

ANALYSIS

"The End of a Career" (1956)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"In the stories of two other women in their forties, Stafford explores again the themes of isolation and disengagement. The emotional withdrawal for each woman has a different source but for each the result is a life of sterility. In 'The End of a Career' (1956) Stafford satirizes the American emphasis on youth and beauty through the tragic story of Angelica Early. Praised and prized from her birth for her great physical beauty, Angelica is cut off from all other human understanding and enrichment, love, intellectual development, even close friendship.

For Angelica, 'aware of her responsibility to her beholders, dedicated herself to the cultivation of her gift and the maintenance of her role in life with the same chastity and discipline that guide a girl who has been called to the service of God.' Her puzzled friends cannot see that she has married the man she has precisely because he is away most of the time and does not interfere with the ritual required to maintain her beauty. She remains childless for doubtless the same reason. Her only real friend and confidant is her maid, her accomplice in maintaining her beauty.

Her acquaintances require nothing of her but that she be beautiful. Hostesses plan parties around her beauty. Men happily escort her for the reflected glow. That she offers little beyond her beauty matters not. That her vocation has robbed her of normalcy is unnoticed: 'she had been obliged to pass up much of the miscellany of life that irritates but also brings about the evolution of personality; the unmolested oyster creates no pearl. Her heart might be shivered, she might be inwardly scorched with desire or mangled with jealousy and greed, she might be benumbed by loneliness and doubt, but she was so unswerving in her trusteeship of her perfection that she would not allow anxiety to pleat her immaculate brow or anger to discolor her damask cheeks or tears to deflower her eyes.' What Angelica perceives is that her friends expect her beauty never to change.

When at forty age inevitably begins to alter her, she fights more desperately to slow it, undergoing yearly and extremely painful facial restorations. Finally, her hands, which cannot be restored, show her years. With no resources open to her, with no sense of herself apart from her beauty, Angelica Early takes to her bed and dies, 'her heart past mending'."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh
Jean Stafford
(Twayne 1985) 72-73

"For a year and a half [her agent] kept a number of TV, movie, and Broadway producers competing for the right to adapt Stafford's story 'The End of a Career,' a mordant account of the dotage of a once-great beauty. He wangled the sale of a one-year film option on the story, getting a thousand dollars for it, but Stafford's lack of success with screen and stage persisted, and the project never reached fruition."

David Roberts
Jean Stafford: A Biography
(Little, Brown 1988) 316

"'The End of a Career,' which dramatizes the desperate and ultimately futile quest of an aging woman to preserve her beauty and her youthful appearance, is an indictment both of the narcissistic woman and of a society that places a premium on feminine beauty and youthfulness. Like the doomed female protagonist in Hawthorne's 'The Birthmark,' Stafford's protagonist, who is symbolically named 'Angelica Early,' is willing to undergo a painful operation each summer in order to keep her angelic youthful appearance unblemished.

Using an assumed name, she retreats to a clinic where a plastic surgeon planes away the surface of her skin with an electrically propelled steel-wire brush, causing her sickening pain.

Desperately anxious to live up to her reputation as a great beauty, she decides that she wishes to die after a cruel remark by a stranger, which she overhears in an elevator, makes her realize that even if her face belies her age, her wrinkled hands reveal how old she really is. In this story about a woman whose frail ego is dependent on the affirmation of others, Stafford uses a telling analogy: desperate herself about her own flagging creativity during this period, Stafford wrote, 'If my talent goes, I'm done for, says the artist, and Angelica said, if I lost my looks, I'm lost'."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman
Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart
(U Texas 1990) 248

"The End of a Career' reads like a parable about the future of Stafford's own art.... True to the story's title--'The End of a Career'--it turned out to be the last year her fiction appeared with any regularity in the magazine [*The New Yorker*].... 'The End of a Career,' Katharine White wrote to Stafford, 'is done in such an interesting style.... Everything is meant to be somewhat larger than life, I take it, since this is a sort of fable in hyperbole.' It was the story of fifty-year-old Angelica Early, 'one of the most beautiful women in the world's history,' and the demise of her career dedicated to the preservation of that beauty. A variation on 'I Love Someone,' the story was about the allure and the ultimate hollowness of striving for a life of perfect surfaces. Stafford encouraged an analogy between Angelica's enterprise and the artist's vocation:

'Perhaps, like an artist, [Angelica] was not always grateful for this talent of beauty that destiny had imposed upon her without asking leave, but, like the artist, she knew where her duty lay; the languishing and death of her genius would be the languishing and death of herself, and suicide, though it is often understandable, is almost never moral.... If my talent goes, I'm done for, says the artist, and Angelica said, if I lose my looks, I'm lost.'

Of course Angelica did lose her looks as she aged, despite all the craftsmanship that she devoted to preserving herself. In this fairy tale, there was no fountain of youth, no salvation--except for love, as a wise doctor tried to explain to her: 'There is an aesthetic principle,' he pursued, 'that says beauty is the objectification of love. To be loved is to be beautiful, but to be beautiful is not necessarily to be loved.... Go and find a lover and obfuscate his senses.' It was a version of the principle that Stafford the artist had poignantly declared to Lowell years before: that literary talent for her held second place to the talent he had cruelly told her she lacked--the talent of loving and being loved.

