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## *Narrative Mediation in Sarah Orne Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs*

by ALLISON T. HILD

RECENT CRITICAL ATTENTION to Sarah Orne Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs* (by critics like Donovan, Pryse, Showalter and Folsom) focuses on the female narrator as a character longing to be reunited with a nurturing, female community in opposition to the more patriarchal world outside Dunnet Landing.<sup>1</sup> Several of these critics trace Jewett's links to sentimental fiction in her exploration of a matriarchal culture where the "artifacts of domesticity" become "virtually totemic objects" (Showalter 68). And in a recent essay Patricia Durso has outlined the critical reaction to Jewett's narrator throughout the twentieth century. Durso notes that while early reviewers defined the narrator "simply as a vehicle through which Jewett related her story, as an interpreter, and as a figure simply there to describe what she saw and relate what she heard, later critics have argued that the narrator is a character who grows, changes, and matures" (171). It is not my intention to refute these later critics who have done much to advance studies of women's communities, but I think the stress on the narrator's intimacy with the region's inhabitants overlooks important acts of mediation in which the narrator engages. As a mediator between the urban, modernized world and that of Dunnet Landing, the narrator must maintain the distance necessary to relate to both her textual object and her audience. Jewett's fiction is more solidly grounded in the genre of local color propagated by, for example, Hamlin Garland and Mark Twain. Jewett explores female spaces within the larger frame of authentic regional detail, local dialect and local customs. As typically occurs in local colorist fiction, her narrator remains somewhat separated from the culture she writes about, identifying not only with the local residents but simultaneously with the readers to whom she relates her adventures. The balance is difficult to achieve, for the narrator must gain a foothold in the community to experience their "local color" firsthand, yet retain enough separation to communicate her experiences to a predominantly urban, middle-class audience.

Jewett achieves this narrative dialectic through her narrator's impulse to mythologize, which distances the narrator from the inhabitants of Dunnet

1. In recent years feminist critics seem to have rediscovered Jewett's fiction as an early example of matriarchal centers of power. Elaine Showalter reads *Country* as a kind of homage to sentimental fiction's concerns with domestic women's culture; Marjorie Pryse claims that the "world of Dunnet Landing is, above all else, a world in which women learn to belong again" (xix); Sandra Zagarell defines Dunnet Landing as a pattern of women's communities; and Josephine Donovan sees the narrator's outsider status as symbolic of her spiritual malaise, since she is "alienated from the fullness of communal and spiritual being that the area has come to symbolize" (105).

Landing. Josephine Donovan and others attribute the narrator's separation to women's "distance from the matriarchal world of their foremothers, and their longing to reconnect with it" (113). In actuality, that distance helps the character function successfully as a narrator. She becomes linked to the community of Dunnet Landing by taking part in its activities and talking with its inhabitants, but always remains an observer who reframes incidents through her own removed perspective. The narrator is the only character in the novel who speaks (and writes) in standard English; the residents of Dunnet Landing converse in colorful, Down-East dialect, at times difficult to decipher without the narrator's interpretation. Eric Sundquist in his essay "Realism and Regionalism" classifies Jewett as a writer particularly aware of distinctions of speech and customs.

Vernacular writing by Mark Twain, Sarah Orne Jewett, Hamlin Garland, and others is one manifestation of the variously held American theory (reflecting that of Hippolyte Taine in France) that realistic literature must embody the race, the milieu, and the historical moment of its author. In their often nostalgic attention to diverse regional customs eroded by standardized urban society, American regionalists share with European writers of the period . . . the belief that a work's "realism" resides both in its local details and in the larger transfiguration of national ideology to which it responds. (502)

Sundquist's attention to the connective role of the "vernacular writing" Jewett employs emphasizes the interpretive role the narrator performs within the fiction. She as observer calls attention to the "diverse regional customs eroded by standardized urban societies." The apothecary skills of Mrs. Todd, the dialect of Dunnet Landing, the lifestyle of widower Elijah Tilley, the family reunion of the entire Bowden clan—all are depictions of an integrated world made understandable to an external audience which no longer owns any such stable, unifying traditions.

