

ANALYSIS

"The Interior Castle" (1946)



Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"The surgical second section, the pain-delivery episode...is *great* writing. And I *mean* great. It is as harrowingly real as the best Dostoevski.... It is physical & emotional agony translated into immortal terms.... The story begins with a rather wordy effect.... Your "room" is exquisitely purveyed. But its symbolic importance seems dependent on its character as 'room' in a perfect category, and that is why the episodic references to the flat in New York...struck me as wrong.... [T]he minute you begin tying the room down to a specific instance of a room in which action takes place--specified--the eternal moment feeling the reader has threatens to be shattered.... The defect [some] call 'lack of focus,' I would call maladjustment in tempo. The infinite deliberation of first [sic] section refuses to relate itself inevitably, as it should, to the dramatic timing of section II.... You get the net impression of two distinct *blocks* of feeling--two sorts of densities--adjusted in mosaic pattern, but not *fused*."

Evelyn Scott
Letter to Stafford
(19 January 1941)

"In 1953 Miss Stafford published *The Interior Castle*, an omnibus volume which contained a collection of short stories called *Children Are Bored on Sunday*. All these had appeared between 1945 and 1950. (in the same period she published additional stories in various periodicals, but these have not yet been collected.) The stories in this volume have the brilliant surface sheen that we have come to expect from the fiction that appears in the *New Yorker*, where many of them were first published. But they are not superficial. Built around the clash of two worlds, the conscious and the unconscious as well as national or regional polarities, they reach, especially in their psychological penetration, far down into the recesses of the human personality. Sometimes one has the feeling that they are nothing more than exercises in Miss Stafford's talent for insight or for psychological empathy, as in 'The Interior Castle,' a concentrated study of pain which in the end is only a tour de force [?]. 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."

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

"'The Interior Castle' (1946) certainly describes the most physically excruciating event of her introduction to New England, her injury in the car accident in 1938. In this story, Stafford describes her own suffering through the character Pansy Vanneman. Pansy's isolation from the world exterior to herself is almost complete. She is frozen in position, the image that Stafford uses for Ella in 'The Darkening Moon'

and Cora Savage in 'The Philosophy Lesson.' Her position signifies her rejection of a world that has caused her such pain. Her immobility is 'so perfect and stubborn...that it was as if the room and the landscape, mortified by the ice, were extensions of herself. Her resolute quiescence and her disinclination to talk, the one seeming somehow to proceed from the other, resembled, so the nurses said, a final coma.'

Pansy's face has been so badly cut up that the surgical stitching makes it appear 'darned,' her nose has been smashed so badly it requires a complete reconstruction, and she has two major fractures of the skull. Her injuries, however, do not require her immobility. She herself wills it. It allows her to concentrate her thoughts on the only remaining beauty left in her head, her brain--'not only the brain as the seat of consciousness, but the physical organ itself.... It was always pink and always fragile, always deeply interior and invaluable. She believed that she had reached the innermost chamber of knowledge and that perhaps her knowledge was the same as the saint's achievement of pure love.'

Consoled by the comparison to St. Teresa, Pansy is not, however, free from an assault on her own 'interior castle.' It is caused by the preparation for the surgery on her nose. Although she has prided herself on her deliberate excursions into pain and her pleasure on returning from the exploration of it, the pain associated with the surgery is beyond her control. It is 'the hottest fire, the coldest chill, the highest peak, the fastest force, the furthest reach, the newest time.' Although Pansy breaks her immobility in a futile attempt to ward off the violation of her inmost secret, the assault is successful, the pain conquers, and Pansy is left 'within her treasureless head.'

In Pansy Vanneman, Stafford displays the young woman dehumanized. Pansy suffers, as Stafford did, the almost literal loss of her face. She is unrecognizable as the person she was. Consequently, she rejects her outward form to focus on a fragile internal beauty, which she perceives in nonhuman images of jewels and flowers. When she plays with the pan, she perceives her whole being as abstract or inanimate: 'Now she was an abstract word, now she was a theorem of geometry, now she was a kite flying, a top spinning, a prism flashing, a kaleidoscope turning.' Pansy is no longer human. She is a thing, however exquisite, at the mercy of others. The cost of regaining her humanity is the loss of the interior beauty she has created."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh
Jean Stafford
(Twayne 1985) 52-53

"In 1946 Stafford wrote a short story called 'The Interior Castle' about her experience in the hospital in 1939. Much anthologized, it is one of Stafford's best pieces of fiction, an excruciating yet somehow detached account of pain and fear. Stafford later claimed that along with 'In the Snowfall,' 'The Interior Castle' was a rare 'occasion on which I wrote directly out of my life'.... She borrowed the name of [Saint] Teresa of Avila's work *The Interior Castle*... 'The Interior Castle'... [was] the earliest absolutely first-rate story to come from her pen. (Published in *Partisan Review*, it was later anthologized in five different collections, including *The Best American Short Stories, 1947*.)...

