Colby Quarterly

Volume 28
Issue 2 *June*

Article 4

6-1-1992

Unstable Narrative Voice in Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron"

Heidi Kelchner

Unstable Narrative Voice in Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron"

By HEIDI KELCHNER

IN THE last fifteen years critical attention to Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron" has suggested that the short story is much more than a simple sentimental piece of regionalism. Jewett's story of an introverted, nature-loving girl who chooses not to reveal the location of a beloved white heron to a visiting hunter contains formal and thematic elements attractive to contemporary literary criticism. Much of this criticism suggests that elements within the story converge to create a sense of advocacy for certain thematic issues. Some critics, Michael Atkinson, for example, believe the story is a lamentation over humankind's estrangement from nature. Atkinson suggests the story affirms the ethical value of Sylvia's decision to reject society and preserve her innocence by remaining in nature (74). Other critics view the story as an affirmation of feminist sensibility. Elizabeth Ammons suggests that Jewett recreates a "male-defined narrative structure" in order ultimately to reject it, just as Sylvia resists patriarchal heterosexual institutions in favor of the "natural realm of the mother" (16). George Held reads into Sylvia's resistance to "masculine allure" a commitment to her own values and "her natural self" (67). Similarly, Richard Brenzo interprets the story as a young woman's declaration of independence from a patriarchal society that would see her "raped, killed, stuffed, and put on display in a man's house" (41).

I believe, however, that these critical positions are generally tenuous because they are determined primarily by the story's imagery and either overlook or treat superficially what I feel is the most engaging and problematic element of the story-narrative voice. This is not to say that the unconventional narrative voice of "A White Heron" has gone ignored by critics. Richard Cary (101-02) and Josephine Donovan (70-71), for example, interpret the story's narrative anomalies as weaknesses in Jewett's style. In contrast, Catherine Barnes Stevenson (6) and Held (58-60) believe that the story's narrative incongruities strengthen the story's advocacy of certain themes. In a recent article, Terry Heller offers a much needed extensive analysis of "A White Heron's" narrative "duplicity" (182). Heller believes that this "duplicity" is part of a sophisticated "rhetoric of communion" that "overcomes the pretenses of separation between narrator, reader, and character that are characteristic of realistic fiction" (190-91). In essence, I agree with Heller. I believe that, indirectly, "A White Heron" says as much about narrative presence and disposition as it does about the themes of nature or female consciousness. However, I offer a different conclusion. I would

like to attempt to show that narrative voice in the story is in constant flux, producing an instability that problematizes, if not undermines, the effect of a perceived advocacy for any thematic issue. I believe these incongruities also inhibit the story's rhetoric of "communion" or "transcendence" that others have suggested (Smith 37-44, Heller 190-91).

The Illusion of Narrative Distance

THE LIMITATIONS of genre may be partly to blame for the relative paucity of thorough examination of Jewett's unstable narrative voice. In 1871 Jewett wrote in her diary that her father told her to "tell things just as they are" (Donovan, in Nagel 212). This advice is not too far removed from the convictions of other American Realists with whom Jewett, usually viewed as a local colorist, has been categorized. The realists' desire to, as Henry James said, "mirror the unmitigated realities of life" implies that with third-person perspective the narrator is "objective" (McMichael 5). A preference for "showing" over "telling" was dominant in the works of James and his contemporaries (Genette 163). Narrative objectivity is dependent upon the problematic concept of a perceived "distance" between the narrator and the narrative. The conventional third-person narrative allows the events essentially to speak for themselves to the point that the narrator is not distinguished as a separate entity. Narrative "distance," however, is an illusion. Narrative presence is constant because the narrator establishes his or her separate identity in the act of creating the events of the narrative. Some may assume that because Jewett is codified as a local colorist the narrative voice of her text is necessarily detached. Therefore, disruptions in narrative distance may be minimized, viewed as inconsequential to the story's "meaning," or seen as stylistic weaknesses. In contrast, I believe these disruptions in the illusion of narrative distance are very important. Part One of the story establishes and sustains the illusion of narrative distance, but only superficially. A countercurrent of narrative intimacy and emotional engagement rumbles under the surface of the text. In Part Two narrative intrusions become so predominant that the reader is forced to deal with the motivations, intentions, and emotions of the narrator, in addition to those of the characters.

