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Local Color and Beyond: The Artistic Dimension of Sarah Orne Jewett's "The Foreigner"

by EDWARD J. PIACENTINO

SARAH ORNE JEWETT'S "The Foreigner," published initially in the *Atlantic Monthly* in August of 1900, is the best of four additional stories she wrote focusing on the Dunnet Landing subject matter, a subject matter she first treated extensively in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), her best crafted and most highly acclaimed work of fiction.¹ Even though the story uses Dunnet Landing as its principal setting and the plot, in part, involves several characters, Almira Todd and her mother, Mrs. Blackett, previously prominently featured in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, "The Foreigner" has been given only general and cursory notice by Jewett's critics. Acknowledged by Warren Berthoff as "one of the mislaid treasures of American writing," the story remained unnoticed in the files of the *Atlantic Monthly* until David Bonnell Green rescued it from oblivion and included it in his 1962 anthology, *The World of Dunnet Landing: A Sarah Orne Jewett Collection*.²

A story in the formulaic mode of regional realism of the local color movement, "The Foreigner" features a provincial rural setting, Dunnet Landing, a Maine fishing village, and portrays a number of eccentric characters, including most notably, Eliza Tolland—the "foreigner" of the title—and the loquacious Almira Todd, who relates the story about Eliza to an unidentified listener, who also functions as the narrator of the frame. Moreover, Mrs. Todd is, as one critic notes, a woman "with intimations of transcendent recognition,"³ a raconteur of memorable events from the past, a time frame of forty years earlier. In part, the purpose of the story is to emotionally engage the reader's interest in the participants and occurrences of a bygone era, a subject Mrs. Todd, in her story-within-a-story, relates from a sympathetic and suspenseful perspective. Also, in adhering to the conventions of local color,

1. In addition to "The Foreigner" the other stories in the Dunnet Landing sequence include: "The Queen's Twin" and "A Dunnet Shepherdess"—both published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1899—and the uncompleted "William's Wedding," published posthumously in the same magazine in 1910. See Barbara H. Solomon's "Introduction," *Short Fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman* (New York: New American Library, 1979), p. 4. Solomon points out that Miss Jewett never indicated, while she was still alive, if any or all of these stories were to be appended to *The Country of the Pointed Firs*.

2. Warren Berthoff, *The Ferment of Realism in American Literature, 1884-1919* (New York: The Free Press, 1965), pp. 98-99. David Bonnell Green, ed., *The World of Dunnet Landing: A Sarah Orne Jewett Collection* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1962). "The Foreigner" has been subsequently reprinted in *The Uncollected Short Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett*, ed. Richard Cary (Waterville, Me.: Colby College Press, 1971); in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Ronald Gottesman, et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), II; and in *Short Fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman*, ed. Barbara H. Solomon. All references to "The Foreigner" in this essay will be to Solomon's edition, and page numbers will appear parenthetically in the text.

3. Richard Cary, "The Uncollected Short Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett," in *Appreciation of Sarah Orne Jewett*, ed. Richard Cary (Waterville, Me.: Colby College Press, 1973), p. 275.

Jewett mainly downplays the controversial, though she does frequently evoke pathos for Eliza Tolland through reverberations of the conflict of cultures theme. Eliza Tolland is, in Mrs. Blackett's accurate judgment, a "poor lone-some creatur'" and "a stranger in a strange land" (p. 184), a French woman whose beliefs and mannerisms clash with the narrow, intolerant attitudes prevalent in the Dunnet Landing community. Furthermore, the quaint dialect of the storyteller, Mrs. Todd, and of the other local characters, coupled with the suspense and intrigue surrounding the appearance of the apparition of Mrs. Tolland's mother, contributes to the story's ostensible local-color effect. Yet "The Foreigner" is more than just another apt, though belated, product of regional realism. A masterfully wrought work of short fiction, a story meticulously crafted around a series of recurring images employed as functional motifs, and told by a character whose rationale for the reminiscences she recounts may be interpreted as psychologically motivated, "The Foreigner" has a suggestive texture which elevates it to a higher plane of artistry than one usually discovers in the typical tale of local color.