Stafford's protagonist, Pansy Vanneman, is regarded by her doctors as an anomaly because of the passive immobility with which she responds to all treatment, including a spinal tap; they wonder if her reaction is due to shock. Her nose surgeon mourns the damage done to his patient's beauty, while she, oblivious to her looks, is secretly obsessed with the fear of damage to her brain.

The story pivots around Pansy's first operation, a submucous resection, or removal of fragments of gristle and bone from her nose. (Stafford endured just such an operation under local anesthetic about six weeks after the accident.) Her doctor--in real life a man whom Jean considered 'vulgar' and a 'social climber'--is portrayed in the story as a cheerful sadist: "'All set?' the surgeon asked her, smiling. 'A little nervous, what? I don't blame you. I've often said I'd rather break a leg than have a submucous resection'."

During the operation, Pansy's ankles and wrists are strapped to the table... The injuries and operations permanently changed Stafford's looks. Blair Clark felt that 'she was badly injured in the pulchritude sense.' According to Peter Davison, 'Jean looked very different before the auto accident. She was truly a pretty woman, pug-nosed, freckled, with expressive features. The operations...turned her face into something

quite different, attractive but somewhat pugilistic, as though its battering combined somehow with the attitude of world-weariness which Jean found it necessary to adopt, for whatever reason.'

Anne White, a skilled painter who became Stafford's roommate, observes, 'What the accident did was to broaden her nose. It gave her a sort of lion nose, square-ended. She had a scar across the middle of the bridge. Part of her cheekbone had been broken. Her face looked a little crooked and swollen around the mouth. The whole impression was squarer and more hollowed out under her cheeks. [Months later] she went around with her mouth open. She was not breathing well.' In general, recalls White, the accident gave Stafford 'a distinguished, battered look.' For the rest of her life her eyes watered uncontrollably. She had also suffered considerable damage to her teeth, and had to make many trips to the dentist throughout the spring of 1939."

David Roberts
Jean Stafford: A Biography
(Little, Brown 1988) 161-62, 206, 232

"Eight years after the accident occurred...she published a fictional work that anatomized both the physical pain and the mental anguish she had endured. Its title, 'The Interior Castle,' was derived from the confessional work by the sixteenth-century mystic, St. Teresa of Avila, who had described the soul as both an 'Orient pearl' and a 'castle made of a single diamond of very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms....' Using similar words to describe her brain, Stafford's protagonist, Pansy Vanneman, pictures it as a 'jewel,' a 'flower,' a 'light glass,' an 'envelope of rosy vellum containing other envelopes, one within the other,' a 'pink pearl,' a treasure 'always fragile, always deeply interior and invaluable.'

As Pansy lies immobilized in a hospital bed six weeks after an automobile accident, the surgeon who is in charge of her case wonders whether she had been a beauty before the crash; now he cannot tell 'what the face had been, for it was so bruised and swollen, so hacked up and lopsided. The black stitches the length of the nose, across the saddle, across the cheekbone, showed there would be unsightly scars.' Slowly, methodically, Stafford dissects her protagonist's pain, just as the surgeon in the story dissects the minute nerves in his patient's nose with his scalpel, penetrating regions that are not completely anesthetized. In its terrifying evocation of the icy atmosphere of the operating room, 'The Interior Castle' resembles a short story by Conrad Aiken called 'Mr. Arcularis'... It is also reminiscent of William Carlos Williams's short story 'The Use of Force,' for both Williams and Stafford depict the examination a doctor performs on his female patient as a kind of violation, almost a rape.

As the surgeon probes the nostrils of Pansy Vanneman, Stafford writes, 'beyond the screen as thin as gossamer, the brain trembled for its life, hearing the knives hunting like wolves outside, the sniffing and snapping.' Stafford's remarkable short story suggests how traumatic her own accident and subsequent medical treatment had been to her. Although her protagonist physically survives the harrowing ordeal of the operation, she bitterly calculates nevertheless what she has lost as a result of her accident and the surgical procedure she is forced to undergo as a result. 'The Interior Castle,' one of Stafford's most impressive short stories, concludes as Pansy, back in her own hospital room, reflects bitterly on what her experience had cost her: 'There was great pain, but since it could not serve her, she rejected it and lay as if in a hammock in a pause of bitterness. She closed her eyes, shutting herself up within her treasureless head.' Although she never specifies what 'treasure' her protagonist has lost, the story is a meditation on the loss of innocence and the violation of selfhood."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman
Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart
(U Texas 1990) 94-95

