

ANALYSIS

"The Liberation" (1953)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"The third Adams [Colorado] story, 'The Liberation' (1953), is not directly autobiographical... it is possible, however, that it was partly inspired by Stafford's marriage at twenty-five to Harvard-educated, Boston-born and -bred Robert Lowell. The heroine, Polly Bay, nearly thirty, orphaned seven years earlier by the death of her father and many years before by her mother's death, had been held as emotional hostage by her father's widowed brother and widowed sister.

When she becomes engaged to a professor at Harvard, whom she meets on a visit to Boston, she fully understands for the first time the control that has been exerted upon her. She waits five months to tell her aunt and uncle that she intends to leave Adams and go east to marry, otherwise 'she might have had to flee, without baggage, in the middle of the night on a bus.' Stafford, of course, had done just that in leaving Iowa on her own flight to Boston.

Polly's emotional oppression is symbolized by the house in which she lives with her aunt and uncle: 'Its rooms were huge, but since they were gorged with furniture and with garnishments and clumps and hoards of artifacts of Bays, you had no sense of space in them and, on the contrary, felt cornered and nudged and threatened by hanging lamps with dangerous dependencies and by the dark, bucolic pictures of Polly's forebears that leaned forward from the walls in their unsculptured brassy frames.'

This house is on a claustrophobia-inducing city block that had once been home to the entire Bay clan, from Polly's great-grandmother through to her own generation: '[T]his was the territory of the Bays and...Bays and ghosts of Bays were, and forever would be in residence.' Intent on leaving, Polly finally realizes that in this place 'her own life had been like a dream of smothering.'

As she confronts her aunt and uncle with her plans, she perceives 'appalled and miserably ashamed of herself, that she had never once insisted on her own identity in this house.' Her struggle with her aunt and uncle is compounded by their western chauvinism as well as their need to hold on to their family. They reduce her to screaming her hatred of the West and finally to fleeing, as she had fantasized, without baggage and in the night, to the East, to Boston, where her fiancé is not suddenly dead. As she sits in the train, alone, torn from her past and bereft of the future that had been promised her, she surveys her position with unconscious irony: 'I am not lonely now!'

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh

Jean Stafford

(Twayne 1985) 41-42

"After her rendezvous with Lowell in Ohio, Stafford boarded another bus and headed east. As she left the West to begin her life anew, her feelings might have been similar to those of the protagonist of her short story 'The Liberation.' A college teacher in a small western town, Polly Bay becomes engaged to a Bostonian named Robert Fair, who owns a handsome house at the foot of Beacon Hill. Announcing to her aunt and uncle, with whom she has been living, her intentions of leaving the West forever, Polly proclaims, 'I hate, I despise, I abominate the West!' She is convinced that the 'dogmatic monotony of the town's provincialism' has almost succeeded in destroying her, and she shudders 'to think of her narrow escape from wasting away in these arid foothills...'

Polly Bay, a thirty-year-old college professor in 'The Liberation,' dislikes the western town called Adams where she resides, and she fully comprehends 'the claustrophobia that sent her sisters and cousins all but screaming out of town.' Feeling that 'her own life had been like a dream of smothering,' she is eager to leave Adams forever and go live in the East with the man from Boston to whom she has become secretly

engaged. Her elderly uncle and aunt, with whom she has lived since her parents' death, insist that in leaving the West she is betraying the heritage of a family dating back to the first western migration. But leave she must to escape the stifling world of her hypochondriacal and chauvinistic relatives, even though she learns that her fiancé has died suddenly. The conclusion of the story is somewhat forced, perhaps. However, 'The Liberation' successfully dramatizes the desperation of a young woman who feels trapped in the small town in the West in which she was raised. Fleeing for her life when she leaves the house of her relatives, Polly Bay realizes that she was in danger of remaining imprisoned forever in their musty, decaying ancestral home."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman
Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart
(U Texas 1990) 239-40

"Polly Bay in the ironically titled 'The Liberation' finally worked up the courage to escape the tyrannical provincialism of Adams to marry an Easterner, only to learn, just as she was ready to depart, that her fiancé was dead. Bravely, she set off anyway, but Stafford deftly conveyed the naivete of her valor in the concluding sentences of the story: 'How lonely I have been, she thought. And then, not fully knowing what she meant by it but believing in it faithfully, she said half aloud, 'I am not lonely now.' What was striking in Stafford's Adams stories was the distance she established from the troublesome landscape of her past."

