



September 1978

## America's "Lonely Country Child": The Theme of Separation in Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron"

Theodore R. Hovet

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 14, no.3, September 1978, p.166-171

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

## *America's "Lonely Country Child": The Theme of Separation in Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron"*

by THEODORE R. HOVET

WHEN SHE was forty-eight years old, Sarah Orne Jewett thought back to 1857 and wrote, "This is my birthday and I am always nine years old." As F. O. Matthiessen shows, the "whole fading world" of pre-Civil War America as it was manifested in Maine continued to hold "the center of her affections."<sup>1</sup> But Jewett's love of her childhood and the past grew into much more than an astute observation of regional characteristics and the delicate rendering of a vanishing people and culture. As "A White Heron" reveals, Jewett discovered in the contrast between the distant world of the nine year old girl and the immediate industrial America of her adulthood the social enactment of the psychological drama of separation, the separation from bodily union with a nurturing environment which each individual must undergo in the process of maturation.

This drama of separation portrayed by Jewett is best explained by Norman O. Brown in *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History*. Brown's Freudian description of individual maturation rests on the premise that "the peculiar structure of the human ego results from its incapacity to accept reality, specifically the supreme reality of death and separation." He explains that "the primal act of the human ego is a negative one—not to accept reality, specifically the separation of the child's body from the mother's body." And, according to Brown, the "separation in the present is denied by reactivating fantasies of past union, and thus the ego interposes the shadow of the past between itself and the full reality of life and death in the present."<sup>2</sup> These fantasies of the past union motivate the individual to search for substitutes with which to recapture that "loved reality," to engage in "an active attempt to alter reality" so as to regain the objects lost as a result of separation. The objects cannot, of course, be regained and thus the individual and the society as a whole are forced to sublimate, i.e., to substitute "non-bodily cultural objects" for the fantasy of bodily union. The quest for these objects by members of a society creates an essentially urban envi-

1. *Sarah Orne Jewett* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1929), pp. 30, 106. Richard Cary also describes Jewett's "unquenchable urge for things-as-they-were" and her "desire to remain a child" in *Sarah Orne Jewett* (New York: Twayne, 1962), p. 19.

2. *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1959), pp. 159, 160, 162.

ronment marked by "the new aggressive psychology of revolt against female principles of dependence and nurture."<sup>3</sup>

Jewett's "A White Heron" clearly portrays a similar view of the human ego and social development. Sylvia, living in the woodlands, remains at a stage of psychological development in which she is dependent upon bodily union with a nurturing environment whereas the young man and "the great world" from which he springs are engaged in an aggressive search for the objects of lost union. Thus the story portrays the fundamental rift in the modern human consciousness which has been so imaginatively explained in *Life Against Death*.

Sylvia spends her first eight years in "a crowded manufacturing town." There she is "afraid of folks" and feels that she is as dead as "the wretched dry geranium"<sup>4</sup> that belongs to a town neighbor. She willingly leaves her parents to live with her grandmother on a farm in a remote area. On this tiny farm in the woodlands, the "old place" as the grandmother calls it, Sylvia (sylvan) finds in nature the "Great Mother," a nurturing environment that she apparently never found in her biological mother.<sup>5</sup> The woodlands provide Sylvia her only food, mostly milk and berries, and a sense of physical union she had never found in the city. She lives "heart to heart with nature"; and "the wild creatur's," according to the grandmother, "counts her as one o' themselves" (pp. 168, 165). Sylvia concludes that it is "a beautiful place to live in and she should never wish to go home" (p. 162). The contrast of this life with that of the city is emphasized by her memory of the manufacturing town as a place where "the great red-faced boy" used "to chase and frighten her" (p. 163).

Into this primitive and feminine world blunders the young man, a red-faced boy grown mature and polished, carrying with him two dominant symbols of the modern world, money and a gun, with which to wrest his ornithological prizes from nature. The money, the economic surplus which creates cities, provides power over others. The young man will pay ten dollars to Sylvia for knowledge of the heron's whereabouts, a sum which she believes will make her and the grandmother "rich with money" (p. 170). The gun, one of the major technological achievements of the modern world, gives the young man power over nature as well. In short, the young man brings to the woodlands "the new masculine aggressive psychology" described by Brown.