"Home from Kenyon on Christmas vacation in 1938, Lowell smashed his parents' car, with Stafford in the passenger seat, into a wall in a dead-end Cambridge street. She was rushed to the hospital with 'massive head injuries,' as a friend described it, 'everything fractured, skull, nose, jaw, everything.' The damage would never be entirely disguised, and Stafford was soon made to feel she had 'crashed' the civilization of Boston--rudely, not heroically, Lowell's parents adopted an attitude of chilling detachment from the unpedigreed interloper. Yet for Stafford the collision took on symbolic dimensions that helped give her the themes around which her emerging style matured. Inspiration did not come immediately: her head needed

mending, and the symbols required time to take shape. In fact, Stafford had another successful novel to go before she found the frame and images, and the distance, to sustain a narrative.

The disastrous car ride with Lowell, a notoriously bad driver who had probably been drinking that evening, was the climax of the high drama that had begun two months earlier when Stafford escaped from Iowa in the middle of the night. Soon after she finally surfaced in Cambridge in November, she had confessed to Hightower the cause of her delay in arriving--the rendezvous with Lowell in Cleveland. Having rearranged his life and rented more spacious rooms to welcome Stafford, Hightower understandably felt betrayed. But he trusted her claim that she was afraid of Cal, and made clear that he was still ready to try living with her.

Lowell certainly was far from the low-key suitor she was used to from her years with Hightower. Cal's romantic history before Stafford had consisted of a swift, fierce, finally aborted campaign two years earlier to marry a twenty-four-year-old Boston debutante, Anne Dick, an unlikely match opposed by his parents--which had only spurred Lowell on. His father had been the victim of his violent zeal on that occasion: protesting his parents' meddling disapproval, Cal appeared on their doorstep and knocked his father down in the front hallway while his mother watched.

Stafford had a taste of Lowell's wild determination during a visit from him in Cambridge over Thanksgiving when she wrote to her friend Mock, 'he got savage and I got scared.' The issue was marriage, she said, which he insisted on and she resisted. 'A friend of his, a young man from Harvard College,' she went on, 'told me in a private interview that Mr. L. wanted me more than anything else in his life and that I wd. never be free of him, that he will continue to track me down as long as I live, a very pleasant thought. It makes me perfectly sick because he is an uncouth, neurotic, psychopathic murderer-poet.'...

Her faith was frail, and a source of conflict with Lowell, but her religious struggles proved to be important inspiration for her writing.... Her quest for some external discipline and vision to guide her writing seems to have been cast in more general terms.... She needed a larger framework of meaning and symbolism for her writing, yet also a closer focus on concrete detail.... 'I worked 7 months on the suicide story and it, I was very proud of, but although the style was sustained and the rhythm carried, it lacked, still, much precision and all imagery. But the present one--you remember my queer room daydream--is almost successful, though it is awkward. It is obscure, allegorical, and the prose is loaded'.... Based on her experience in the hospital after the accident with Lowell two years earlier, the twenty-seven-page manuscript (never published) was in a sense her answer to Lowell's poem 'On a Young Lady Convalescing from a Brain-Injury but Unable to write a novel in Concord, Mass.'...

[In] what was to become perhaps her best-known story, 'The Interior Castle,' (1946) she had, in fact, found the deep symbolic landscape that informed her fiction for many years. St. Teresa of Avila was her inspiration.... In particular the saint sympathized with certain weaknesses of the soul that Stafford felt she knew well. St. Teresa didn't assume a focused, contemplative intellect, and she was notably lenient about two other handicaps, a wayward will and a vivid imagination.... Her audience, she emphasized, consisted of those with 'souls and minds so scattered that they are like wild horses no one can stop'.... Teresa's style was marked by its wit and colloquial intimacy.... The greatest distinction of St. Teresa's style was its metaphoric profligacy. Though all mystical writings necessarily work through concrete symbols and analogies, Teresa was renowned for her extravagant recourse to elaborate imagery... St. Teresa based her classic, *The Interior Castle*, on a trust in vision. She urged her readers to imagine 'our soul to be like a castle made entirely out of a diamond or very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms, just as in heaven there are many dwelling places.'...

