

ANALYSIS

"In the Zoo" (1953)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"The deaths of both their parents place the sisters in 'In the Zoo' (1953) in the hands of the paranoiac Mrs. Placer, the widow of a tubercular husband and a boardinghouse keeper. Grief-stricken for their parents and with no responsible relatives to offer them comfort, the girls are left to grow up 'like worms,' in a house 'steeped in...mists of accusation and hidden plots and double meanings...' The only comfort in their lives is their friendship with a drunkard Irishman who lives near the railroad tracks with a menagerie of animals. Mrs. Placer's greatest triumph over the sisters is turning the gentle dog that Mr. Murphy gives the girls into a killer that destroys one of his beloved capuchins. The sisters cope with their situation by adapting their behavior to the suspicions of Mrs. Placer, living 'in a mesh of lies and evasions, baffled and mean, like rats in a maze.'

As adults, they wonder why they had not fled their situation as soon as they were old enough to work. They realize, the narrator concludes, that Mrs. Placer had 'held us trapped by our sense of guilt. We were vitiated and we had no choice but to wait, flaccidly, for her to die.' The sisters as adults feel themselves at last free of the 'succubus' who had preyed on them. Their farewell remarks to each other, however, reveal that they have been permanently damaged by the suspicion and hostility toward other people that Mrs. Placer ingrained in them, even to the point of their unconsciously using her favorite phrase, 'I had to laugh,' to preface their spiteful remarks about the narrator's fellow passengers.

The horror of the girls' situation in 'In the Zoo' is unrelieved by the humor to be found in other Adams stories. In this story, even more than in the ones in which Emily and Jessie appear, the image of the young girl in the West that emerges is that of a human being who is powerless, who has few defenses, who exhibits some degree of self-hatred, who lives in a confined psychological and physical space, and whose actions are restricted to surviving in that space, rather than redefining it. When Stafford fled the West, she was no doubt pursued by the smothering image that she presents in the Adams stories.

'In the Zoo' contains some of those 'seeds of truth' from Stafford's life that indicate that the story has some autobiographical basis. The two sisters remember their lives with Mrs. Placer while sitting before the blind polar bear that actually once lived in the Denver Zoo. The sisters' situation parallels the real-life situation of Stafford and one of her sisters. The narrator, as Stafford did, has been on a visit to her sister, who lives as Stafford's sister did, across the Rockies from Denver in western Colorado. The sister has come to Denver with the narrator to see her off on her train east, as it is likely Stafford's own sister had done. It is also likely that Stafford and her sister on such an occasion would have reminisced about their lives growing up in a boardinghouse run by their own mother.

Given this revelatory 'seed,' Stafford's transformation of real life to art in the story reveals how deep ran the resentment and hatred of the real life she had led as the daughter of a boardinghouse keeper. One can speculate that she felt in her misery that she might as well have been an orphan. How much of her own feelings about her mother went into the portrait of Mrs. Placer --and of all the other landladies and boardinghouse keepers she painted so vilely--is impossible to evaluate, for Stafford wrote no nonfictional portrait of her mother."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh
Jean Stafford
(Twayne 1985) 23-25

"Of the three Adams [Colorado] stories published in 1952 and 1953, the darkest and most haunting is 'In the Zoo.' It appeared in the *New Yorker* in September of 1953 and subsequently received a three-hundred dollar first prize in the O. Henry Memorial Awards of 1955. Thanks to the fact that 'In the Zoo' has been

reprinted in the widely circulated *Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*, it is today perhaps the best known of Stafford's short stories. The narrator of 'In the Zoo' is an older incarnation of Polly Bay, the protagonist of 'The Liberation.' If Polly Bay has hopes of escaping physically and psychologically from Adams, the narrator of 'In the Zoo' is forced to acknowledge in middle age that even though she succeeded in leaving Adams many years earlier, the years of desperation that she spent there left a permanent mark on her psyche. Born in the East but orphaned when she was eight and her sister Daisy was ten, the narrator and her sister had been sent to live with the 'possessive, unloving, scornful, complacent' Mrs. Placer, a girlhood friend of their grandmother. As she and her older sister observe a blind polar bear in the Denver zoo during one of their infrequent meetings, they are both mournfully reminded of a man named Mr. Murphy who was their only friend during their childhood when they were exiled to Adams.

