

ANALYSIS

"Life Is No Abyss" (1952)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"Cantankerous, and sadistic, eighty-year-old Isobel Carpenter, in 'Life Is No Abyss' (1952), spitefully lives in the poorhouse in order to cause as much pain as possible to her Cousin Will for losing her fortune in bad investments. Isobel is also a spinster, she proclaims, 'I was too good to get married.... I was too good and too rich.' Her insistence on staying in the poorhouse, despite numerous and frequent offers by various wealthy cousins for her to live in their homes, contrasts grotesquely--even evilly--with the hopelessness of those who are there because they have no choice.

In the large ward which Lily Holmes, Isobel's twenty-year-old cousin, can view from Isobel's bedside, 'every bed--and there were four long rows of them--was occupied by an ancient, twisted woman; the humps of their withered bodies under the seersucker coverlets looked truncated and deformed like amputated limbs or mounts of broken bones, and the wintry faces that stared from the stingy pillows had lost particularity; among them it would have been impossible to determine which was primarily bleak or mean or brave or imbecile, for age and humiliation had blurred the predominant humor and had all but erased the countenance.' Closer by, Isobel's roommate Viola, a blind, perhaps mentally defective, woman presents to Lily a 'generic face...a parody, the scaffolding of ageless bone; it was an illustration, a paradigm of total, lifelong want.'

Lily, an orphan, penniless herself, but a ward of Cousin Will, is taunted by Isobel that she too will wind up in the poorhouse: 'The lack of money is everything... The lack of money is the eternal punishment.' Isobel's total disregard of the genuine pain and suffering of the other inmates of the institution is revealed in her taunt. Lily, who has felt herself 'drowning' as Isobel has dispassionately described the screams of dying old people, turns finally on Isobel and in doing so accurately describes the old woman: 'You are a vulture! You haven't got a drop of love in you!' Privileged herself, however, Lily's thoughts of the paradoxical situation she has viewed between her hateful, spiteful old cousin and her roommate Viola, whom Lily thinks is the 'only person who has love...who can't take anything and can't give anything,' are rapidly erased by the sight of her favorite beau waiting for her return. Life is, after all, no abyss--for the privileged few."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh
Jean Stafford
(Twayne 1985) 75-76

"Among Stafford's stories that were published in 1952 and 1953 was 'Life Is No Abyss,' which appeared in the *Sewanee Review* in July of 1952. This story probably was a favorite of hers since she later chose to read it when she gave a public reading at the...Poetry Center in New York in 1967. Somewhat reminiscent of Welty's story in *A Curtain of Green* called "A Visit of Charity,' a short story that also describes the visit of a young female protagonist to a public institution in which the elderly and infirm are incarcerated, 'Life Is No Abyss' depicts the visit that twenty-year-old Lily pays to the poorhouse to see her octogenarian cousin, a bitter, cantankerous, and impoverished daughter of a Boston judge.

Once well-to-do, Cousin Isobel had foolishly entrusted her fortune to her cousin Will, and he 'madly and instantly' had 'thrown her fortune to the four winds,' leaving her penniless. Resembling one of the feisty elderly protagonists of Mary Wilkins Freeman, but somewhat less sympathetically drawn, Cousin Isobel exacts her revenge on the cousin who ruined her by making him feel guilty about her present state. Refusing the offers of various relatives to give her a home, Isobel prefers to feed upon her own wrath in the squalid surroundings she has chosen. Stafford unsparingly depicts how hateful the vindictive Isobel becomes when she is reduced to poverty. Nevertheless, morbidly in fear of being destitute herself, Stafford

probably concurred with the sentiments voiced by her elderly protagonist, who says fiercely, "The lack of money is everything... The lack of money is eternal punishment."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman
Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart
(U Texas 1990) 238

"Was there any escape from this vision of life as a divided self, at once tyrant and victim, at the mercy of an unappeasable hunger for love, or at least for some acknowledgment of one's existence? That was the question Stafford addressed in two other stories written around this time, both of them about the fate of older characters, neither of which made its way into *The New Yorker*. Her answers were far from heartening, as Katharine White's reaction to 'Life Is No Abyss' (which eventually appeared in the *Sewanee Review* in the summer of 1952) suggested. White had clearly discussed the idea of the story--a girl's confrontation with two crones in a poorhouse--with Stafford before. 'As you described your actual visit to me,' White wrote, 'your compassion, of course mixed with distaste and horror, came through strongly. If this compassion doesn't register somehow, one can't help wondering why the story was written.'

But White failed to understand that precisely the point of the story was to convey spiritual terror at the loveless face of existence as revealed in the two old women. One of them had turned against her relatives in a rage of vengeful sadomasochism. The other, blind and witless, was cut off from the world and consumed by an 'empty ecstasy.' Stafford described that ecstasy in a passage reminiscent of William James's appalling image in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* of an epileptic idiot in an asylum, an image that overwhelmed him with 'a horrible fear of my own existence. Stafford's old woman was equally horrifyingly, vacant: 'In that hideous grin and that convulsive dance and that moan of bliss, she had demonstrated something sheer and inhuman and unnamable.... There had been no mistaking it: the look on the thinly covered skull had been one of white-hot transport, but what emotions had generated it? Hope? Gratitude for the heartening assurance that life was no abyss? A desire for love? Could there be in that travailing length of blue flesh and devious bone a longing...? If there was, it was too terrible to contemplate.'