She was looking for some form in which to conjure with the pain of consciousness, the sense of estrangement that was the emerging subject of her fiction--and the persisting fact of her life. In *The Interior Castle* she found a powerful set of images to help her translate the kind of psychological agonies she had visited upon her character Gretchen into the terms of a spiritual ordeal. Teresa's supremely tantalizing and inaccessible castle--a series of glimmering, receding chambers, beset by wicked serpents at its walls--provided Stafford with a central symbol: the bounded circle of the self, in thrall to darkness without and in search of illumination within. Teresa taught the way from the outer, cloudy chambers where the senses

were besieged to the inner, irradiated room where the soul met God. For the devoted and blessed among her students, the prison house became a transcendent palace. The circle was an encompassing mystical metaphor for Stafford to work into her own, more mundane writing. As she acknowledged...her first efforts were 'obscure, allegorical.'

But she was striving for greater concreteness, and it seems clear that William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (a title she later considered borrowing for a novel she never finished) helped her make the crucial bridge between the empirical and the spiritual. It is no surprise that she would have turned to him in her religious travails, for she, like so many others in the 1940s, was avidly reading his brother; it was the peak of the Henry James revival in America. William James's acute description of the physical, psychological, and epistemological qualities of religious consciousness offered a perspective that might well have spoken to Stafford as she tried to adjust to life with Lowell the convert.... Stafford...had become well versed in the varieties of anesthetic experience, and of pain, thanks to operations on her head after the accident. While her skull was aching as she worked on *Autumn Festival*, she explored the path from physical suffering to some kind of metamorphosis of the spirit, however fleeting.... About two years after the accident, in the fall of 1940, Stafford's memory of the pain, and doubtless also of anesthetic release, was refreshed. On a trip to New Orleans with Lowell's school friends Blair Clark and Frank Parker, who were down in Louisiana for a visit, Lowell hit her, breaking her nose again....

The story was divided into two parts, two stages in the lessons of suffering. The progression loosely followed Teresa's *Interior Castle* and is worth tracing in some detail, for the story's structure, themes, and style laid the groundwork for much of Stafford's fiction to come. In the first section, the nameless patient lay silently in her hospital bed, cultivating aloofness from the outside world and alertness to the motions of her mind. It was an all-consuming occupation, which required a willed self-absorption but promised some ultimate repose.... But like St. Teresa's pilgrims in the preliminary stages, Stafford's protagonist was in a precarious position, her progress away from the world still only tentative.... In the transition to the second section of Stafford's story, the will's true trials began, as St. Teresa instructed they must on the route to salvation: 'Doing our own will is usually what harms us.' The will was chastened by greater physical suffering: an assault from without enable the necessary surrender within. For the path to God, the mystics taught, was passivity. The soul did not gain entrance to God; it was admitted if he so willed. For Stafford's patient, the liberating ordeal came at the hands of her nose doctor... Forced to endure anesthetic cocaine packs stuffed into her injured nostrils--a procedure that Stafford described in excruciating detail...her crisis began to convert her from a psychological to a spiritual perspective on her plight...

The second section of the story was a meticulous description of the surgery on her skull and a metaphorical evocation of the seizure of her soul. As the doctor cut close to her brain, piercing tissue unprotected by the anesthetic, the patient in her agony was suddenly delivered into her room [sanctuary in the interior castle]. Stafford's effort to put that moment, that decisive turn, into words recalls William James's 'gifted woman' who strained to find adequate expression for her experience. Like her, Stafford groped after geometrical imagery: 'Her solitude was pyramidal: its peak was the snarl of unsheathed nerves. It was naked pain, a clean and vivid pain, causing her to be reduced to a focal point. She had no existence beyond it...' 'Her solitude was a sustained shriek, an infinite line, a light of incommensurate intensity. It was a minute sharp edge, a metallic malice, a flame from the hottest fuel.'

In the room itself, the calm seemed almost anticlimactic: 'She was so loving she felt she could not ever leave.' Stafford's vision of faded grandeur was quite different from Teresa's brilliantly sparkling inner chamber, but she closed her story with the image of a jewel familiar from the saint... Stafford's patient came into possession of a pearl: 'Now she lay upon her gentle bed with her aches stroked out and her fever cooled by the pacific maturity of her room. Her bleeding brain was sealed and rounded, was like a loaded, seamless ball, the agony's wonderfully perfect pearl'.... Stafford's story was the map of her formative efforts to find some accommodation between writing and religion--an accommodation implied but not spelled out by the New Critical teachers with whom she was now so closely associated....

