

ANALYSIS

"A Country Love Story" (1950)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"In the deceptively tranquil, slow-moving 'A Country Love Story' the young wife May eludes her husband Daniel--the tyranny of his almost reasonable madness--by imagining for herself a lover, a lover whose natural place is in an antique sleigh in the front yard of their home. The lover possesses a ghostly plausibility: '...there was a delicate pallor on his high, intelligent forehead and there was an invalid's languor in his whole attitude. He wore a white blazer and gray flannels and there was a yellow rosebud in his lapel. Young as he was, he did not, even so, seem to belong to her generation; rather, he seemed to be the reincarnation of someone's uncle as he had been fifty years before.' Escaping the oppressive authority of her cerebral husband, May drifts into a sinister, because more seductive and satisfying predicament; by the story's end she and Daniel have traded places. ('A Country Love Story' bears an interesting relationship to a very late story of Jean Stafford's, 'Lives of the Poets,'...1978.) One cannot quarrel with the prevailing critical assessment that finds Jean Stafford's art 'poised,' 'highly reflective,' 'fastidious,' 'feminine.'..."

Joyce Carol Oates

"The Interior Castle: The Art of Jean Stafford's Short Fiction"
Shenandoah 30 (Winter 1979) 61-64

"I begin with a passage obviously intended to be dense, rich, and evocative, carefully made, self-conscious, but solidly of the late modernist period, unmistakably before the work of the postrealist, postmodernist writers who are my subject. Jean Stafford's 'A Country Love Story' begins in this way:

'An antique sleigh stood in the yard, snow after snow banked up against its eroded runners. Here and there upon the bleached and splintery seat were wisps of horsehair and scraps of the black leather that had once upholstered it. It bore, with all its jovial curves, and air not so much of desuetude as of slowed-down dash, as if weary horses, unable to go another step, had at last stopped here. The sleigh had come with the house. The former owner, a gifted businesswoman from Castine who bought old houses and sold them again with all their pitfalls still intact, had said when she was showing them the place, 'A picturesque detail, I think,' and, waving it away, had turned to the well, which, with enthusiasm and at considerable length, she had said had never gone dry. Actually, May and Daniel had found the detail more distracting than picturesque, so nearly kin was it to outdoor arts and crafts.'

The most conspicuous feature of the passage, if one is thinking of obvious contrasts with the experimental fiction of our own decade, is the treatment of time and physical objects. 'An antique sleigh,' 'snow after snow,' 'eroded runners,' phrases like these from the first sentence begin to present a durational mode that is little short of obsessive, projecting us immediately into a world of waiting, expecting, contemplating, appreciating, hoping, wondering, all of those experiences in which the mind and the sensibility are deployed around the central object of the contemplation, slow change. Both objects and people bear with them the marks of their own past; everything decays and disintegrates; both nature and people present the appearance of cyclic or ritualistically recurring behavior. In addition, time, in that passage and in such fiction in general, always carries with it an implicit valuation. A character shows his age gracefully or clumsily; the process of aging carries with it great dignity or great pathos; an aging object carries with it a sense of deceased value, as a result of its diminished usefulness, or a sense of enhanced value, as a result of its tasteful durability. And so it is that we are unsure, in that first paragraph, whether the sleigh is worn out, and should be discarded, or is an authentic antique, and should be preserved. There is no doubt that the cyclic, ritualistic house-buying and -selling of the 'gifted businesswoman' is specious and faintly repulsive.

It need hardly be said that no one goes through life with his eye so firmly fixed on the clock as this, saying to himself, A is older than B, but B bears its age more gracefully than A. Such an obsession with time is a convention which we never particularly noticed as a convention when a great deal of fiction was written that way. Yet, stylized and conventionalized though it may have been, such an obsession with time in modernist fiction surely represents a mode of perceiving the world and feeling its rhythms, shared, in a more diffuse and less specialized way, by the general culture.