The narrator functions as an interpretive filter which allows the urban world from which she hails to learn about the local region. Neither space can claim superior skills or more intelligent residents: they are separate but equal. Through her mythologizing the narrator sets the details of Dunnet Landing against a transfigured national ideology. One society is waxing while the other wanes, and the narrator struggles to reveal the richness and importance of the traditions which seem on the verge of extinction, traditions to which society must respond. The narrator's need for a second, mythological language clearly marks the presence of this second audience. Dunnet Landing understands its own dialect, but without mediation the narrator's urban world might not. The residents of Dunnet Landing, though perceptive and intelligent, do not use mythological figures and comparisons themselves, and thus the narrator's phrases become a secondary discourse for her readers. Jewett employs her narrator's predilection to mythologize as a way to work both sides of the equation. The narrative voice chronicles specific experiences of the Dunnet Landing community while simultaneously speaking in terms which are those of an outsider, one from an urbanized world distinctly separate from that being examined.

Our first introduction to Mrs. Todd accentuates the dual presence of local detail and timelessness. Almira Todd is labeled as the landlady of "the tiny

house . . . which stood with its end to the street . . . behind its bushy bit of a green garden" (3). The narrator is quick to note the domesticity of the world which surrounds Mrs. Almira Todd as she comments on her "rustic pharmacopoeia":

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 caldron on Mrs. Todd's kitchen stove. (4)

In this description, Jewett reflects the two aspects of her narrator's situation as both insider and outsider. The dominance of the hearth, the center of the house and the realm of women's culture, suggests an acceptance into the inner circle of Mrs. Todd's home. The scene revolves around the kitchen stove with its pots brimming with herbs and oils familiar as vinegar and molasses. But equally important to the passage is the language which evokes history and timelessness. The narrator connects Mrs. Todd's brews with those from some "sacred and mystic rites" from a "forgotten past." Her herb medicines become part of the medical lore developed over many centuries, knowledge which encompasses more than Mrs. Todd's kitchen. The mythology invoked is framed in a language of polished sentences and academic associations which serve as that secondary discourse to the vernacular speech of rural Dunnet Landing. The narrator consciously places the specific within the larger realm of the universal, thereby removing any personal link to the subject.

The narrator again steps back to mythologize Mrs. Todd on her braided rug, whose "rings of black and gray seemed to circle about her feet in the dim light. Her height and massiveness in the low room gave her the look of a huge sibyl" (8). Elaine Showalter uses this image to point out what she calls Jewett's glorification of the sentimental genre and women's culture, in which the braided rug becomes "a kind of prayer mat of concentric circles from which the matriarchal priestess, Mrs. Todd, delivers her sibylline pronouncements" (68). Michael Holstein remarks on the "psychic function" of this scene, picturing the narrator as a "writer-healer," an acolyte to Mrs. Todd's pharmaceutical and spiritual healing. "She [Mrs. Todd] is one who both supervises the initiation of the writer into the subtleties of the spiritual life around her and serves as an ego goal" (43).

But what these critics overlook is the narrator's responsibility for creating Mrs. Todd as a mythic figure. The narrator creates a literary model for the scene she personally experiences, thus reducing the immediacy of her experience. Significantly, this mythologizing occurs immediately after Mrs. Todd has told "all that lay deepest in her heart" (7), and so becomes a way to invoke distance to thwart the rising level of intimacy. Rather than simply uniting with Mrs. Todd in emotional sympathy the narrator chooses to label her with academic phrases which set the physical Mrs. Todd in relation to the larger mythic image of the sibyl. Mrs. Todd has been removed from her "intimate" contact with the narrator and made to serve as a prototype for an eternal ideal. The language the narrator uses and the creation of such a comparison serve only to reaffirm to the reader

the outside nature of the narrator. Certainly here the narrator also desires to attract the reader, to make the private world of Mrs. Todd accessible to an exterior audience. But the presence of such a stratagem signals once more the separation between the two worlds of object and audience. The world of the narrator's life prior to her arrival in Dunnet Landing is not contiguous with the world of Mrs. Todd, and some interpretive work must be done by the narrator to engage her readers.

