

ANALYSIS

"The Philosophy Lesson" (1968)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"The Philosophy Lesson' is the story that resulted from the several attempts Stafford made to write a novel about the suicide that profoundly affected her when she was a college student. Both she and a very wealthy young woman had been in love with the same young man. The other young woman committed suicide. In the fictionalized account, it is the young man who dies. The description of Cora Savage during the action of 'The Philosophy Lesson' is the most constricted image of a young woman, except for Pansy Vanneman in 'The Interior Castle,' in all of Stafford's fiction. Cora has 'turned herself to stone' for the three hours that she poses nude for the life class. She rests only at the end of each of the first two hours.

Although in 'Souvenirs of Survival' Stafford had called her own modeling at the University of Colorado the 'best paying' job on campus and implied her happiness in obtaining it, she omitted the painful details, which she reveals as she describes Cora's situation: 'Usually...the tension of her muscles would not allow her to think or to pursue a fantasy to a happy ending.... Often she felt she must now surely faint or cry out against the pain that began midway through the first hour, began as an itching and a stinging in the part of her body that bore the most weight and then gradually overran her like a disease until the whole configuration of bone and muscle dilated and all her pulses throbbed. Nerves jerked in her neck and a random shudder seized her shoulder blades and sometimes, although it was cold in the studio, all her skin was hot and the blood roared; her heart deafened her. If she had closed her eyes, she would have fallen down.'

The modeling is equally painful for Cora emotionally. The art students react to her as they would to inanimate objects for a still life. They talk about her as an object, as if she could not hear. She is 'at once enraged and fascinated' by her anonymity. When one of the students admiringly asks her if she plans to be a professional model, she is especially dismayed: 'the servant whose ambitions go beyond his present status does not wish to be complimented on the way he polishes the silver.'

Cora--like Stafford, a philosophy student--escapes only in her mind, by counting to hundreds or, on this way when the snow flies, by the consolation of Bishop Berkeley's philosophy: 'she concluded that she would be at peace forever if she could believe that she existed only for herself and possibly for a superior intelligence and that no one existed for her save when he was tangibly present.' Both this 'quieting phenomenon' and her 'inhuman' ability to remain frozen in position are tested when a student bursts into the class to announce the suicide of a young man with whom Cora has been infatuated, although his wealth and his love affair with a wealthy young woman put him out of Cora's social range. Cora holds her pose throughout the ensuing uproar in the classroom. It masks the terror that shakes her as she asks herself what could have driven this privileged young man to his death: 'And yet, why not? Why did not she, who was seldom happy, do it herself? Cora's contemplation of suicide is her ultimate rejection of herself and her entrapping and painful existence.'

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh
Jean Stafford
(Twayne 1985) 40-41

"In 1968 *The New Yorker* published 'The Philosophy Lesson,' the twenty-third story of hers to appear in the magazine--though the first in eleven years.... The piece follows the thoughts in its protagonist's head as she poses nude for her college life-drawing class."

David Roberts
Jean Stafford: A Biography
(Little, Brown 1988) 366

"The experience of modeling before a college art class is...recounted in Stafford's short story 'The Philosophy Lesson,' another episode about Cora Savage that Stafford undoubtedly had intended to include in *The Parliament of Women*. In the chilly tower room of Macky, an 'exorbitantly Gothic building' where Professor Truckess's drawing classes met three mornings a week, Jean Stafford would pose in the nude, as did her protagonist, Cora Savage. Remembering her own ordeal as a model, she writes of Cora that during these tedious modeling sessions she would 'faint or cry out against the pain that began midway through the first hour, began as an itching and a stinging in the part of her body that bore the most weight and then gradually overran her like a disease until the whole configuration of bone and muscle dilated and all her pulses throbbed.'

Though Stafford was pleased to have a regular job that provided her with spending money and enabled her to contribute some money to the indigent Stafford household as well, the fact that she had to expose her nude body to the scrutiny of her classmates was a great source of embarrassment. She also thought it humiliating to find herself sitting in a lecture hall next to one of the boarders whose blouse she had ironed the evening before. In the rigidly stratified society of the university, fraternity members dated only young women belonging to sororities. Too poor to join a sorority, so poor in fact that she had to pose in the nude to earn money, Stafford felt she was as much of a social outcast at the university as she had been in high school....

