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John Marin, is the angle of vision, the perspective, the framing of the perceiving consciousness, which is teased by Nature's protean significance even as it endeavors to tease others into experiencing a shifting apprehension of things. If we speak of the fully tragic or comic in Jewett, of the deepest facts of life and death, we must also use that phrase which Marin used so often in the titles of his seascapes: "pertaining to." Like his, her art is an art of reference, of lines and dashes and snatches of people, places, voices, and views held constant only by the frame of the self which beholds, and the buried dream of another world of myth and archetype. "The view of a landscape, broad, unaccented, lying under a summer sky" was the way in which a contemporary critic summed up Jewett's descriptive technique, a technique which makes her art as open and firm as the granite of the Maine shore, yet as elusive as its moody and inconstant waters.



MRS. ALMIRA TODD, HERBALIST-CONJURER

By SYLVIA GRAY NOYES

For all their attraction, other stories by Sarah Orne Jewett seemed dimmed beside the excellence of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. Central to it is Mrs. Almira Todd, herbalist and conjurer, whose simplicity is subtle, whose knowledge of the essence and power of herbs is almost mystical. Throughout Mrs. Todd is a country woman, placid and self-contained. She possesses a uniquely affirmative intelligence and rebuts negativism as if her life depends upon it, and, perhaps it does. Herbs are life-giving and Mrs. Todd has committed herself to an alliance with their powers.

The narrator introduces her landlady, Mrs. Almira Todd, in a "rustic pharmacopoeia," rather than in her "tiny house," at Dunnet Landing, Maine. She is up and working in the "queer little garden" before the writer awakens in the morning. In setting the mystical tone of the story, it is necessary to sense the significance of the "strange and pungent odors" rising from

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the garden, odors which awaken the visitor. Clearly, there is something superstitious, something mythical, about the life force of the herbs: "Some of these might once have belonged to sacred and mystic rites, and have had some occult knowledge handed with them down the centuries."¹ Having become awakened by the "pungent odors," the visitor becomes intellectually awakened, as the story progresses, to a deep understanding of this herbalist who "trod heavily upon thyme, and made its fragrant presence known" (p. 14) under her window.

A dedicated concern for others would be first among the qualities one must attribute to Mrs. Todd. In fact, her desire to cure all the ills of her neighbors is, in one instance, misguided. The village doctor warns her of overuse of a thoroughwort elixir she is fond of dispensing. But Mrs. Todd must have an innate gift for accuracy in concocting syrups, elixirs, and cordials because there is only that one warning. The reader must assume her potions are scientific, or, at least, innocuous; otherwise the small caution would have been followed by severe admonition, and, perhaps, legal repercussions. There are only two other references in the story which concern her rapport with the doctor. Both relate to sick children. The first child is administered a potion and the mother is told to take the child to the doctor in a half-hour, "if she ain't better." Mrs. Todd isn't competing with the doctor; rather, she is hoping to save the child's family the price of a house, or office, call. It is well known that the herbalist's "folks" only pay for medicine. Of the prosperous butter-makers from Black Island, who bring their sickly child to Dunnet for medical advice, Mrs. Todd explains "that they were people she never liked, and they had made an excuse of a friendly visit to save their doctor's bill; but she pitied the poor little child, and knew beside that the doctor was away" (p. 153). Her compassion isn't completely satisfied with dispensing herb preparations. Evidently, the Black Island child needs nursing because she tells the writer, "I wish they'd let me keep her."

There is a modest reticence in Mrs. Todd's solicitude. Although proud of her skill, she deprecates praise. Her vast

1 Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1927), 4. All subsequent page references in this essay are to this edition.

knowledge is just a "slender business" to support a widow. It is that, of course, yet one reads of very little money crossing hands. Because sick people need medicine whether they can pay for it or not, she never requests payment. She waits to be asked the price of "the vial." It would be a mistake, however, to conceive of her as an innocent idealist; her concern is balanced by a strong pragmatism. She admits she took "great advantage" of the writer by using her for "seeing folks" (waiting on customers) while she went off collecting herbs. Mrs. Todd gets things done, confidently. To Mis' Abby Martin, she supplies "a small packet o' very choice herbs . . . ; they'll smarten her up and give her the best of appetites come spring" (p. 134). She scolds William, her brother, when he comes "sighin' and bewailin' how feeble Mother is," for neglecting to replenish her tonic supply. With simple honesty, she expresses satisfaction in the effects of the syrup: "Next thing I know, she [her mother, Mrs. Blackett] comes in to go to meetin', wantin' to speak to everybody and feelin' like a girl. Mis' Martin's case is very much the same" (p. 135).