References to the storm-ravaged sea frame the story. These references also contribute significantly to the story's artistry, providing a convenient means not only for jogging Mrs. Todd's memory of Eliza Tolland, and consequently for creating an appropriate occasion for recounting the story about her, but also for generating and sustaining the foreboding mood that informs the tale. As Richard Cary astutely observes, "physical nature, whether beneficial or ill-favored, serves as more than backdrop in Miss Jewett's stories and sketches."⁴ "She engages it actively in symbol and analogy," Cary further points out, "and also employs it thematically to grasp its psychic impress upon man."⁵ In choosing to depict nature in a sinister guise, Miss Jewett employs it in "The Foreigner" as a recurring motif effecting a "psychic impress." Rather than presenting the sea affirmatively as life giving or life sustaining, as a force of regeneration or of purification, Jewett stresses the sea's devastating or potentially devastating power, the result sometimes exemplified in the deaths of some of the Landing's seafaring men, including Captain Tolland.

At the outset, the narrator of the frame observes that "the first cold northeasterly storm of the season was blowing hard outside. . . . I could hear that the sea was already stirred to its dark depths, and the great rollers were coming in heavily against the shore. One might well believe that Summer was coming to a sad end that night, in the darkness and rain and sudden access of autumnal cold" (p. 174). Mrs. Todd, worried about how the storm may be affecting her elderly mother and brother, also regards the sea on this night in much the same way as the authorial narrator. As she exclaims:

"Lord, hear the great breakers! . . . How they pound!—there, there! I always run of an idea that the sea knows anger these nights and gets full o' fight. I can hear the rote o' them old black ledges way down the thoroughfare. Calls up all those stormy verses in the Book of Psalms; David he knew how old seagoin' folks have to quake at the heart." (p. 175)

4. Richard Cary, *Sarah Orne Jewett* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1962), p. 42.

5. Cary, *Sarah Orne Jewett*, p. 42.

Acutely sensitive to the raging elements outside her house, Mrs. Todd perceives the sea and storm emblematically as antagonistic forces, which, as she says, "battle together nights like this" (p. 175). She further discloses the prevalent superstitious impression the Landing's natives have of storms: "Folks used to say these gales only blew when somebody's a-dyin', or the devil was a-comin' for his own. . . ." (p. 176).

Throughout the story, Jewett envelops her storm-sea descriptions, both of the past and present, with inauspicious and vexing details: "the awful roar of the sea" (p. 178), "dash of great raindrops" (p. 174), tidal waves, and gale-force winds blowing twigs against the window panes and making "a noise like a distressed creature trying to get in" (p. 184), and similar references. And as Almira Todd repeatedly mentions, it was on a stormy night, like the one occurring when she relates her story, that Mrs. Eliza Tolland died. " 'T was a gale that begun the afternoon before she died," she remarks, "and had kept blowin' off an' on ever since" (p. 191).

A stock plot device commonly employed in tales of the gothic tradition and in ghostlore, this storm-sea motif, which links the past and the present in "The Foreigner," becomes more than mere scenic embellishment. Rather, it functions to initiate as well as to sustain a portentous mood, thereby establishing a suitable atmosphere for satisfying the reader's natural anticipation for mystery and suspense.

A second and more prominent imagistic motif, which likewise acts to stimulate reader interest and correspondingly through carefully arranged details to suggest the direction of intended emotional response, is light. References to light recur throughout "The Foreigner," and are most noticeably associated with Mrs. Tolland as Almira Todd reminisces about her. When Captain Tolland first observes his future wife on the island of Jamaica, a place Mrs. Todd later describes as sunny and warm, she is working as an entertainer, singing and playing her guitar. The house, Mrs. Todd explains, was "real bright and pleasant lookin', with a lot o' lights . . ." (p. 178), and Eliza Tolland's listeners are seated at a table decorated with "big candlesticks like little trees o' light" (p. 179). Yet the light in this scene may be viewed as an ironic counterpoint, for when seen against the background of Mrs. Tolland's actual lonely and unhappy condition, it does not conjure up the expected hopeful associations. After all, Mrs. Tolland is a French-born lady already once widowed, living in an alien environment; out of economic necessity, she has hired herself out to harbor houses as an entertainer.