In this story, begun soon after Stafford visited her father in Hayden during the summer of 1951, it is the mother figure, Mrs. Placer, rather than the father figure, Mr. Murphy, who plays the role of a Dickensian villain. The operator of a boardinghouse, like Stafford's own mother, 'Gran' is forever dwelling on her own martyrdom and the slights she has had to endure. Life, according to Gran and her doleful boarders, is essentially a matter of being done in, let down, and swindled.' In the corrosive atmosphere of the boardinghouse, the narrator and her sister are taught by Gran to be suspicious of others. As they begin to comprehend how mean-spirited their foster mother is, they grow to despise this woman who constantly reminds them that she has 'sacrificed herself to the bone,' for them. Their only moments of happiness occur when they visit their friend Mr. Murphy, an alcoholic ne'er-do-well who plays solitaire all day and talks to a menagerie of bedraggled animals he has collected. When Mr. Murphy gives the girls a loving pup named Laddy, Gran appropriates the dog, renames him Caesar, and trains him to be a vicious cur who nips at the heels of strangers. The violence in the story escalates when Caesar kills Mr. Murphy's pet monkey, and Mr. Murphy, in turn, poisons Caesar.

At the story's conclusion, the narrator describes her trip back to the East after she has parted from her sister in Denver. She reveals that the attitude of mistrust instilled in her by Mrs. Placer has permanently altered her own perception of the world: she is suspicious of her fellow passengers on the train, and looking at the alfalfa fields through the train window, she imagines 'they are chockablock with marijuana.' As Joyce Carol Oates has pointed out, 'the story concludes with an extravagant outburst of paranoia that manages to be comic as well as distressing.' Just as Stafford recalled the bitter arguments of her own parents when she described the interminable wrangling of the Marburgs in *Boston Adventure*, so does she recreate her own feelings of horror and powerlessness during her childhood when she describes the reactions of the cringing narrator and her sister Daisy to the savage conflict between Mrs. Placer and Mr. Murphy, bitter antagonists who resemble her own mother and father. Sorrowfully remembering that her own beloved dog had been poisoned, that her mother had disliked the dog, that her father had often allied himself with her against her mother, she chose in this story to make the father figure, Mr. Murphy, a more sympathetic figure than the mother surrogate, Mrs. Placer. Convinced that her own upbringing had had a pernicious effect on her adult psyche, she created this brilliant, unforgettable, harrowing tale of childhood misery and adult regret."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman
Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart
(U Texas 1990) 240-42

"In the anti-pastoral Adams stories, Stafford's protagonists were passive creatures who couldn't fight back against the influences that oppressed them but could only try to flee. In 'In the Zoo' [1953] two middle-aged sisters, meeting in Denver, were suddenly overcome by memories of the dismal past they had spent fifty miles north in Adams, where their view of the world and of themselves had been eroded by Mrs. Placer, their foster mother. A Dickensian figure, she ran a boardinghouse and dedicated herself to proselytizing a view that echoed John Stafford's bleaker attitude, that 'life was essentially a matter of being done in, let down, and swindled'."

Ann Hulbert
The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford
(Knopf 1992) 302

"The most brilliant example of Jean Stafford's Adams [Colorado] stories with older protagonists is the story that received the O. Henry Prize, 'In the Zoo' (1955). Charlotte Goodman points out that this story was written during a creative burst of energy in Stafford's career right after her first two volumes of short stories were published in 1953: *Children Are Bored on Sunday* and *The Interior Castle*. Narrated by what Goodman calls an older version of Polly Bay in 'The Liberation,' 'In the Zoo' begins with two elderly sisters sitting in a Denver zoo, where they have met to see each other off, as they do after their periodic visits. The blind polar bear they are watching reminds them of Mr. Murphy, a childhood friend.

