



March 1982

## Heart to Heart with Nature: Ways of Looking at "A White Heron"

George Held

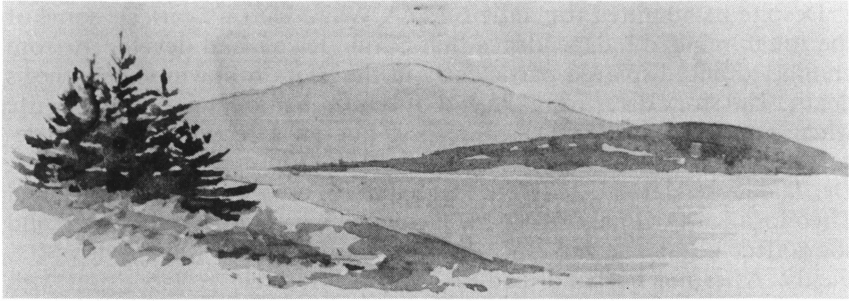
Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 18, no.1, March 1982, p.55-65

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.



## *Heart to Heart with Nature: Ways of Looking at "A White Heron"*

by GEORGE HELD

THOUGH "A White Heron" has been among Sarah Orne Jewett's most admired stories since its publication in 1886, its richness and strength may appear even greater today in the light of a feminist perspective. This tale of nine-year-old Sylvia's encounter with a young male ornithologist reverberates with meaning for such issues as the socialization of girls, the balance of power between the sexes, and the need for a woman to be true to her nature. In the heroine's conflict over revealing the heron to the young man, the story also concerns the need for mankind to resist the erosion of our integrity with the natural world.

Jewett herself claimed to "love" this fiction, though she despaired that it was too romantic to appeal to many readers in an age of literary realism. In fact an earlier story, "The Shore House," had drawn praise from the champion of realism, William Dean Howells, who had "urged her to do more, for he thought that she had found her true bent in realism."<sup>1</sup> Thus after having written the romantic "A White Heron," Jewett refrained from trying to publish it in a magazine, as was her practice, and instead withheld it to appear first as the title story of a new collection of her work. Her reasons for this strategy she explained in a letter to her dearest friend, Annie Fields: "Mr. Howells thinks that this age frowns upon the romantic, that it is no use to write romance any more; but dear me, how much of it there is left in every-day life after all. It must be the fault of the writers that such writing is dull, but what shall I do with my "White Heron" now she is written? She isn't a very good magazine story, but I love her, and I mean to keep her for the beginning of my next book. . . ."<sup>2</sup>

1. Francis Otto Matthiessen, *Sarah Orne Jewett* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1929), p. 48.

2. *The Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett*, ed. Annie Fields (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), pp. 59-60.

Despite its admitted romanticism, "A White Heron" reflects some of the tough-minded independence that Sarah Jewett had developed from childhood and displayed particularly in the years following her father's death. The story dates from the end of that transitional period in her life when she was transferring her deepest human affection from her deceased father to Annie Fields, widow of the publisher James T. Fields. Dr. Theodore Herman Jewett, after whom his daughter had been named Theodora Sarah Orne, died in 1878, causing her first deep sorrow, "and soon after began the correspondence," "a diary in truth,"<sup>3</sup> with Mrs. Fields. After her husband died in 1881, Annie Fields's friendship with Sarah Jewett grew intimate: "the two women were absorbed into a union that endured as long as their lives."<sup>4</sup> Though fifteen years older than Sarah Jewett (1849-1909), Annie Fields (1834-1915) shared with her, among other things, a similar relationship to the most important man in each woman's life: James T. Fields (1817-1881) was, after all, born only two years after Theodore Herman Jewett (1815-1878); Annie had been a teen-aged bride, her husband a man practically old enough to be her father. Thus when both women suffered, within the span of three years, the loss of the older man to whom each was emotionally committed, the fruition of their own attachment became natural and inevitable. And one of the significant fruits of that union was the volume to which "A White Heron" gave its title.<sup>5</sup>