The young man, who as an adult has by definition experienced the reality of separation, directs the aggression toward obtaining "nonbodily objects" which can be substituted, i.e., sublimated, for the lost union. But in the words of Freud, "after sublimation the erotic component no

3. Brown, pp. 281-282.

4. "A White Heron" in *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956), p. 162. Subsequent references will appear in the text.

5. Brown briefly discusses the importance of the pre-Oedipal "Great Mother" to Freudian anthropology. See p. 126.

longer has the power to bind the whole of the destructive elements that were previously combined with it, and these are released in the form of inclinations to aggression and destruction."<sup>6</sup> Thus the young man's search for the lost objects of past union turns into a violent and destructive attempt "to alter reality" in the hope of regaining them. Sylvia witnessed "the sharp report of his gun and the piteous sight of thrushes and sparrows dropping silent to the ground, their songs hushed and their pretty feathers stained and wet with blood" (p. 171). Sylvia cannot understand why "he killed the very birds he seemed to like so much" (p. 166). This violent attempt to alter reality in order to regain what has been irrevocably lost also affects the male's approach to the woman. Jewett strongly hints that the fate of the birds—killed, stuffed, and displayed—is symbolic of the fate of a woman in the hands of the sublimating male. For example, the young man's aggressive confrontation of Sylvia in the woods causes her to hang "her head as if the stem were broken" (p. 163), a picture which clearly reflects the appearance of the dead birds in the young man's game bag. One cannot help but comment on Jewett's perception of the violence implied in the aggressor's tendency to mount women ("quails" or "birds" to use popular slang terms) on pedestals.

The hunt ("the fiery hunt" one might call it) for objects from the lost world of the self brings the modern world of masculine aggression into Sylvia's existence and threatens to alienate her from nature. The young man extends to Sylvia for the first time the hand "of the great world" and stirs in her "the woman's heart, asleep in the child" (pp. 170, 166). "Alas," the narrator interjects, "if the great wave of human interest which flooded for the first time this dull little life should sweep away the satisfaction of an existence heart to heart with nature and the dumb life of the forest" (p. 168). The encounter in the woods between Sylvia and the young man becomes, therefore, an encounter of the adult with the lost world of childhood and, simultaneously, of modern society with the state of nature from which it has sprung. It is an encounter of the modern with its primitive past. As a result of this meeting, Sylvia is forced to affirm her relationship to nature and to face the realities of childhood. Viewed from Sylvia's perspective, the meeting is a confrontation of the old fashioned world of rural America with the forces of modern society.

To convey the significance of Sylvia's affirmation of her dependence on nature, Jewett turns to the mythic concept of what Joseph Campbell calls the "World Navel," the symbolic center of the universe.<sup>7</sup> This symbolic center is located in "a great pine-tree, the last of its generation" which is "like a great main-mast to the voyaging earth" (pp. 167, 169). Sylvia must climb this "tree of life" (one of the variant

6. Quoted by Brown, p. 174.

7. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 40-46.

forms of the world navel) in order to locate the nest of the white heron, a climb which enacts the mythic trial by ordeal: "The way was harder than she thought. The sharp dry twigs caught and held her and scratched her like angry talons, the pitch made her thin little fingers clumsy and stiff as she went round and round the tree's great stem, higher and higher upward" (p. 168). Perched at the top of the great pine like the great bird she is seeking, her identification with nature as complete as the human condition allows, Sylvia can see, in a sense, the whole world: "There was the sea with the dawning sun making a golden dazzle over it, and toward that glorious east flew two hawks with slow-moving pinions. . . . Westward, the woodlands and farms reached miles and miles into the distance; here and there were church steeples, and white villages; truly it was a vast and awesome world" (p. 169).

But the mere physical world is not what Sylvia seeks. As the narrator puts it, "was this wonderful sight and pageant of the world the only reward for having climbed such a giddy height?" (p. 169). The answer, of course, is no. Sylvia is initiated into the very secret of nature:

Now look down again, Sylvia, where the green marsh is set among the shining birches and dark hemlocks; there where you saw the white heron once you will see him again; look, look! a white spot of him like a single floating feather comes up from the dead hemlock and grows larger, and rises, and comes close at last, and goes by the landmark pine with steady sweep of wing and outstretched slender neck and crested head. And wait! do not move a foot or a finger, little girl, do not send an arrow of light and consciousness from your two eager eyes, for the heron has perched on a pine bough not far beyond yours, and cries back to his mate on the nest, and plumes his feathers for the new day! (p. 170)

