ANALYSIS

"The Captain's Gift" (1946)

[aka "The Present"]

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"In three stories of elderly women, Stafford explores the results of both willful innocence and willful malevolence. In 'The Captain's Gift' (1946) Stafford writes of the folly or perhaps the evil of a willful state of innocence which ignores evil. Mrs. Chester Ramsey, 'an innocent child of seventy-five,' resists change of all kinds. She refuses to move from her house on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, although it has been condemned by the fire department and is surrounded by slums. She dresses as her mother dressed a generation before, an eccentricity that sometimes she feels renders her 'invisible' to the anonymous and motley crowd that throngs the once elegant square on which she lives. Above all, she refuses to recognize that World War II is being fought. She is unmoved by this cataclysmic fact despite her correspondence with several young men who are fighting in Europe and the reality that all her children and grandchildren are involved in some way in the war effort.

Mrs. Ramsey has lost all trace of any physical beauty, but she is known for her charm, which brings frequent visitors to her unsuitable house. The charm lies in 'her tenderness and pity, her delicate and imaginative love, her purity that makes her always say the right thing.... She has neither enemies or critics, so that like an angel she is unendangered by brutality or by difficult situations.' Mrs. Ramsey's 'purity' and innocence, however, do at last provoke brutality, from her favorite grandson, Arthur, who has been fighting in Europe. While he has sent her many affectionate letters and says he knows he will find her unchanged when he returns, he finally writes from Germany that he is sending her 'the best present' he has yet found for her. When it arrives, it proves to be a long golden braid, cut from the nape of a girl's neck. Shaken, Mrs. Ramsey says aloud, 'How unfriendly, Arthur,' but through the 'present' his message comes to her, 'There's a war on, hadn't you heard?'"

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh
Jean Stafford
(Twayne 1985) 73-74

"'The Present'...appeared in her *Collected Stories* under the title 'The Captain's Gift'.... 'The Present' was...about the barbarity of war, but here Stafford had mastered an extraordinarily polished irony. Recounted in the present tense (one of only two such stories in her *Collected Stories* volume), the story was a mixture of familiar themes presented in the compacted Jamesian style that came to characterize much of her fiction. The protagonist, Mrs. Chester Ramsey, was another in an expanding gallery of elderly characters whose salient quality was their resistance to change. Miss Pride-like, she immured herself in her brownstone in New York, unaware of the world and above all of the war: 'The ivory tower in which she lives is impregnable to the ill-smelling, rude-sounding, squalid-looking world which through the years has moved in closer and closer and now surrounds her on all sides.' Stafford's irony was effective because Mrs. Ramsey's delusion was not simply folly by any means. It was presented as a dignified aesthetic reaction to a sordid reality. Just as the appeal of Boston snobbery was clear in *Boston Adventure*, the allure of the widow's self-protective cocoon was obvious.

Yet its inadequacy was also obvious, and the suspense of Mrs. Ramsey's inevitable disillusionment propelled the plot. Her ultimate shock was, as Caroline Gordon judged in a letter to Stafford about the story, vivid in precisely the right way: Mrs. Ramsey's favorite grandson, a young captain off fighting in Europe who thus far had faithfully and cheerfully kept in touch with her, sparing her the facts of combat, one day sent her a fateful package. When the old woman eagerly opened it, out fell a thick, blond braid. 'You have concentrated on that golden braid,' Gordon commended Stafford. 'It's very real and its reality invokes overtones, makes the story go on sounding in the head, conveys, I feel, all the implications you want conveyed.' It was a symbol, yet it was also a particular object, 'cut off cleanly at the nape of the neck,' as Stafford described it. 'It is the sensuous aspect of the braid that does it,' Gordon told her, and went on to set that praise in the context of a more sweeping criticism:

'What I am trying to say...is that I don't think you observe things closely enough, or perhaps it's that you don't observe them passionately enough to render them the way I like to see them rendered.... I realize that fiction, considered from the standpoint of technique, is, after all, only the combination of long and short views. You do the long view so well. Those long sentences, with their sudden shifting of view point, their detachment from the scene, do exactly what you want them to do. It's your short views I criticize. They aren't sensuous enough. The rhetoric that you use so well in the long views often creeps in and blurs things.... But Cal knows all this so well and can put it to you so much better than I can.'