This volume marked "the first time [Jewett] far transcended 'Deephaven,'"<sup>6</sup> her first, very successful, published book. Earlier, however, Jewett had dedicated *The Mate of the Daylight* (1883), her fourth collection of stories, to Annie Fields, with whom she had made an extended tour of Europe in 1882. And then, in *A Country Doctor* (1884), Jewett had given a fictionalized account of her life with her father. This book is usually cited for its early descriptions of the delighted company little Nan Prince, Jewett's alter ego, keeps with Dr. Leslie, her guardian, the same sort of pleasurable companionship that little Sarah had known with Dr. Jewett. But more important for understanding the course of Jewett's life and art are the final two chapters. In the first of these the now grown-up Nan rejects the marriage proposal of the attractive young lawyer George Gerry in order to pursue singlemindedly her plan of being a doctor. For "she had long ago made up her mind that she must not marry. . . . It would be no real love for another person, and no justice to herself, to give up her work, even though holding it fast would bring weariness and pain and reproach, and the loss of many things that other women held dearest and best."<sup>7</sup> In Jewett's own case, though she had

3. Fields, p. 5.

4. Matthiessen, p. 71.

5. *A White Heron and Other Stories* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1886).

6. Matthiessen, p. 82. *Deephaven* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1877).

7. Sarah Orne Jewett, *A Country Doctor* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1884), pp. 307-08.

once considered becoming a doctor, "her work" was writing, and the firm resolve to stay unmarried was clearly autobiographical.

In the final chapter of *A Country Doctor* Jewett offers, through the thoughts of the understanding Dr. Leslie, a sensitive, reasoned defense of a woman's right to choose both to pursue a career and to remain free from wedlock. Dr. Leslie is allowed to perceive what Jewett had perceived about herself, that some women "are set apart by nature for other uses and conditions than marriage."<sup>8</sup> Jewett was set apart by nature to be a writer and to be the companion of first her father and then another woman. In the three or four years prior to writing "A White Heron," then, she had secured her union with Annie Fields, had paid homage to her late father, and had openly declared, for anyone willing to read *A Country Doctor* plainly, her independence from matrimony.

It was against this background that Jewett wrote "A White Heron." As its main character she chose a nine-year-old girl very like herself at that age and equally like little Nan Prince, of *A Country Doctor*, though children are rare in her fiction, which mainly concerns old people. "This lonely country child" (p. 171)<sup>9</sup> Jewett named Sylvia, in reference to the girl's affinity for the forest. Like little Sarah and little Nan, "this little woods-girl" (p. 163) is at home among the trees and animal life of the "New England wilderness" (p. 164). Describing herself as a child, Jewett once wrote Whittier that in "the country out of which I grew, . . . every bush and tree seem like my cousins."<sup>10</sup> And Annie Fields called her friend "a true lover of nature and . . . one accustomed to tender communings with woods and streams, with the garden and the bright air."<sup>11</sup> In a similar vein, Dr. Leslie says of Nan Prince that "she has grown up as naturally as a plant grows, not having been clipped back or forced in any unnatural direction."<sup>12</sup> Sylvia, then, clearly descends from Jewett and the autobiographical Nan Prince.

Also like Nan, Sylvia, through family misfortune, has come to live with her grandmother; Nan, based more explicitly on Sarah Jewett, soon proceeds to live with a doctor, her guardian Dr. Leslie. But for Sylvia it's crucial that she be isolate on her grandmother's farm, with no males about, because the conflict in this story occurs with the sudden, unexpected arrival of the ornithologist. The farmhouse is "lonely" (p. 162)<sup>13</sup> and Sylvia's only "companion" is a prankish milch cow: "a plodding, dilatory, provoking creature in her behavior, but a valued com-

8. Jewett, p. 336.

9. Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1956). Parenthetical references to "A White Heron" are to this, most readily accessible, edition.

10. Cited in Matthiessen, p. 22.

11. Fields, p. 6.

12. *A Country Doctor*, p. 102.

13. Jewett uses "lonely," as in "this lonely country child" (p. 171), to mean "solitary," in the sense of Wordsworth. Sylvia is akin to his rural solitary figures.

panion for all that" (p. 161). Thus with an economy of detail that F. O. Matthiessen found new to her work in *A White Heron and Other Stories*,<sup>14</sup> Jewett establishes the aloneness of her heroine.

