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"All that lay deepest in her heart": Reflections on Jewett, Gender, and Genre

by KAREN OAKES

In the beginning (or in 1941), God (later known as F. O. Matthiessen) created the American Renaissance.¹ Emerson and Thoreau, Melville and Hawthorne and Whitman he created them. And he saw that it was good.

I GIVE this rather whimsical introduction to my thoughts on Sarah Orne Jewett by way of suggesting how circuitous my route to her has been. Nineteenth-century American literature has, until very recently, focused primarily if not exclusively on the magnetic figures gathered around mid-century. My own education, at an excellent women's college, and later, at a radical university, foregrounded Emerson and company to the obliteration of "lesser" deities. I experienced the pleasure of Jewett—appropriately, it turns out—through the mediation of a friend, who said simply, as if of peach pie, "I think you'll like her."

And I did. The setting of her work conjured the New England of my childhood, her characters and their voices, the members of my extended family. But if my first response to reading *The Country of the Pointed Firs* was pure delight, my second was pure rage. I was staggered that I had never heard her name even once in the course of my elite "formal" education, though I thought I understood why. Jewett's writing has over the years been the source of much critical discord. Is *The Country of the Pointed Firs* a (failed) novel, a set of loosely related sketches, or something else entirely? The flurry of recent interest in her work at times evinces the same jittery quality. Those who love her often prove determined to show how she meets the standards set by American Renaissance writers—or, perhaps more accurately, by Matthiessen and his cohorts—and hence other questions arise such as how to define her main character (which of course assumes that there must be a *main* character) or how to describe her development (which presumes a progressive rather than an accretive model). A recent essay in the feminist journal *Signs* attempts to locate the book within a "new" genre, "narrative of community."² But before I focus

1. F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941).

2. Sandra A. Zagarell, "Narrative of Community: The Identification of a Genre," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 13 (1988): 498–527. Other recent criticism of Jewett includes: Jennifer Bailey, "Female Nature and the Nature of the Female: a Re-vision of Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*," *Revue Française d'Études Américaines* 8.17 (1983): 283–94; Marcia McClintock Folsom, "'Tact is a Kind of Mind-Reading': Empathic Style in Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*," *Critical Essays on Sarah Orne Jewett*, ed. Gwen L. Nagel (Boston: Hall, 1984), 76–98; Josephine Donovan, "Sarah Orne Jewett's Critical Theory:

more specifically on *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, I'd like to rehearse some of the larger issues to which Jewett's work speaks, hoping that you will be patient with my game of hopscotch and will accept my assurance that all the jumps will lead to "home."

Genre, to be sure, is a convenient concept not only for contemporary critics, a peg on which to hang our hats, but also for professors of literature. How else might we lasso the rambunctious variety of texts which we teach? Hence, we imagine courses in "Twentieth-Century American Women's Poetry" and "Nineteenth-Century Women's Fiction," to cite two of the courses I've taught in recent years. Indeed, genre is not only convenient, but, as one contemporary critic argues, "Few concepts of literary criticism are quite as 'literary' as the concept of genre."³ Genre study is as old as Plato and Aristotle and as new as a course a friend teaches, "The Contemporary Mystery Novel." Of course, the most sophisticated genre criticism explores the overlap of genres within individual works and attempts constantly to recognize or invent new terms.

If genre figures prominently in discussion of Jewett's work, canonical texts have hardly been immune to debate. Is *The Scarlet Letter* a novel or a romance (I think it's a sermon, but that's another paper)? Nor has the debate been only a recent concern, for mid-nineteenth-century reviewers constantly interrogated Whitman's work according to the touchstone of lyric poetry; was *Leaves of Grass*, they asked, poetry, prose, or, as tastemaker Rufus Griswold asserted, trash? Even writers whose work has seemed generically reliable have encountered scrutiny; at a recent conference, one meeting I attended focused on Dickinson's poems as letters and her letters as poems.⁴

Because of the traditional, even self-defining, quality of genre in literary studies, much influential feminist criticism has explored women's relation to genre. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss in *The Madwoman in the Attic* the affinity of narrative to women's lives and the problematics of lyric poetry, just as Virginia Woolf before them had done.⁵ Such critics, female and male, have for some time questioned the hegemony of the traditional literary genres of fiction, poetry, and drama, and we can see the concrete consequences of this questioning in revised syllabi and in new anthologies. For example, many in American

