

ANALYSIS

"The Violet Rock" (1952)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"Stafford introduces twelve-year-old Emily in 'The Violet Rock,' which is narrated by Emily's eight-year-old sister, Tess. On the occasion of going to the foothills to look for pasque flowers, an activity that Stafford often enjoyed as a child, Emily plays on Tess's general fearfulness and terrorizes her into believing that a curse has been placed on her by a wealthy dude. Tess half expects what she gets from the 'volatile and clever' Emily. She describes the 'bad character' that Emily laments elsewhere.

As Emily's frustration over not finding the pasque flowers grows, she builds toward a temper tantrum, a result of 'the fury that had bedeviled her' since birth. In the midst of a tantrum, 'she would do a kind of writhing witch dance, shrieking out the most appalling imprecations against everyone she had ever known or heard about.... Sometimes, when the rage was spent, she turned grayly pale, and not infrequently she vomited and had to be put to bed in a dark room with a wet washrag over her feverish and aching head.'

This day in the midst of her rage, 'her long, skinny arms were flailing in their blue serge middie-blouse sleeves, her pigtailed thrashed, her feet stomped out a warpath...and her mouth was a livid cave from which spewed out, like rats and reptiles, the declarations of her hatred of everyone...' Silhouetted against the sky as she was, Emily appeared to Tess 'like some huge injured bird of prey, a little fictitious and a little farcical but exciting and resplendent.' It is an understatement to remark that Emily, born to such rages, is an unhappy child."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh
Jean Stafford
(Twayne 1985) 20

"The three Colorado stories that appeared in 1952 and 1953, 'The Violet Rock,' 'The Liberation,' and 'In the Zoo,' all focus on female protagonists who suffer at the hands of their elders. As Stafford did, the youngest of the three protagonists, Tess Vanderpool in 'The Violet Rock,' has two older sisters and an older brother. Tess enjoys most the company of her brother Jack: she wears his outgrown shirts and in the summer operates the popcorn machine with him in the park for the concessionaire. But Jack is not there to protect her when her sister Emily succeeds in convincing the little girl that the richest man in town has put a curse on her because she had 'sassed him.' The 'violet rock' in this charming if somewhat slight tale is described so vividly that people in Boulder who had read the story claimed the rock actually stood at the entrance to Boulder Canyon.

Amused by their inability to distinguish fact from fiction, Jean Stafford told Oliver Jensen...'this is an interesting fact to me since the violet rock, so far as I know, existed only in the mind of my sister Marjorie for a very brief time when we lived in Colorado Springs.' As Mark Twain had done, Stafford employs as narrator a child who speaks in the vernacular of the region; and as effectively as Mark Twain, she portrays the secret terrors of a naive child who is all too easily duped by her elders. For Tess Vanderpool, the small town in the West where she grows up is a place that terrifies her: she fears a corpse might be damming up the park 'crick'; she suspects that miners who live on the outskirts of the town are 'ready to carve up a girl into pieces if they took a mind to'; and she imagines that a house she must pass on her way home is haunted, its 'long-dead, weed-ravaged garden...marking the graves of three horses, whose ghosts were heard trotting through Main Street invariably on a night when someone met a violent death.'

But perhaps the grimmest aspect of the story is its depiction of the way a twelve-year-old preys on the fears and insecurities of her little sister. Because she herself is bored, the clever and volatile Emily frightens her sister Tess for her own amusement instead of offering to protect her."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman

"We first meet Emily [Vanderpool] through her sister Tess in the 1952 story 'The Violet Rock.' Like the other Emily Vanderpool stories, 'The Violet Rock' fleshes out a portrait of the artist as a young girl out West--brainy, volatile, and imaginatively stifled. Feeling powerless in the larger world, Emily rebels against her immediate surroundings, throws tantrums, and inspires awe and fear in her younger sister, who becomes the object of Emily's frequent rages. Since Adams [Colorado] bears faint resemblance to the abode of desperadoes and gun-toting cowboys with steely blue eyes, Emily as budding artist must create a heroic text out of the materials at hand. To frighten Tess, she constructs an imaginary story concerning Mr. Norman Ferris, a polo-playing easterner and wealthy owner of the Gold Palace Hotel. Ferris, according to Emily, remembers the day Tess 'sassed' him--called him a 'dude'--and he has vowed revenge. Presumably, he and his mad scientists have injected the violet rock looming up in the mountains with gentian violet, a lethal gas that is released only at twilight and directed solely at Tess.