In addition to the dozen or so book reviews by Stafford that appeared in 1968 in *Vogue*, the *New York Review of Books*, and *Washington Post Book World*, her short story 'The Philosophy Lesson' appeared in the *New Yorker*, the first story by her to be published in that magazine in more than a decade. 'The Philosophy Lesson' describes the experience of a college student on a day when she is serving as a model in a college art class. Cora Savage, daughter of an anxious United Presbyterian mother and sister of Abigail, Evangeline, and Randall, learns on that day of the suicide of a medical student who was engaged to a rich young woman named Maisie Perrine. What misery had brought the boy, 'rich, privileged, in love,' to commit suicide, Cora wonders. 'And yet, why not? Why did not she, who was so seldom happy, do it herself?' Since the protagonist of 'The Philosophy Lesson' bears the same name as the protagonist of *The Parliament of Women* and since the suicide of a student is an oblique reference to the suicide of Lucy McKee, it is reasonable to assume that this story, which includes many other autobiographical references as well, was originally intended to serve as yet another episode in Stafford's unfinished autobiographical novel....

'She loved the snow,' Stafford wrote about Cora. 'When she had first heard of heaven, she had thought it would be a place where snow was forever falling and forever concealing the harshness of the world.' The story, which describes the suicide of a young student, concludes peacefully: 'The snow was a benison. It forgave them all.'

Charlotte Margolis Goodman
Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart
(U Texas 1990) 32, 295, 323

"Modeling...seemed to be a dramatic expression of deep uncertainty about her identity, as her subsequent fictional treatment of it in her story 'The Philosophy Lesson' suggested. There was a real gulf between the student who sat raptly in awe of her buttoned-up Victorian professor and the avant-garde girl who posed nude for her artistically inclined (and philistinely curious) classmates. In fact, her story, extracted from *In the Snowfall* and published in 1968, implied even more profound tensions than that. Teetering naked on the podium was a perfect emblem of her efforts to find some balance between her sense of isolation and her desire for connection with a wider world; it captured her fears that an escape from loneliness might entail an equally alienating exhibitionism.

For her autobiographical protagonist (renamed Cora Savage in 'The Philosophy Lesson') to stand up on the platform undraped was at once a declaration and a denial of her independent existence in the world of other consciousnesses: she presented herself as an object of others' scrutiny, only to see herself disappear in their subjective renderings of her. Cora was disturbed by that invisibility. 'Then she wandered about through the thicket of easels and saw the travesties of herself, grown fat, grown shriveled, grown horsefaced, turned into Clara Bow. The representations of her face were, nearly invariably, the faces of the

authors of the work. Her complete anonymity to them at once enraged and fascinated her.' Profoundly unsettled, Cora resorted to bleak Berkeleian meditations: 'She concluded that she would be at peace forever if she could believe that she existed only for herself and possibly for a superior intelligence and that no one existed for her save when he was tangibly present.

This sterile vision of detachment was precisely what Stafford was looking to escape at college. When she put her clothes back on and joined her fellow barbarians, the dilemmas were posed in less abstract form. In pursuit of her artistic aristocracy, she tried out different versions of belonging as she mingled with the bohemian intellectual and literary set that was avidly discovering modernism, pretending that Boulder was Paris and the early 1930s were the early 1920s. It was an exhilarating introduction to the possibilities of creative art....

Her story 'The Philosophy Lesson' appeared in *The New Yorker* in November of 1968. It was apparently drawn from work she had done long before on *In the Snowfall*, which had since then migrated into the autobiographical novel that was still giving her so much trouble. The story was set at a university clearly modeled on her alma mater, and its plot also linked it to *In the Snowfall*, though Joyce had been renamed Cora Savage. Like the protagonist of *The Parliament of Women*, she confronted a familiar, Lucy McKee-inspired trauma: while posing for an art class, Cora heard the news of a fellow student's suicide. In exploring Cora's consciousness as she meditated on the death and watched the snow start to fall, Stafford included a moment reminiscent of the bilocation that she was experimenting with in her new novel--the disorienting shift between vivid present and dreamlike past.