Notes toward a Feminine Literary Mode" in Nagel, 212-25; Elizabeth Ammons, "Jewett's Witches" in Nagel, 165-84; John C. Hirsh, "The Non-Narrative Structure of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*," *American Literary Realism* 14 (1981): 286-88; Richard G. Carson, "Nature and the Circles of Initiation in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*," *Colby Library Quarterly* 21 (1985): 154-60; Sarah W. Sherman, "Victorians and the Matriarchal Mythology: A Source for Mrs. Todd," *Colby Library Quarterly* 22 (1986): 63-74; Marilyn E. Mobley, "Rituals of Flight and Return: The Ironic Journeys of Sarah Orne Jewett's Female Characters," *Colby Library Quarterly* 22 (1986): 36-42; Laurie Crumpacker, "The Art of the Healer: Women in the Fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett," *Colby Library Quarterly* 19 (1983): 155-66; Gwen L. Nagel, "The prim corner of land where she was queen": Sarah Orne Jewett's New England Gardens," *Colby Library Quarterly* 22 (1986): 43-62; Josephine Donovan, "A Woman's Vision of Transcendence: A New Interpretation of the Works of Sarah Orne Jewett," *Massachusetts Review* 21 (1980): 365-80.

3. Paul Hernadi, *Beyond Genre: New Directions in Literary Classification* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1972), 1.

4. Martha Nell Smith, Chair, "Reading Dickinson's Poems in Letters, Letters in Poems," Div. on Emily Dickinson, NEMLA Convention, 7 Apr. 1990.

5. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979), 539-80; Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1957), 43-81.

literature would now consider texts like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "journal," *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, or Harriet Jacobs' autobiographical *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* to be canonical; and the new *Heath Anthology of American Literature* includes such "non-canonical" works as Afro-American folk tales. But the larger question these transformations raise is the essentiality of genre as a lens for discussion.

Jewett, I believe, questions radically the notion of genre if we understand that concept to resonate beyond the categories of fiction, poetry, and drama to include the larger matter of boundaries. Her current reputation (or lack thereof) reflects her corseting by critics into forms and attitudes which she refuses to occupy.⁶ One of her best readers, Elizabeth Ammons, discusses the image of the circle as a metaphor for the structure of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, and in so doing she de-emphasizes the norms of development, climax, and denouement which have haunted her critical predecessors, not to mention poor high-school students across the country.⁷ We do well to follow Ammons' lead and step outside the boundaries of literary theory into psychological and cultural theory. The work of sociologist Nancy Chodorow is useful here; Chodorow argues that masculine and feminine identity are differently defined, the former by an emphasis on individuation and a need for separateness and the latter by a need for relation and connection with others. Feminine identity, to use her terms, evinces "flexible or permeable ego boundaries." In spite of her focus only on white, middle-class, heterosexual individuals, Chodorow provides a helpful metaphor in connection to the matter of Jewett and genre.⁸

Indeed, the problem of genre is as intimately linked with the matter of gender in Western literature as ham and eggs. Sandra Gilbert suggests this connection in her recent article, "The American Sexual Politics of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson," which is grounded in Chodorow's theory. In brief, Gilbert argues that both Whitman and Dickinson wrote something she calls "not-poetry"; but she contrasts the reliance of each on traditional genres. Whitman's poetry ultimately rehearses familiar poetic forms, suggesting a masculine impulse toward individuation, while Dickinson's elides those boundaries, suggesting a feminine impulse toward fluidity and providing a paradigm for the female artist.⁹ In a masculine-minded culture, such a model for consciousness, for artistic creation, and even for critical discourse may receive little credence. (I recall here

6. Jewett herself may have internalized the standards of the critical community; in a famous letter to Horace Scudder she writes, "But I don't believe I could write a long story. . . . In the first place, I have no dramatic talent. The story would have no plot. I should have to fill it out with descriptions of character and meditations. It seems to me I can furnish the theatre, and show you the actors, and the scenery, and the audience, but there is never any play!" *Sarah Orne Jewett Letters*, ed. Richard Cary (Waterville, Maine: Colby College Press, 1967), 29.

