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“dilemma” has not led to a certain limitation of range and to overly discursive handling: whether sometimes an unwilling moralist—perhaps even schoolmaster (for one seems to apprehend an air of defiance of past timidities suggestive of the ex-teacher)—is not manipulating the material, with concentration toward unity of effect in some of the stories consequently violated.

Be all that as it may, and granting that an occasional touch of strain—even smartiness—is evident in his tales (one recalls, again, especially “The Woman Who Married Clark Gable”), that he would not suffer by possession of a measure of the casual amiability of, say, Frank O’Connor—or of O’Connor’s capacity to amble widely through Irish experience, it is still true that O’Faolain at his best is a writer who counts and that from his volumes could be drawn an anthology to stand perhaps only half a pace behind a marshaling of similar hypotheticals representative of the Irish best. For he has with reasonable frequency achieved that fusion (v. The Short Story) of “punch and poetry,” of “reality . . . and personal voltage,” which he demands of the short story: that communication of “personality while appearing only to tell a story” which operates through “suggestion” and charged language and which does not lack “subtle comment of human nature.”

THE POETIC REALISM OF SARAH ORNE JEWETT

By Jean Boggio-Sola

Because of her precarious health in youth, a private education at home developed Sarah Orne Jewett’s sensibility above the average. It might have made her an earlier Mary Wilkins Freeman if she had been left to brood in spiritual solitude but her father, a successful country doctor, fought against isolation by taking her with him on his visits to his patients all over the Berwick region. This proved an efficacious means, for Sarah not only grew into a sociable young woman but she also kept her eyes open to observe country people and their manners. Her receptive sensibility made her understand and
love them thoroughly. This wide knowledge of, and genuine affection for, her material were incomparable assets for an incipient local-color writer.

A re-reading of Harriet Beecher Stowe's sentimental regional novel *The Pearl of Orr's Island* (1862) was a revelation to her, and it probably made her realize that her own store of materials was at least as valuable as Mrs. Stowe's. So she turned from juveniles to produce a series of sketches, her first important local color work *Deephaven* (1877), in which two summer visitors to a small Maine community discard the condescending and ignorant attitude of the usual summer people and try to understand the Yankee population truly. This device gave birth to a succession of sketches full of charm, color, and quaintness that places Miss Jewett in the first rank of traditional local colorists. But she was already a little different from them: she did not look at people with curiosity as if they had been museum pieces, but rather tried to see them as fellow human beings whom one might learn to know, to understand, and to love. Her education with a man who devoted his life to the service of his people fitted her perfectly for the task. In her first attempt she succeeded in communicating to her readers a sense of intelligent sympathy which rises definitely above mere coarse inquisitiveness.

Her effort was toward the refinement of the appeal of local color. In the years that followed *Deephaven* she wrote many sketches and stories that mark the different stages in the progress of her art. These were collected in volumes with the evocative titles of *Country By-Ways* (1881), *The Mate of the Daylight, and Friends Ashore* (1883), *The King of Folly Island and Other People* (1888), *Strangers and Wayfarers* (1890), *A Native of Winby and Other Tales* (1893), and an autobiographical novel with a slight plot, *A Country Doctor* (1884), which is essentially a tribute to the goodness of her father personified by Doctor Leslie. Through the series may be witnessed the gradation of her attitude towards her object, from gentle curiosity she moves to interest, understanding, to reach admiration and love in the end. Curiosity, which had been the mainspring of ordinary local color, no longer sufficed to raise such feelings. Higher feelings depend on subtler appeals. Understanding results from sympathy, while admiration and love cannot exist without beauty.
The use of these subtler appeals is the great innovation of Sarah Orne Jewett, and she brought it to perfection in her masterpiece, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896). A body of loosely connected sketches and stories, it has been called Miss Jewett's swan song, for she produced little remarkable after it until her death in 1909. How did this artist treat her object, which after all is the same as that of every other local colorist, to bring forth its latent beauty? For in an object of admiration and love, beauty must no longer be simply occasional, it must hold the scene all the time and be present in the slightest detail. Thus, no element of the object must be neglected; each must be exploited to yield its share of beauty. Examples from *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and several of the short stories will give an idea of the value of her work and of her methods of producing admiration and love through the use of beauty.