Ann Hulbert
The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford
(Knopf 1992) 302

"'The Liberation,' appearing in the *New Yorker* in 1953, is the story of Polly Bay, a 30-year-old unmarried woman living with her aunt and uncle in the Bay ancestral home in Adams. Ironically, the trappings of this family mansion are exactly those the young Stafford yearned for--gilt family portraits, brass jardinières, and tea tables--but Polly finds them stifling as she looks forward to the day when she will leave the house forever to go East and marry her Boston fiancé. She is trapped, however, by a family history that allows her no room for individuality, and by two querulous old relatives whose nagging complaints instill only guilt and fear. Their own children having wisely gone East, Aunt Jane and Uncle Francis 'had a vehement family and regional pride, and they counted it a virtue in themselves that they had never been east of the Mississippi.' Polly finally reveals her plans to them, amid their accusations of disloyalty and lack of family pride. Shortly after this long, painful scene, Polly's sister calls from Boston with the news that her fiancé has died of a heart disease. Stricken but undeterred, Polly boards the last train to Denver on her way to Boston, confident a new life awaits her.

Polly's intended journey ironically reverses the normal westward migration endemic to the frontier myth. Her Bay ancestors had indeed made the journey west across the plains, settling in Adams; had built intimidating stone mansions to house their children and other possessions; and had inevitably been abandoned by these same 'heartless' children. Stafford clearly links interior space to psychological space in her descriptions of the vast but crowded rooms of the Bay family mansion: 'its rooms were huge, but since they were gorged with furniture and with garnishments and clumps and hoards of artifacts of Bays, you had no sense of space in them and...felt cornered and nudged and threatened by hanging lamps with dangerous dependencies and by the dark, bucolic pictures of Polly's forebears.' Stafford's text ultimately subverts the frontier myth of freedom and expansion, for within the wide-open spaces of its rugged mountain environs, Adams offers only imprisonment for women like Polly Bay.

But the vast, looming Bay house symbolizes more than the material wealth the family has accumulated. To Polly it represents an oppressive family history reaching back generations--a text she did not write and from which, she fears, there is no escape. As she bitterly notes, 'Nothing can more totally subdue the passions than familial piety.' Polly's aunt and uncle are remnants of a once glorious past, a past they will not relinquish but instead relive through their collection of family memorabilia: 'cracked photographs, letters sallow-inked with age, venomous green, little white boxes holding petrified morsels of wedding cake.' In the Dickensian environment Polly realizes with stunning clarity that 'she had never once insisted on her own identity in this house.' Wistfully, she thinks of her fiancé's stately house in Boston, 'at the foot of Beacon Hill, its garden fac[ing] the Charles.' It would appear that Polly intends to exchange one house

for another, moving from the house of her nouveau riche western relatives to the house of her intended husband. If so, the liberation she so fervently desires may in fact remain beyond her reach, as Aunt Jane's spiteful comment midway through the story suggests. To Polly's impassioned plea 'I want to live my own life,' she responds, 'Being married is hardly living one's own life.'

Near the end of the story, as a result of her impassioned declaration of independence, Polly looks at this familiar landscape differently: the young Bays will return to the West, 'free at last to admire the landscape' without 'a trace of the dust of the prairies.' She has ultimately invested her surroundings with a sense of her newfound freedom. She leaves for Boston without the hope of an impending marriage, but with the hope of liberation."

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 46-47

Michael Hollister (2020)