7. Elizabeth Ammons, "Going in Circles: The Female Geography of Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs*," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 16.2 (1983): 83-92.

8. Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1978), 169. Chodorow's theory is resolutely cultural in its definitions, insisting that "feminine" and "masculine" are not limited by biological sex; hence, the reader should be aware that when I use these terms, I mean psychologically feminine and masculine, unless I specify otherwise.

Adrienne Rich, among others, has pointed out some of the limitations of Chodorow's theory. Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (New York: Norton, 1986), 23-75.

9. Sandra M. Gilbert, "The American Sexual Politics of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson," *Reconstructing American Literary History*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986), 123-54.

D. H. Lawrence's abhorrence of Whitman: "Always wanting to merge himself into the womb of something or other.")¹⁰

For Jewett, the impulse to erase boundaries could not have been unambivalent. The popularity and respect accorded to her by her contemporaries was no doubt in some measure due to her apparent acceptance of some traditional boundaries. Literature, for example, should possess a reverence for the past, and *The Country of the Pointed Firs* gestures toward the past in several ways. The city-dwelling narrator's escape to the Maine coastal town of Dunnet Landing echoes the anxiety of an increasingly industrialized country and its desire for a simpler life. The narrator's landlady, Mrs. Todd, is a practitioner of traditional herbal medicine who initiates the former into a tradition of community and family relations. Jewett connects Mrs. Todd not only with the New England past and the American past, however, but also with the Western tradition, as in the central scene where the two characters gather pennyroyal:

She looked away from me, and presently rose and went on by herself. There was something lonely and solitary about her great determined shape. She might have been Antigone alone on the Theban plain. It is not often given in a noisy world to come to the places of great grief and silence. An absolute, archaic grief possessed this country-woman; she seemed like a renewal of some historic soul, with her sorrows and the remoteness of a daily life busied with rustic simplicities and the scents of primeval herbs.¹¹

Jewett's allusions to myth confirm her membership in literary history, yet she simultaneously incorporates herself into a "modern" realistic tradition in her attentiveness to the important issue of humans' alienation from nature. The tone of this passage is unmistakably elegiac, with its emphasis on "places of great grief and silence," on Mrs. Todd's "lonely and solitary figure," and her "absolute, archaic grief."

If paradise is lost, it is also regained and conserved in Jewett's own writing, which she metaphorizes in the narrator's efforts at herb-gathering:

I was not incompetent at herb-gathering, and after a while, when I had sat long enough waking myself to new thoughts, and reading a page of remembrance with new pleasure, I gathered some bunches, as I was bound to do, and at last we met again higher up the shore, in the plain every-day world we had left behind when we went down to the pennyroyal plot. (49-50)

A kind of waking dream, writing, like its sister act of reading, accomplishes a conservation of the self and its history. My interest here, however, is not to discuss how Jewett confirms some of the boundaries of her time—among them the idea that women should focus more on the domestic and private than on the public and political realms—but to suggest some of the ways in which she breaks "generic" boundaries, boundaries of kind, of definition, and in so doing commits a radical act for Western culture.¹²

10. D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1951), 180.

11. Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, ed. Mary Ellen Chase (New York: Norton, 1981), 49. All subsequent references to Jewett's work cite this edition.

12. Two contemporary feminists who discuss boundary-breaking from distinctive theological perspectives are: Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Boston: Beacon, 1986), and Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today* (Boston: Beacon, 1986).

Paula Gunn Allen's work provides an avenue from which we might meet Jewett. In her Introduction to *Spider Woman's Granddaughters*, a collection of short pieces by Native American women, Allen discusses literary convention with a particular emphasis on the convention that specifies the segregation of (for example) "long stories from short, traditional stories from contemporary." Allen's reflections on boundaries is so intense and interesting that I quote it here at length:

The dogmatism of the Western literary position has consequences that go well beyond the world of literature, which include the Western abhorrence of mixing races, classes, or genders (which is why homosexuality and lesbianism are so distressing to many Western minds). Similarly, the mixing of levels of diction, like the mixing of spiritual beliefs and attitudes, is disdained if not prohibited. This rigid need for impermeable classificatory boundaries is reflected in turn in the existence of numerous institutional, psychological, and social barriers designed to prevent mixtures from occurring. Western literary and social traditionalists are deeply purist, and today, millennia after Aristotle described the features that characterized Greek literature, his descendents proclaim and enforce purism's rules in thousands of ways large and small.