Furthermore, Jean Stafford's paragraph evokes a set of relationships between two different modes of existence, in this case the man-made object and the forces of the natural world, and these relationships are played upon in a symbolic way. The function of a sleigh is to ride in the snow, not to be covered by it. And we know, even from the first sentence, that the presence of the sleigh, immobile and nonfunctional, will be made into a metaphor, charged with a flexible, ironic value, a metaphor for the presence of man in the world. As in the case of time, such a man-nature dichotomy, as a center for a symbolic charge of meaning, is a convention, present in the kind of sensibility fiction that Jean Stafford represents. In fact, it is a device central to innumerable novelists in the nineteenth century, such as the Brontes, Dickens, and Hardy. A Romantic way of focusing one's consciousness of the world, that man-nature dichotomy is a familiar device both of fiction and the general culture for a hundred years.

Moreover, there is, in Jean Stafford's story, the presence of the thing itself, an object pulled out of the background and conspicuously placed before our attention, described from a double viewpoint, near and far, given a touch of the pathetic fallacy (the sleigh has 'jovial curves'), and above all invested with taste. The sleigh, of course, is a chameleon image and is in good taste or bad according to its human context. And it is a marvelously versatile structural device, which compresses and gathers together a number of attitudes axial to the story that follows. But there is not much doubt that the image of the sleigh is more than a trope or a structural device to Jean Stafford and her readers. It is a thing, with intricacy of contour, complexity of texture, solidity, and the marks of its own past. Whatever its usefulness in the story, it is an image that issues from the imagination of a writer fascinated with the material objects of daily, sensory existence, a mode of understanding central to Anglo-American fiction from Defoe to what survives of the realistic tradition in the present time."

Philip Stevick
Alternative Pleasures: Postrealist Fiction and the Tradition
(U Illinois 1981)

"Stories set in Damariscotta Mills describe...the disintegration of Stafford and Lowell's marriage. 'A Country Love Story' (1950) describes the hollowness and anger of the fifth year of the marriage of May, who is thirty, and Daniel, her senior by twenty years, a history professor who has just spent a year in a tuberculosis sanatorium. The two move from Boston to Maine at the insistence of Daniel's physician, despite May's own judgment that another year of isolation would be harmful to Daniel. May's judgment proves correct. What she did not recognize, however, is that the year would allow Daniel to drive her to the brink of questioning her own sanity.

In October, after a few months of pleasant, companionable work on their house and grounds, Daniel retreats to his study and closes May out of his life. The few conversations they have deteriorate into quarrels. Daniel refuses to recognize May's pleas to him for release from the isolation he has imposed upon her. He instead begins to accuse her of having 'done something' that she is ashamed of while he was in the sanatorium and begins to suggest that she is going mad, a suggestion that remains with May as a 'deep, bleeding injury.'

The effect of Daniel's treatment is to push May into 'a weighty but unviolent dislike' of Daniel. More dangerous to her, she is pushed to the edge of madness, into fantasizing a lover whom she eventually 'not only believed in...but loved...and depended wholly on his companionship.' She develops the guilt about this fantasy lover that Daniel tries to force on her about her supposed indiscretion. In a savage kind of irony, Daniel feeds her sense of disequilibrium by forgiving her 'because you don't know how you persecute me.' He continues, by the time she has reached such a state of depression that she is insomniac, by telling her that 'perhaps when this is over, you will know the reason why you torture me with these obsessions and will stop.'

On one of her nightly insomniac vigils she hallucinates and clearly sees her fantasized lover sitting in the sleigh whose continued dilapidated presence on their front lawn has become a symbol of May and Daniel's inability to communicate and has also excited May's imagining of her lover. After this vision, she sleeps as if in a coma, dreams of her lover, and is awakened by Daniel's saying to her, 'The winter is over, May. You must forgive the hallucinations of a sick man'; he begs her, 'If I am ever sick again, don't leave me, May.' Her affair ends. The pale, fair head of Daniel bending over her as she awakes is the fair head of her lover, who had 'seemed rather frail, for there was a delicate pallor on his high intelligent forehead and there was an invalid's languor in his whole attitude.' The return of the real Daniel is too late for May. She remembers his previous condescending treatment of her even before the long winter began. She knows the lover/Daniel she has fantasized will never appear. The terrible image Stafford uses to describe May's contemplation of her future life--'like an orphan in solitary confinement'--reveals the utter hopelessness of her situation.