Inherent in the narrator's separation from her material is a natural identification with the community she has temporarily left behind. The narrative voice employs a device Josephine Donovan locates in sentimental fiction, particularly in Stowe's first published story, "Isabelle and Her Sister Kate, and Their Cousin." Donovan cites Stowe's use of a narrator who "seems to be a woman 'very much like the reader'" (52). Apparently Stowe found such a narrative voice highly effective in "conversing" with her audience, who like the story's subjects were predominantly middle-class women. But Jewett, because her narrator shares the urban audience's social milieu, transforms the function of this voice from conversation to separation. The narrator in *Country of the Pointed Firs* is very much "like the reader" and so *not* like Mrs. Todd or any other local resident. Despite the apparent intimacy the narrator creates for her audience, the success of her narration depends on the gap between the reader and the character being observed. As Sundquist argues, this distance in effect becomes internalized in the fiction itself. "Local color records in part the rustic border world rendered exotic by industrialism but now made visible and nostalgically charged by the nation's inexorable drive towards cohesion and standardization" (509).

Such distance necessitates a local mediator who can introduce the narrator to that "rustic border world." Mrs. Todd is that guide for Jewett's narrator. Louis Auchincloss describes Mrs. Todd's mission: "Mrs. Todd takes her [the narrator] about to meet everybody and fills in any missing backgrounds with stories" (15). Auchincloss goes on to call the narrator "our guide" through the story, and so calls attention to the layers of interpretation through which subjects are presented to the audience. The transactions taking place in *Country of the Pointed Firs* are subtle, and payment occurs on a substantive level as rent for a room in the landlady's house. But in reality the narrator pays for a ticket into the realm of personal relationships in Dunnet Landing.

The narrator's description of her relationship with Mrs. Todd points to the almost parasitic nature of the bond. She tells her audience that in conversation with Mrs. Todd "a deeper intimacy seemed to begin" (7). Certainly Mrs. Todd opens herself emotionally, but as the narrator continues it seems difficult to believe she too partakes in this intimacy. The friendship depends not on shared revelations and intimacies, but only on those revealed by the landlady.

I do not know what herb of the night it was that used sometimes to send out a penetrating odor late in the evening. . . . 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)

The narrator gives away no part of herself, but listens eagerly and then proceeds to present her reader with Mrs. Todd's secrets. She has already admitted to being an eavesdropper on Mrs. Todd's business and social dealings with her clients. Though the eavesdropping is at first explained as inadvertent, and indeed impossible to avoid for anyone "with cottonless ears," the narrator several sentences later notes that she "had listened . . . and then laughed and listened again" (9). She resembles a scientist observing experimental subjects, not a woman personally involved with others and searching for regeneration through community.

The schoolhouse scene and the funeral observed from the window suggest at first glance the narrator's desire to become part of this community. But this scene really functions as a demonstration of the importance to the narrator of her ability to communicate in writing. Watching the funeral procession distracts her and unsettles her, but only for a short time: "[A]n hour later I was busy at my work" (14). It is only when her "sentences failed to catch these lovely cadences" of the sheep bells which tinkle outside (14-15) that she becomes disturbed, and longs for contact from outside. Significantly, that desired contact is not with a Dunnet Landing resident but with one from her world, external to this idyllic retreat. The narrator remains a link between those reading and the rustic old-fashioned world which is her object. As a result, she must retain her distance from Dunnet Landing so as not to lose her ability to interpret it for her readers.

Her interpretive function becomes so paramount that the people with whom she interacts are reduced to textual objects. Michael Holstein notes the narrator's dual role of observer and participant, and locates a "secondary narrative" which concerns the narrator's attempt to reconcile herself as both a writer and an intimate in the community (39). But what Holstein names secondary is in fact the primary narrative, because the narrator refashions every character in the text to serve her own purposes as a writer. She actively transforms Dunnet Landing and its inhabitants into textual material. In fact, the stories the narrator writes take the place of whatever she originally came to the island to produce. We are never told what the writer's summer project is, only that "literary employments are so vexed with uncertainties at best" (7) that she must seek out isolation to put anything on paper. Though the continual presence of the locals interrupts her "literary employment," her vexation lasts only long enough to put pen to paper and describe each new visit with Captain Littlepage or Elijah Tilley or Mrs. Blackett. These descriptions always include a blurring of the specific into the larger focus of history, reducing the individual to only a piece in a larger work. Considering Captain Littlepage, for instance, she wonders, "as I looked at him, if he had sprung from a line of ministers; he had the refinement of look and air of command which are the heritage of the old ecclesiastical families of New England" (17). In this way, the narrator imposes a hierarchy in which she retains her uniqueness while the inhabitants of the area remain unique only through geographical identification.