Faith eluded her, and her will tended to be fickle. She explored her predicament, stylistically as well as thematically, in her story. She introduced the central subject of her fiction: the isolation of the self. Her outwardly passive patient was in a sense the extreme archetype of many of her future protagonists, under assault from without yet also secretly plotting an escape within. And Stafford focused on the double-edged

faculty that dominated her characters: the imagination. In a world of opaque selves, it was the only power that permitted any semblance of interpenetration, any possibility of transparency.... And yet, inescapably subjective, the imagination wasn't simply to be trusted. Following St. Teresa, Stafford suggested deep ambivalence about its status. The most seductive of faculties, the imagination granted vision, but it also increased vulnerability. To see into the alien world was not necessarily to master it; to be at its mercy was perhaps more likely. The imagination threatened entrapment at the same time that it promised transcendence.

The other faculty that complicated matters was the will, if anything even more unsteady than the imagination. On the one hand, it helped define the rootless self, establishing its identity in embattled relation to the rest of the world. Stafford's patient, all alone in the hospital, deliberately ostracized herself from her surroundings and consciously worked at cultivating a private, self-protective realm. On the other hand, the chief allure of that realm seemed to be that it offered a respite for the will--a place of repose. Moreover, ultimate access to that realm required a surrender of the will. In her story, Stafford introduced the uncanny dynamic at work in so many of her characters. They start out on the arduous route to self-creation, which turns out to be the path of passive self-abnegation.

In the curious play of will and imagination that Stafford set up in her characters, escape could seem a kind of imprisonment and imprisonment a kind of escape. For her patient, the red-tinted room was not a simple refuge, and the return to the real world was a very ambivalent resolution. Playing the therapeutic and theological perspectives off against each other, Stafford discovered a rich source of irony and tension, qualities that she counted on in her writing--which were also the key literary ingredients in the New Critical recipe. The double identity of the victim/votary provided her with a suggestive set of oppositions--body versus mind, outer versus inner, active versus passive. The most important opposition of all for Stafford was innocence versus experience, as her patient yearned for enchantment and faced disenchantment. It so happened, though doubtless not by explicit design, that the contrasts answered to the prescriptions Brooks and Warren were shortly to announce in *Understanding Fiction* (1943), the companion to their influential volume on poetry. The oppositions were encompassing and morally ambiguous, and thus productive of the complex conflict that was an 'essential aspect of fiction.' They were central to all-important irony, which 'in its most sophisticated form,' Brooks and Warren explained, 'concerns the alignments of judgments and sympathies on the part of the author--the problem of his own self-division.'

That division was reflected in Stafford's style as well as her themes. In the course of the story, her prose underwent a striking transformation. She opened in an abstract, discursive, rather mandarin style, but by the second section, she had shifted to concrete, imagistic language and was inclining toward a colloquial tone. It was an evolution entailed by the shifting focus of her subject matter. The first section, as the patient lay undisturbed in her bed, was introspective and meditative. The second, when she was ambushed by the doctor and his knives, was interactive and dramatic. But the shift was itself also part of the subject matter, for in probing the place of the self in the world, the story also probed the role of language in linking the mind to physical and metaphysical reality.

The Latinate discursiveness of the first half conveyed a mistrust of metaphor, an insecurity about how to relate the subjective and the objective, the abstract and the concrete. The ungainly grasping after, yet holding back from, analogy or allegory often resulted in heavy obscurity--the 'words merely' problem that was all too familiar to Stafford: 'The steadfast plant was like an allegory of her body in which comfort followed pain in progression syncopated with retrogression. The sameness of her occupation was, indeed, as unrelieved as the winter sky; yet she was not so mournful as the scene, nor was the protracted interruption of her activity suitable to arbitrary categorizing.'

Stafford's discovery in the second half of the story was an increasing confidence in concrete detail as a vehicle for metaphysical meaning. She had set herself perhaps the most difficult challenge of all in the use of metaphor: to give expression to pain--that is, to find for the most subjective of experiences some objective form. It meant venturing out onto the poetic verges of metaphor, as she did in her geometric allusions. As important, it meant creating a more solid, prosaic context to set off those poetic excursions. Stafford was inspired to a mixture of the mandarin and the mundane, of elevated and lowly diction and imagery, which came to be a staple of her style."

Ann Hulbert
The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford
(Knopf 1992) 87-88, 118-28

"One of Stafford's earliest stories...anticipates the later themes and styles she would develop. 'The Interior Castle' appeared in the *Partisan Review* in 1946 and is the only attempt Jean Stafford made to fictionalize the automobile accident that permanently marred her face.

Stafford's title is instructive. She chooses Saint Teresa of Avila's mystical work written in 1577, *Los Morados (The Dwelling Places)*, which describes the soul's retreat through the seven-chambered interior castle of the soul. Teresa's contemplative piece gave Stafford a vehicle by which to convey the inexpressible--the excruciating physical and psychic pain occasioned by the actual surgery and its aftermath. Her heroine, Pansy Vanneman, retreats into the interior castle of her mind and remains aloof from the doctors and nurses who try to engage her in conversation. The doctor's proposed surgery will cut close to the brain, and the implications of this invasion resonate for Stafford's persona.

