

ANALYSIS

"A Summer Day" (1948)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"In developing male characters, Stafford places them in situations and settings that are not significantly different from those of her female characters. She frequently portrays them as displaced persons of a kind. She also often shows them at the mercy of a dominating female foster parent or landlady. The youngest of these, in 'A Summer Day' (1948), is an orphaned eight-year-old Indian boy, Jim Littlefield, who is shipped west to Oklahoma when his remaining relative, his grandmother, dies. An apparently well-meaning minister promises him that his 'Uncle Sam' will now take care of him. Faced with the heat and the rampant disease at the boarding school to which he is taken, he decided immediately to escape. This decision, although he does not carry it out and the story ends with him sleeping in a fetal position dreaming of his mother, separates him from the orphaned girls in Stafford's fiction, who generally accept their fates and do not expect to escape--and usually are unable even to fantasize about such a possibility."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh
Jean Stafford
(Twayne 1985) 14

"Her sister Marjorie was now teaching at an Indian reservation in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, a school very much like the one Stafford describes in her short story 'A Summer Day'.... Jim Littlefield, the orphaned eight-year-old Cherokee Indian who is the protagonist of 'A Summer Day,' also finds himself in an alien environment when he is sent from Missouri to a desolate Indian orphanage in Oklahoma after his grandmother dies. Hot and dusty after a long train trip, he dares not drink the water in the orphanage when he learns that many of the children have become ill after doing so, and although he has been planning to run away as soon as night falls, he is so exhausted by the heat and his sorrow that he lies down on the 'sickly grass' in the yard and falls asleep'."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman
Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart
(U Texas 1990) 32, 196

"Published in the same month and year as 'The Bleeding Heart,' a tale of an orphaned young girl who yearns to be adopted, 'A Summer Day' is the story of Jim Littlefield, an orphaned boy who arrives in Oklahoma barefoot on the train from Missouri. A typical Stafford displaced person, Jim's first impression of the desolate Oklahoma site of the Bureau of Indian Services sharply contrasts with the familiar world he has left behind--a world of rainwater shining in washtubs, wisteria-shaded porches, and trees big enough to sit under. His train ride has been similarly disappointing: even the lunch of the preacher's wife had packed for him had 'a dead ant on one of the peanut butter sandwiches and the Baby Ruth had run all over the knobby apple.' As he waits for someone to show up at the station, he thinks back to the alternative lives he could have had if people back in Missouri had adopted him. Finally rescued by personnel from the orphanage, Jim realizes when they arrive that the deserted playground is a result of an epidemic, and that even at the orphanage he will be isolated. The only other orphan Jim meets is an older boy who represents what Jim could become: a bitter, angry adolescent punished for stealing a gun from Mr. Standing-Deer, and harboring dreams of escape. The story ends with Jim falling into an exhausted sleep, too tired to think of escape."

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 54-55

Michael Hollister (2020)