The story begins by establishing a distant, objective narrator by using the indefinite pronoun when Sylvia is first introduced: *"A little girl* was driving home her cow" (161; my emphasis).[1] "*A little girl*" could be one of many who share the same experiences of youth. No affinity is expressed for this particular little girl, and a sense of a separate narrative presence is concealed by this implied indifference. By establishing narrative distance from the beginning, the text suggests that *who* is speaking is inconsequential. This impression is sustained as events are related in a seemingly indifferent manner throughout Part One: "The cow stopped long at the brook to drink, as if the pasture were not half a swamp,

1. All quotations from the story are from Sarah Orne Jewett, "A White Heron," in Sarah Orne Jewett, The Country of the Pointed Firs *and Other Stories*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1989).

and Sylvia stood still and waited, letting her bare feet cool themselves in the shoal water" (162). In addition, the illusion of distance is reinforced because narrative perspective seems to be "non-focalized," to borrow the taxonomy of Gerard Genette (189).[2] The reader is given glimpses into the minds and hearts of all three characters, Mrs. Tilley, the Hunter, and Sylvia. As Genette reminds us, readers must be careful not to confuse mood (perspective) with voice; a text can have a subjective, emotionally engaged narrator even with multiple perspectives (186). Multiple perspectives do, however, create, superficially, the impression of objectivity. In Part One this impression may suggest a sense of "fairness" because it is related by a disinterested, seemingly nonexistent entity. I believe this effect may be most predominant on a modern reader who lives in a mass media age that glorifies impartiality and objectivity.

Running counter to the illusion of narrative distance is an undercurrent which suggests an intimate connection between the narrator and the protagonist, a merging of the two. The narrator's tendency to express thoughts and feelings without the use of quotation marks or other forms of attribution ("she said," and so forth) presents a confusion between character and narrator. Sivagami Subbaraman noticed Jewett's use of this technique in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, suggesting that the technique "conflates" narrative voice (69). This merging of character and narrator may remind one of James Joyce's "Uncle Charles Principle."[3] Although the techniques may be similar, I believe Jewett's method goes further. "A White Heron's" third-person, omniscient narrative voice not only adopts the attitudes and, sometimes, the idiomatic phrases and syntax of the characters, as Joyce does, but also brings in the narrator's own feelings and experience in this "merging technique." In Part One, these apparent alterations in narrative distance are subtle. For example, in the beginning of the story when Sylvia is walking the cow home, the narrator states: "Sometimes in pleasant weather it was a consolation to look upon the cow's pranks as an intelligent attempt to play hide and seek, and . . . the child . . . lent herself to this amusement" (161). "Consolation" suggests a subjective impression, but the narrator offers no direct attribution to Sylvia: no "she thought it was," simply "it was." The narrator seems to "know" this experience herself, sharing the feeling of "consolation" with Sylvia. The technique also is used in the first passage about Sylvia's grandmother. Here the narrator seems to lapse into the characteristic language and speech of the grandmother without use of quotation marks or attribution: "The good woman suspected that Sylvia loitered occasionally on her own account; there never was such a child for straying about out-of-doors since the world was made!" (162). The exclamation mark indicates the emotional intensity expressed by the grandmother, but spoken by the narrator.

In Part One the narrator seems to merge with all three characters; with Sylvia, however, the effect seems more pronounced. This technique goes beyond the

2. Genette believes that traditional terms of perspective—"first person," "second person," etc.—are limited because they do not distinguish between mood and voice. He replaces these terms with the concept of "focalization." For further explanation see Genette's *Narrative Discourse,* pp. 161-211.

3. For a more extensive explanation of James Joyce's "Uncle Charles Principle" see Hugh Kenner, *Joyce's Voices* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1978).

narrator's simply telling the reader of Sylvia's intimate thoughts to what may be interpreted as a "shared consciousness" in which the boundary separating Sylvia's feelings and those of the narrator disappears. The sense of intimacy is enhanced by the lack of direct quotations by Sylvia. The narrator seems to speak for Sylvia because the girl speaks directly only twice in the story. In a sense, the passages with Sylvia give the impression of two voices sounding simultaneously: the narrator and Sylvia. For example, when Sylvia first encounters the hunter, the narrator says that the young girl is concerned about what her grandmother might think: "Would not her grandmother consider her much to blame? But who could have foreseen such an accident as this?" (163). Again the narrator slips into the mind of Sylvia. The lack of quotation marks, the language, and the use of the pronoun "her" implies the voice of the narrator. However, the feelings and thoughts belong to Sylvia. This seemingly intimate attachment between character and narrator contradicts the illusion of narrative distance suggested by other aspects of the text that have already been discussed. Further, another tension exists: the illusion of narrative distance diminishes a sense of a separate narrative presence, but the technique of merging voices, in contrast, creates the existence of an "other"—the narrator—outside the characters themselves.

