world of inanimateness. She has perceived herself as besieged by the intellectuals of the city as surely as the young woman on the Lower East Side has been surrounded by human detritus. She is a victim of her isolation and her fears and has projected her hatred onto herself. She is, like most of Stafford's young women characters, acted upon rather than being capable of action herself.

The dominant portrait of the young woman that emerges in the stories is that of a passive victim. Within the context of the family, she feels estranged from or maimed by the loss of a parent or both parents. She responds most characteristically by ironic detachment or by guilt-ridden, sometimes suicidal, self-hatred. Outside the family context, she encounters a world that seems to have no place for her, where malignant or grotesque forces, either natural or human, prey upon her. The victories she wins are small ones and costly in emotional, psychological, or physical terms. The young women who differ from this dominant portrait and who escape relatively unscathed usually are those who are protected by the advantages of wealth and social position."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh
Jean Stafford
(Twayne 1985) 53-54

"One of the best short stories Stafford ever wrote... Peter Davison, who as a nine-year-old had shyly admired the precocious college girl smoking her cigarette in his parents' living room in Boulder, was a Harvard senior that winter. He has a vivid memory of reading 'Children Are Bored on Sunday' the week it came out and saying to himself, 'My God, that's the way people should write.' The story 'seemed to me the *locus classicus* of the difficulties of having been brought up in Colorado.'

The story has a deceptively simple structure. Emma, coming off a vaguely explained year 'in hiding,' wanders through the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In front of her favorite Botticelli she sees Alfred Eisenburg, with whom she once flirted 'for seven or eight minutes' and who was the last friend she ran into before her year's withdrawal. The plot does little more than follow Emma through her deliberate avoidance of him until, as she is leaving the museum, just as she has half wished all along, he bumps into her and asks

her out for a drink. Eisenburg knows of her 'collapse' and is sympathetic; Emma has heard that he, too, has been through a dreadful year, one of divorce and professional failure.

The story's subterranean current is a lucid exposition of Emma's inner terrors; in this respect it is a profoundly autobiographical work. In part, 'Children Are Bored on Sunday' represents a meditation on the inadequacy Stafford felt in the cocktail-party company of the 'Olympians'--the world of New York intellectuals ranging from the Rahvs to Sidney Hook to Mary McCarthy to Robert Lowell himself. The story also marks the first occasion on which Stafford wrote about her drinking. As Emma recalls the desperate weeks that led to her going into seclusion, the details mirror Stafford's own crack-up in the fall of 1946."

David Roberts
Jean Stafford: A Biography
(Little, Brown 1988) 276-77

"It was 'Children Are Bored on Sunday,' a story which so trenchantly analyzes the clash of cultures, the subtle differences between 'rubes' and 'intellectuals,' the perspectives of outsider and insiders, that launched Stafford's career at the *New Yorker*....

As associate editor of the *Partisan Review*, Delmore Schwartz was one of the youngest, most gifted, but most neurotic of the New York literati... The son of Jewish immigrants, Delmore Schwartz resembled those 'first generation metropolitan boys' whose familiarity with 'everything political and artistic and metaphysical and scientific, Stafford would write about in her short story 'Children Are Bored on Sunday'.... Just as she took pleasure in satirizing the Beacon Hill world of her socialite in-laws in *Boston Adventure*, so in her short story 'Children Are Bored on Sunday' she would seek revenge for the way the New York intellectuals had treated her by describing with deadly wit and irony their drunken parties at which absent friends were 'garroted'....

'Children Are Bored on Sunday' [is] an enormously accomplished short story that wittily caricatures the New York intellectuals, depicting them from the point of view of a vulnerable young woman who is recuperating from an illness, as Stafford herself was at that time. During the winter when the story was written, Stafford told Lowell that she had declined an invitation to the Rahvs' to meet Arthur Koestler because she 'had already been to that party upward of a hundred times.' In 'Children Are Bored on Sunday,' which takes its title from a popular French song, her protagonist, too, has scrupulously been avoiding parties given by the New York literati, parties crowded with composers and painters and writers who 'pronounced judgments in their individual argot, on Hindemith, Ernst, Sartre, on Beethoven, Rubens, Baudelaire, on Stalin and Freud and Kierkegaard, on Toynbee, Frazer, Thoreau, Franco, Salazar, Roosevelt, Maimonides, Racine, Wallace, Picasso, Henry Luce, Monsignor Sheen, the Atomic Energy Commission, and the movie industry.'

