

ANALYSIS

"Polite Conversation" (1949)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"'Polite Conversation' (1949) is a thinly fictionalized account of Stafford's relationships with one set of her neighbors in Damariscotta Mills. She and Lowell (who appear as Margaret and Tommy Heath in the story) lived across a narrow road from an Episcopalian bishop's widow and her 'rambunctious' brood of grown and half-grown children. When she could no longer find excuses, Stafford would give in to the widow's invitations to tea, where they were often joined by an Episcopalian nun. 'Polite Conversation' immortalizes the widow as Mrs. Wainright-Lowe and the nun as Sister Evelyn. Stafford is particularly cruel in describing Eva, one of the Wainright-Lowe children, home on summer vacation from her teaching job in Salt Lake City, who 'gurgled like a stomach' after being applauded for her well-known love of children.

The story satirizes the small-mindedness of Sister Evelyn and Mrs. Wainright-Lowe, the intensity of their concentration on their own village matters, the inanity of their conversation, and their inability to understand the Heaths' unwillingness (because they are writers and because they are trying to work) to join in all their projects thought up by the Wainright-Lowes. Tommy Heath is impervious to them: 'he had irrefutably replied [to Margaret] that he would not go today or any other day, because he was an eccentric.' But Margaret experiences the frustration of being sufficiently manipulated by the ladies to make her feel guilty for not complying with their wishes. She is helpless against them because of their inability to recognize the validity of any kind of life other than their own."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh

Jean Stafford

(Twayne 1985) 62-63

"The obligatory social visits came to weigh on Stafford's spirit. Lowell inevitably barricaded himself in the upstairs study and refused to deal with the neighbors, while Jean trudged off to teas alone. Her deft short story 'Polite Conversation' chronicles these ordeals by boredom. Nancy Booth, one of the six children of the bishop's widow, was a college student in 1945. The model for the girl who 'gurgled like a stomach' in 'Polite Conversation,' she remembers Stafford sitting on the stool in her mother's kitchen, turning anecdotes about the townspeople into hilarious stories. Several times Stafford accused Mrs. Booth of deliberately misplacing her drink."

David Roberts

Jean Stafford: A Life

(Little, Brown 1988) 231

"In her humorous short story, 'Polite Conversation,' Jean Stafford describes how a couple who are both writers deal with their neighbors. Margaret Heath makes 'polite conversation' with a bishop's widow who has eleven children and with an Anglican nun who frequently visits 'her truculently unwell mother in an ancestral dwelling...at the top of the hill.' Listening to the women gossip about people in the town as they make plans for various social activities, Margaret Heath looks with longing at her house across the road and pictures her husband 'lying on his couch reading either the memoirs of Saint-Simon or the New English Dictionary, while she, poor martyr, listened to these hell-for-leather crusaders scheming and facetiously arguing.' No doubt Stafford's neighbors recognized themselves immediately in this story so closely paralleling her own life in Damariscotta Mills."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman

Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart

(U Texas 1990) 153-54

"In 'Polite Conversation,' Stafford took an earlier chapter of her marriage as the occasion for lighter social comedy and for experimentation with dialogue. Her protagonists were the Heaths, a young literary

couple newly settled in Maine who struggled only half successfully to avoid the insistent social overtures of the local folk. As a letter several years earlier to Cecile Starr from Damariscotta Mills shows, Stafford was writing this one directly from life: 'To be quite frank, I have reached the age when I do not want to meet any new people. This appears quite hard for certain characters around here to believe and we are continually being summoned to swimming, dancing, cocktail and dinner parties and as you may well imagine, Cal is always extremely difficult and either makes me make up some horrendous lie or makes me go alone with an equally horrendous excuse for him.'

The real interest of the story was Margaret Heath's ambivalence as she endured tea with the local ladies. She staunchly defended the reclusiveness of her husband, Tommy, yet there was also a part of her, as there was of Stafford, that agreed with her neighbor's exclamation: 'I think Tommy is gravely mistaken if he thinks one can live by art alone. But I daresay he would call *me* bourgeois for posing that question!'

The choice between isolation and mingling posed in the stories was not clear-cut. On the one hand, retreat seemed to promise self-sufficient calm, whereas sociability involved self-compromising struggle. On the other hand, there was something ominous about the passivity implied by detachment--a sense that escape into the lonely psyche might well not offer peace or creativity. But Stafford kept these stories light, playing on the social ironies of her theme rather than exploring darker psychological implications. They apparently were not a struggle to write, and *The New Yorker* was pleased to print them."

Ann Hulbert
The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford
(Knopf 1992) 273-74

"'Polite Conversation' focuses on a social ritual expected of new residents in this insular New England town--a teatime visit. Margaret Heath visits Mrs. Wainwright-Lowe for tea while her husband stays at home in his study to write. Margaret is a writer too, but her husband has foisted off all the social duties on her. The story recounts one such humorous duty call, based on Jean's actual experience in Damariscotta Mills when Lowell casually left all the socializing to her while he remained isolated in his study.

Stafford captures in this story the pointless, boring conversations she must have suffered through in order not to be labeled antisocial by the locals: talk of aristocratic family trees, inherited furniture, interior decorating schemes, flower gardens. Throughout, Mrs. Wainwright-Lowe, a bishop's widow with 11 children and an indefatigable social conscience, chastises Margaret for the isolated existence she and her husband have chosen and for their failure to join with the local Anglican community in its evangelical activities: 'Margaret vividly recalled the scenes of January, when she and Tommy had been made to feel irresponsible and stonehearted because they would not give up their Saturdays to direct the games of sullen children who wholly hated this Christian intrusion upon their privacy.'

Yet beneath the idle banter lies a central tension in Stafford's and indeed any writer's life: between involvement with the world and withdrawal from it. Mrs. Wainwright-Lowe articulates the problem midway through the story when she maintains, 'I think Tommy is gravely mistaken if he thinks one can live by art alone.' Margaret herself is ambivalent. On the one hand, she realizes the need to be a part of the intimate community of this isolated village; on the other, she loathes the bourgeois sound of the arguments she uses to persuade her recalcitrant husband to relent."

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 21-22

Michael Hollister (2020)