The altogether likeable and healthy personality of Mrs. Todd is complemented by some undefinable qualities, qualities which specifically relate to her wild, and cultivated, herbs:

It may not have been only the common ails of humanity with which she tried to cope; it seemed sometimes as if love and hate and jealousy and adverse winds at sea might also find their proper remedies among the curious wild-looking plants in Mrs. Todd's garden (p. 15).

How does one remedy the pains of "love and hate and jealousy?" By the application of herb potions. And who would dare play God with such suffering? A mythical-like seer, perhaps—"a huge sibyl." The writer, at first, laughs as Mrs. Todd's "governing mind" commands, "Take of hy-sop one handful," then wonders at the respectful silence upon which her orders fall, and, finally, falls herself under what she calls Mrs. Todd's "spell."

In the first movement of the plot, the writer decides to work days at the schoolhouse since there are many distractions at the lodging house. It is difficult for her to concentrate even in the quiet schoolroom, for the windows reveal scenes of field and sea which absorb her imagination. One day, while gathering

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tansy to be made into a children's drink, and to flavor tansy cakes, a children's delicacy, Mrs. Todd interrupts her friend in the schoolhouse yard. The tansy excursion coincides with Mrs. Todd's wise comment on the hardships some youths endure which spur them to attain success in adulthood. She may also be alluding to the writer's lack of literary inspiration. Like the tansy, perhaps she needs to be "scuffed down" to "grow so much the better."

Mrs. Todd's interest in the writer's general welfare includes both an understanding of her literary need to gather material, and an astute concern for her emotional stability. For example, on the afternoon of Mrs. Beggs' funeral, the writer is supplied with more than enough realistic and romantic impressions. The two ladies attend the funeral together. Being younger, the writer is more upset by the solemn service than is Mrs. Todd, who can accept the inevitability of death, even of an old and dear friend. Her mind reeling with thoughts of immortality, the writer spends the rest of the afternoon with Captain Littlepage, a retired sea captain, whom she described in this manner:

He might have belonged with a simple . . . , whose use she [Mrs. Todd] could never be betrayed into telling me, though I saw her cutting the tops by moonlight once, as if it were a charm, and not a medicine, like the great fading bloodroot leaves (p. 20).

There is little known of the herb, simple's joy, except that it has been vaguely recorded as a sacred herb, par excellence. Bloodroot was successfully used by the American Indians and early settlers as an astringent. As Mrs. Todd had known she would, the shaken but ever theme-hungry writer encourages Captain Littlepage to relate his supernatural tale. In the light of his physical and intellectual credentials, the fantastic story becomes almost believable. The gentleman has memorized his Milton, and she fancies him as having "the refinement of look and air of command which are the heritage of the old ecclesiastical families of New England" (p. 23)—certainly a man, par excellence, quite like the simple. As an astringent draws the blood, so the writer draws from the erudite and well-traveled Captain his other worldly image of a physical, arctic limbo. Then when the writer returns home, Mrs. Todd knowingly observes the shattering effect the afternoon has had upon her, and

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enters her cool cellar for "a little mite o' camomile" to add to a comforting cup of tea. One of camomile's uses is as a mild sudorific and its application here suggests an emotional easement. Mrs. Todd, surreptitiously, succeeds again, and for the third time in one afternoon. The writer's imagination is soothed, although she thinks "nothing happened":

"I don't give that to everybody," said Mrs. Todd kindly; and I felt for a moment as if it were part of a spell and incantation, and as if my enchantress would now begin to look like the cobweb shapes of the arctic town. Nothing happened but a quiet evening and some delightful plans that we made about going to Green Island (p. 34).

The four units describing the visit with Mrs. Todd's family on Green Island reveal significant emotional data about the herbalist-conjurer. The day begins with Mrs. Todd and her guest sailing across the bay with Johnny Bowden to "Where the Pennyroyal Grow." The pleasant visit with Mrs. Blackett, whom the guest describes as possessing "that greatest gift, a perfect self-forgetfulness," is also enjoyed by Mrs. Todd, but she cannot for long resist a brisk walk in the island pastures "to gather the desired herbs," pennyroyal and bayberry. In the context of this episode, the pennyroyal has the power of recall. A stimulant aromatic, the pennyroyal grows near a Green Island promontory which is rich in memories for Mrs. Todd. In an artistic juxtaposition, the literal and figurative elements fuse as Mrs. Todd becomes the willing victim of her favorite herb. She confides to her companion that she did not love her husband, Nathan, although "he loved me well," and "he died before he ever knew what he'd had to know if we'd lived long together" (p. 49). The musk of pennyroyal poignantly reminds her of her lost love, "the other one." Mrs. Todd, then, has loved deeply and privately. There is a sad nobility in her resolve to fulfill her femineity by marrying an honorable man she can respect, rather than isolating herself in self-pity when she loses "the other." The waxy berry of the east-coast bayberry plant, which was used for making candles, and crushed for removing pine pitch from hands, is as significant as the pennyroyal. One may, I think, relate the suggestion of candles to the memories Mrs. Todd expresses; it may not be too ingenious to equate the pitch to subconscious, if undeserved, guilt.