Convalescing from an unnamed illness, Emma recalls how she had succeeded in ingesting small quantities of food that autumn only by 'flushing the frightful stuff down with enormous drafts of magical, purifying, fulfilling applejack diluted with tepid water from the tap.' On this Sunday when the events of the story take place, she wanders from room to room of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and observes two 'first-generation Metropolitan' boys, products of a New York City upbringing, who spend their Sundays in museums. Though she believes that her own upbringing in a small town, amidst lilac bushes and hollyhocks, was in some ways superior to that of these urban children of immigrants, she nevertheless feels like a 'rube' in comparison to them and laments that her own childhood 'had not equipped her to read, or to see, or to listen, as theirs had done.'

Suddenly Emma comes upon a New York intellectual named Alfred Eisenburg, with whom she had flirted at one of those literary parties she now avoids. Terrified when she sees someone she had known before she became ill, she decides that 'today's excursion into the world had been premature.' The story concludes on a more positive note, however, for Emma recalls having been told that Alfred 'was having a very hard time of it with a divorce, with poverty, with a tempest that had carried off his job, and at last, with a psycho-analyst, whose fees he could not possibly afford.' Relieved to have discovered in this New York intellectual a fellow sufferer, someone whose pain is comparable to her own, she agrees to go have a

drink with him, 'a honeymoon of cripples,' a 'nuptial consummation of the abandoned,' hoping nevertheless that during their rendezvous in some unfashionable bar he will 'lay off the fashions of the day and leave his learning in his private entrepot.'

'Giving her protagonist the same name as Jane Austen's energetic but sometimes misguided protagonist, Stafford reveals in this story not only her identification with the unhappy Emma, but the way in which she herself had metamorphosed from a 'rube' to a highly sophisticated if self-educated writer, one who could introduce the names of Titian, Holbein, Rembrandt, Dali, Botticelli, Seurat, Vermeer, and Klee as well as Palestrina, Copland, Hindemith, Baudelaire, Sartre, and Racine into a single story. Although Stafford might have despaired of becoming a real intellectual and might have feared that she was a dilettante rather than a true scholar, in 'Children Are Bored on Sunday,' as William Leary has argued, she does not merely compile an impressive list of names but also skillfully uses the paintings she mentions to parallel the emotions of her protagonists."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman
Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart
(U Texas 1990) 135-36, 186-87

"The story seems to have had as its inspiration an episode in Stafford's personal history that involved him [Delmore Schwartz], and rough autobiographical contours are easy enough to discern. But Stafford's accomplishment was precisely to avoid confining her account to chatty memoir. It is true that its ingredients are among the most transparently autobiographical Stafford ever used. She wrote about literary people, which she did nowhere else in any detail except in 'An Influx of Poets,' and she often alluded to her breakdown. Her theme was close to home. In her protagonist Emma, she described a young woman's wary reemergence into New York life after an unspecified trauma, convinced that a 'rube' like her was always going to feel 'in alien corn' among her former intellectual set.

Yet it was far from a therapeutic confession of insecurity, sensitive though the subject must have been for Stafford that fall. Instead she managed to make it the occasion for, among other things, a detached portrait of her place in a larger literary and social setting. Stafford welded anecdotal fragments into an ironically accurate sociology of the New York literary milieu that both Schwartz and she knew well. What Stafford demonstrated in her story was the peculiar power of her outsider status to liberate her even as it isolated her. Neither an authentic intellectual nor really a rube, she could pass for either but wasn't herself fooled by her poses (in her fiction, at least, she wasn't fooled) and so could capture the view from both sides. The tension between the rustic and the sophisticate, the colloquial and the refined, had been a theme of her fiction since *Boston Adventure* and continued to be. In 'Children Are Bored on Sunday' she addressed it in more explicitly literary terms than she had before, at a time when her own literary direction and style were newly in question. Distinctly not a *New Yorker* staple, Stafford's story examined the intellectual insecurities that urbanity was designed to deny.