This story provided another opportunity for Robert Lowell to vent his own emotions about Stafford and their marriage. According to C. David Heymann, 'The fiction provided fragments of the imagery for Lowell's 'The Old Flame' (1964), with its hint of the poet's second wife, Elizabeth Hardwick.'

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh
Jean Stafford
(Twayne 1985) 63-64

" During the span of her marriage to Jensen, Stafford published six short stories in *The New Yorker*. One was 'A Country Love Story,' her muted but powerful version of the imaginary-lover incident in Damariscotta Mills [when she was married to Lowell]. The story won her her third O. Henry Award and was thereafter often reprinted in anthologies.... Along with the Adams [Colorado] tales, Stafford wrote at least nine other first-rate stories during the 1950s: 'A Country Love Story,' 'The Echo and the Nemesis,' 'Cops and Robbers,' 'The Liberation,' 'Beatrice Trueblood's Story,' 'Maggie Meriwether's Rich Experience,' 'The End of a Career,' 'My Blithe, Sad Bird,' and 'A Reasonable Facsimile.' No American writer produced a finer body of short fiction during that decade."

David Roberts
Jean Stafford: A Biography
(Little, Brown 1988) 313

"In 'A Country Love Story,' she speaks of a house like her own, which, though 'old and derelict,' has beautiful 'lines and doors and window lights' as well as a cricket on the hearth. The two characters in this story, a writer who is recuperating from an illness, just as Lowell was recuperating from his appendectomy that winter, and the writer's wife, May, rejoice in their house and the views it affords of river, lake, woods, meadow, and a nearby mansion. Stafford and Lowell's own initial joy about their house and its surroundings is reflected in her description of May and Daniel: 'Together, and with fascination, they consulted carpenters, plasterers, and chimney sweeps. In the blue evenings they read at ease, hearing no sound but that of the night birds--the loons on the lake and the owls in the tops of trees. When the days began to cool and shorten, a cricket came to bless their house, nightly singing behind the kitchen stove. They got two fat and idle tabby cats, who lay insensible beside the fireplace and only stirred themselves to purr perfunctorily....'

Yet during the course of the winter, the relationship between Jean Stafford and Robert Lowell became more and more strained. As May and Daniel in 'A Country Love Story' do, they began to argue over trivial matters, and Lowell frequently retreated to his study, leaving her to spend her days and evenings alone. She revealed one source of tension to Cecile Starr: 'I have reached the age when I do not want to meet any new people.... We are continuously being summoned to swimming, dancing, cocktail and dinner parties and as you may well imagine, Cal is extremely difficult and makes me make up some horrendous lie or makes me go alone...'

Lowell's poem 'The Mills of the Kavanaughs' also appears to be a meditation on the conflicts that arose between him and Stafford in Maine. The speaker in the poem, to whom he gives the name of his first fiancée, Anne, sits in the garden playing solitaire, as Stafford was wont to do. Dressed in 'blue jeans,' perhaps a cryptic reference to Jean Stafford's state of mind as well as her habitual apparel that year, Anne

reflects of her marriage to wealthy Harry Kavanaugh, who had 'Prince Charming' to her 'Cinderella' by rescuing her from a life of poverty. Ian Hamilton points out the connection between Lowell's poem and Stafford's 'A Country Love Story.' Both works deal with a husband who is suspicious of his wife. The nature of Daniel's suspicions is never specified in Stafford's story, though Stafford does describe an imaginary love May conjures up to help relieve her terrible isolation. In Lowell's poem, however, when Anne drams of making love with a 'boy' who is 'not black / Like Harry,' her husband actually accuses her of infidelity and tries to strangle her.

A further connection between the two works is that both mention the noise of a snowplow outside the couple's window. Citing these connections, Hamilton observes that it is tempting to read Lowell's 'The Mills of the Kavanaughs' as a parable of his marriage to Stafford and a reflection of his jealousy.' Also reflecting their marital strife, Stafford's 'A Country Love Story' is a poignant tale about despair, isolation, and loss. The story concludes with May contemplating the disintegration of her marriage and 'rapidly wondering over and over again how she would live the rest of her life'....