Allen goes on to assert, "Intellectual apartheid of this nature helps create and maintain political apartheid."¹³ The impulse for this apartheid, she makes quite clear, is the Western value of purity, a value which circumscribed women of Jewett's era in the dominant culture in precise and well-documented ways, from the sexual to the literary.¹⁴ It seems to me that Jewett's blurring of boundaries, both substantive and structural, in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* represents a dialogue with the notion of purity and a gesture toward the tribal sensibility which Allen describes. Or perhaps, in other terms, we can construct an analogy between the tribal and the psychological feminine.

My route to Jewett has so far been intentionally circuitous since one of my goals is to rehearse the writer's own freedom. Nonlinear, accretive, process-oriented, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* eludes interpretive certainties, refusing to stand still for dissection, yet inviting pleasure. I offer my observations up to this point and those to come less as a map for reading Jewett and more as a meditation on her world.

One important fence which Jewett dismantles is that between culture and nature. Historian Ann Leighton tells us that in early New England, one of women's jobs was to tend the gardens, a source of food and medicine; Jewett's Mrs. Todd occupies this traditional role, growing herbs and dispensing nostrums.¹⁵ But Mrs. Todd's role exceeds its boundaries, for Jewett tells us that "Mrs. Todd was an ardent lover of herbs, both wild and tame." Furthermore, the

13. Paula Gunn Allen, *Spider Woman's Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women* (Boston: Beacon, 1989), 2, 3.

14. See, for example, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 53-76; Gilbert and Gubar, 568; Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: Morrow, 1981), 145-294; John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 55-221.

15. Ann Leighton, *Early American Gardens: "For Meate or Medicine"* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1986).

garden itself supersedes its margins, as wild and tame converge inside the pale. Easily identifiable are the “balm and sage and borage and mint, wormwood and southernwood,” in contrast to another corner:

At one side of this herb plot were other growths of a rustic pharmacopoeia, great treasures and rarities among the commoner herbs. There were some strange and pungent odors that roused a dim sense and remembrance of something in the forgotten past. Some of these might once have belonged to sacred and mystic rites, and have had some occult knowledge handed with them down the centuries; but now they pertained only to humble compounds brewed at intervals with molasses or vinegar or spirits in a small cauldron on Mrs. Todd's kitchen stove. (3-4)

Jewett indicates the cultural status not only of the garden itself but of its botanical inhabitants, for to the familiar and domesticated herbs she assigns names, while others more mysterious than and antecedent to the tame ones remain unspecified. Mrs. Todd distills “wild” herbs into what were once primordial elixirs but are now only “humble compounds.”

Nevertheless, the residue of wildness remains in the description as we discover that Mrs. Todd dispenses her concoctions “to suffering neighbors, who usually came at night as if by stealth, bringing their own ancient-looking vials to be filled.” One, however, is more significant than all the rest: “One nostrum was called the Indian remedy, and its price was but fifteen cents; the whispered directions could be heard as customers passed the windows” (4). This “Indian remedy,” which elicits Mrs. Todd's connection with untamed nature, is most likely a medium of woman's freedom from her cultural role as mother—namely, an abortifacient; her favorite pennyroyal has been esteemed for the same purpose since at least the mid-seventeenth century. Most of her herbs, in fact, respond to female reproductive needs; a veritable women's health center is Mrs. Todd, whose “garden” is the world.¹⁶

The mention of the Indian remedy in connection with Mrs. Todd raises an adjacent problem of purity, namely, racial and cultural purity. In an era in which the problems of Native Americans were receiving fresh attention, when Standing Bear had come to Boston to speak on the displacement of the Poncas, when missionary women headed west and the United States government was establishing boarding schools to “help” Native Americans “assimilate,” when Jewett's contemporary Mary E. Wilkins (Freeman) had written a novel published in the same year as *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, *Madelon* (1896), whose female protagonist possessed Iroquois blood, and Helen Hunt Jackson had completed *A Century of Dishonor* (1881) and *Ramona* (1885), it would have been impossible for Jewett not to be aware of and, however subliminally, to respond to the notion of ethnic purity.¹⁷ Mrs. Todd, she implies, figures a person whose heritage is (at least metaphorically) mixed-blood, for she possesses the herbal skill not only of her colonial counterparts but of her Indian predecessors. Furthermore, we learn in another story, “The Foreigner,” that Mrs. Todd has acquired much of her