The factual source of her fiction was apparently to be found in the autumn of 1946, in a chance encounter with Delmore Schwartz on the day she entered Payne Whitney. As she wrote to Lowell, it crystallized her predicament perfectly and hauntingly: 'The day I came in here, I had gone out of my hotel to get a blouse from the cleaners and I ran into Delmore. I walked to Washington Square with him and we sat there for little while. He tried to find out where I had been and what I was doing, but I would not tell him. Would I have dinner with him that night? I said I was going somewhere at four o'clock. He said, 'Where are you going? Maybe you shouldn't go there. You have been among strangers for a long time.' I looked at him (he looked dreadful) and it seemed to me that he was *the* stranger, he was the embodiment of all the strangers I had been with for years and years.'

It was one of those events that seem too literary to belong to real life--and yet it did. Still, it was too literary for literature, as Stafford wisely saw. In the story she ended up writing, the portentous tone was gone, the event itself was stripped down and relegated to the last third of the story, and the moral was transmuted. The face of Alfred Eisenburg, the Delmore Schwartz character in the story, 'the last familiar face she had seen before she had closed the door of her tomb,' evoked more complicated reactions in Emma, her autobiographical protagonist, than melodramatic recoil.

Writing in a more explicitly comic vein than she had before, Stafford called on perfectly chosen details to convey Emma's fascinated estrangement from 'Eisenburg's milieu...of composers, of painters, of writers who pronounced judgments, in their individual argot, on Hindemith, Ernst, Sartre, on Beethoven, Rubens, Baudelaire, on Stalin and Freud and Kierkegaard, on Toynbee, Frazer, Thoreau, Franco, Salazar, Roosevelt, Maimonides, Racine, Wallace, Picasso, Henry Luce, Monsignor Sheen, the Atomic Energy Commission, and the movie industry.' Amid this intimidating company, Emma moved 'shaky with apprehension and martinis, and with the belligerence of a child who feels himself laughed at'--and she watched everything. Along with a child's belligerence, she had the childish innocence that Stafford had proclaimed was the key to irony and to a kind of naively devastating insight.

In the first of the story's three sections, Emma was the bemused observer, wandering one Sunday through the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where she unexpectedly caught sight of Alfred Eisenburg. An old friend, he had dropped from view for a long time, and now his presence thoroughly distracted her from the paintings. She was invaded by thoughts of him and his 'cunning' set, 'on their guard and highly civilized, learnedly disputing on aesthetic and political subjects'--just the people Emma had hoped to put out of her mind and her life. But on this day, though she was still shaky at even the thought of her old company, she was suddenly and newly detached, able to play anthropologist. In a central passage she dissected the main ritual of the clan--the cocktail party, at which merciless gossip and deadly drinks glowed, and all too often 'the cream of the enlightened was horribly curdled, and an argument would end, quite literally, in a bloody nose. Emma missed nothing:

'These cocktail parties were a modus vivendi in themselves for which a new philosophy, a new ethic, and a new etiquette had had to be devised. They were neither work nor play, and yet they were not at all beside the point but were, on the contrary, quite indispensable to the spiritual life of the artists who went to them. It was possible for Emma to see these occasions objectively, after these many months of abstention from them, but it was still not possible to understand them, for they were so special a case, and so unlike any parties she had known at home.'

The key to Emma's perspective was her origins, which emerged in the second section of the story, as Stafford took the sociology a step further. As Emma saw it, the fact that she had grown up in a house and played among lilacs instead of living in an apartment accounted for the chasm that divided her from the New York intellectuals. While she was innocently savoring the simple pleasures of experience, they were cultivating 'opinions on everything political and artistic and metaphysical and scientific.' Her insecurity had a satiric edge. The humble hick poked some fun at the New Yorkers' poses as she lamented her lack of them: 'Her pretensions needed brushing; her ambiguities needed to be cleaned; her evasions would have to be completely overhauled before she could face again the terrifying learning of someone like Alfred Eisenburg, a learning whose components cohered into a central personality that was called "intellectual".... This being an intellectual was not the same thing as dilettantism; it was a calling in itself.'