She was beginning to attract a good deal of attention as a short story writer. In May of 1950, one of her finest short stories, 'A Country Love Story,' appeared in the *New Yorker*. Included in the O. Henry Prize stories of 1951, 'A Country Love Story' is one of her best and best known short stories. Especially after it was reprinted in Robert Penn Warren and Albert Erskine's excellent, widely circulated, and frequently reprinted anthology, *Short Story Masterpieces*, the story reached a wide audience. Set in Damariscotta Mills and focusing on despair and loss, 'A Country Love Story' is related in theme and setting to *The Catherine Wheel*, the novel Stafford began that year after she finally had laid the still uncompleted manuscript of *In the Snowfall* aside."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman
Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart
(U Texas 1990) 152-55, 208

"Shortly after she finished *The Mountain Lion*, there seems to have been a violent scene between her and Lowell, who had just returned from a Trappist retreat. She called it 'the incident,' as distinct from 'the accident,' the other memorable shake-up at the hands of her husband (the New Orleans episode, when Lowell broke her nose, never seemed to figure in her memories): she claimed that Lowell beat her up and threatened to kill her.

Clearly something happened that was disturbing enough to surface later in one of her stories, 'A Country Love Story,' in 1950 (originally titled 'When the House is Finished, Death Comes'), and in Lowell's *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*. The scene was strikingly similar in both (though Stafford excised it from her final story): the husband, in a seizure of jealousy, tried to strangle his wife in bed. So were the details of the setting--the Damariscotta Mills house looming, as Stafford put it, 'as if it were their common enemy, maliciously bent on bringing them to disaster,' the snowplow clanging in the quiet night, its lights ominously blinking. And a larger theme lurked behind both of their portraits of marital crisis: the fear of mental collapse....

Starting in the fall of 1949 Stafford turned to the darker suggestions of her theme in four of her most notable stories. Two of them stood out as exceptions to *New Yorker* urbanity, as several critics remarked, and the other two were rejected by the magazine. Katharine White was unsettled by 'A Country Love Story' (originally entitled 'When the House Is Finished, Death Comes'), which appeared in the spring of 1950 (and won an O. Henry Award, her third). It is a 'fascinating and poetic and puzzling piece of writing--not too personal I would think if certain things were done,' she wrote to Stafford. 'It fascinated me completely, but also bothers me.' Inspired by 'the incident' with Lowell during the spring of 1946 at Damariscotta Mills, the story was about the psychological dangers of submissive retreat.

A couple living alone in the country grew increasingly estranged, the husband withdrawing into his work as he convalesced from a long illness, the wife sinking into depression when she was brutally rebuffed by him. Instead of finding peace in their solitude, they were caught up in a self-destructive drama. He accused her of infidelity and was consumed by jealous visions. She internalized the (false) charge and imagined herself adulterous and guilty, slipping into a fantasy world that was a source both of comfort--her

imaginary lover was a solace in her isolation--and of fear. Was she going mad? 'From every thought, she returned to her deep, bleeding injury. He had asked her if she were going mad.'

Once again, Stafford set up a relation in which passivity invited mental tyranny, isolation invited enslavement. A curious diary entry reflecting on the role she played with Lowell, apparently written in the midst of work on *In the Snowfall*, suggests that in her story she was drawing on an interaction she knew firsthand. Her journal snippet was a cold self-diagnosis: 'Sometime, he said, I would lose my temper and stop letting people knock me about. 'As you have always done?' I asked and he replied, 'Yes, it's all that could be done with someone like you.' But I did not know how to refuse to accept the mistreatment. If I fought back with anger, it only made things worse; yet my submissiveness maddened him. I apologized for everything; I had no center and therefore I had no self and therefore I did not lead a real life. His vanity and passionate self-devotion fascinated me evilly.'...

'A Country Love Story' comes the closest to a confessional account of a traumatic personal experience [with Lowell], but here too Stafford pulled back. The husband's effort to strangle his wife that climaxed an early draft--which was apparently the actual, violent source of the story--was cut in the final version.... Ominous though [these] stories were, Stafford's protagonists were young and her endings, however bleak, did not rule out all hope.... At the close of 'A Country Love Story,' the wife sat 'with her hands locked tightly in her lap, rapidly wondering over and over again how she would live the rest of her life.' Was there any escape from this vision of life as a divided self, at once tyrant and victim, at the mercy of an unappeasable hunger for love, or at least for some acknowledgement of one's existence?"