16. See Ammons, “Jewett's Witches,” 175; Crumpacker, 158; Nicholas Culpeper, *Culpeper's Color Herbal*, ed. David Potterton (New York: Sterling, 1983), 142.

17. Jewett's explicit attitude toward racial mixing is less affirmative than we might wish. See Ferman Bishop, “Sarah Orne Jewett's Ideas of Race,” *New England Quarterly* 30 (1957): 243-49.

insight from a woman who parallels the figure of the Indian outsider, a French woman from Jamaica, who significantly cannot speak "Maine" and who horrifies her sober and asexual counterparts by singing and dancing in the meeting-house vestry in a shockingly "natural" manner (170, 167). This "foreigner's" subsequent social exclusion surely speaks to the women's fears of the loss of purity.

If racial or cultural boundaries are an important, if covert, issue in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and Jewett's work generally, another set of boundaries that the writer rattles is that of gender. Mrs. Todd, while she figures the community's loving mother in her position as herbal doctor, is equally capable of assuming traditional masculine power. When she and the narrator embark to visit Mrs. Todd's mother, Mrs. Todd directs their progress in images which evoke the shape and movement of the book itself: "'You better let her drift; we'll get there 'bout as quick; the tide'll take her right out from under these old buildin's; there's plenty wind outside'" (32). As paradoxical "lawgiver," Mrs. Todd occupies the seat of power, as we see in the exchange which follows. An onlooker feels compelled to criticize her management, concluding, as some critics have of the book, "'She's lo'ded bad, your bo't is—she's heavy behind's she is now!'" but Mrs. Todd does not relinquish her captaincy: "'That you, Asa? Goodmornin',' she said politely. 'I al'ays liked the starn seat best. When'd you get back from up country?'" (33). Her verbal wit in response to this landlubber indicates her ability to assume masculine power not only in the realm of seamanship but also in the realm which defines all masculine power, language itself (Gilbert and Gubar, 3–92).

This blurring of gender boundaries emerges in any number of characters, from Mrs. Todd's shy brother William to Captain Elijah Tilley, who receives the narrator into his home with his knitting, "a blue yarn stocking," in hand (120). The narrator observes, "There was something delightful in the grasp of his hand, warm and clean, as if it never touched anything but the comfortable woolen yarn, instead of cold sea water and slippery fish" (120). After the death of his wife, Elijah has become domesticated so that his year is shared by feminine and masculine endeavors:

"No, I take stiddy to my knitting after January sets in," said the old seafarer. . . . "The young fellows braves it out, some on 'em; but, for me, I lay in my winter's yarn an' set here where 'tis warm, an' knit an' take my comfort. Mother learnt me once when I was a lad. . . . They say our Dunnet stockin's is gettin' to be celebrated up to Boston—good quality o' wool an' even knittin' or somethin'. I've always been called a pretty hand to do nettin', but seines is master cheap to what they used to be when they was all hand worked. I change off to nettin' long towards spring. . . ." (125–26)

What strikes me most about this passage is the convergence of knitting, a traditionally feminine task, with netting, a traditionally masculine one. Even netting possesses feminine overtones in its other meaning of lace-making. Domestic and public realms mesh here in the synthesis of these activities by a single individual and even in the contiguity of the very sounds of the words. Their performer embodies their texture in his doubly-gendered self-creation.

