

ANALYSIS

"The Maiden" (1950)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"In 'The Maiden' (1950), a much darker manipulation occurs to Evan Leckie, an unusual figure in Stafford's list of characters. Leckie, an American journalist covering the war crimes trials in Germany, is treated to the grotesque story of the engagement and marriage of the only German couple at a dinner party in Heidelberg. With Leckie and the others held a captive audience, Herr Reinmuth triumphs over the American captors, who grace their tables with the gorgeous contraband resulting from Germany's defeat, by relating how he asked his wife to marry him immediately after he had just witnessed the death by guillotine of his first client. In the telling of the tale, the Reinmuths 'had joyfully danced a *Totenzanz*, had implied all the details of their sixty-pfennig marriage, and as if there had never been anything untoward in their lives'."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh

Jean Stafford

(Twayne 1985) 18

"In 'The Maiden' she focuses on the coexistence of German brutality, civility, and opulence. At a dinner party given by Americans who live in postwar Heidelberg, the guests sit at a table laden with lovely relics of the past: cut-glass wine decanters embossed with silver, heavy silverware, and Dresden china fruit plates.' Stafford's protagonist, an American journalist named Evan Leckie who has just arrived in Heidelberg after spending a month in Nuremberg, is almost able to forget the havoc he has witnessed and the squalor of the Occupation as he observes his hostess's resplendent dinner table and her beautiful garden.

However, the illusion of peace and harmony is shattered when one of the guests, a German lawyer who claims to have been an enemy of the Third Reich, describes the day twenty years earlier when he had proposed to his wife: after witnessing the execution of his first client, he had called up his sweetheart and insisted that they get married immediately since he was already appropriately dressed in a Prince Albert and a top hat. Although earlier in the evening Leckie had empathized with the German lawyer and his lovely wife and had wondered 'what Eumenides had driven this pair to hardship, humiliation, and exile' from Nuremberg, he now comprehends what a great gulf separates Americans from those Germans who 'joyfully dance a *Totenzanz*.'

If the gleaming wine decanters on his hostess's table represent the elegant trappings of German civilization, the great knife of the guillotine is a reminder of the brutal underside of German life. Calling the guillotine in her story 'the Maiden,' the name given to the guillotine she had just seen in Edinburgh, Stafford establishes in this chilling tale a subtle connection between decapitation and defloration, between innocence and guilt, between life and death."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman

Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart

(U Texas 1990) 202-03

"Another Heidelberg story with a male protagonist is Stafford's 1950 *New Yorker* piece 'The Maiden.' Its disaffected main character is an American journalist, Evan Leckie, whose wife has just left him and who, recently 'transferred to Heidelberg from the squalor and perdition of Nuremberg,' is feeling disoriented and rootless. The story's compressed setting is a post-World War II dinner party in Heidelberg of Germans and Americans, a sophisticated, eclectic group whose conversation inevitably turns to the ravages of war and a nostalgia for Germany's opulent past. Even is entranced by the charming German couple, the Reinmuths, particularly the gentle, wifely Frau Reinmuth, whose seeming detachment from the horrors and indignities of war evokes a timeless and seductive world. In her unabashed love of the past and its artifacts such as the crystal wine decanters of their hostess, in her intensely feminine demeanor, but especially in her equally

obvious and intense love for her husband, Frau Reinmuth seems the antithesis of Evan's resolutely modern wife, who dates everything from the year of her birth, 1920.

As the evening progresses, this ethereal German couple comes to symbolize to the itinerant American journalist everything of value disappearing from the world: 'And Evan Leckie, to whom the genesis of war had always been incomprehensible, looked with astonishment at these two pacific Germans and pondered how the whole hideous mistake had come about, what Eumenides had driven this pair to hardship, humiliation, and exile. Whatever else they were, however alien their values might be, these enemies were, *sub specie aeternitatis*, of incalculable worth if for no other reason than that, in an unloving world, they loved.'

But Judge Reinmuth shatters the ephemeral unity of this social gathering when he tells the story of his first case, a seemingly innocuous dinner party anecdote that ends on a grimly ironic note. As a young lawyer in Nuremberg, the Judge unsuccessfully defended a young man who confessed to stealing a paltry amount from an old woman. Invited by engraved invitation to the young man's guillotining, Reinmuth and his cohorts in formal dress watch the deceptively civilized spectacle of executioners in spotless white gloves silhouetted against a beautiful May morning. Rather than being repulsed at the violent ritual, Reinmuth confesses to an illogical euphoria that inspired him to call his young girlfriend on the telephone and propose. When he finishes his lugubrious tale, the Frau gazes lovingly at her husband of 20 years, remembering the romance of their long-ago courtship.

As a pall settles over the assembled dinner guests, they stare at each other, uncomprehendingly, over an immense cultural divide--the Americans shocked and repelled by the brutality concealed under a thin layer of civilization, the Germans apparently oblivious of anything contradictory in their behavior. Native American innocence might have led Evan to conclude that, in this isolated instance, love had triumphed over death, but Stafford's story resists such a pat interpretation. Its epiphanic conclusion instead dramatizes the paradox that such an idyllic relationship could, in effect, be spawned by a deathly ritual, a face so inescapably horrifying that another American at the party, 'snatching at the externals of the tale,' remarks on an antique guillotine he had once seen in Edinburgh, called the Maiden. Stafford thus conflates sexuality, love, and death as she dramatizes a bleak moment of psychological awareness in her innocent American's life that no doubt reflects her own cultural naivete as a young woman in Heidelberg.

Jean Stafford's references to Heidelberg in these stories evoke a place redolent with memories for her, the first step away from the home she would unceasingly try to leave behind. As her sister Marjorie Stafford Pinkham wistfully notes in a reminiscence of Jean, 'Jean was leaving home for good when she left for Heidelberg, and none of us ever lived under the same roof with her again. The fellowship to study philology at the University of Heidelberg in 1936 introduced Stafford to an alien world preparing for war, and she was alternately seduced and repelled by what she saw.'

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 9-11

Michael Hollister (2020)