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Mrs. Todd's acceptance of life and her strength to live with disappointment is contrasted to an episode entitled "On Shell-heap Island." The Joanna story also illustrates Mrs. Todd's fallibility because, this time, her herb-conjuring doesn't achieve the desired effect. "Poor Joanna" is lamented when she chooses to live alone among the Indians relics, the wormwood plants, and "mullein in great quantities" (p. 64) after her lover elopes with another. Although the story is told sympathetically, and without sentimentality, the wormwood and mullein best connote the pain of her loss and the isolation of her living. Mullein was collected to make poultices and thus it may suggest the healing power of temporary escape. Beach wormwood, with its tenacious roots buried too deep for cutting in sand dunes which face the sea, may suggest that Joanna's suffering is too intense for healing. Since she is Joanna's "cousin by marriage," Mrs. Todd feels she should visit the youthful recluse and try to persuade her to return to family and friends. Before leaving for the island with the minister, she "picked her a bunch of fresh lemon balm" (p. 65). But neither the minister's call to forgive her lover, nor the power of lemon balm tea can comfort or persuade Joanna to return to life.

Although Mrs. Todd becomes thoroughly involved with the emotional and physical frailties of her friends and neighbors, she is as vulnerable as they to the hardships in life—perhaps more so, since she bears her own ills, as well as theirs. Her inner weakness may be sensed in the "Bowden Reunion" units, which are almost free of herbal references. When Mrs. Blackett, who had left Green Island before daylight for the reunion journey, points out a "nice plant o' elecampane" by the roadside, Mrs. Todd, unexpectedly, responds, "I'm bent on seeing folks" (p. 84). But, while driving home after their happy day, Mrs. Todd has nothing "on her mind except not to forget to turn a few late mullein leaves that were drying on a newspaper in the little loft" (p. 98). One may infer from the brief recess, Mrs. Todd's need for change. Perhaps she salves her own anxieties and restores her herbal skills by "seeing folks" who do not know her very well and who do not need her. An elasticity of spirit, on the other hand, is indicated by her eagerness to return to the mullein leaves, the poultice (healing) herb.²

Some of Mrs. Todd's responsibilities are not burdensome. In

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an amusing scene she applies a pennyroyal solution to her brother William's face the day he calls to ask the writer to go fishing with him. Pharmaceutically, the salve repels insects, always plentiful during Maine's trout fishing season; romantically, the herb reveals her sisterly and mischievous intention—to influence William's love affair with Esther Hight. The independence and inarticulateness of rural Maine people is exquisitely portrayed in this delicate scene. Not until the end of the episode does the writer learn that she has been invited to go along just to entertain Mrs. Hight, or, even, that William and Esther are in love, and that their rendezvous is the planned purpose of the fishing trip. The pennyroyal-conjurer, whose response to the herb reunites her with Nathan and "the other one," can be given credit for the lovers' eventual marriage.

The romantic aspects of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* in no way detracts from its realism. The humanitarian herbalist is also a woman who has lived bravely, and, at sixty-seven, can walk miles across Maine's open fields, shake and beat her own rugs, drive a team of horses, and "land" a haddock for dinner while sailing to Green Island. It is the complete reality of the woman which provides the artistic experience and accounts for the durability of this story in American literature.

² Herb references taken from *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. (Asterisk indicates the herbs referred to in this paper.)

Sweet-Mary	Caryatide
Sage	Fennell
Borage	Portulacas
Mint	Mallow
*Wormwood	Linnaea
Southernwood	*Bayberry
*Thyme	Oolong
Indian Remedy	*Lemon Balm
*Hy'sop	Dandelion
Lobelia	Laurel
*Elecampane	Witch Hazel
*Tansy	*Simple's Joy
*Bloodroot	*Thoroughwort
*Camomile	

The origin and medicinal use of the herbs referred to in this paper are uniform. There is disagreement, however, among the sources concerning capitalization of the herbs. I have elected not to capitalize them. The specific resources used in the study of these herbs are:

Colin Clair, *Of Herbs & Spices*, (New York, 1961).

Gertrude B. Foster, *Herbs for Every Garden*, (New York, 1966).

Minnie Watson Kamm, *Old-Time Herbs for Northern Gardens*, (Boston, 1938).