Though alone—"the child had no playmates" (p. 161)—Sylvia is not lonesome; indeed she is incomparably happier in the country than she was during the first eight years of her life, spent "in a crowded manufacturing town" (p. 162). Released in the environs of the farm, Sylvia seems almost mythically at home: "there never was such a child for straying about out-of-doors since the world was made!" (p. 162), thinks her grandmother. And "as for Sylvia herself, it seemed as if she never had been alive at all before she came to live at the farm" (p. 162). The key to her vivacity is that she is utterly in harmony with nature. As her grandmother tells the ornithologist, "There ain't a foot o' ground she don't know her way over, and the wild creatur's counts her one o' themselves" (pp. 164-65).

The town-country antithesis indicated by the contrast between Sylvia's earlier life in "the noisy town" (p. 163) and her previous year on the "beautiful" (p. 162) farm introduces part of the underlying dialectic of this story. Its next increment appears in the ornithologist, whose presence Sylvia first becomes aware of through his whistle: "suddenly this little woods-girl is horror-stricken to hear a clear whistle not very far away. Not a bird's whistle, which would have a sort of friendliness, but a boy's whistle, determined, and somewhat aggressive" (p. 163). Jewett underscores the intrusion of this foreign sound into Sylvia's world by shifting, in these two sentences, into the present tense, a device she will use significantly twice more in the story. The comparison between a bird's whistle and a boy's helps to emphasize the antithesis between the forest creatures with whom Sylvia is friendly and "the great red-faced boy who used to chase and frighten her" (p. 163) in her hometown, about whom she has been thinking uneasily just before she hears the whistle. Thus when Jewett first introduces the ornithologist himself, she labels him "the enemy" and Sylvia responds "trembling," "alarmed," "awed" (p. 163). There seems, then, to be something threatening in his very "boyness" that makes Sylvia fearful and that perhaps psychologically predisposes her to reject him in the climax. Her awe of the ornithologist may in part be caused by his being the first grown-up boy she has seen in her woodland isolation. When he first appears to the girl she is practically unable to speak, and "she did not dare to look boldly at the tall young man, who carried a gun over his shoulder . . ." (p. 163). A gun, to paraphrase Freud, is sometimes only a gun, but in "A White Heron" the ornithologist's weapon may be a symbolic as well as a real threat. Later, her initial fear of him having abated, "Sylvia would have liked him vastly better without his gun . . ." (p.

14. Matthiessen, p. 82.

166), for whether deadly weapon or symbolic phallus, his hunting piece makes her uncomfortable.<sup>15</sup>

No description of "the tall young man" (p. 163) or his dress is given; he is simply identified by the accoutrements of his profession, a gun and a game-bag heavy with the birds he has killed and collected. Mainly, the ornithologist is characterized by his voice. Toward Sylvia, whom he hails as "little girl" (p. 163), he adopts the superior tone of one older, more cosmopolitan, and maler, but he also speaks to her "kindly" and "gallantly" (p. 163), trying to calm her fears and win her assistance. By the time he has supped, the recipient of the grandmother's hospitality, the young man and his hosts have become "new-made friends" (p. 164). Yet we sense exploitation in the relationship: in exchange for supper and lodging, the guest provides merely the entertainment of a stranger to the isolated and his charm, while all the time plotting to use his hosts in his quest to collect the white heron.

That Jewett sees the ornithologist as an outsider inimical to the farmstead is illustrated by Mrs. Tilley the grandmother's reference to her son Dan, who "was a great hand to go gunning" (p. 164), but who hunted only for food. By contrast, her guest goes gunning in the interest of an abstraction, the science of ornithology, and of his egoistic desire to complete his bird collection. He self-importantly tells Mrs. Tilley, "I am making a collection of birds myself. I have been at it ever since I was a boy." Then in response to her question whether he cages them, he says, "Oh, no, they're stuffed and preserved, dozens and dozens of them, . . . and I have shot or snared every one myself" (p. 165). His pride in his expertise allies him with those characters in Hawthorne who have sacrificed warm humanity on the chill altar of science; but Jewett's ornithologist is less evil than banal, for his cheery egoism reflects the optimism of the nineteenth-century despoilers of nature who deforested the woods where she grew up.