Thus begins a reminiscence of their lonely childhood as orphans raised by a mean-spirited, unloving foster mother, Mrs. Placer, in Adams, Colorado. They remember listening to Mrs. Placer and her boarders complaining about their miserable lives; they remember the dog Mr. Murphy gave them and how Mrs. Placer took him over and trained him to be mean and spiteful like herself; they remember the dog killing Mr. Murphy's monkey, after which Murphy poisoned the dog. Thereafter, Murphy gets older and sicker, and the girls are forbidden to see him. They grow up, their foster mother dies, and both sisters go their own way--one, Daisy, married and has two sons; the other, the narrator, never marries, and as the story progresses, her strident, whining tone begins to sound more and more like the embittered Mrs. Placer she can never forget.

This story uses a frame technique, literally beginning and ending 'in the zoo,' enclosing the past in what appears to be an equally grim present. This frame narrative also begins with the narrator ironically describing the zoo animals in distinctly human terms: she imagines that their little community here in the zoo is riddled with all the cruel social snobberies plaguing their human counterparts. Across from the blind polar bear is a cage of 'conceited monkeys' who scornfully note his behavior and that of his neighbors, the 'stupid, bourgeois grizzlies.' As they remark on the polar bear's resemblance to Mr. Murphy, a flood of memories returns, bringing with it images of the western town that haunts them: '[W]e are seeing, under the white sun at its pitiless meridian, the streets of that ugly town, its parks and trees and bridges, the bandstand in its dreary park...its mongrel and multitudinous churches, its high school shaped like a loaf of bread, the campus of its college, an oasis of which we had no experience except to walk through it now and then, eyeing the woodbine on the impressive buildings.'

Living in the shadow of this Dickensian stepmother who constantly reminds them of her sacrifices and who delights in finding examples of her 'solitary creed' that 'life was essentially a matter of being done in, let down, and swindled,' Daisy and her sister grow up lonely, isolated, and sensitive to the slightest wrongs done to them. In their childhood desperation the sisters find some escape in a precursor of the zoo where the adult sisters find themselves: Mr. Murphy's menagerie of a fox, a skunk, a parrot, a coyote, and two capuchin monkeys whose soulful glances recall a nearly human sorrow. But the focus of all their childhood affections is the puppy Mr. Murphy gives them.

In relentless detail Stafford documents how the embittered 'Gran' as Mrs. Placer has them call her, transforms this lovable, harmless animal into a growling, suspicious beast: 'Laddy' becomes 'Caesar,' a tyrant and bully of the weak, and an apt symbol of how Gran poisons everything within her grasp. When Caesar kills Mr. Murphy's monkey, Murphy vows revenge, and the very next day poisons the dog. This grotesque scenario forms the climax of the inner narrative--reinforcing, as Daisy's sister narrates from the perspective of maturity, the sisters' utter powerlessness in the face of such unremitting cruelty. With this example of animalistic behavior, it is no surprise that, as the narrator remarks, she and her sister 'lived in a mesh of lies and evasions, baffled and mean, like rats in a maze.' Dehumanized by their surroundings, thwarted in their efforts to rise above this crippling environment, the sisters often stare at the massive mountains circling the town and covet their aloofness.

As the story moves toward its bitter conclusion, Stafford makes it clear that while the sisters may have separated themselves geographically from their nightmarish childhood, emotionally they are still trapped there--to an extent even they do not realize. As the sisters prepare to leave, the dialogue they exchange with each other replicates in tone and expression Gran's conversations with her boarders. They complain that the train conductors serve widows and spinsters last; Daisy notices a woman 'nab the redcap [her sister] had signaled to'; Daisy's sister suspects the porter of having designs on her luggage; and the alfalfa fields she sees from her train she is certain must be full of marijuana. They seem willing to concede that 'life [is] essentially a matter of being done in, let down, and swindled.' As Ann Hulbert notes, 'In the Zoo,' unlike the

Emily stories, 'reversed the Vanderpool plot line of progress toward healthy maturation.' Instead, she continues, what Stafford dramatizes is 'an insidious destruction of spirit that rendered her characters ...anxious souls ill equipped to face the world'."

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 52-54

Michael Hollister (2020)