

ANALYSIS

"The Darkening Moon" (1944)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"The first of the western stories Stafford published is 'The Darkening Moon' (1944)... It is emblematic of Stafford's portrayal of the young girl in the West. Ella, the central character, is eleven years old. Her father has been dead for one year. She lives in a small, nameless mining town. Her story takes place completely at night. When we first see her, she is 'alone beneath the black firmament and between the blacker mountains that [loom] up to the right and to the left of her like the blurred figures of fantastic beasts.' She makes a trip she often makes, riding her brother's horse several miles through the dark to babysit at an isolated farm on the other side of the town. Sometimes she dreads the trip because the horse tries to throw her if it is frightened by the high bluffs along the highway. Tonight she has the added danger of carrying through town ten pounds of elk meat her brother has poached.

Ella postpones her arrival at the farm as long as she dares, knowing that this will be like all the other evenings she has spent there: 'Afraid to move lest by moving she make a noise that would obscure another noise...she would sit motionless all evening in a big pink wing chair... By midnight she would be wringing wet with sweat, although it was cold and she had let the fire go out. And yet, as soon as she had mounted for the ride back, her fear had changed its focus and she was not anxious to get home, but only to get Squaw safely past the bluff.' This night *is* like the others, except that Ella endures the additional horror of a total eclipse of the moon.

Stripped of its narrative particulars, this story embodies Stafford's version of the mythic journey possible to young girls in the West. An orphaned child travels through a dark landscape riding a steed that she has difficulty controlling because the landscape itself threatens the beast. Her destination is a place where she sits paralyzed by fear. She is released from her place of paralysis only to travel once again through the threatening landscape and to return to where she began. This is not the triumphant journey of a hero. Her dark night of the soul does not release her finally into the light of new perceptions and new possibilities. Instead, it is a journey that she is doomed to repeat. The repetition and the willingness with which the young girl reenters her paralysis distinguishes the horror of her situation. She has accepted the journey as normality. In one of the last stories she published, Stafford shows how differently she sees the possibilities for a young boy in a very similar situation...in 'Mountain Jim' (1968)..."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh

Jean Stafford

(Twayne 1985) 26-27

"A feeling of apprehension engendered by the natural world is evident in a number of Jean Stafford's fictional works. In 'The Darkening Moon,' for example, a young girl remember how fearful she had felt as a five-year-old when she accompanied her father on a fishing trip. 'The fish were so thick that they swarmed slimily over her and she had nearly gagged at the smell,' she says. In contrast to a character like Hemingway's Nick Adams, who sees fishing as a sacramental rite, Stafford's female protagonist hates the very feel of the fish, which she describes as 'fat slithering blobs in her bare hands.' Her memory of the 'horror of the reptilian odor' of the water makes the girl conclude that if her father, who had died soon after the fishing trip, were alive, she would refuse to accompany him on another fishing expedition."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman

Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart

(U Texas 1990) 24

"In 'The Darkening Moon,' Stafford turned to a dramatically different terrain and style, harbingers of the texture of *The Mountain Lion* and of Stafford's subsequent Colorado stories. This was the first of her

western stories, featuring a twelve-year-old character named Ella and told by an omniscient narrator who favored exact, objective description over subjective meditation, a colloquial over a refined manner. The story was about the dawning of a divided consciousness, the moment of maturity when Ella suddenly recognized the end of an unreflective unity between her self and the external world, her mind and her body. Nature abruptly turned ominous and unwelcoming: she was cast out.

This time the garden was not a tended enclave but the looming, rugged country of Colorado. Ella began the story courageous and comfortable in that world, thanks to her deceased father's lesson years before on a night fishing trip, when he left her alone by the riverbank with these reassuring words: 'There ain't nothing to harm you sister. The animals is all there is and they won't be looking you up.' But this night, babysitting for a neighbor, Ella let her imagination take over from her senses, and she was profoundly disoriented. Unnerved by the mystifying eclipse of the moon, Ella was revisited by a darker version of her childhood fishing trip. She had fallen into the river up to her waist, and the fish had picked up the 'fat slithering blobs in her bare hands,' and to her terror the fish blood had been smeared on her. 'The horror of the reptilian odor' came back to her now, and Ella cried out for her father, but there was no comfort. The imagery of the story was unmistakably sexual: Ella's own body was about to become unfamiliar; the moon's rhythms and new fears and desires were about to hold sway. The old Edenic confidence had become part of the irretrievable past."