In his overriding self-interest the young man adds to the story's dialectic the contrast between the egoist and the altruist, a conflict often dramatized by W. D. Howells, Jewett's mentor. Thus, in response to the stranger's plea for lodging, Mrs. Tilley immediately and altruistically proffers her hospitality, saying, "You're welcome to what we've got. I'll milk right off, and you make yourself at home" (p. 164). Furthermore, she and her granddaughter live with the kind of modest self-sufficiency that Howells's Silas Lapham, bankrupt after his fall, gratefully settles for on his Vermont farm. Mrs. Tilley's housekeeping Jewett characterizes as "the best thrift of an old-fashioned farmstead" (p. 164). The author here salutes the homely economy of her own girlhood, even then "a fashion of life already on the wane, . . . that subsistence on sea

15. In *A Country Doctor* Nan Prince's suitor George Gerry is introduced as "Friend and Lover," the title of Chapter XIX. But George is so nice and genteel that he poses no phallic threat; Nan's conviction that she should remain unmarried easily carries the day against his gentlemanly proposal.

and forest which was already a forgotten thing in New England when she was grown.”<sup>16</sup>

During the ornithologist's conversation with his aged hostess, he listens insensitively yet selectively: he “did not notice [the] hint of family sorrows [in Mrs. Tilley's discourse] in his eager interest in something else” (p. 165), but he grasps alertly the useful information that Sylvy knows all about birds. And at this point he brings up a white heron he has spotted and pursued to the vicinity of the farm. He calls the bird a little white heron, a species unknown to that area. In ornithological fact, such a bird was never more than a casual visitor as far north as southern Maine. It is usually known as the snowy egret, but also as the little white egret and the snowy heron, among several other names. Around the time Jewett wrote her story the snowy egret was being extirpated to fill the need of the millinery industry. By 1900 it was almost extinct, and in 1913 it was completely protected by the federal government.<sup>17</sup> Thus its rareness may have prompted Jewett to select the little white heron for her story in order to give her bird unusual value. In addition, she depicts the creature as odd: the ornithologist describes it as “a queer tall bird,” and Sylvia instantly knows it as “that strange white bird” (p. 165). Strangeness and whiteness in a wild creature recall *Moby Dick*. Does Jewett hope to probe the skies with her bird as Melville tries to sound the depths with his whale? On her decidedly smaller scale, “A White Heron” does involve a hunt that focuses on a white prey valuable for both material and symbolic reasons and that causes a conflict in values between its pursuers such as we find in *Moby Dick* or, *The White Whale*. Of course, the ornithologist is no Ahab, Sylvia no Starbuck; but saving the white heron is the rough equivalent of Starbuck's humane policy's winning out in *Moby Dick*.

In order to induce Sylvia to lead him to the sought-after bird, the ornithologist offers a reward of ten dollars. In the moral and dialectical scheme of the story, this offer amounts to a bribe of the poor by the rich, the seduction of good by evil. Its impact on the girl is so great that “no amount of thought, that night, could decide how many wished-for treasures the ten dollars, so lightly spoken of, could buy” (p. 166). By offering to pay for a favor that would otherwise be done as but a gesture of country hospitality, the ornithologist introduces into a subsistence economy the instrumentality of money. Perhaps no other element of his determination to secure the heron as a specimen more bespeaks his alien presence at the farm and suggests the possibility of corruption from without than his proffer of the ten dollars. Thus at the climax Sylvia, dearly tempted to please the young man, reasons, “He can make them rich with money; he has promised it, and they are poor now” (p. 170).

16. Matthiessen, p. 12.

17. John Bull, *Birds of the New York Area* (New York: Dover, 1964), p. 99.

Despite his attractive qualities, there is something insidious about his attempt to bribe the girl in effect to betray her world. Yes, he represents the broader, more cosmopolitan world beyond the New England wilderness, the man of science and technique, and the rich, in contradistinction to the poor but homely people on the farmstead. But he also suggests a sort of blithe Satan tempting a naïve Eve to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. From this point of view the Maine woods parallels the Garden of Eden, and the early label of "the enemy"<sup>18</sup> for the ornithologist becomes recognizable as a traditional term for Satan.

It should also be noted that the introduction of money into the story has the effect of interfering with Sylvia's instinctive harmony with the natural world. As the ornithologist tells of his quest for the heron, the girl has been watching a hop-toad and disguising her recognition of the white bird he has referred to. But after the ten dollars has been mentioned, "Sylvia still watched the toad, not divining, *as she might have done at some calmer time*, that the creature wished to get to its hole under the doorstep, and was much hindered by the unusual spectators at that hour in the evening" (p. 166; my emphasis). Her mind on the "treasures" his money could buy, she loses her usual sympathy for the wild.