Each inhabitant with whom the narrator comes in contact is named and described, but remembered principally as a representative of local manners and

eccentricities. For instance Mrs. Todd's brother William is neatly labeled after the briefest of conversations with the narrator as "an untraveled boy . . . and yet one loved to have him value his native heath" (45). The man becomes inseparable from his land, attaining an almost primitive status in the visceral connection to his "native heath." Though on arriving at Green Island the narrator has expressed a "sudden unwonted curiosity in regard to William" (42), this desire extends only "to make his interesting acquaintance," as one might express a desire to explore a new vista or investigate an unknown territory. Ultimately, the narrator rhapsodizes about the bittersweet nature of William's existence, but finally relegates him to the status of a curious fisherman, sweet and shy and simple who "like a pious Brahmin" (46) has his musical rendition of "Home, Sweet Home" as his "real and only means of expression" (53).

The narrator seems to strike up friendships with William and other characters in a moment's time. The frequency of these assertions of sudden intimacies makes the statements suspect. Only in the case of Mrs. Fosdick is the narrator's feeling of instant sympathy more convincing, for the connection is that of two experienced travelers who know of the world external to Dunnet Landing. The narrator tells us that Mrs. Fosdick is "full of a good traveler's curiosity and enlightenment" (59). There is a part of Mrs. Fosdick, then, which resembles the narrator, and which no other inhabitant of the region possesses. But she, too, is textualized by the narrator, labeled an "entertaining pilgrim" in congress with Mrs. Todd, whose timelessness is "like an idyl of Theocritus" (59). This mythologizing of both women equals an evaluation of them, made by attributing and labeling qualities with the distance of a professional author.

The narrator's greatest opportunity for textual recreation of a character is Joanna Todd of Shell-Heap Island. Joanna must be fully recreated since she has been dead for several years, and cannot provide the narrator with any dialogue or self-interpretation. Marcia McClintock Folsom explains that the episode on Shell-Heap Island "offers a rich instance of the narrator's reconstructing someone else's feelings by actively interpreting a few outer facts" (80-81). But the narrator goes beyond active interpretation actually to create Joanna's emotions and memories, asserting as she hears voices on the sea that "I knew, as if she had told me, that poor Joanna must have heard the like . . . and must have welcomed the good cheer in spite of hopelessness and winter weather" (82). The narrator asserts her authority over her characters by making her personal interpretation their reality. Her language again makes the experience universal, linking Joanna's grave to "the shrines of solitude the world over" (82). Once more the words of the narrator stress a conception of a world in which Dunnet Landing is only a small piece, a piece which the narrator dissects but to which she does not belong. Her use of the secondary discourse of mythology underlines her separation.

Even during the Bowden family reunion, the communal climax of the book, she remains separate from the community, and thus able to objectify it. Most critics point to the reunion as a time when the narrator finally becomes one with Mrs. Todd and her family. In Donovan's words, "[t]he visitor-narrator feels a

part of this ceremonial, as opposed to the funeral rite earlier. The experience is one of drawing into a timeless ritual, of drawing closer to a fuller participation in being" (116). But as we have seen, the moments when the narrator describes "a timeless ritual" are the moments she most fully distances herself from the people around her. The reunion becomes one more pageant in the annals of history, a tableau which tells the narrator more about eternal truths than about the community in which she sits.

The plash of the water could be heard faintly, yet still be heard; we might have been a company of ancient Greeks going to celebrate a victory, or to worship the god of harvests, in the grove above. It was strangely moving to see this and to make part of it. The sky, the sea, have watched poor humanity at its rites so long; we were no more a New England family celebrating its own existence and simple progress; we carried the tokens and inheritance of all such households from which we had descended, and were only the latest of our line. (100)

The narrator's use of the word "we" suggests that she feels herself caught up in the celebration of family, but this is strongly counterbalanced by the objective manner in which she relates the scene. The classical Greek imagery makes mythic the progress of New England families through history, but the sense of a specific Bowden community is all but lost. At the moment of strongest (seeming) connection with these people, when she has been made part of their clan, the narrator retains her authorial distance. Such conscious withdrawal from the events taking place suggests that the narrator's interaction is primarily valuable because it allows her access to textual material.