But the real interest of the story was that Emma's perspective was not simply that of the rustic innocent. As she acknowledged, 'she was not even a bona-fide rube,' which explained her keen insight into her erstwhile company. More important, her uneasy sophistication explained her identity crisis, and that was what, it turned out, this deceptively casual story was about. She blamed her education, which though it 'had never dissuaded her from her convictions,' had nonetheless 'ruined the looks of her mind--painted the poor thing up until it looked like a mean, hypocritical, promiscuous malcontent, a craven and apologetic fancy woman.' Stafford summed up Emma's dilemma with comic poignancy, mixing vernacular and formal styles: 'Neither staunchly primitive nor confidently *au courant*, she rarely knew where she was at. And this was her Achilles' heel: her identity was always mistaken, and she was thought to be an intellectual who, however, had not made the grade. It was no use now to cry out that she was not, that she was a simon-pure rube; not a soul would believe her. She knew, deeply and with horror, that she was thought merely stupid.'

In the final section Stafford revealed the depth of Emma's crisis, drawing on her own nightmarish autumn--'the months of spreading, cancerous distrust, of anger that made her seasick, of grief that shook her like an influenza chill, of the physical afflictions by which the poor victimized spirit sought vainly to wreck the arrogantly healthy flesh'--and on the encounter with Delmore. Emma had been suffering from psychological and spiritual woes far deeper than social insecurity--and so, she suddenly realized, had

Alfred, who had the telltale shaky look. She was seized with the desire to commune with him, but Stafford was strict about the limited terms of the rapprochement. Ravaged rube and intellectual could innocently share their loneliness over an afternoon drink, but they shouldn't imagine that neurosis was the ground for some ennobling union: 'If only it could take place--this honeymoon of the cripples, this nuptial consummation of the abandoned--while drinking the delicious amber whisky in a joint with a jukebox, a stout barkeep, and a handful of tottering derelicts; if it could take place, would it be possible to prevent him from marring it all by talking of secondary matters? That is, of art and neurosis, art and politics, art and science, art and religion?'

Wary of weightiness, Stafford studiously aimed at lyrical irony to culminate her story: 'To [Emma's] own heart, which was shaped exactly like a valentine, there came a winglike palpitation, a delicate exigency, and all the fragrance of all the flowery springtime love affairs that ever were seemed waiting for them in the whisky bottle.' It was a tone, not unlike the style of her Bard lecture, that seemed on the surface designed to deflect expectations of ambition. In her talk, she was in effect saying, I'm not the *PR* kind of critic, and she was right, she wasn't. Her story was a more complicated case. She was not writing mere pallid memoir, as Schwartz accused her. Yet her larger social portrait looked like a case perhaps of even more explicit co-optation: it was as though she were offering up her credentials for joining the *New Yorker* family in the very theme of her first story for the magazine--the witty evocation of a charming, not crude, anti-intellectual sensibility.

But that is to overlook the extent of Stafford's irony, which was trained as much on Emma as on the intellectuals. And it is to miss a dark undercurrent beneath the playful, agile surface. In writing about social poses, Stafford was treating not mere antics but deep anxieties about identity. Emma 'never knew where she was at,' Stafford wrote with disarming casualness, and skimmed over the specific cause of her protagonist's 'collapse.' But it was precisely the understated tone that helped convey just how precarious Emma's situation was, how unsure she was 'in the territory of despair' where the world and the self had become misaligned--and how comparably disoriented Alfred was, despite all his knowledge and confidence. Stafford's sociological tour de force unobtrusively proved to have spiritual implications. The same writer who showed herself acutely attuned to the subtlest social distinctions by which one claims one's place in the world also saw through them to the soul's abiding sense of homelessness. She looked into that darker realm in deceptively demure fashion--true to her Bard lecture's stricture against waxing 'hysterical and slovenly' in the face of confusion.