The next day, however, Sylvia is tempted less by the young sportsman's money than by his masculine appeal. Though he "hovered about the woods" like the bird of prey he speculates may have chased the heron out of its home region, Sylvia finds him "friendly," "most kind and sympathetic" (p. 166). In a gesture with possible phallic significance, "he gave her a jack-knife, which she thought as great a treasure as if she were a desert-islander" (p. 166), though the gift also has the aspect of a trinket for the natives. Despite her discomfort over his gun and the birds he brings down with it, "Sylvia still watched the young man with loving admiration. She had never seen anybody so charming and delightful; the woman's heart, asleep in the child, was vaguely thrilled by a dream of love" (p. 166).<sup>19</sup> If this romantic response seems a strange turn for a story about a nine-year-old to take, it nevertheless has a cer-

18. In *A Country Doctor* Jewett uses the word "enemy" in describing Nan Prince's fearful reaction to the probability that George Gerry wants to be her lover: "she had been suddenly confronted by a new enemy, a strange power, which seemed so dangerous that she was at first overwhelmed by a sense of her own defenselessness" (p. 299). Since Sylvie is only nine, her fear of "the enemy" is less radical than Nan's. To stave off the threat of George's suit, Nan converts him from prospective lover to friend, thereby deftly desexualizing their relationship: "I will always be your friend," she tells him, "but if I married you I might seem by and by to be your enemy" (p. 325). A neat transference of roles.

19. In this respect "A White Heron" is the forerunner of such stories as Anne Warner's "The New Woman and the Old" (1914) and Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People" (1955), in which an unmarried woman living alone with her mother is courted by an unsuitable man. The main difference between Jewett's heroine and the other two, of course, is their age: Warner's Emily and O'Connor's Hulga are both in their early thirties, women old enough to be vulnerable to a man's romantic entreaties. Make Sylvia eighteen instead of nine, and you have a very different story. Jewett, however, was probably incapable of and uninterested in writing a romance in which libido is an express reality—Matthiessen notes "her inability to portray passion in her books" (*Sarah Orne Jewett*, p. 144); nor would she have been able to call her male intruder Manley Pointer, as O'Connor does, although the name is apt for her unnamed ornithologist with his gun.



tain psychological validity. Though originally frightened by her association of the ornithologist with the town boy, Sylvy now sees only the superficial charm and attractiveness of the young sportsman; he also impresses her with his knowledge of birds, though this is not so great as to lead him to perceive that they should be preserved, not collected.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, many a nine-year-old girl feels attracted to or develops a crush on an older boy or a man, especially one who might drop unique from the sky like our ornithologist *ex machina*. If the young girl has no one to warn her of the possible consequent dangers, she is quite liable to go on, as Sylvia does, in a kind of thrall to him. At this point Jewett's alliterative style enhances the romantic aura of the situation: "Some premonition of that great power [love] stirred and swayed these young foresters who traversed the solemn woodlands with soft-footed silent care" (pp. 166-67)—a twenty-one word sentence containing twelve sibilants, including six initial *s*'s.

True to the roles that age and gender have assigned them, the young man leads the way and the girl follows. In other words, even though she knows these woods better than he, expertise leads instinct, male leads female. Nevertheless, Sylvia's feelings are ambivalent: "She grieved because the longed-for white heron was elusive, but she did not lead the guest, she only followed, and there was no such thing as speaking first" (p. 167). In this sentence Jewett implies that if the girl would, she could take the lead; she could speak up and say she's seen the heron and will show the way to it. But her socialization as a girl, ironically, saves her from revealing the bird and therefore betraying her world to this intruder. For if Sylvia were a boy or if the element of romantic attraction were eliminated, she could quite readily speak up and take the lead.