And yet by comparison to the other crone, who was perversely settling her scores with the world, this abandoned soul 'who can't take anything and can't give anything' seemed to inhabit a 'state of grace,' however terrifying. The only escape from the cruel complexity of passion, Stafford suggested, was a pure, detached irrationality. Or else a pure, detached rationality, the alternative she explored in the ironically titled 'I Love Someone'."

Ann Hulbert
The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford
(Knopf 1992) 276-77

"Another look at old age and its afflictions, 'Life Is No Abyss' takes place within the walls of a New England nursing home in a muted winter landscape. But though its external landscape remains hazy, this story lays bare the aristocratic pretensions and mindless prejudices of Isobel Carpenter, the Boston octogenarian who claims to have been incarcerated by her Cousin Will in this shabby poorhouse. Her 20-year-old orphaned Cousin Lily visits one day, taking Will's place, and the ensuing confrontation between youth and old age takes place.

Reveling in her self-imposed martyrdom, Isobel is an inveterate snob, icily class-conscious, who passes judgment on the grim public institution, the doctors, the food--but most bitingly on her less fortunate inmates and their various afflictions. She is merciless as she makes the poorhouse a microcosmic representation of the decidedly hierarchical world she was born into. She separates herself from 'the others' who rave, moan, babble, and eventually die, while Lily remembers her Cousin Isobel in happier days, when Isobel's father, Judge Carpenter, was alive and they lived in splendor in an elegant North Shore summer home.

What Lily sees as well are images of twisted, deformed old age that seem to mock her youth and beauty: 'Lily could see into the large ward, where every bed...was occupied by an ancient, twisted woman; the humps of their withered bodies under the seersucker coverlets looked truncated and deformed like

amputated limbs or mounds of broken bones, and the wintry faces that stared from the stinky pillows had lost particularity.... [A]ge and humiliation...had all but erased the countenance.' Like Rose Fabrizio, or Fanny in *A Winter's Tale*, Lily has a sobering vision of what the future may hold for her, as she witnesses from a comfortable distance the bitterness and isolation of old age. Her errand of mercy has brought her face to face with poverty, disease, and dementia--a spectacle played out against the hauntingly ironic refrain of 'Life Is No Abyss,' a popular song blaring from a nearby radio. The story ends with Lily feeling isolated not only by her youth but by her failure to see how and why this family, as her Cousin Augusta protests, can still love the embittered old woman who refuses to be rescued from her prison. 'Repudiat[ing] her hypocritical family blood,' Lily gratefully escapes into the arms of her waiting boyfriend.

In a *Holiday* magazine essay called 'New England Winter,' written two years after 'Life Is No Abyss,' Jean Stafford describes the stern beauty of a New England winter and evokes both its rigors and its blessings. Significantly, she relates this frozen landscape to 'the adversities and tribulations' of the Pilgrims of 300 years ago, thus placing her recurring setting in an explicit historical context. Jean's descriptions of the isolating winters in Damariscotta become emblematic of the disenchantment all such visions ultimately suffer. Her modern-day pilgrims seem to live in a world similarly threatening and unknown--fated to fall short of their illusions."

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 28-29

The Feminist critics continue to overlook, or disregard, the Christian implications in Stafford's fiction: Cousin Isobel is an atheist, stating that "Easter had had no meaning since the year one." This is ironic, since her last name is Carpenter, a name used in literature to evoke Christ the carpenter. If she was a Christian, she would forgive Will for losing all her money and accept the charity of Cousin Augusta and go and live with her and her husband Roger. Having no charity herself, it is ironic when she shows her attendant a picture of herself in costume for a Charity Ball and asks the girl if she has noticed what she wears to her "daily Charity Ball," indicating that Isobel has always been interested in her appearance rather than in reality, and also that she actually is enjoying the poorhouse while pretending to Will that it is all horrible. The unforgiving patrician Isobel is guilty of the root sin, the original sin--Pride. Her pride and desire for revenge have given her a "suicidal gloat," a masochistic selfishness that has turned her into a cruel "vulture," as Lily says. In her "deviltry" she has damned herself.

Ironically, Isobel is more blind than the blind woman, who has "inner sight" and can enjoy her radio. Cousin Augusta is able to love Isobel despite everything evil she has become, displaying the charity and hospitality of a true Christian: "Money *isn't* everything!" Lily's name evokes Christ's promise of rebirth and eternal life, but she is young and unforgiving and would send Isobel to an insane asylum. She is in romantic love with Tucky but is not spiritual enough to love in the Christian sense of "agape." At least Lily is able to see that, ironically, the blind woman Viola sees more than Isobel: "There's only one person who has love, she thought, and that's Viola." The one who can love is in a "state of grace."

Michael Hollister (2020)