Unlike Teresa, Pansy contemplates not the soul but the brain, which she sees 'now as a jewel, now as a flower, now as a light in a glass,' as she withdraws into some central core of self where she can be at peace. Stafford subverts religious mysticism, turning it to secular purposes, as she describes her heroine's reaching 'the innermost chamber of [knowledge, which]...was the same as the saint's achievement of pure love.' Just as the mystic dreads the inevitable return to this world, Pansy fears the intrusive hand of the surgeon, who might maim her 'treasure' and cause her either to die or to go mad: 'While she did not question that in either eventuality her brain would after a time redeem its original impeccability, she did not quite yet wish to enter upon either kind of eternity, for she was not certain that she could carry with her knowledge as well as its receptacle.'

In a savage perversion of a sacramental ritual, with unmistakable sexual overtones, Stafford describes the operation performed by Dr. Nicholas, who whispers to Pansy in 'the voice of a lover,' and Pansy's 'ascent to the summit of something...a tower or a peak or Jacob's ladder.' She is left empty, hollowed out, 'as dry as a white bone.' More than any other of Stafford's stories dealing with illness or disease, this one best captures the profound isolation of the stricken.

Lacking the clearly defined setting of the Damariscotta Mills stories, 'The Interior Castle' nevertheless uses its wintry setting effectively as a fitting backdrop for the motionless passivity of Pansy Vanneman. Stafford pointedly contrasts outer and inner worlds--the 'frozen river and leafless elm trees,' 'cold red brick buildings,' 'pale and inert' sky--to the frozen immobility of Pansy's body and mind. Inner and outer worlds at one point seem to merge, 'as if the room and the landscape, mortified by the ice, were extensions of herself.' Eerily premonitory of Stafford's young heroine Molly in her novel *The Mountain Lion* (published a year later, in 1947), who denies her sexuality and inflicts deliberate harm on herself, Pansy likewise seems to desire complete self-effacement as she prepares to subject herself to the surgeon's invasive knife.

Undeniably, 'The Interior Castle' grimly dramatizes woman as object--to be poked, prodded, wondered and fantasized about (the nurses and attendants speculate about whether Pansy had been a beauty before her accident). Even Pansy's disconnected memories of her past life reinforce a sexual subtext: she remembers a veiled invitation to intimacy from one of her older male teachers; the old porter who wanders by her hospital room forms a 'brutish word' with his 'toothless mouth.' Pansy's brain--her treasure--is unmapped terrain implicitly analogous to her body. Stafford's language here is metaphorically rich: Pansy is 'overwhelmed with the knowledge that the pain had been consummated in the vessel of her mind.' Perversely masochistic, Pansy sometimes invites the pain, 'recklessly,' desiring it 'to attack her.' When the surgery is finally complete, she finds herself painfully aware of both inner and outer worlds--the first now 'treasureless,' the second promising a violent winter storm inescapably foreshadowing an uncertain future."

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 25-26

In Hemingway's story "The Gambler, the Nun, and the Radio," set in a hospital, a Mexican patient asks the protagonist Frazer, "What class of pain do you have?" Frazer replies, "Big enough. Clearly not as bad as yours. When the nurse goes out I cry an hour, two hours. It rests me." The severity of his pain is conveyed by the simple fact that Frazer is a Hemingway protagonist, yet sometimes, contrary to the stereotype of Hemingway as a macho man, he cries for "two hours." Frazer talks about it but Hemingway does not try to render his pain, relying instead on his objective method of understatement--the "iceberg principle"--while affirming his code of grace under pressure. In "The Interior Castle" Stafford renders the pain--superbly. Yet she also maintains a tone of objectivity while using the techniques of Expressionism to convey the extreme subjectivity and erroneous thinking of Pansy Vanneman. This story is the most powerful rendering of extreme pain in American literature. Its effect is intensified by the common knowledge that Jean Stafford suffered such pain herself. She is able to turn the agonizing experience into an allegory of the brain discovering the soul. In her detailed realism she makes Pansy seem more brave--making her name ironic--than Frazer in the Hemingway story.

Before the surgery, in her extreme pain Pansy "believed that she had reached the innermost chamber of knowledge and that perhaps her knowledge was the same as the saint's achievement of pure love." This is Gnosticism, the heresy of brainy intellectuals that knowledge rather than faith is the path to God. The story is titled after a mystical work by St. Teresa of Avila that dramatizes the progress of a soul from materialism to spirituality, from heresy to truth: After Pansy thinks about her brain for awhile, "She knew that she could never again love anything as ecstatically as *she loved the spirit* of Pansy Vanneman, enclosed within her head." Her focus has shifted from her brain to her "spirit." [Italics added.]