Given the situation as it is, however, Sylvia feels extraordinary tension: "The sound of her own unquestioned voice would have terrified her—it was hard enough to answer yes or no when there was need of that" (p. 167). The tone has now, within the space of a few sentences, shifted from sensuously romantic to threateningly gothic. What does "her own unquestioned voice" mean? That she has not been asked a question that would allow her to voice a response? Or that she herself daren't make a sound without questioning her motivation? In any case, this sentence depicts a girl in peril. This is also the climax of the first part of the story, which ends a sentence later in a tone of pastoral serenity as Sylvy and the sportsman drive home the cow together, and the "pleasure" (p. 162) that she felt the previous evening over listening to

20. Even J. J. Audubon, of course, shot birds and mounted them in order better to paint them from close observation. But, then, birds were plentiful in the earlier nineteenth century, and Audubon's paintings brought pleasure to the many who saw them. But compare Thoreau: "As for fowling, during the last years that I carried a gun my excuse was that I was studying ornithology, and sought only new or rare birds. But I confess that I am now inclined to think that there is a finer way of studying ornithology than this. It requires so much close attention to the habits of the birds, that, if for that reason only, I have been willing to omit the gun" ("Higher Laws," *Walden*).

the thrushes is replaced by the "pleasure" of coming "to the place where she heard the whistle and was afraid only the night before" (p. 167). A day's outing has thus brought the girl closer in sympathy to the young man than to the natural world.

Part 2 of "A White Heron" relates Sylvia's quest for the sought-after bird and focuses on a giant pine tree, "the last of its generation" (p. 167) to remain standing in the wake of the woodchoppers. No doubt the tree is based on Jewett's memory of a childhood favorite of hers that did not survive the lumbermen, and about which she wrote to Annie Fields, "Alas, when I went to see my beloved big pitch-pine tree that I loved best of all the wild trees that lived in Berwick, I found only the broad stump of it beside the spring, and the top boughs of it scattered far and wide. It was a real affliction. . . ." <sup>21</sup> The "excitement" (p. 167) that Sylvia felt while walking behind the ornithologist the previous day has been superseded by "a new excitement" as she thinks of climbing the tree to enable her to "see all the world, and easily discover whence the white heron flew, and mark the place, and find the hidden nest" (p. 167). <sup>22</sup>

At this point in the story the narrator formulates its crux: "Alas, if the great wave of human interest which flooded for the first time this dull little life should sweep away the satisfactions of an existence heart to heart with nature and the dumb life of the forest!" (p. 168). This didactic rendering of the threat to Sylvia's innocence is both condescending and supererogatory. To call the girl's romantic excitement over the young sportsman a "great wave of human interest" generalizes and diminishes what has earlier been "a dream of love" (p. 166); to speak of her "dull little life" unnecessarily belittles the charming, if not charmed, existence that has earlier been characterized as making Sylvia feel "as if she had never been alive at all before she came to live at the farm" (p. 162). Still, this authorial intrusion does express nicely the substance of Sylvia's quiet strength: living "heart to heart with nature." It is this wholly integrated existence that the ornithologist, and all that he represents, ultimately threatens. We have seen how the lure of his money put Sylvia out of sympathy with the hop-toad. Now, as she climbs the great pine tree at dawn, she disturbs a bird in its nest, and a red squirrel scolds her; she has become a "harmless housebreaker" (p. 168) to the very creatures among whom she'd walked at the beginning of the story "as if she were a part of the gray shadows and the moving leaves" (p. 162) of the forest. But the "little birds and beasts" were then "in the great boughs overhead" (p. 162), and Sylvia was on the ground.

21. Fields, p. 24.

22. Sylvia's excitement as she begins her climb has a sexual resonance: "There was the huge tree asleep yet in the paling moonlight, and small and hopeful Sylvia began with utmost bravery to mount to the top of it, with tingling, eager blood coursing the channels of her whole frame . . ." (p. 168). A Freudian critic might find it tempting to call the great pine tree the largest phallic symbol in American literature.

Once she is aloft in the pine tree, "the sharp dry twigs caught and held her and scratched her like angry talons, the pitch made her little fingers clumsy and stiff" (p. 168), as though nature itself sought to keep her from succeeding in her project and thereby breaching their heart-to-heart relationship.