Ann Hulbert
The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford
(Knopf 1992) 180-81

"Jean Stafford's second published story, 'The Darkening Moon' (1944)...introduces the innocent child figure that would appear in many of her best stories and foregrounds the western landscape she would use so brilliantly three years later in *The Mountain Lion*. Mary Ellen Williams Walsh sees this story as 'emblematic of Stafford's portrayal of the young girl in the West' in its pointed divergence from a typical male questing journey. Rather than a world of infinite possibility and fulfillment, Stafford's fatherless heroine Ella sees only a threatening landscape and an uncertain destination as she travels through the western dark, symbolizing her transition from childhood to adolescence. In its downward spiral Ella's journey also reflects the typical pattern of the female initiation story identified by such critics as Susan Rosowski, a pattern involving not movement outward to a welcoming world but movement inward to an acceptance of limitation. In 'The Darkening Moon' Stafford in fact seems to be establishing the paradigm of female development that would figure in most of her works: a growth into disillusionment, constriction, and uncertainty.

The story concerns a 12-year-old girl's nighttime journey on her brother's horse Squaw to babysit for family friends, the Temples. It is a journey Ella has made before and will make again, and contrary to reader expectations, she is frightened not as she is riding toward her destination amid the howls of bobcats and coyotes but only when she arrives at the Temple house and closes herself up within its walls. Ella's father, before his death, had taught her not to fear nature and the dark, and this particular night she remembers his lesson wistfully: 'So long as she was outdoors, she was not afraid at night. Her father had taught her that, long ago, when she was only a little girl of five and he had taken her and Fred fishing one night when the grayling were spawning. They had left her alone at the riverbank for half an hour while they went upstream through brush that would have cut her bare legs. Before they left, her father had said, 'There ain't nothing to harm you, sister. The animals is all there is and they won't be looking you up.' But the landscape Ella travels through is not completely without danger, for she must contend with a skittish mare who bolts at a full moon, at the sight of the bluffs on either side of the highway, or at the sound of the Santa Fe Trailways bus. As she makes her way through the uncertain darkness, Ella remembers her previous trips when, arriving at the Temple house, she would sit rigid in a high wingback chair, listening to the outside noises and staring at the painting of the Temples' prize bull on the opposite wall.

From the beginning of the story, Stafford clearly delineates Ella's journey as archetypically female by calling attention to the male images framing it. She rides her brother's horse--appropriately named Squaw; she notes how her brother's voice has taken on the cadences of their dead father's--a fact Ella finds disturbing; she imagines her brother's male talk tonight at Uncle Joe's with his friends, boasting of the 'six-point buck' someone shot. Later, after Ella reaches the Temple house, she hears the noise of Squaw being

kicked by Mr. Temple's horse, a 'big, mean, ball-faced black.' Ella even remembers a fishing trip with her father when she had plunged into the cold, slimy water amid the clammy fish and 'he had smeared her wrist with fish's blood which dripped in gout from his fingertips as if it were his own.' The 'horror of the reptilian odor' still haunts her. Presiding over all Ella's reminiscences is the red-ringed moon, emblematically female, which gradually diminishes as the story unravels.

When the Temples return to the shaken Ella, Mrs. Temple empathizes with the young girl and solemnly reflects on her own amorphous adolescent fears: 'Some way, as you get older... I don't know. I'm just thinking the way I used to be. Until I was fifteen, wasn't a living thing could give me a turn. And then, later on...' Stafford's narrative thus achieves a tentative closure, a circularity emphasizing not the linear progress of a charmed hero but the repetitive, inward-turning movement of a disenchanted heroine. Ella's journey takes her back on a known path now suddenly defamiliarized: 'A world slipped past her blinded eyes as she traversed a road she would not recognize again, beneath the full, unfaithful moon.'

Both of these rather somber early Stafford stories set in the West ["And Lots of Solid Color" (1939) and "The Darkening Moon" (1944)] are told by an omniscient narrator with a detached, objective angle of vision appropriate for the abstract nature of the fictional material: a young girl's mythic journey from childhood to adolescence. Stafford had not yet mined the innocent eye technique of the childhood narrator--she had not yet found the authentic voice--that served her mentor Mark Twain so well in *Huckleberry Finn*. But as she developed her literary aesthetic, Jean Stafford would formulate a new critical philosophy connecting the childhood world she evokes so powerfully with the ironic technique she uses to depict it.... She goes on to articulate a belief that animates the best of her fiction: My theory about children is my theory about writing. The most important thing in writing is irony, and we find irony most clearly in children. The very innocence of a child is irony. Irony, I feel, is a very high form of morality."

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 33-35

Michael Hollister (2020)