The rest of the story's light references are associated with Dunnet Landing, during the period following Eliza's marriage to Captain Tolland; and they too function to enhance the story's various mood sequences. After her marriage, Eliza, like the wives of the Landing's other seafarers, is compelled to spend long periods of time separated from her husband. Moreover, a French Catholic, she lives a largely hermetical existence, for her lively, uninhibited manner as exhibited in her dancing, singing, and playing the guitar, as well as her presumed practice of conjuration, make her an object of disdain and suspicion,

and therefore create a chasm between herself and the provincial Protestants of the Landing. Indeed, she finds herself “a stranger in a strange land.” Perhaps because of her alienated status—the community at large refuses to accept her idiosyncracies—Mrs. Tolland expediently projects a false demeanor disguising her true feelings. Almira Todd, however, senses this and sees through Eliza’s deceptive mask, for as she perceptively notes: Eliza “wore a fixed smile that wa’n’t a smile; there wa’n’t no light behind it, same’s a lamp can’t shine if it ain’t lit. I don’t know just how to express it, ’t was a sort of made countenance” (p. 187). The absence of light in this description aptly complements Mrs. Tolland’s melancholy mood, especially after Captain Tolland departs on his last voyage, a voyage from which his wife had a premonition he would never return. Her so-called “made countenance” may be regarded as a self-imposed concealment of her identity, a repression of her actual self-image, an image nurtured on the free expression and candid manifestation of personal feelings.

Only within the privacy of her own home, which she acquired through marriage to Captain Tolland, and only when alone there, removed from the reproving presence of the community’s busybodies, does Eliza venture from behind her “made countenance.” On one such occasion, Almira Todd recalls, when she and Captain Lorenzo Bowden, her uncle, visit the Tolland home to inform Eliza of her husband’s death, they immediately notice that “the best room” is resplendent with light, “all lit up,” Mrs. Todd remembers, “with a lot o’ candles” (p. 188). As they approach the house, they hear Eliza singing and playing the guitar; and when they see her, she is wearing a wreath of flowers in her hair and a gold chain, and “her eyes [are] a-shinin’ ” (p. 188), Mrs. Todd reports. In addition, she talks in her native French tongue and, as Mrs. Todd observes, “that set look [is] gone out of her face” (p. 188). In this instance, as Mrs. Tolland, following the French custom, celebrates her feast day (presumably the feast of her patron saint), ironically a party of one, she asserts her true self, exhibiting a natural vitality she has long since repressed from public view. The intense light illuminating this scene suggests the life force itself, the unencumbered manifestation of Eliza Tolland’s essential being. But this ends predictably enough, for Uncle Lorenzo informs her of her husband’s death, and, therefore, Eliza succumbs to grief, resigning herself to a death-in-life existence. At this point, then, the light, both literally and figuratively, goes out of her life, its absence a foreboding harbinger of her own death:

. . . she wavered a minute and then over she went on the floor before we could catch hold of her, and then we tried to bring her to herself and failed, and at last we carried her upstairs, an’ I told uncle to run down and put out the lights. . . . (pp. 188–89)

Yet before Eliza Tolland dies—on the night of her death to be precise—light is introduced once again. Outside, a storm has been raging but begins to subside. Inside, a small pewter lamp illuminates the room where Mrs. Todd is sitting with the sick and depressed Eliza. And the light, which shines on Eliza’s face, is, Mrs. Todd recalls, “not too bright to be disturbin’ ” (p. 197). In this

softly illuminated bedroom the apparition of Eliza's mother briefly appears, an apparition seen not only by Eliza herself but by Almira Todd as well. As Mrs. Todd reports: "The lamplight struck across the room between us. I couldn't tell the shape, but 't was a woman's dark face lookin' right at us; 't wa'n't but an instant I could see. I felt dreadful cold, and my head begun to swim; I thought the light went out; 't wa'n't but an instant, as I say, an' when my sight came back I couldn't see nothing there" (pp. 198-99). This light provides the symbolic frame of reference for the occurrence, creating a suitable ambience for effecting an affirmative resolution in the story's plot. Further, it initiates the story's final mood shift; Mrs. Tolland presumably dies happily, consoled as she lay dying by the familiar, understanding face of her mother in a strange land. As Josephine Donovan cogently explains, "Transcendence and redemption are associated with the salvific maternal figure of Mrs. Tolland's mother. Not only does Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett's charitable behavior save Eliza from total isolation in life, in death she is welcomed to the world beyond by another female figure."⁶

