

ANALYSIS

"The Mountain Day" (1956)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

""The Mountain Day' (1956) was suggested to Stafford by a story told her by Katherine White. It is also set in Colorado but is rather far removed in its outer trappings, although not in its ironic core, from the stories set in Adams. Judy Grayson, the heroine and narrator, has everything Stafford did not have in her own life in Colorado. Judy, a Bryn Mawr undergraduate, only visits the West. She describes her family's position: 'Our life was sumptuous and orderly, and we lived it, in the winter, in New York and, in the summer, in the mountains of Colorado. The Grayson fortune, three generations old, [was] founded on such tangibles as cattle, land, and cargo vessels...' Judy relates the events of her 'storybook summertime romance' with Rod Stephansson, 'woven in the mountain sun and mountain moonlight.' The 'storybook' quality of Judy's view of events allows her such transports as her cry: 'Is there anything on earth more unearthly than to be in love at eighteen? It is like an abundant spring garden. My heart was the Orient, and the sun rose from it...language that is markedly different from the pithiness of the speech in most of Stafford's western stories....

Judy is brought up short in her rapture when, on a perfect 'mountain day,' her grandmother's Irish maids drown in the heart-shaped lake between her father's cabin and her grandmother's house. Not only do the maids drown, but in the few hours they lie in the water, 'their lovely faces and their work-swollen hands' are eaten away by the hellbenders and the turtles that live in the lake's deepest holes. This tragedy, occurring in the symbolically shaped lake, shakes Judy from the egocentricity of her love affair, and she finds a new definition of love--'wanting the beloved to be happy.' The stark image of the mutilated corpses of the young maids is, however, the most powerful in the story. Stafford's choosing to juxtapose it against Judy's charmed life causes a deeper impact than does the happy ending suggested for Judy. The image symbolizes the violence and danger waiting for unprotected 'innocent' women in the West."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh

Jean Stafford

(Twayne 1985) 42-43

"In December 1955, while lunching with Katharine White, Stafford had complained that she had no ideas. By way of a response, her editor told her a gruesome story from her own childhood, about two family maids who had drowned on a summer outing, and encouraged Stafford to borrow the incident. Jean duly appropriated it and produced 'The Mountain Day,' which *The New Yorker* published in 1956. As White later noted, 'It is not one of her good stories but writing it did help her get out of a writing block.'"

David Roberts

Jean Stafford: A Biography

(Little, Brown 1988) 320-21

"[Her editor Katharine] 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. She had produced an impressive group of stories, but they didn't seem to help spur on the novel."

Ann Hulbert

The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford

(Knopf 1992) 307

"Jean Stafford's next story of a young heroine out West was 'The Mountain Day,' which appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1956. Though not one of her strongest stories, it is instructive for students of Stafford's short fiction because it shows the imprint of Katharine White from its inception. The idea for 'The Mountain Day' in fact originated with a story Katharine White told Stafford over lunch, concerning a true incident from White's childhood about two Irish maids who worked for her family in New Hampshire. The maids had gone swimming, stayed out beyond their expected time of return, and were subsequently discovered drowned. The event haunted White for years, and she had even intended to write a story about it herself. Hoping to help Stafford over her writer's block, White shared the material with her, and the result was this story, in which Stafford uses the tragic event as a formative experience in the life of a young woman.

Stafford makes her protagonist a wealthy young eastern woman on holiday out West, where she meets and becomes engaged to a Harvard student doing research at the nearby Science Lodge. One Sunday near the end of summer, they go on an outing, learn of the maids' disappearance, and shortly after find their bodies ravaged by sea turtles. This harrowing experience breaks the young lovers' complacent, secure mood and forces the starry-eyed Judith to move beyond her adolescent fixation on self.

'The Mountain Day,' like several of Stafford's other stories, deals with the maturation of a young woman and her burgeoning consciousness of the larger world she is a part of. But on a deeper level, it also dramatizes the seductions and dangers of innocence, not only for Judy, whose Edenic dreams of invulnerability are shattered at the sight of two young maids very much like herself, but also for the Irish maids, whose innocence of their environment ultimately causes their death. Judy's Boston grandmother spends her summer in Colorado, always bringing her maids. This summer it is two 'red-haired Irish girls, Mary and Eileen [who]...looked down their pretty noses at Mother's servants--local mountain girls who wore ankle socks and cardigans when they served dinner.'

No doubt lulled into a false sense of security by their mistress's house, which is log cabin outside but pure Boston sitting room inside, the transplanted maids do not believe in the dangers of their rustic environment; consequently, they are not prepared for the sudden mountain storm that capsizes their canoe. At the end of the story, Judy's grandmother, horrified by the incident, vows never to 'come here again with innocents.' Forced to confront her own naivete and self-absorption in the face of someone else's tragedy, Judy also realizes that neither wealth nor family position can finally shield her from the unexpected."

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 47-49

Michael Hollister (2020)