The *spirit* is differentiated from the *brain* or *head*. "It was only convention, she thought, that made one say 'sacred heart' and not 'sacred brain'." She is wrong about this, just as she is wrong in being a Gnostic. Nor is her *spirit* in her *head*. The traditional psychological metaphors of the *head* and the *heart*, replaced in popular usage by the scientific metaphors of left-brain and right-brain, identify the *heart* with the *soul*, which is sacred. See Hawthorne in particular, a Victorian who uses the terms *heart* and *soul* as synonyms. The secular change in metaphors is atheist in that it purges them of any sacred nature. Pansy learns from experiencing this traumatic operation that the term "sacred" is more than merely "conventional" and it does *not* apply to the head. This understanding is in the tradition of Hawthorne and is consistent with Stafford's satires of intellectuals.

There follows a digression that associates her pink hat with a naive sentimentality illustrated by her throwing the pink hat away after she feels betrayed by a rich older man she fell in love with: "The color pink troubled her and the picture of herself in the wrong hat hung steadfastly before her mind's eye." Her false secular "knowledge" of the soul is "the wrong hat." Here the *mind* is associated with untrustworthy imagination as distinct from *spirit*. This digression is immediately followed by Pansy's statement that she loves "ecstatically" the *spirit* "enclosed within her head." Most precisely, in her view the *spirit* is her "treasure," the sacred contents of its container, her head. The materialistic Pansy continues to equate her *brain* or *head* with her *soul* as her "jewel." But she subverts her theory when she identifies her brain with "a little hat-shaped boat" set adrift, recalling the pink hat she threw away into the sea. Now she "conceived of the pain [demon] as the guardian of her treasure who would not let her see it." Satan is not guarding her soul, he is trying to possess or destroy it by deceiving her. Pain is an inevitable consequence of living in a world that has fallen and is dominated by evil.

Pansy speaks of her "treasure" as a jewel "whose price he [the doctor], no more than the nurses, could estimate," evoking the familiar biblical phrase referring to the soul as "the pearl of great price." The phrase is also central to *The Scarlet Letter*, the famous allegory by Hawthorne in which Pearl reflects the soul of Hester Prynne. "The Interior Castle" is likewise an allegory of the soul transcending evil, as Pansy resists the onslaught of her angry hateful feelings caused by pain--"the demon." However, Pansy continues to mistakenly identify her *soul* with her *brain*: "she saw her brain lying in a shell-pink satin case. It was a pink pearl." But when thinking of her physical *brain*, she refers to its two hemispheres as "the mind" and "the soul," contrary to the form of a pearl. This contradiction exposes her thinking as erroneous. That she needs to discard her identification of the *brain* with the *soul* is imaged in her continuing to think about the pink hat she threw away. Stafford is keen on precise definitions of words--she once wanted to be a philologist--

and the meanings in this story depend upon a reader's understanding the distinctions among the terms *brain*, *mind*, *head*, *heart*, *soul*, and *spirit*.

This allegory of spiritual revelation casts Dr. Nicholas in the role of God, since he overcomes her pain [the demonic] and controls her fate--life or death. His allegorical role makes it pertinent that he is a Christian and that Pansy is hospitalized at Christmas time. His name is the same as St. Nicholas. Pansy so effectively withdraws from the world of pain that the nurses think that "she might as well be dead." Her self-effacement is consistent with the withdrawal from life of a mystic. At times she loves the doctor, but when the pain is so great she wants to die she turns against him--"she wished him ill"--as people often turn against God and blame him when in pain. After the operation it is realistic that she feels some bitterness. Stafford is more a Realist than Hawthorne and her realism probably distracts readers from the pattern of symbolic correspondences that constitute allegory. Her priorities are Modernist, setting the values of art above the limitations of the reader.

Like Hawthorne, Stafford makes the allegorical structure of her story explicit: "She was aware of nothing but her ascent to the summit of something; what it was she did not know, whether it was a tower or a peak or Jacob's ladder." Jacob in the Bible is climbing toward Heaven. To be "reborn" in returning to the world Pansy will have to climb "Jacob's ladder." A long series of facial reconstruction surgeries will be like excruciatingly painful steps up the rungs of recovery. She is still in shock when near the end of the story she momentarily blames the doctor for her pain: "You are heartless and you should be put to death." This is so excessive it is comical and exposes her unreliable judgment. The vindictive notion of killing the doctor who corresponds to God in the allegory is her most evil impulse incited by the pain, or Satan.

