

ANALYSIS

"The Bleeding Heart" (1948)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"In the stories involving a clash of cultures, Miss Stafford is ironic and disciplined, always giving her loyalties conditionally in recognition of the universal fallibility of man. 'The Bleeding Heart' is a plant in the story of that name, but the title refers also to a Mexican girl who deludes herself, idealizes the New England character, and then must face the realities of an impoverished and decadent New Englander, who is himself something of a bleeding heart. This story, where the irony compels out perception of the difference between reality and appearance, is one of the few that presents a fully rounded form. Many are wanting in a design for the whole that gives the aesthetic satisfaction of completion. Few are astir with the moral overtones of Miss Stafford's imagination when it burns most brightly."

Chester E. Eisinger
Fiction of the Forties
(U Chicago 1963) 306-07

"After failing--in her eyes--as a teacher, Stafford fled east. In 'The Bleeding Heart' (1948) Stafford reveals through the character of the young Mexican woman Rose Fabrizio the extent of her own feelings of isolation as an outsider in New England even as she had achieved her desire to get there. Rose, at twenty-one, has come to New England from the West, because 'as far back as she could remember, she had been driven to get away, far away, and never go home again...' Despite the misery that she feels half the time because she is an outsider, she nonetheless takes great joy in the complete difference from her home that she finds in New England....

Unfortunately, Stafford's stereotyping of the 'Mexicans' is almost vicious. What is important is that Stafford chooses to allow her character such a distorted misapprehension of the relative validity of the two places and the two peoples. Rose's hatred of her origins must indicate a hatred of herself. It certainly includes a hatred of her father, whom she considers 'stupid and cynical' and about whom 'she did not know one good thing.' She remembers him wearing 'a black coat-sweater from J. C. Penney's and a sporty gray cap and Army store pants and miner's shoes studded with cleats,' carrying with him 'the putrefied smell of sugar beets' even after his rare baths. When she is especially despondent, she thinks, 'If my father had not been a low person and if he had loved me, I would not have grown up in poverty and I would not have hated him so much that I had to go away from home to the first job that came along...'"

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh
Jean Stafford
(Twayne 1985) 49-50

"One of Stafford's short stories, 'The Bleeding Heart,' describes the experiences of a newcomer to Concord. Recalling her own feelings of alienation during the brief period that she had lived alone in a rented room in Concord, Stafford wrote movingly of the loneliness of Rose Fabrizio, a Mexican girl from the West. Envyng the people who were lucky enough to have been born and raised in this tranquil and quaint New England town, Rose longs to be adopted by a New Englander. As John Stafford liked to do, Rose's father wears 'miner's shoes studded with cleats that tore up the linoleum and made a harsh racket.' As Ethel Stafford had done, Rose's mother feels like a social outcast and broods about 'the impertinence of a salesgirl in the five and ten.' And Rose, a college graduate, regrets, as Stafford did, that she had not gone to Radcliffe and considers her own education to have been a 'shabby, uninteresting affair.' What Stafford reveals as well, however, is Rose's gradual realization that even in this New England town everything is not as idyllic as she had first imagined it to be. Nevertheless, Rose cannot help comparing Concord to the dreary town in the West where she grew up....

Rose Fabrizio...lives alone in a rented room in Concord, Massachusetts, and dreams of being adopted by an elderly gentleman she sees in the reading room of the public library. However, her illusions are shattered when she discovers how grotesque his life really is. His neck is disfigured by an ugly wen, and he lives with his senile mother and her malevolent parrot in rooms that smell of ordure. When he invites Rose to a movie, she flees in panic from the 'elderly roue' who has asked her to call him 'Daddy'."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman
Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart
(U Texas 1990) 89-90, 196

"Two stories were published in the fall [1948], 'The Bleeding Heart' in *Partisan Review* and 'A Summer Day' in *The New Yorker*. Both were tales of dislocation in which Stafford chose protagonists far removed from herself--a Mexican girl from the West transplanted to Concord, Massachusetts, and an eight-year-old Cherokee Indian sent from Missouri to Oklahoma--whose travails nonetheless struck close to home. They were stories of orphanhood, which was clearly on Stafford's mind, and the conclusions were bleak. Rose Fabrizio, who dreamed of being adopted by an elderly New England man, was profoundly disillusioned when she glimpsed his sordid life. Poor Jim Littlefield's arrival at a grim orphanage, full of sick children, was even more terrifying: dreaming of escape, he succumbed to a deathlike sleep in the heat."

Ann Hulbert
The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford
(Knopf 1992) 263

"'The Bleeding Heart' sets up its contrast between East and West in the first paragraph when we learn that Rose Fabrizio is a Mexican girl from the West transplanted to New England to work in a girls' boarding school as secretary to the headmistress. Miss Talmadge misses no opportunity to remind Rose of her undistinguished origins, which she vaguely imagines connected to 'cigar store Indians' and 'clumps of sage.' The pristine setting of this small New England town (probably modeled on Concord, where Stafford briefly lived) entrances Rose as she compares its 'venerable graveyards' and 'imposing trees' to her barren, sterile western town, composed of dingy pool halls, beer parlors, and hotels whose windows were adored with sweet potato vines planted in jam cans. In contrast, Rose notes that 'the people here in this dignified New England town, shabby as they might be, wore hats and gloves at all hours...and appeared moral, self-controlled, well-bathed, and literate.'

Desperate to erase her childhood out West in a town largely Mexican, Rose constructs an alternative text for her life by secretly choosing as her foster father a handsome, distinguished man she sees in the library. Her real parents are still alive, but her memories of them--especially of her 'stupid,' 'cynical' unwashed father in his army surplus clothes--are bitter and spiteful. Rejecting her shabby past and embracing what she feels is a much more desirable present, Rose dreams of adoption and tries to remake herself in the image of a proper New England daughter. She reads Emerson's 'Self-Reliance' to soothe her restless spirit.

Predictably, illusion and reality meet in the second half of the story when Rose delivers a bleeding heart plant from the headmistress to a sick old woman and discovers that this woman's unmarried son is her romanticized foster father. In a macabre sickroom scene replete with an obscene, squawking parrot, a senile, embittered old woman who can only communicate in nouns and pronouns--"Tea!" "Toast!" "Me!"--and her leering, pathetic son, Stafford evokes a family dynamic as grotesque as Rose's own. With deft touches she describes a grim parody of a New England tea, worlds away from Roses' dream of lace doilies and aristocratic interiors: 'On the tray were a plate of English muffins and a jar of peanut butter and one of the marmalade and a store-bought pound cake and a dish of pickled peaches. There were a can of evaporated milk and a tin of bouillon cubes.' As the old woman drinks bouillon she thinks is tea, Rose wonders how and if she will ever be able to forget this scene of naked loneliness. She rejects Mr. Benson's pitiful attempt to have her call him 'Daddy,' aware that the relationship he proposes is not the parental one she had desired. In the last scene Stafford has Benson reveal to Rose that his yellow silk ascot hides an ugly wen.

Seeking to authenticate herself, Rose Fabrizio is one of Stafford's lonely, alienated young women--reminiscent of Sonie Marburg in *Boston Adventure*--who imagine a radically different life for themselves

and are inevitably disappointed. Jean Stafford looked old age, illness, and death squarely in the face and gave them imaginative power in her short fiction."

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 26-28

Michael Hollister (2020)