Variations in Tense

THE STORY's frequent shifts in tense also complicate the impression of narrative distance. These interesting shifts in tense have been noticed by many critics. George Held asserts that switching to present tense underscores the immediacy of Sylvia's convergence with nature, specifically with the present tense narrative of Sylvia's seeing the white heron at the end of the story (66). Gayle L. Smith agrees, but takes the idea further in suggesting the shift in tense "argues. . .the absence of a distinct boundary between past and present" (42). This idea is seen in the story's first shift in tense. Using past tense the narrator tells how Sylvia was remembering the "red-faced boy" who used to chase her. The narrative then switches to present tense, surprising the reader just as Sylvia is surprised herself by the whistle: "Suddenly, this little woods-girl is horror-stricken to hear a clear whistle not very far away" (163). Past experience, still present in Sylvia's mind, directly effects present experience to the point that past and present seem to become one (Smith 42). These ideas are excellent points of departure for the discussion of an intriguing aspect of the text—the effect shifts in tense have on narrative presence. I agree with Heller that the shifting of tense is a marked rupture that calls attention to the presence of a narrator (186). If we apply Tzvetan Todorov's definition of tense, the text undergoes a dramatic shift in the relationship between the time of the story and the time the story is told (Genette 29). This rupture calls attention to the narrator in two ways: as the creative entity who effects the change and as an interested party who seemingly becomes emotionally engaged with the events of her narrative, sharing the feeling of "horror" with Sylvia. Doubts about narrative control and knowledge may also

reverberate from shifts in tense. Past tense implies that the narrator has a foreknowledge of events; the entire event has already played itself out in the past. The shift to present tense, however, implies that the narrator is relating events as they unfold, unaware of what the future holds and just as surprised by the occurrences as the character (or the reader). A tense shift which suggests both an intrusive narrative presence and a loss of narrative authority strikes a discordant note in a text that initially seemed to have a distant and obscure narrator.

Narrative Intrusion in Part Two

IN DRAMATIC contrast to Part One, Part Two of "A White Heron" completely rejects the notion of narrative distance; it contains frequent ruptures in the illusion. "Focalization" shifts to what Genette would call "fixed internal focalization" because the story almost never leaves the point of view of Sylvia (189). Instances in which the voices of Sylvia and the narrator merge become more pronounced. When Sylvia remembers the tall tree in the forest she hopes that it can help her in her quest for the heron:

> Now she thought of the tree with a new excitement, for, if one climbed it at break of day, could not one see all the world, and easily discover whence the white heron flew, and mark the place and find the hidden nest?
>
> What a spirit of adventure, what wild ambition! What fancied triumph and delight and glory for the later morning when she could make known the secret! (167)

The language in this passage indicates a gradual merging of voices. The phrase "she thought" sets up a slim distance between the feelings of Sylvia and the narrator. The indefinite pronoun "one" instead of "she" or "I," however, closes that distance by allowing the possibility of another person—the narrator—to climb the tree with Sylvia. The merging of voices culminates in the exclamatory: "What a spirit of adventure, what wild ambition!" (167). Though the language is that of the narrator, the emotion belongs to both Sylvia and narrator.

Toward the end of the story a separate narrative presence and consciousness is made explicit. The narrative persona of "detached and omniscient observer-creator" that dominated the narrative in Part One is abandoned from this point to the end of the story (Smith 42). The narrator first reveals herself explicitly in an intrusively didactic statement:

> 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! (168)

Here the narrator seems to have offered the crux of the story. However, as Held points out, the statement seems condescending and superfluous. Sylvia's romantic excitement over the young hunter—what the narrator calls a "dream of love"—seems belittled by the phrase "wave of human interest." The phrase "dull little life" diminishes what was earlier characterized as making Sylvia feel "as if she had never been alive at all before she came to live at the farm" (Held 65). The effects of the adjective "dumb" in describing the life of the forest are varied.