A third major motif that shapes the artistic texture of "The Foreigner" is the recurring pattern of childhood, a motif that seems to suggest an important defining aspect of Eliza Tolland's character. The first such reference occurs when Mrs. Todd reminisces that one evening at the church meeting house Eliza sang and "began to dance a little pretty dance between the verses, just as light and pleasant as a child" (p. 182), an action which at the time was appreciated but which on the next day provoked scandalous gossip. Later in describing Eliza's "broken English," Mrs. Todd indicates that "she spoke . . . no better than a child" (p. 184). Also, because Eliza is imaginative and knowledgeable about many things the residents of the Landing do not know, Mrs. Todd deduces: "You often felt as if you was dealin' with a child's mind" (p. 187). And when Eliza conducts her own private celebration in observance of her feast day, Almira Todd points out that she "behaved very pretty and girlish" (p. 188). The authorial narrator likewise perceives this childhood association. In praising Almira Todd's "unusual knowledge of cookery" (p. 186), experiential knowledge she has learned from Mrs. Tolland, she calls Almira "a child of France" (p. 186), an apt designation suggesting that Almira, at least in her cooking skills, has become a protégée of Eliza Tolland, the proverbial child-woman. And finally, when Captain Lorenzo told Eliza of her husband's death, Mrs. Todd tenderly remembers that he "spoke the sad words to her as if he was her father" (p. 188).

Taken collectively, then, the imagery of childhood elicits mainly positive connotations—naiveté, innocence and consequent vulnerability, as well as freedom and spontaneity. While childhood imagery helps to convey principally an endearing impression of Eliza, Dunnet Landing, both as Jewett depicts it in "The Foreigner" as well as in longer works like *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, is, by contrast, a conservative, provincial community dominated by mature, serious-minded adults, many of whom demonstrate little tender-

6. Josephine Donovan, *Sarah Orne Jewett* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1980), p. 115.

hearted understanding and patient tolerance of the uninhibited display of emotional feeling, especially when blatantly manifested in an outsider, a childlike adult such as Eliza Tolland.

Besides the skillful use of selected motifs, another facet of "The Foreigner" that contributes to the story's artistry is Jewett's handling of point of view. Using Almira Todd as the primary focal point, a character whose first-person retrospective account of Mrs. Tolland seems noticeably sympathetic, perhaps at times even graciously eulogistic, Jewett may be obliquely implying something about the psychological motivation of her narrator. As her narration reveals, Mrs. Todd and her mother, Mrs. Blackett, are the only residents of the Landing who seem sensitive enough to recognize and thereby sympathetically appreciate Eliza Tolland's individuality and her corresponding loneliness and alienation. As we have already seen, Mrs. Todd's choice of motifs, most notably light and childhood—devices helping to delineate Mrs. Tolland's character within a favorable perspective—reflects her empathy for this foreign lady. For example, when a scandal arises over Eliza's singing and dancing in the church vestry, Mrs. Todd proudly discloses that it is she who openly defends the foreigner's actions. "Mrs. Tolland," she remarks, "didn't intend no impropriety—I reminded her [Mari Harris] of David's dancin' before the Lord . . ." (pp. 182–83). And when Mrs. Blackett asks her daughter, "to make her have a sense that somebody feels kind to her" (p. 184), Mrs. Todd humbles herself and somewhat reluctantly complies. However, in visiting Eliza soon afterwards, Mrs. Todd discovers a genuine humanness in her. "When I see the tears in her eyes," Mrs. Todd states, "'t was all between us, and we were always friendly after that . . ." (p. 185). As a result of their friendship, Mrs. Todd becomes a grateful beneficiary of Eliza's knowledge of herbs and other plants, and after her death the heir to her estate.