The principle had been a recipe for pain then, when she was lonely and her talent was in full flower, and it was even harder to live by now, when she was leading the solitary spinster life and doubting her gift. (She was also doubting that craftsmanship could compensate--though she tried: White proposed a plot to her, which Stafford turned into 'The Mountain Day,' not one of her better stories.) The words that she had written to her sister five years earlier at another creative impasse lurk behind Angelica's: 'If [my gift] has [gone], God knows what will become of me because that is the only thing in the world I have.' Though not consciously confronting the end of her career, Stafford was less sure of her gift at this point'."

Ann Hulbert
The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford
(Knopf 1992) 304-07

"The last story in *Collected Stories*, aptly titled 'The End of a Career' (1956), is a narrative of an aging beauty who, like Beatrice Trueblood, becomes a creation of her friends' adoring glances and the vehicle of their desires. But Stafford not only trenchantly satirizes society's expectations of beautiful women; she also, as the story's title suggests, explores the powerful dynamic that exists between a writer and her audience--a subject that, at 41 and in mid-career, she inevitably contemplated.

'The End of a Career' is the story of Angelica Early, whose unearthly beauty makes her an international celebrity and a frequent guest at glamorous dinner parties, where she graces the table like a glittering ornament. Married to an obtuse, rather insensitive big-game hunter whose frequent absences give her

considerable freedom to pursue her beautifying rituals. Angelica feels an obligation not only to herself but to her admirers to maintain the beauty that so animates their lives. In an artfully compressed introductory paragraph, Stafford describes Angelica in the words of her adoring public as a 'nymph in her cradle' and a 'goddess' in her 'silvery coffin,' thus framing this woman's pathetic life in a few sentences and foreshadowing the story's inevitable conclusion.

When her hands begin to show her age, Angelica hides from the world, spreads the rumor that she is dying of cancer, and takes to her bed. Angelica's aunt visits at the end of the story, bringing the languishing invalid a beautiful pair of embroidered gloves. After her initial hysteria Angelica slips the gloves on as she lies in bed. As the story ends, the maid who comes in later in the day finds her dead of a heart attack.

From the beginning of the story, Stafford depicts Angelica as a beautiful object, a passive, shallow woman not rich enough to be interesting to the truly rich, not chic enough to set fashion trends, not intelligent enough to utter any profound observations, not even flirtatious enough to incur the wrath of other women. Childless, without any center to her life except the religious devotion to her face and body, Angelica recalls Edith Wharton's Lily Bart from *The House of Mirth*, a beautiful adornment in her rigidly hierarchical, ultimately fickle world, and like Angelica, a victim of her own innocence. Angelica has no friends, but an 'entourage' like a 'public personage,' though her smitten male admirers quickly discover that very little substance lies under the beautiful facade. With unlike dedication Angelica has withdrawn from life and--like far too many American women, Stafford implies--devoted herself to the religion of the body: '[S]he was consecrated to her vocation and she had been obliged to pass up much of the miscellany of life that irritates but also brings about the evolution of personality; the unmolested oyster creates no pearl.'

Little do Angelica's admirers suspect the torturous rituals she undergoes, from applying her makeup in front of mirrors that cast 'an image of ruthless veracity,' to making yearly trips to a plastic surgeon in France who painfully scrapes her skin to maintain the illusion of youth. These annual trips incite her friends to speculate that the renewed passion they see in Angelica comes from a secret lover who has given her life new purpose. Angelica's 'passion' is, of course, herself and the endless attention her now aging face and body require. Significantly, she assumes an alias when she visits the sanitarium, thereby divesting herself of any personal identity and intensifying Stafford's implication that, for women like Angelica, the image is the self. Faced with the prospect of aging beyond the control of her masterful plastic surgeon (who advises her to get a lover), Angelica fears the emptiness ahead and regrets not 'lay[ing] up a store of good things against the famine of old age.'

The adoring public that contributed to Angelica's narcissism also victimizes her. When she overhears a cruel comment about her hands spoken by two young men, Angelica begins her painful downward spiral, withdraws from the world, and finally loses the will to live.

The story's numerous pointed references to art and the artist, beginning with the title, make the analogy clear and add another dimension to this parable of an ill-fated beautiful woman. Like Angelica, the artist labors to construct an illusion--a fiction--requiring constant labor and devotion that are largely invisible to her audience: 'The world kindly imagined that Mrs. Early's beauty was deathless and that it lived its charmed life without support.' Both beauty and artistic talent imply obligation and incur expectations: a fickle public is quick to see the chinks in the edifice, the flaws in the marble. As Jean Stafford found the writing of fiction increasingly difficult in the last 20 years of her life, as literary fashions inevitably shifted, she might well have voiced the request⁶ Angelica poses near the end of the story: 'I was faithful to your conception of me for all those years. Now take pity on me--reward me for my singleness of purpose.'

Jean Stafford placed 'The End of a Career' last in her 1969 *Collected Stories*, thus punctuating her life's work with a story whose obvious subject is woman but whose deeper subtext is writer. Mediating between these two often conflicting identities was never easy for Stafford, though in stories like 'The End of a Career' she articulates the tensions and demands of both roles more lucidly than she ever would in life. Studiously avoiding artist figures in her work, Stafford nevertheless wrote, in various guises, a composite portrait of the woman artist--from the childhood adventures of Emily Vanderpool to the wistful meditations of the aging Angelica Early."

Mary Ann Wilson

Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 73-75

Michael Hollister (2020)