The narrator's interpretive stance sets her own abilities and opportunities against the more limiting confines of Dunnet Landing. Her education and greater range of experience serve as necessary corollaries to the mediation she performs between textual object and audience. "It was not the first time" she tells us "that I was full of wonder at the waste of human ability in this world. . . . More than one face among the Bowdens showed that only opportunity and stimulus were lacking,—a narrow set of circumstances had caged a fine able character and held it captive" (106-07). The language of mythology privileges her status as outside the community as she draws important lessons from the raw material offered by the local residents and their community's activities. The narrator spins her threads of perception and weaves them into a whole cloth of significant lessons for her urban audience. In this way, she calls to mind Hamlin Garland's prescription for local color, which "corresponds to the endless and vital charm of individual peculiarity" (57). In *Crumbling Idols*, Garland explains that local colorists "have made art the re-creation of the beautiful *and the significant*" (59). But what the narrator ultimately finds significant are the mythological images and the timeless symbols the Dunnet Landing residents embody, not Garland's spontaneous reflection of "the life that goes on around" one (62). The past and present mingle in the narrator's insistence on finding in local residents templates which have universal resonance, and, though the specifics of the present are subsumed in the tradition of the past, the narrator forges a new sense of "poor humanity at its rites" in her mediation between worlds.

The narrator achieves what Eric Sundquist defines as one of regionalist



fiction's aims, and "offers a window into secluded territory receding into a past paradoxically contemporaneous with the urban worlds" (510). Those urban worlds are the natural environment of the narrator, who places Dunnet Landing more firmly in the past with each overarching comparison to eternity. Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs* interweaves the timeless with the specific, and the mythologizing of the narrator achieves a poignancy because that simpler way of life which vanishes in her comparisons has all but vanished in reality as well. Sundquist calls local color fiction a "literature of memory" (508) which recalls peoples and customs fast disappearing. Jewett's narrator does more than remember Dunnet Landing, she recreates that place in her textual interpretation. The narrator creates her own mythology, and in that simultaneously recreates her own experience. She in effect textualizes herself, as she implicitly writes her own life in the distinctions she draws between her subjects and herself. These distinctions recreate both the coastal town of Maine and the world external to it.

The narrator in the end leaves Dunnet Landing to return in later years. But Jewett's words do not suggest a spiritually revitalized woman, as some critics have claimed. Her parting with Mrs. Todd evokes a less optimistic image: "So we die before our own eyes; so we see some chapters of our lives come to their natural end" (131). The narrator adds herself to the decay of the region around her and mythologizes both deaths in the way we have come to expect. Her final view of Mrs. Todd does not imply an intimacy which can not be broken by physical separation, for "her distant figure looked mateless and appealing, with something about it that was strangely self-possessed and mysterious" (131). While there may be affection in the voice, the stress lies on Mrs. Todd's self-sufficiency and aloneness, not on her relationship with the narrator. This separation denotes no change, for the friendship has not grown within the text. As usual, the narrator transforms Mrs. Todd into a textual object.

The narrator connects specific personal histories to larger symbols of classical mythology in an attempt to create a more universal experience, but her language symbolically prevents Mrs. Todd and the other local residents from taking part in any communion. Philip Terrie notes that storytelling "is the primary vehicle of social intercourse," and that Mrs. Todd and the others, "by constantly sharing (and perhaps revising)" their pasts are able to renew continually themselves (20). But the narrator is less concerned with personal renewal than with creating a textual interpretation of the region. The narrator's knowledge of Dunnet Landing becomes a eulogy evoking the past and erasing the individual present. Thus she corrupts the "social ritual" Terrie describes, in which "the participants experience both the relieved feelings of a recreated past as well as the present pleasure of telling and listening to the story itself" (20). The lessons the narrator draws are for herself and her external audience; the local inhabitants are merely sources from which the more educated, urban world can benefit. The narrator does not integrate herself with the community, because that community is not invited to share in her narrative conclusions. She leaves Dunnet Landing personally and textually enriched, but without sharing her stories with those she leaves behind. Jewett's narrator appropriates the Dunnet Landing community, claiming the geographical region as her own textual property.

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