But the story was summarily dismissed by more than Schwartz: Stafford's *New Yorker* debut created a stir, according to her report to Peter Taylor. The move to the magazine was treated as something of an apostasy, as Taylor himself was to experience later. (At one point he responded firmly to Lowell's condescension: 'If you think your snide remarks about the *New Yorker* and its ruination of writers could affect me you need to come home and refresh your memory of your friends.... The trouble with most people is that they can't tell the difference between good and bad *New Yorker* writers.') Stafford's story seems to have elicited an especially vehement reaction from John Berryman, and she quavered some under the onslaught: 'John Berryman came to New York a few days after ["Children Are Bored on Sunday"] was published and spent one entire afternoon berating me for printing it. The cardinal sin was printing it in the *New Yorker*; it was, he said, the weakest story he had ever seen of mine; he said that I had no 'right' to print so 'lazy' a piece of work and that I should be perpetually ashamed of myself. It went on and on and on and as a result of it, I got terribly drunk. I thought, 'He is right and I must allow myself to be judged only by my peers and the compliments I get from people who are not my peers are meaningless, foolish and inaccurate.'

As for Schwartz, 'he announced that this was proof positive that I was going after middle-brow success and that presently I would turn into a second Fanny Hurst.' But Stafford was quickly bolstered by praise from two other peers, Taylor and Randall Jarrell, and her confidence in her independent course rallied--though she admitted that she wouldn't mind a little of the old company in her new surroundings, urging Taylor to submit work to *The New Yorker*: 'Please consider it: it would comfort me very much to have you as a co-author in the NYer and as an ally therefore, against my ex-friends and enemies like John Berryman.'

Ann Hulbert
The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford

"Jean Stafford wrote one of her most brilliant short stories dealing with a crippling retreat from life, 'Children Are Bored on Sunday' (1948). Her first *New Yorker* story and the title story of her first collection in 1953, this and her much later 'An Influx of Poets' would be her only attempts to fictionalize the literary world she and Robert Lowell had been a part of--and to document its destructive effects on a young woman during that period.

Not surprisingly, Stafford's inaugural appearance in the *New Yorker's* pages was greeted with derision by those very friends, such as John Berryman and Delmore Schwartz, who had attached themselves to the literati she excoriates in her story. These poets accused Stafford of slumming among the middlebrow writers and readers of the *New Yorker*. Thus, her dilemma after the story's publication ironically replicated the subtle insults her character Emma experiences at the hands of highbrow New Yorkers on the cocktail party circuit.

Though 'Children Are Bored on Sunday' can be compared to actual events, such as Stafford's alienated status among the New York intellectual crowd and her mental breakdown after the divorce from Lowell, the story is perhaps more basically a parable of the lost soul, the marginalized, the outsider, who simultaneously judges herself by the standards of the same world she rejects, and finds in a chance encounter on a Sunday afternoon another similarly wretched soul. Emma and a past acquaintance, Alfred Eisenberg, meet in the Metropolitan museum one cold Sunday by accident. They know each other from the New York social scene, though Emma is not a New Yorker. She thinks of herself as gauche, unsophisticated, and unintellectual. Both she and Alfred have just been through a nervous collapse--he from divorce and she from some unnamed cause. Their mutual refuge is drink. The story ends with the two of them going to a bar, like two lonely children, to commiserate and 'to marry their invalid souls for these few hours of painful communion...to babble with rapture that they were at last, for a little while, no longer alone.'

With Emma as its controlling consciousness, 'Children...' is neatly divided into three distinct sections and moves with grim relentlessness toward its surprisingly lyrical conclusion. Its primary tension emanates from the contrast Emma articulates when she sees Alfred and mentally relives her distance from him and the brittle, intellectual milieu they had once shared. When Emma first catches sight of Alfred as the story begins, she remembers his artificial, stylized world, a place where 'cunning guests, on their guard and highly civilized, learnedly disputed on aesthetic and political subjects,' seemingly unaware of the encroachments of spring outside the apartment window. Irresistibly awash in memories, Emma resents Alfred's appearance in this, her hiding place, not only because he is an unwelcome reminder of all she does not know about art but also because he conjures up a host of other faces and names from the past.

Following a mock-heroic-epic catalog of all the subjects these self-styled specialists pronounce judgments on, the story describes Emma's profound isolation as she is drawn back into Eisenberg's world: 'And she saw herself moving, shaky with apprehensions and martinis, and with the belligerence of a child who feels himself laughed at, through the apartments of Alfred Eisenberg's friends, where the shelves were filled with everyone from Aristophanes to Ring Lardner, where the walls were hung with reproductions of Seurat, Titian, Vermeer, and Klee, and where the record cabinets began with Palestrina and ended with Copland.'