Sylvia's vision encompasses the contrarities of human existence—the golden light of the rising sun and the darkness of the swamp below, the natural world of sea and forest and the man-made world of towns and churches. These contrarities are encompassed by the most fundamental one of all, the coexistence of birth and death. As the sun grows "bewilderingly bright," Sylvia sees the heron rise out of the nest by the dead hemlock. Thus having climbed the tree of life, Sylvia has been initiated into what Campbell calls "the miracle of vivification," "a culminating insight which goes beyond all pairs of opposites."<sup>8</sup> She has perceived that, to use Brown's words, "life and death are in some sort of unity at the organic level."<sup>9</sup>

With this vision of the unity of existence before her, Sylvia refuses to commit the act that would separate her from nature forever. She does not "send an arrow of light and consciousness" which would frighten the heron. Her refusal to separate herself from her union with the natural world is affirmed by her refusal to tell the young man of the "dead hemlock tree by the green marsh" which marks the location of the heron's nest. By declining the "triumph and delight and glory" as

8. Campbell, pp. 42, 44.

9. Brown, p. 100.

well as the ten dollars which the young man would bestow on her for this knowledge, Sylvia rejects the values of the great world beyond the woodlands in order to preserve her timeless, heart to heart existence with nature. And she also preserves a unified sensibility by not, as the young man has done, employing her consciousness to help to alter a living force into a nonbodily symbol. "She cannot tell the heron's secret and give its life away." In short, she, by aligning herself with the mother she has found in nature, refuses to cross the threshold into adulthood and the stream of modern history.

In this seemingly simple tale, then, the encounter between Sylvia and the young man becomes an encounter between two stages of psychological and, consequently, historical development in America. The young man, one of the rising generations of Americans building the new industrial order, is engaged in what Brown calls "the immortal project" of recovering his own childhood, a childhood which is irrevocably lost in the past "state of nature."<sup>10</sup> The young man's quest for the beautiful birds which modern social forces are making increasingly rare captures precisely the neurotic wellspring of the pursuit of progress. It is, to again quote Brown, a "forward-moving *recherche du temps perdu*."<sup>11</sup> In contrast, Sylvia reminds us of the passive, dependent timeless relationship to nature which exists before the crucial separation of child from mother, society from nature.

The outcome of the encounter is not encouraging. Sylvia possesses something of inestimable value, a recognition of our dependency on nature and the inextricable oneness of life and death. The young man also owns something of crucial importance, the scientific knowledge which potentially could increase human freedom by a purposeful action upon nature. But the value of what each possesses remains impotent without the other. Sylvia's knowledge of vivification is useless if it is not connected to purposeful action; the young man's technological and scientific knowledge is destructive without Sylvia's insight into the heart of nature. Sylvia "cannot speak" and the young man kills what he loves. And the story ends without an understanding by either character of what the other possesses. Sylvia suffers "a sharp pang" as the young man leaves "disappointed" (pp. 170-171). She remains the dependent child he can no longer be; he stays the aggressive adult she must become if she will live in the modern world.

Sarah Orne Jewett—the person who always felt nine years old even though she saw the great world and knew some of its great people—must have felt keenly the failure in "A White Heron." Perhaps her stories, like Sylvia's vision of the bird, became for her the means of preserving the lost world of childhood which could not be incorporated into the busy society beyond South Berwick, Maine. Or maybe the stories

10. Brown, p. 84.

11. Brown, pp. 84, 83.

are, like the stuffed birds of the young man, the symbolic nonbodily objects which resulted from her own search for the lost life of childhood she had shared with her father and her aunts before the Civil War. In either case, in some profound depth of herself, Jewett understood the child and adult in her were writ large in the pockets of wilderness left in rural America and in the "unsatisfactory activity," as she once put it, of the cities.<sup>12</sup> She also felt that the history of modern America was being increasingly determined by the failure to unite the meaning of the child and the adult. The story ends with the young man journeying off engaged in an endless and destructive quest for the lost world of childhood; Sylvia in the last words of the story, remains in the woodland, a "lonely country child," a haunting reminder of the forgotten world of union with nature which nestles in the heart of the American behemoth.

*University of Northern Iowa*  
Cedar Falls

12. *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, p. 147.