But in this version, rather than aiming for unsettling disjunction, she smoothed it into a relatively tame moment of memory. Looking out at the snow, Cora was suddenly transported back to her childhood in Adams by thoughts of the danger she had associated with winter when the sleds came out: 'Once Cora lost control and went hurtling into a barbed-wire fence. It seemed to her, on reflection, that she had slowly revolved on her head, like a top, for a long time before the impact. Then, too frightened to move lest she find she could not, she had lain there waiting for her brother.... Afterward she had been afraid of the ski jumps....' The vision of cold loneliness haunted her again as she found herself all too able to imagine what had driven her fellow student to death. 'A darkness beat her like the wings of an enormous bird and frantic terror of the ultimate hopelessness shook her until the staff she held slipped and her heart seemed for a moment to fail.' This story about the terrors of an isolated consciousness within an alienating body was a carefully shaped work, whose very artfulness served to underscore the dangers of disintegration."

Ann Hulbert
The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford
(Knopf 1992) 30-31, 354-55

"Another Adams [Colorado] story dealing with the events of Stafford's college years was 'The Philosophy Lesson,' appearing in the *New Yorker* in 1968. (This and the 1979 'An Influx of Poets' would be the last two Stafford stories in the *New Yorker*.) This time the painful memory concerned the suicide of a close friend, Lucy McKee Cooke--an event that haunted Stafford by her own admission and consistently eluded her attempts to give it fictional form. As Carolyn Ezell Foster notes in the introduction to her recently edited portion of Stafford's *In the Snowfall*, 'The Philosophy Lesson' was transcribed almost word for word from one of Stafford's many versions of the unpublished manuscript. Its pervasive image of snow would be a familiar one in Stafford's work, both a physical reality from her childhood and a symbol of the peace and detachment she so desired.

The story's protagonist, Cora Savage, poses nude for art classes at the university to make extra money. During one of these sessions, a student bursts in with the news of another student's--Bernard Allen's--suicide. As Cora reflects on this tragic news, she remembers Bernard as 'rich, privileged, in love,' and the least likely person to commit such a drastic act. Cora had, in fact, admired him from afar--envying his social graces, his inexhaustible supply of money, and his beautiful red-haired girlfriend. Jolted out of her idealized dreams of an obviously troubled young man, Cora contemplates the falling snow outside the studio and sees in it a silent blessing for herself and all these 'fledgling artists [who] put their own faces on their canvases.'

This epiphanic conclusion, so typical of Stafford's short fiction, has, as William Leary points out, a complex of meanings--all relating back to the title and indicating what a conscious literary artist Jean Stafford always was. Earlier in the story Cora remembers a recent philosophy lecture in which the professor had sarcastically referred to Berkeleian idealism as nonsense. Cora, in contrast, welcomed the bishop's theories that material objects have no independent being but exist only as concepts of a human or divine mind, reveling in the notion 'that she existed only for herself and possibly for a superior intelligence and that no one existed for her save when he was tangibly present.' What she desires, obviously, is a disembodied life--without memory, without unsettling intrusions such as a friend's suicide or the dehumanizing need to make herself into an object for amateur art students.

As the story moves toward its conclusion, Stafford alternates Cora's interior monologue with accounts of the art students' responses to Bernard's death. Detached and isolated from them as she always is, Cora believes only she can understand the desolation that must have driven this seemingly sheltered student to take his own life. As Leary notes, she vacillates 'between the claims of common humanity and isolating solipsism.' The ultimate philosophy lesson for Cora at the story's end is that not only she but 'each mortal in the room must, momentarily, have died.' They all 'had perished in their own particular ways.' Like Pansy Vanneman in 'The Interior Castle,' Cora is inevitably brought back into the material world, whose harsh contours are mercifully blanketed by the pure, white snow."

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 50-52

Michael Hollister (2020)