The first section of Stafford's carefully plotted story ends with a microscopic examination of the cocktail party as drama, a vicious spectacle where hapless souls like Emma are alternately ignored and devoured by the participants, under whose thin veneer of civilization lurks a barely controlled savagery. These parties inevitably degenerate into gossip sessions fueled by alcohol and frequently punctuated by actual physical attacks, which the naive Emma finds it hard to reconcile with the guests' Olympian demeanor. This 'species' of partygoer shocks Emma, who believes 'urban equal[s] urbane, and ichor r[uns] in these Augustans' veins.' From her own Olympian height as detached ironic judge, Jean Stafford exposes the raw underside of a parasitic social organism.

The story's second section begins with Emma's reflections on the young boys she sees wandering through the museum. Alfred Eisenberg, she decides, would have been one of these 'first-generation metropolitan boy[s],' raised in an environment so exotic and alien that Emma can hardly imagine it. Watching the boys examine a suit of armor, Emma thinks back to her arrival in New York at the age of 20, when she is shocked to learn that not everyone had grown up reading Charles Dickens, as she had. These resolute urban intellectuals, in fact, grew up reading Pound's *Cantos*, playing hide-and-seek 'behind ash cans' instead of 'lilac bushes.' One of them 'had not heard a cat purr until he was twenty-five.' Emma, on the other hand, guiltily believes that '[h]er own childhood, rich as it seemed to her on reflection, had not equipped her to read, or to see, or to listen, as theirs had done; she envied them and despised them at the same time, and at the same time she feared and admired them.'

Clearly, Stafford is isolating two modes of relating to the world--the experiential and the intellectual--neither complete in itself. Emma's response to the masterpieces she views on the museum walls is sentient and aesthetic rather than intellectual: she is drawn to the horse's 'human and compassionate eyes' in Botticelli's *The Three Miracles of Zenobius*; she admires the peaches in the background of a Crivelli Madonna; Goya's 'little red boy' inspires in her only the pressing desire to go out immediately in search of a plump cat to stroke.' But Emma's education has made it difficult for her to play the genuine intellectual naif as others had done; instead, she must, college degree in hand, assume a false persona ill-suited to her real self. 'Neither staunchly primitive nor confidently *au courant*,' Stafford notes, '[Emma] rarely knew where she was at.'

This section ends with a passage William Leary sees as 'an unusual revelation of [Stafford's] bedrock philosophical position': 'Thus she continued secretly to believe (but *never* to confess) that the apple Eve had eaten tasted exactly like those she had eaten when she was a child...and that Newton's observation was no news in spite of all the hue and cry. Half the apples she had eaten had fallen out of the tree, whose branches she had shaken for this very purpose, and the Apple Experience included both the descent of the fruit and the consumption of it, and Eve and Newton and Emma understood one another perfectly in this particular of reality.'

Reduced to the same level of suffering humanity by the story's third section, Emma and Alfred finally meet as they leave the museum. Dropping all pretense, they greet each other as long-lost friends, children again, temporarily free to spend a winter Sunday together in New York away from the 'grownups.' Instantly '*en rapport*,' they understand their mutual addiction to alcohol as they wander off to a bar on Lexington Avenue where 'the peace pipe' awaits them. The lyrical conclusion of Stafford's story subverts the reader's expectation of a bleak ending. Invoking the image of a heart carved on a tree with the names Emma and Alfred inside, Stafford unites these two lonely souls in an illusory romantic moment in which 'all the flowery springtime love affairs that ever were seemed waiting for them in the whisky bottle.'

In perversely romantic language Stafford ends this story with an image of rebirth, imagining the outcome of Emma and Alfred's meeting as a child, a 'separate entity' spawned from this union of two lovers. Leaving the museum, they 'scrambled hastily toward this profound and pastoral experience.' But perhaps it is no accident that the last picture Emma sees is a Van Eyck diptych of the Judgment Day and the souls in Hell."

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 63-66

Michael Hollister (2020)