One may interpret a life of speechlessness as quietly reclusive or as a pathetic escape from human interaction because of a social disability. The story's unstable narrative voice encourages this skepticism. Ambiguous language and the intrusive and didactic nature of a narrator who earlier seemed emotionally distant and obscure may invite an ironic reading of this passage. The reader may resist this intrusion and reject the ethical message the narrator's outburst attempts to summarize.

Narrative intrusion complicates the reading of the story because the reader is now forced to consider the motivations, feelings, and intentions of the narrator. The narrator seems to become a character herself, wrapped up in the dynamism of the fiction. The description of Sylvia's climb up the great tree contains pronounced instances of the narrator's intense emotional engagement in the text and bonding with Sylvia. The narrative slows down dramatically to relate the smallest detail of her journey. As we sense the narrator's own emotional involvement in this climax, the narrative gradually progresses to merging voices when Sylvia reaches the top of the tree. The language suggests that the narrator's emotional involvement surpasses even the feelings of Sylvia:

> Yes, 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. How low they looked in the air from that height when before one had only seen them far up, and dark against the blue sky. (169)

Again, the narrator uses the pronoun "one" instead of "she" opening up the experience to more than Sylvia. Six lines later the narrator seems to cry out: "truly it was a vast and awesome world" (169). As the dramatic narrative progresses the feelings of narrator and Sylvia seem to merge into one voice: "where was the white heron's nest . . . was this wonderful sight . . . the only reward for having climbed to such a giddy height?" (169). Suddenly, as the narrative shifts to present tense, the narrator addresses Sylvia directly: "Now look down again, Sylvia . . . 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 . . . " (169). This emotional outburst disrupts the text, creating a paradox. The narrator is not content to stay "behind the scenes"; by revealing herself she calls attention to her role as creator of the fiction, totally in charge and aware of what is happening and what will happen. This passage, however, suggests that the narrator has lost control of the narration, almost forgetting herself. Meta-fictive chords resonate throughout this passage. This perceived omniscient narrator, seemingly in control of events in that she creates the fiction by the act of narration, feels it necessary not only to advise her character but to inform her of the future: "you will see him again." This contradiction seems to undercut narrative authority, perhaps making the reader suspicious of a narrator who seems to play multiple roles.

Narrative voice becomes increasingly unstable and contradictory to the story's end. The narrative continues in present tense as Sylvia makes her way down the tree filled with the excitement of knowing the heron's "secret," but then shifts back to past tense when we return to the grandmother calling out to Sylvia.

The tense shifts at this point add to the unstable narrative authority. If present tense implies the immediate unfolding of events and lessens the possibility of narrative foreknowledge, the narrator's disclosure to Sylvia that she "will see" the bird seems to counter the effect of present tense. This dynamic is complicated further in that the narrator tells us that Sylvia was wondering "what [the hunter] would think *when* she told him how to find his way straight to the heron's nest" (170; my emphasis). At this point Sylvia is confident she will tell. This language reveals itself as a strategy to enhance suspense and surprise because the reader will discover that Sylvia will not give up the bird. This technique is another rip in the narrative fabric. The narrator has already revealed her power of foreknow–ledge and was willing to advise Sylvia to be patient and the bird would arrive. The narrator, however, will not counsel her now. Sylvia believes she will give up the heron; the narrator knows she will not. This selective intrusion makes the intentions of the narrator suspect as her attempts at manipulating text and reader become apparent.

Following Sylvia's descent down the tree, the narrative again switches tense: to past tense as the grandmother and hunter await Sylvia's arrival and again to present as Sylvia arrives: "Here she comes now, paler than ever" (170). The grandmother and hunter eagerly await Sylvia's account of her adventure, but she does not speak: "No, she must keep silence!" (170). This pronouncement seems like both an expression of Sylvia's thoughts and a demand from the narrator, further counsel from an intrusive narrative presence. Within the question that follows two voices again resonate: "What is it that suddenly forbids her and makes her dumb?" (170). One voice belongs to Sylvia, unsure of why she chose the heron over the hunter. The other is the ironic voice of the narrator; the question implies the narrator herself knows the answer. This ironic voice reverberates to the story's end. In the final paragraph, for example, the narrator maintains her separate persona by once again addressing Sylvia directly as "Dear loyalty" (171). We find that Sylvia regrets her decision because she misses the hunter and even forgets "the piteous sight of thrushes and sparrows dropping silent to the ground, their songs hushed and their pretty feathers stained and wet with blood" (171). Although the girl may not comprehend her decision, the use of this graphic image reveals that the narrator knows why the girl chose the way she did (Donovan 71). Once again, the narrator chooses not to counsel Sylvia directly and instead makes a plea to nature:

> Were the birds better friends than their hunter might have been—who can tell? Whatever treasures were lost to her, woodlands and summer-time, remember! Bring your gifts and graces and tell your secrets to this lonely country child! (171)

Many critics have had problems with the tension in this last instance of narrative intrusion. Josephine Donovan, for example, believes the tension stems from the rift between the narrator and Sylvia because the narrator does not relieve Sylvia's confusion by explaining Sylvia's motivations to her (70-71). Catherine Barnes Stevenson asserts that the source of the tension lies in ambivalence on the part of the narrator who "cannot wholeheartedly endorse either alternative"—

remaining in the safe, but lonely, world of childhood in nature or maturing to join an unknown world of the hunter (6). I believe this tension is only an extension of the narrative instability that exists throughout the entire text.

Conclusion

MY READING stems from the idea that an assessment of narrative sensibility or advocacy for certain concepts or themes is dependent upon establishing a consistent narrative voice. Based on this assumption, tension in the narrative voice of "A White Heron" complicates the reader's attempt to discover "meaning" in the story or assess the narrator's sensibilities. The narrator runs the gamut of narrative roles—from detached to emotionally engaged, from obscurity to explicit revelation of her presence. The reader has difficulty assessing narrative sensibility amid the constantly shifting planes of narrative voice. Further, the effect of this narrative "duplicity" may be the opposite of "communion" (Heller 190). This narrative "identity crisis" actually may alienate the reader. I believe the meta-fictive aspects of Jewett's complex narrative gives her particular relevance to the postmodern literary world. Her story seems to call attention to the very natures of "narrative," "narrator," and "reader." The dynamic interplay between the sensibilities of both reader and narrator may bring into question the possibility of "message" or narrative advocacy in "A White Heron," or, perhaps, in any story.

Works Cited

AMMONS, ELIZABETH. "The Shape of Violence in Jewett's 'A White Heron.'" *Colby Library Quarterly* 22 (1986): 6-16.

ATKINSON, MICHAEL. "The Necessary Extravagance of Sarah Orne Jewett: Voices of Authority in 'A White Heron.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 19 (1982): 71-74.

BRENZO, RICHARD. "Free Heron or Dead Sparrow: Sylvia's Choice in Sarah Orne Jewett's 'A White Heron.'" *Colby Library Quarterly* 14 (1978): 36-41.

CARY, RICHARD. *Sarah Orne Jewett.* New York: Twayne, 1962.

DONOVAN, JOSEPHINE. *Sarah Orne Jewett.* New York: Ungar, 1980.

GENETTE, GERARD. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method.* Trans. Jane E. Lewin. New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980.

HELD, GEORGE. "Heart to Heart with Nature: Ways of Looking at 'A White Heron.'" *Colby Library Quarterly* 18 (1982): 55-65. Rpt. in *Critical Essays on Sarah Orne Jewett.* Ed. Gwen L. Nagel. Boston: Hall, 1984.

HELLER, TERRY. "The Rhetoric of Communion in Jewett's 'A White Heron.'" *Colby Library Quarterly* 27 (1990): 182-94.

JEWETT, SARAH ORNE. The Country of the Pointed Firs *and Other Stories.* 2nd ed. New York: Doubleday, 1989.

MCMICHAEL, GEORGE, ed. *Anthology of American Literature.* 4th ed. New York: Macmillan, 1989.

NAGEL, GWEN L., ed. *Critical Essays on Sarah Orne Jewett.* Boston: Hall, 1984.

SMITH, GAYLE. "The Language of Transcendence in Sarah Orne Jewett's 'A White Heron.'" *Colby Library Quarterly* 19 (1983): 37-44.

STEVENSON, CATHERINE BARNES. "The Double Consciousness of the Narrator in Sarah Orne Jewett's Fiction." *Colby Library Quarterly* 11 (1975): 1-12.

SUBBARAMAN, SIVAGAMI. "Rites of Passage: Narratorial Plurality as Structure in Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs.*" *Centennial Review* 33 (1989): 60-73.