Ann Hulbert
The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford
(Knopf 1992) 212, 274-76, 278

"'A Country Love Story,' which uses the remote New England setting to much bleaker ends, is generally regarded as one of Jean Stafford's finest stories. This masterful portrait of a disintegrating relationship is firmly grounded in its wintry setting, complete with an antique sleigh that serves as focal point and symbol both for the leaden passing of time and for the inertia May and Daniel experience at this juncture in their married life.

May and Daniel suffer through a bitterly cold, isolating winter while Daniel, a university professor of history, recuperates from an illness. His doctor has ordered the solitude, but May yearns for some conversation and socializing. She and Daniel become increasingly estranged from each other until Daniel finally accuses her of madness and infidelity, and she, in retaliation, imagines a ghostly lover. This lover is her escape, her refuge, but one day she sees him sitting in the sleigh looking like an invalid. His identity and Daniel's merge as May wakes to Daniels' pleading with her to forgive him. The story ends with May resigned to her unchanging life, 'like an orphan in solitary confinement.'

'A Country Love Story' treats the same theme of isolation versus immersion Stafford deals with in stories like 'The Echo and the Nemesis' and 'Polite Conversation.' Thus, though the story is narrated primarily from a distant, detached third person point of view, we are sympathetically drawn into May's unstable world in passages like the following, which show multiple layers of consciousness at work: 'But she did not disturb Daniel in his private musings; she held her tongue, and out of the corner of her eye she watched him watch the winter cloak the sleigh, and, as if she were computing a difficult sum in her head, she tried to puzzle out what it was that had stilled tongues that earlier, before Daniel's illness, had found the days too short to communicated all they were eager to say.'

Beneath the superficial seasonal references in this story lies an unmistakable sexual subtext. Moving in during the summer, May and Daniel are caught up not only with the beauty of the landscape and the architectural curves of their ancient farmhouse but with each other in what is 'a second honeymoon.' But as winter sets in with its long, dark silences, May remembers the doctor saying that 'a long illness removes a thoughtful man from his fellow beings.' It is, he says, 'like living with an exacting mistress who is not content with half a man's attention but must claim it all.' Later, as the depth of their estrangement becomes apparent, May echoes the doctor's metaphor when she reflects that 'to the thin, ill scholar whose scholarship and illness had usurped her place, she had gradually taken a weighty but unviolent dislike.'

Finally, when Daniel's accusations drive May to invent an imaginary lover who perversely consumes her thoughts and emotions, this lover assumes a primary role in the subversive subtext May creates for herself as she retreats into what must be sexual fantasies of this urbane, solicitous specter--fantasies that intrude when she is having tea with the neighborhood ladies, or buying groceries in the local store, 'fearful that the old men loafing by the stove could see the incubus of her sins beside her.' During the day, when she goes to the barn for firewood she smells the earthy odor of horses once kept there and is reminded of 'their passionate, sweating, running life.' At night 'she lay straight beside [Daniel] as she slept...and tried not to think...of the man, her lover.'

This imaginary lover constitutes the subversive subtext early feminist critics such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar identify in texts by women writers. Undercutting the conventional text female characters often find themselves trapped in and mirroring their rebellious, hidden natures, such a rhetorical strategy often accompanies the heroine's painful awakening, as Susan Rosowski notes, to a profound acknowledgement of limitation. Thus, Mary becomes increasingly introspective, lost in her musings, withdrawing into a world of her own creation when she finds the real world too frightening. Stafford reinforces this turning inward by the circular patterning of her narrative: the antique sleigh appearing in the first paragraph as a charming artifact of the past reappears at the conclusion in a more ominous light as May contemplates it and realizes that her life will not change. Though this somber realization saves her from madness, it also dooms her to a loveless sanity. She climbs into the sleigh, 'hands locked tightly in her lap, rapidly wondering over and over again how she would live the rest of her life'."

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 22-24

Michael Hollister (2020)