Because Mrs. Todd makes a sincere effort to understand Eliza and to be amicable toward her, she becomes acquainted with a side of her character that most of the Landing's other residents never recognize. In fact, on several occasions she openly and honestly expresses in retrospect generous feelings about Eliza. Then upon finding out she has been named Eliza's heir, Mrs. Todd confesses: ". . . I begun to cry . . . I couldn't help it. I wished I had her back again to do somethin' for, an' to make her know I felt sisterly to her more'n I'd ever showed, an' it come over me 't was all too late, an' I cried the more . . ." (p. 194). And earlier in her narrative monologue, the section describing the day of Eliza's funeral, Mrs. Todd makes another feeling admission: "You can't be sorry for a poor creatur' that's come to the end o' all her troubles; my only discomfort was I thought I'd ought to feel worse at losin' her than did; I was younger then than I be now" (p. 192).

One may justifiably speculate about the rationale behind Mrs. Todd's highly sensitized revelations some forty years after Eliza Tolland's death. The explanation for this, I believe, may be readily accounted for. In part, Almira Todd's lengthy monologue is not exclusively to record the woes of a lonely foreign lady in "a strange land." Instead, if viewed from a psychological per-

spective, as perhaps Miss Jewett intended it should, the monologue becomes an emotively infused confession of Mrs. Todd, a woman, who for forty years, has apparently carried the burden of personal guilt for Dunnet Landing's misunderstanding of Eliza Tolland, a false impression Mrs. Todd feels compelled to correct through her narration. Cognizant then of Eliza's victimized status, her alienated condition, her loneliness, and her goodness and humanity, Mrs. Todd tells the story to a sympathetic listener to exonerate Eliza's character, setting forth the previously unacknowledged, long repressed truth about her, and thereby purging her own troubled conscience.

At the end of "The Foreigner," after Mrs. Todd has finished relating her pathetic tale of Eliza Tolland, she tells the authorial narrator: "Sometimes these late August storms'll sound a good deal worse than they really be. I do hate to hear the poor steamers callin' when they're bewildered in thick nights in winter, comin' on the coast. Yes, there goes the boat; they'll find it rough at sea, but the storm's all over" (p. 200). While this passage may be interpreted literally as Almira Todd's reflections on a situation in the present, a situation seemingly irrelevant to the story she has just completed, it may also be viewed as an offhanded acknowledgment of Almira's own cathartic release. "The storm's all over" for Almira, for indeed she feels she has finally expurgated from her guilt-ridden psyche the collective community's erroneous impression of Mrs. Tolland. In place of false truths and narrow-minded, unfounded insinuations, Mrs. Todd, though belatedly, has finally attempted to set the record straight, giving a warmly sympathetic appraisal of Mrs. Tolland.

Therefore, what Jewett has successfully accomplished in "The Foreigner" is to employ her narrator as a vehicle for reevaluating a foreign lady's misapprehended character. In other words, Mrs. Todd's narrative is a tribute to Eliza Tolland's essential humanity. By using her central narrator as a purveyor of truth or as a demythologizer, Jewett has anticipated by thirty years a narrative strategy William Faulkner would employ for a similar purpose in his intriguing masterwork of short fiction, "A Rose for Emily."

As I have attempted to demonstrate, Sarah Orne Jewett's "The Foreigner" displays an impressive mastery of the art of short fiction. While it may be conveniently classified as regional realism, the story may be considered more profitably as a well-designed work of art whose carefully crafted texture and suggestiveness have been enhanced by mood-inducing and character-delineating motifs, the most prominent being sea and storm, light, and childhood imagery. In addition, Jewett's conscious manipulation of the central point of view to effect a catharsis for her narrator likewise accentuates the story's artistic impact. Given then these aspects of the story's artistry, it is not difficult to discern why "The Foreigner" duly deserves Richard Cary's accolade as "the richest figment of local legendry in Miss Jewett's repertory."⁷

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7. Cary, *The Uncollected Short Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett*, p. 275.