Miss Jewett made extensive use of the New England scene as a sort of active setting. Many stories and sketches contain one of these magnificent and skilfully elaborated broad pictures of a landscape or a place that actually materializes the setting in the reader's imagination. Most often they are introduced by the author's will alone, who very deliberately stops a moment to paint a scene she judges striking. Some are essentially pieces of landscape painting, and their titles do not try to hide that fact. Such is the case of "At the Schoolhouse Window," which is the most complete picture of a portion of the Maine coast:

> The bay-sheltered islands and the great sea beyond stretched away to the far horizon southward and eastward; the little procession in the foreground looked futile and helpless on the edge of the rocky shore. It was a glorious day early in July, with a clear, high sky; there were no clouds, there was no noise of the sea. The song sparrows sang and sang, as if with joyous knowledge of immortality, and contempt for those who could so pettily concern themselves with death. I stood watching until the funeral procession had crept round a shoulder of the slope below and disappeared from the great landscape as if it had gone into a cave. (Chapter IV, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*)

Although independent from the general progress of the book, as far as there is any, this piece of painting, however, fits in very well. The inclusion of the funeral procession paves the way for what follows, and introduces a note of grandeur, majesty, and mysticism that is going to be kept up in the pages that come after. Other pieces of scenery are set up in a man-
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ner that is in more direct connection with the context. In the relation of a wagon trip in the country, the description of a panorama comes in quite naturally:

When I thought we were in the heart of the inland country, we reached the top of a hill, and suddenly there lay spread out before us a wonderful great view of well-cleared fields that swept down to the wide water of a bay. Beyond this were distant shores like another country in the midday haze which half-hid the hills beyond, and the far-away pale blue mountains on the northern horizon. There was a schooner with all sails set coming down the bay from a white village that was sprinkled on the shore, and there were many sailing boats flitting about. It was a noble landscape . . . (Chapter XVII)

The effect of surprise at the discovery of the view justifies the broad description, but skilfully the painter puts in a few details, namely the boats, that provide a link with the rest of the anecdote which tells of a journey to a family reunion. The concluding sentence reveals the purpose of this landscape painting — to convince the reader of the majestic beauty of the New England scenery.

In spite of its grandeur, the setting remains very close to men, and never overpowers them to the point of preventing a feeling of loving admiration. This is well evidenced in another example taken from another collection, A White Heron and Other Stories (1886). The little girl in the title story, having ascended a giant pine tree, gets a sweeping view of the landscape: "Yes, there was the sea with the dawning sun waking 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. Their gray feathers were as soft as moths; they seemed only a little way from the tree, and Sylvia felt as if she too could go on flying away among the clouds. Westward, the woodlands and farms reached miles and miles into the distance; here and there were church steeples, and white villages; truly it was a vast and awesome world." Miss Jewett paints a scene through the medium of character, in what may be called subjective landscape painting. The aim is to create a love for nature in the reader, out of sympathy for the little girl, who herself is identified with it.

But the elaboration of setting is not made entirely by that method. Throughout her writings the author intersperses
touches of scene painting which, if they are not so memorable as the grand scenes, are fully as effective. They cannot easily be severed from their content, and their impact is cumulative. A few examples will give an idea of their peculiar quality, very common in a brief comparison as “the small house, standing high like a beacon.” The recurrent image of “the pointed firs” is most effective in creating the atmosphere of isolation and solemnity that prevails at times. The sedate quiet of a return home after an exciting day is precisely suggested by this plain remark about the weather in “The Hiltons’ Holiday”: “it was a cool evening, there was a fresh sea-wind that brought a light mist with it, and the sky was fast growing cloudy.” These scattered touches also allow Miss Jewett to make the best of New England’s enormous wealth of flowers, and her extensive knowledge of them, in her search for beauty.

These several approaches leave nothing of the setting out of the picture, but it is not merely complete, specific, quaint, or even beautiful. It has an additional quality that most local colorists are unable to reach to a comparable degree. It is an active setting, that is to say, it does not only serve its normal purpose of localization but also contributes considerably to the total effect of Miss Jewett’s writings. Localization, if one may say so, is not only geographical or material, it is also emotional. The reader does not simply see but actually feels the beauty of the scene. This feeling is by no means a vague sensation but a very real law of nature which often verges on identification. This result is obtained by means of suggestion, evolved from the choice of details and words in the setting. Moreover, this language painting lends to her work the tone repeatedly referred to by various critics as “Indian Summer mellowness.”

The quality of style that best matches this natural sort of tone is grace, and Sarah Orne Jewett quite naturally fitted her own delicate expression to the delicacy of the object. She is principally a painter, and her general technique of landscape painting has been examined. A detailed view of her means, however, might be useful to round out the study. Her precision and evenness of style are remarkable, suiting well the order and neatness that distinguish her work. The basic picturesqueness of her landscapes is enhanced by words that are colored in themselves. The effect of “There was a flashing
of white gulls over the water” is an immediate visual sensation. Comparisons are used abundantly to the same purpose. Most are quite apposite, like this one from the Bowden reunion: “The old Bowden house stood, low-storied, and broad-roofed, in its green fields as if it were a motherly hen waiting for the flock that came straying towards it from every direction.” There are passages in which comparisons are overabundant, as in the description of Mrs. Blackett’s house. In this short paragraph the phrase “as if” is repeated four times, and “like” twice, thereby losing the effect of clearness and concreteness.