We can meditate at length on Jewett's other deconstructions of boundaries—such as those between humans and nature (Mrs. Todd talks of a tree as if it's a person), between the individual and the community (the narrator and the Bowdens), between life and death (Captain Littlepage's story and Joanna's synchronic presence)—but it seems most important to me to suggest briefly the loosening of the boundaries between the reader and the story itself, between life and art. While all narrative implicitly asks for some measure of our participation or identification, Jewett's hospitality to our presence and our creativity is much more intense than that of other familiar texts.¹⁸ Take, for example, the two books with which Cather grouped *Country* in her estimation of the most enduring works of American literature, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Scarlet Letter*. Both Twain and Hawthorne inscribe their simultaneous narrative presence and absence, Twain with his famous opening injunctions against interpretation and Hawthorne with his insistence that his narrator/alter ego will “keep the inmost Me behind the veil.”¹⁹

In contrast, Jewett's generosity toward the reader, her feminine fluidity, is quite striking, though our acceptance of it may not be immediate. This generosity emerges in the multiple roles of the narrator and Mrs. Todd, for each is in some sense both writer and reader, artist and interpreter; and Jewett invites the book's reader to participate in these roles as well, suggesting not only their convergence but their interconnection. I haven't space to construct this argument in detail, but let me end my reflections on *The Country of the Pointed Firs* with an incident that is illuminating. On her arrival, the narrator quickly falls into the rhythms of Dunnet Landing and of Mrs. Todd, alternately accompanying her on her gathering forays and “acting as business partner” (6). She says:

I found the July days fly fast, and it was not until I felt myself confronted with too great pride and pleasure in the display, one night, of two dollars and twenty-seven cents which I had taken in during the day, that I remembered a long piece of writing, sadly belated now, which I was bound to do. To have been patted kindly on the shoulder and called “darlin’,” to have been offered a surprise of early mushrooms for supper, to have had all the glory of making two dollars and twenty-seven cents in a single day, and then to renounce it all and withdraw from these pleasant successes, needed much resolution. (6–7)

In spite of an undertone of irony, pleasure figures largely in the narrator's self-forgetfulness, as it does in my own reading of the book; and the effect of this passage is to render self-consciousness vivid. Yet Mrs. Todd's response is respectful of the other's needs and generous with praise; it is an intimate moment which moves toward publicity, as she affirms, “‘I ain't had such a season for years, but I have never had nobody I could so trust. All you lack is a few qualities, but with time you'd gain judgment an' experience, an' be very able in the business.’” She concludes, “‘I'd stand right here and say it to anybody’ ” (7).

18. Walter J. Ong, “The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction,” *PMLA* 90 (1975): 9–21.

19. Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: Washington Square, 1973), n. pag.; Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, ed. Sculley Bradley et al., 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), 6–7.

In spite of the narrator's masculine movement toward "withdrawal," Mrs. Todd's generosity forestalls the possibility of their "separat[ion]" or "estrang[ement]," and the narrator tells us, "on the contrary, a deeper intimacy seemed to begin" (7). It is as if, by affirming her uniqueness, the narrator (and the reader), receiving Mrs. Todd's (Jewett's) reassurance, can relinquish the boundaries of the self:

I do not know what herb of the night it was that sometimes used to send out a penetrating odor late in the evening, after the dew had fallen, and the moon was high, and the cool air came up from the sea. Then Mrs. Todd would feel that she must talk to somebody, and I was only too glad to listen. We both fell under the spell, and she either stood outside the window, or made an errand to my sitting-room, and told, it might be very commonplace news of the day, or, as happened one misty summer night, all that lay deepest in her heart. (7)

This sharing of the "deepest" confidence occurs only seven pages into the story, and it figures the connection that Jewett imagines not only between the narrator and Mrs. Todd, but between the reader and Jewett herself—a connection modeled after Jewett's own "real-life" intimacy with Annie Adams Fields.

Jewett makes me worry about the convenience of genre, like the convenience of all boundaries. Such boundaries—whether those of ethnicity, gender, class, race, age, or sexual orientation—are like convenience food. Not only do they exclude texts, writers, voices, nuances which can't be packaged into a shiny container, they also reify texts, privileging product (interpretation) over process; they enable us to remove literary voices from their social and historical contexts and place them in the stainless steel refrigeration unit of formalist literary criticism, skinned and deboned. On a still larger scale, these boundaries enable the compartmentalization of the academy into those convenient and competing units, departments. In contrast, Jewett imagines for us the interconnection, multiplicity, and intangibility of knowledge. As one of my students once said after reading *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, "I can't tell you what this book means to me."