Though Tess narrates, it is clearly Emily who directs the narrative. Like Molly in *The Mountain Lion*, Emily is often a creature possessed, and her possession always involves language. In her milder, literary moments, she wanders the mesas with her sister, reciting Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud"; in her wilder moods, she invents ghost stories and 'tales of mutilation and kidnapping' or hurls curses at randomly targeted acquaintances while doing bizarre, gesticulating dances. Her tone, Tess notes, 'ranged from the iciest sarcasm to the fiercest venom.' Emily's innately self-dramatizing tendency often results in stories so powerful they can cast a strange and lurid light on a once loved and familiar scene. As Tess reflects, 'I knew every inch of the park by heart--each tree and turning, each boulder and minuscule plot of grass.... But this evening, as I glanced away from Emily, the whole place looked altogether unfamiliar to me, unnaturally dark, the cottonwoods immense, and the springtime voice of the creek that bifurcated it was strange.'

But the spell of language the imaginative Emily casts on this familiar landscape suggests something more than sibling tyranny. What the story describes--through comparing Emily to Svengali and Tess to Trilby--is the process of narrative seduction at the heart of the storyteller's art. Words skillfully wielded have enormous power: the lichen-covered boulder Tess and her brother Jack routinely play on becomes, through Emily's verbal machinations, a violet rock seething with lethal gas and intended as the agent of Tess's destruction.

Emily Vanderpool's love affair with language recalls Jean Stafford's own early passion for words, fueled by her parents' tales of their childhood adventures and family history. Conscious of her father's cow-punching western roots and her mother's more proper, blue-blooded heritage, the young Stafford invariably found the legends of her paternal cowboy grandfather more intriguing. Her novel *The Mountain Lion* treats a similar family dynamic, when Ralph and Molly feel they must choose between Grandfather Bonney's aristocratic pretensions and Grandpa Kenyon's tales of meeting Jesse James. But John Stafford himself was also a curious mix of these two impulses: his bookshelves contained Ovid, Virgil, Shakespeare, and Mark Twain; his western tales often flaunted such incongruous titles as 'The Transmogrified Calf.' Clearly, the impressionable young Jean absorbed this complex literary heritage and used it to advantage in stories like 'The Violet Rock' that reflect the narrative seductions of her youth.

Always concerned with precision and clarity in language, Stafford was equally attuned to nuances of diction and style and to regional variations in usage. She had an ear for the telling phrase, the offbeat metaphor, the colorful analogy. In her travels through the United States, she would frequently jot down in her journals words and phrases that would later appear in her stories and novels and in her conversation, which was sprinkled with a strange mixture of the literary and the colloquial. Two of her favorite expressions were 'in a pig's valise' and 'it's none of your beeswax'--both worthy of her character Lotty Jump, who so entralls Emily Vanderpool in the story 'Bad Characters.' In her later years Stafford would deride the homogenization of the English language, blaming television and the movies for their insidious influence. In a 1973 essay, 'Plight of the American Language,' she laments this inevitable process in a comment that sheds light on her western tales: '[W]hat is going to become of regional speech? Who will carry on the rich oral traditions of New England and the South and the West? I reckon that convicts and

children, who have the most time on their hands, will go on contriving slang and jokes, and, God willing, the wellspring will not be polluted and will not go dry, and hillbillies and pickpockets and able-bodied seamen and timber-cruisers and southern politicians will go on sweetening the pot.'

Near the end of 'The Violet Rock,' when young Tess finally makes her peace with Mr. Ferris by telling her version of Emily's treacheries, Ferris is obviously curious about the kind of girl who could concoct such an outlandish tale and have such power over her younger sister. As he banishes the 'spell' he has supposedly placed on Tess and hands her a silver dollar to seal the bargain, his last words are 'I'll be interested to know what ever becomes of Emily.' Her story--even as retold by Tess--retains its imaginative allure."

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 38-40

Michael Hollister (2020)