Miss Jewett’s language exhibits the delicacy and precision of her style at large: it is that of a well-bred girl, deeply read in English literature, yet not stilted and far-fetched. On the contrary, it is almost plain in its directness. Like Mrs. Stowe’s, her rendering of dialect is particularly successful, for she catches its rhythms as well as its sounds. But she uses it sparingly, just enough for flavor.

In fact, her use of suggestion, though limited and elementary, is remarkable. She encourages meditation by her own mental attitude: “I often wondered a great deal about the inner life and thought of these self-centered fishermen.” The silence of Sylvia in “A White Heron” is full of significance as to the transformation of the soul of this child: “the splendid moment has come to speak of the dead hemlock tree by the green marsh. But Sylvia does not speak after all. . . . No, she must keep silence . . . she cannot tell the heron’s secret and give its life away.” By such means moments of intense communion with nature or of communication between souls are made possible. Suggestion succeeds in conveying the inexplicable.

It is a common attack against Miss Jewett to say that her picture of New England life is not realistic. Indeed, hers is probably the rosiest view of New England given by the great local colorists. All the elements of the situation that might be unpleasant are either not carried into effect or are left in the shade or are presented as definite advantages. But it is easy to see through her own picture that the idyllic view is not quite realistic because not quite comprehensive. Without taking up the whole argument, a few examples should convince.

Captain Littlepage’s evocation of the glory of the heyday of New England shipping and his reviling of the present time,
though they issue from a semi-lunatic, are nevertheless very true, even echoed by two old gossips full of commonsense, "There, how times have changed!" That wistful note makes the sense of decay unmistakable and can hardly be concealed. But perhaps more striking is the ignorance of the influence of the secluded situation upon some characters: "There was more energy then, and in some the energy took a singular turn." Poor Joanna, the recluse, though genuinely pitied for the hardships she suffered, is shown as an admirable example of will-power and self-sufficiency. The dearth of opportunities has made Sant Bowden, the military genius, a complete failure: "His life's all in it, but he will have those poor gloomy spells come over him, and then he has to drink." Though such a waste of ability is shown as sad, the reader is not supposed to feel too much concerned about it. "'Twas most too bad to cramp him down to his peaceful trade, but he's a most excellent shoemaker at his best, an' he always says it's a trade that gives him time to think and plan his manoeuvres."

Obviously Miss Jewett has no need for tragedy or simply unpleasant elements in her perfect, bright picture, so she leaves them out. Whether this omission was deliberate or unconscious is difficult to determine. It is probable that these elements did not escape her sensibility, but this very sensibility, together with her optimistic nature, could not bear the sight of unhappiness, so she chose to close her eyes. "She looked at nature in its milder moods and at mankind in its more subdued states of tenderness and resignation. . . . She was aware of all these aspects, she simply did not emphasize them," says F. O. Matthiessen in Chapter V of his biography. Neither can she be accused of dishonesty, according to Edward M. Chapman, for "She exercised too an artist's privilege in choosing subjects that seemed to her worth painting" (Yale Review, October 1913).

One should not forget "The Gray Mills of Farley," which is not only a touching, realistic picture of the evils of unemployment but also a sharp attack against the sweatshop methods enforced by the Boston capitalists. The story ends happily but the hardships suffered by the workers cannot, and are not, meant to be lightly dismissed. It is demonstrated that Miss Jewett's idealism is due to no inability of hers to be realistic but to a considered choice. Every aspect of her personality
prompted her to avoid drabness, and not least her aristocratic background. Miss Jewett's sympathy for her people has something of a great lady's condescension to her poor neighbors. She knows and understands them but is not involved in their situation deeply enough to feel compelled to represent every facet of it. Her detachment is indeed an artistic attitude, since it allows her to choose what is beautiful.

It remains, nevertheless, that the truth to life of her work is unaltered by this. What she paints really exists and is essential in the object New England. It is approximately what E. W. Whiting says in Chapter XV of Changing New England: "It is not a complete picture, but it is nearer the truth than would be emphasis on the tragic side." Paradoxically, her picture, if less realistic than that of other writers, is more real because it comes nearer the essence of life. Beneath the surface of quaintness and drabness she is able to find the underlying beauty — without which no art exists.

Her work, less a social document and more a work of art than that of her colleagues, radiates a deeper realism akin to that of poetry. Following Flaubert, she uses all the rich potentials of her object to create a particular state in the reader's mind which, for lack of better words, might be called a musing condition. This is the way nature speaks to the soul in her work. Her power of suggestion, heightened by her easy flowing style, rests in great part on a complete identification with her material at large, and more particularly with nature in a manner that recalls Thoreau's. That is why Miss Jewett's work is genuinely poetic: she writes the poetry of everyday life in New England out of an exceptionally refined emotive sensibility. Her realism, then, emerges as undoubtedly poetic realism.