The higher Sylvia climbs, however, the more her harmony with nature seems restored. Jewett personifies the great tree as in a fairy tale: "The old pine must have loved his new dependent" (p. 169), supporting and lifting her along her way to his summit. Purified in the heights she has reached, Sylvia becomes metaphorically at one with the universe: her face is "like a pale star," and she feels "as if she . . . could go flying among the clouds" (p. 169) with a pair of hawks. Despite the wonder of the view from atop the tree, the girl resolutely wants to discover the white heron's nest: "was this wonderful sight and pageant of the world the only reward for having climbed to such a giddy height?" (p. 169). Would she who has lived so contentedly in the natural world have thought about a "reward" previous to the ornithologist's offer of ten dollars? At this point the narrator shifts into the imperative mood and the present tense, pointing out to Sylvia the white heron rising in flight from a dead hemlock far below, directing her to remain motionless and unconscious lest she reveal herself and deflect the bird from reaching the perch he assumes on a pine bough close to her. "Well satisfied" by knowing the secret of the heron's nesting place, Sylvia painfully "makes her perilous way down again" (p. 170), filled with thoughts of the ornithologist's response to her news of the bird's location.

The present tense works well to create a sense of immediacy and heighten the drama of Sylvia's discovery. In contrast, back at the farm her grandmother and the guest awake in the past tense, removed in time, place, and sense of wonder from the girl's experience. But as she enters their presence, with the young man determined that she tell what she knows of the heron, Jewett once more shifts into the present tense: "Here she comes now, paler than ever, and her worn old frock is torn and tattered, and smeared with pine pitch" (p. 170). "Paler," she approximates the whiteness of the heron, while the pitiful condition of her frock emphasizes her poverty and her need of the ten dollars; "smeared with pine pitch," she wears the shameful sign of her enterprise to find the bird but also the badge of her identity as a "dependent" of the tree. The shift in tense here increases the suspense at the climactic moment, "the splendid moment [that] has come to speak of the dead hemlock-tree . . ." (p. 170). In this instant Sylvia balances the desire to earn the ten dollars and to please the attractive stranger against her unspoken fidelity to nature. As Jewett formulates it, "Has she been nine years growing, and now, when the great world for the first time puts out a hand to her, must she thrust it aside for a bird's sake?" (pp. 170-71). But how can "the great world" that the ornithologist represents com-

pensate her for the world that she has seen from atop the pine tree, a world in which she recalls having achieved a union with the white heron as it "came flying through the golden air and . . . *they* watched the sea and the morning *together*" (p. 171; my emphasis)? Her heart stirred for a bird, "Sylvia cannot speak; she cannot tell the heron's secret and give its life away" (p. 171).

Most readers will find that "A White Heron" would better end here. They will regret the didactic final paragraph, with its apostrophes, its needless question, and its mixed tone. But it also contains some pertinent material. In its first sentence Jewett addresses Sylvia as "Dear loyalty" and rather satirically suggests that, had things been otherwise with the guest, "she could have served and followed him and loved him as a dog loves" (p. 171).<sup>23</sup> Though Sylvy has earlier followed the ornithologist in the woods, Jewett's principled opposition to such subservience, as expressed in *A Country Doctor*, makes it clear that no heroine of hers could be allowed such a fate. The final paragraph also contains this vivid picture of the fate that would have awaited the white heron had Sylvia revealed its nest to the collector: "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).

As the story concludes, all woodland and summertime secrets are, like the heron's, safe with "this lonely country child" (p. 171). For in the end the heron's life has become the equivalent of the girl's life, at least of her existence heart to heart with nature. In addition, the heron signifies the solemnity and beauty of the natural world that human beings relinquish at the cost of impoverishing their existence. For Sylvia, to surrender the bird would be to surrender her integrity with the natural world as well as with herself, since the heron has come to represent anything precious that a girl might yield for the sake of a man, but only at her peril. Resistant to masculine allure, and the offer of monetary profit, Sylvia can grow into a woman like Nan Prince or Sarah Jewett, a woman committed to values that will allow her to be her natural self and lead a life heart to heart with her own nature.

*Queens College, CUNY*  
Flushing, New York

23. Curiously, Jewett uses the simile of a faithful dog in a positive way to describe young Nan Prince "every day by the doctor's side, . . . following him like a little dog . . ." (*A Country Doctor*, p. 85). This is no doubt the source of Matthiessen's remark that young Sarah Jewett "used to follow her father about silently, like an undemanding little dog, content to be at his side" (*Sarah Orne Jewett*, p. 13).