It was a telling criticism in general, comparable to Tate's emphatic teaching to Lowell that poetry was *'ideas* tested by experience, by *direct apprehension*.' Lowell too was seduced by rhetoric, but at the same time he inclined--perhaps more than his mentor--to the fiercely concrete over the abstract. And in the poems he was working on in 1945, the emphasis was increasingly on experience, as he winnowed out the more intellectual poems in *Land of Unlikeness*, revised the ones that Tate had judged 'richer in immediate experience,' and wrote new poetry more firmly grounded in fact. Stafford's progress too had been steadily away from 'the words, merely' difficulty of her early unpublished efforts. In her stories of 1944 and 1945, which introduced her major protagonists--disoriented old women, lonely young women, sensitive but stalwart children, uneasy expatriates--she was taming some of the Proustian ornamentation that had cluttered parts of *Boston Adventure*. She was perfecting her gift for the well-selected detail with symbolic resonance and she was working at mixing more colloquial cadences into her Jamesian style."

Ann Hulbert
The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford
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"Secluded in her New York townhouse, Mrs. Chester Ramsey in 'The Captain's Gift' (1946) is 'an innocent child of seventy-five,' for whom the outside world has grown increasingly unreal. Seemingly oblivious to the passing of time, she lives in one of the few private houses left in her decaying inner-city neighborhood, ensconced amid Victorian antiques and family portraits, imagining the days when she walked among "French nursemaids,' 'English prams,' and 'little girls in sailor hats.' She masks the unpleasant food smells from the street with 'potpourri' and 'lemon oil,' judging the increasingly ethnic population outside her apartment window crude and animalistic.

But the world fails to see Mrs. Ramsey too: on the days when she sits outside dressed in clothes distinctly of another generation, the crowds pass her by as though she were 'invisible.' Blissfully untouched by sorrow and loss, Mrs. Ramsey elicits no harsh responses from the world, because among its clearly delineated sights and smells she has become a nonentity. Unaware that she has become a bland anachronism, she retreats from the shabby, teeming streets into her placid environment, proclaiming, 'I have never liked change, and now I am too old for it.'

But the world has indeed changed, as the story makes clear from its first sentence: 'Though it is wartime, it is spring, so there are boys down in the street playing catch.' Though many of the young men who once came to tea at Mrs. Ramsey's have since left for overseas, though she dutifully copies their military titles and serial numbers clearly onto the letters she writes, though her daughter is a Red Cross supervisor and her son is a military attaché, she projects a stubborn unwillingness to acknowledge this dark side of humanity so jarringly out of place in her calm, harmonious surroundings. The most incongruous note in this unreal world Mrs. Ramsey inhabits is that fact that her deceased husband was a heavily decorated general whose final portrait depicts a man as 'keen-eyed' and 'imposing' as his wife is cloudy and insubstantial.

Retreating into a twilight world of buried consciousness, the general's widow is clearly ill-equipped to face the startling conclusion of the story. Thinking back on her favorite grandson's childhood, Mrs. Ramsey vividly remembers his eager, shining face beside her at concerts, his angelic demeanor as an altar boy at church services. Now a soldier, he has continued to correspond with her, sending presents from around the world and vowing they will ride through Central Park in a carriage when he returns. In a chillingly premonitory statement, he trusts that 'he will find her exactly the same as she was when he told her goodbye.'

What the young Captain Cousins and his grandmother could not have predicted is the profound change he would undergo as he travels from one arena of war to the other--England, France, Italy, and finally Germany. A growing chill invades the aging townhouse as Mrs. Ramsey opens the present, ironically hoping it will be something unexpected. Out of the tissue paper falls a 'braid of golden hair' that once adorned a beautiful girl--'cut off cleanly at the nape of the neck.' Its exact source unknown, this brutal reminder of a war whose atrocities were only too real seems to have a life of its own as Mrs. Ramsey tries to imagine the girl who, Stafford grimly interposes, 'is hidden from [her] just as Mrs. Ramsey is hidden from the people in the square.' In one of the few sentences Mrs. Ramsey utters in this story composed largely of description and retrospective narration, she addresses her absent grandson in words she might have used to chide one who has overstepped the bounds of good manners: 'How unfriendly, Arthur!' she says. 'How unkind!' But the answering voice she hears resonates with unwanted, inescapable cruelty: 'There's a war on, hadn't you heard?'

Six years later Jean Stafford would write her last and most complex novel, *The Catherine Wheel* (1952), whose heroine, Katherine Congreve, remains similarly trapped in the past. Congreve House is an extension of Mrs. Ramsey's aging brownstone, as Katherine's pronouncement--'Not changing is my only occupation'--echoes the earlier heroine's philosophy of stasis. Both women are eerie projections of Stafford in her later years--painfully detached from the post-1960s world, determinedly railing against everything from deplorably modern children's books to the emerging women's movement. This innate conservatism--both literary and political--manifests itself particularly in her older women characters, who live in a densely textured world of antimacassars, silver tea services, Irish linen napkins, and ornate family portraits. Increasingly, Jean Stafford came to resemble the women she had examined with such cold scrutiny, and she of all people would have appreciated the irony in that."

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 66-68

Michael Hollister (2020)