Near the end of the story, "She saw her brain lying in a shell-pink satin case. It was a pink pearl, no bigger than a needle's eye, but it was so beautiful and so pure that its smallness made no difference." Pansy has made her brain both the container and its contents rather than recognizing the distinctions between them. The details of its description here--pink, beautiful, pure, pearl--have been used for centuries to describe the *soul*, whereas the physical *brain* is a gray mass of tissue larger than a needle's eye and the mind it generates is impure and subject to error--as exemplified by Pansy until the end of her story.

As she frequently does, Stafford reserves her most important implications for the very end of the story: After Pansy's operation, "There was great pain, but since it could not serve her, she rejected it and she lay as if in a hammock in a pause of bitterness. She closed her eyes, shutting herself up within her treasureless head." This is a temporary reaction--a "pause." The evidence that she is now on a path to God is that she is being "reconstructed" by the doctor, the God-figure, and is transcending the pain--the demonic evil. "It could not serve her." It is the doctor who will serve her. With many surgeries and much pain ahead, she must learn to trust the doctor, just as she must learn to trust God. By the power of her spirit and the grace of God, her unjust anger at the doctor is subdued--Satan is overcome.

In the *last* words of the story Pansy finally differentiates her treasured spirit from her brain by referring in bitterness to "her treasureless head." She has experienced the sacred treasure of her spirit in her vision and it is *not* her brain, or head. Gnostics be damned. From now on it will be up to her to use her limited brain more accurately and to make the most of her new knowledge to protect and save her soul, as implied when the doctor tells her, "You're the doctor."

CRITICS

Again the critics try to void the religious implications in the story. Eisinger does not even acknowledge the religious title from St. Teresa, saying that Stafford merely reaches "far down into the recesses of the human personality." Personality? Walsh stops analyzing the religious theme after quoting the Gnostic line about knowledge being the same as the saint's achievement of pure love, perverting Stafford into a heretic. Goodman acknowledges that the story derives from St. Teresa, who described the soul as a pearl, but she reduces the religious theme to mere psychology: "The story is a meditation on the loss of innocence and the violation of selfhood." Wilson, another Feminist, *reverses* the religious meanings of the story, claiming that Stafford subverts religious mysticism, turning it to secular purposes" with the Gnostic line that knowledge is the same as mystical pure love. She finds Stafford guilty of "a savage perversion of a sacramental ritual, with unmistakable sexual overtones": This critic sees a "sexual subtext" in Pansy's pain when the doctor

whispers to her in "the voice of a lover." The reference to Jacob's ladder is taken to mean that Pansy gets turned on sexually by her agony--she is "perversely masochistic."

Ann Hulbert is the only critic to pursue the religious theme, acknowledging the influence of St. Teresa: "The progression loosely followed Teresa's *Interior Castle*" as describing "the route to salvation"... "the path to God." Stafford "began to convert her from a psychological to a spiritual perspective on her plight." But then Hulbert merely generalizes vaguely that "Stafford's story was the map of her formative efforts to find some accommodation between writing and religion." Hulbert does not explain Stafford's map, she draws her own: *This atheist critic denies that Stafford affirms religious faith*: "Faith eluded her." Then why did Stafford use the same title and focal metaphor and allegorical development as a Christian saint? Hulbert also trashes *The Catherine Wheel*, which likewise refers to the experience of a Christian saint. *All three* of Stafford's novels are realistic Christian allegories of progress toward salvation.

To support her atheist misinterpretation Hulbert abandons the text and switches from Stafford's primary focus on the *spirit*, which a believer can trust, to the *imagination*, which no one can trust: "The imagination granted vision, but it also increased vulnerability. To see into the alien world was not necessarily to master it; to be at its mercy was perhaps more likely. The imagination threatened entrapment at the same time that it promised transcendence." Hulbert argues that Pansy rejects her mystical vision because it is scary, that the spiritual dimension is an "alien world" to be avoided, that her soul is just a figment of her imagination, and that the interior castle is meaningless. Hulbert is handicapped as a critic not only by her materialism and subjective inattention to significant detail contrary to her own beliefs, but by her aversion to allegory because she cannot understand it, for which she blames Stafford, awkwardly: "the ungainly grasping after, yet holding back from [?], analogy or allegory often resulted in heavy obscurity." Behind this accusation of incompetence against a master of fiction is the arrogant critic's own ungainly grasping after the meanings of a text beyond her comprehension, resulting in heavy obscurity.

Michael Hollister (2021)