

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 7
Issue 11 *September*

Article 5

September 1967

The Child in Sarah Orne Jewett

Eugene Hillhouse Pool

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 7, no.11, September 1967, p.503-509

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.

Colby Library Quarterly 503

time, as Nan, produced fresh as a rose from the laboratories and amphitheatres where she has remained a woman while becoming a doctor. This proven miracle ought to be rare enough for one to write it down.



THE CHILD IN SARAH ORNE JEWETT

By EUGENE HILLHOUSE POOL

Sarah Orne Jewett's artistic approach seems primarily to be an attempt to avoid extremes in an effort to maintain a balanced mean. It is this approach that gives to her works the quality of tranquility that is so captivating, and the refinement of emotion that demonstrates the presence of a sophisticated and commanding hand. In general Miss Jewett wished, both personally and artistically, to ride comfortably over and through the tensions of life, seeking through compromise to attain a relatively steady, central plane of existence.

Miss Jewett was born in South Berwick, Maine, in 1849 and died there, in the same house in which she was born, in 1909. She gained her great love for this northern region of New England chiefly from her father, Dr. Theodore Herman Jewett, whom she once called "the best and wisest man I ever knew."¹ Sarah Jewett would often travel with him through the Berwick countryside as he went on his rounds, and listen to him speak of literature as well as the names of the birds and flowers and animals. He almost encouraged her to be truant from school, and would sometimes insist the trips would be beneficial to his daughter just so she would accompany him. Miss Jewett thus enjoyed a firm and close relationship with her father. As Richard Cary says, "In her estimation of men and mortals, he stood at the pinnacle."² Miss Jewett always looked back with happiness upon their rides together, and the stories that her father would tell. . . . They were to have indelible influence.

¹ Dedication, *Country By-Ways* (Boston, 1881).

² "Sarah Orne Jewett and the Rich Tradition," *Colby Library Quarterly*, IV (November 1957), 211.

504 Colby Library Quarterly

To herself and others in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* Miss Jewett constantly applies the metaphor of *child*. When Mrs. Fosdick comes at long last to visit Mrs. Todd, for instance, Miss Jewett experiences “an unreasonable feeling of being left out, like the child who stood at the gate in Hans Andersen’s story.”³ Mrs. Todd’s photograph displays “the full face of the cheerful child she looked like still in spite of being past sixty” (74), and as Mrs. Todd herself says, “There, you never get over bein’ a child long’s you have a mother to go to” (55). Thus, Miss Jewett casts herself and her Dunnet Landing companions in the same mold as she and Kate Lancaster in *Deephaven*, where even in the preface she speaks of the main virtue of the book as its “youthfulness.” Miss Jewett was also an admirer of Wordsworth, and read avidly both his and his sister’s writings. In the Englishman’s Romantic canon it was the child that was the visionary; maturity implied the loss of certain extraordinary faculties.

On her forty-eighth birthday Miss Jewett said to Mrs. Annie Fields, “This is my birthday and I am always nine years old.”⁴ She would rather remain in the world of her childhood, where she was so happy with her father. One can also cite such instances as when, already a distinguished middle-aged spinster of some literary acclaim, she impulsively borrowed a sled and spent several hours coasting on the hills of Berwick. She points out to William Dean Howells that she finds everyone in Berwick to be “distressingly grown up,”⁵ and laments that she has no one with whom to play. She talks of how much she would like it if the natives of her home town would always say upon meeting her, as one of them once did, “Now which one o’ the Doctor’s girls be you!”⁶ And here she reveals her two main concerns: her father and her childhood. She searches for the time when she had still her prime companion. Miss Jewett’s greatest friend after her father, Annie Fields, admitted that while Sarah’s plans were on a large and original scale, “She never put her doll away and always used her child-names.”⁷ It is significant that to Annie and other close friends Sarah Orne Jewett referred to herself as “Pinny,” the nickname she

³ *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (Boston, 1896), 90.

⁴ Annie Fields (ed.), *Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett* (Boston, 1911), 125.

⁵ Francis Otto Matthiessen, *Sarah Orne Jewett* (Boston, 1929), 38.

⁶ Fields, 215.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 252.

Colby Library Quarterly 505

had carried as a child. Miss Jewett conceived of herself as a child whenever she could, as with her intimates, and was delighted when they should think of her as such.

But if Miss Jewett is drawn, psychologically, into the past, and towards a re-creation of herself as a child, it must be remembered that not only was she in real life an adult, but even in her works reveals a consciousness of this fact. In *The Country of the Pointed Firs* she is physically an adult, and she sits writing in a symbolic place of authority, the schoolhouse, that is above the scurry of life in Dunnet Landing. It is she also who through her condescension for Captain Littlepage and his story gains the dominating position. She looks down at him from, as she presents it, the mature standpoint. At one point in the schoolhouse she "rapped to call the bees to order as if they were unruly scholars" (18), thus exercising symbolically the adult prerogative of command. It is this same knowledge of herself as an adult that allows her, by writing, to pass judgment on Dunnet Landing; and that in the end of the book calls her home from vacation in a mature acknowledgement of the responsibility to return. In her work Miss Jewett thus walks midway between what she would like to be and what she must necessarily be.

Her life also seems to have been an uneasy middle road between childhood and adulthood, whether or not she was aware of it (although she certainly seems to be conscious of some tension). For this reason she could never really devote her life to the cause of feminism, as she hints of doing through the character of Nan in *A Country Doctor*, because this would necessitate repudiation of the importance of her father. Yet, neither can she accept a fully masculine world.

This same structure of tension is evident in her position midway between a life totally devoted to writing children's stories and a life devoted completely to serious, adult fiction. She resolves the two tendencies by doing both, by taking the middle course. As her friend and literary colleague Willa Cather said of her, "She had never been one of those who 'lived to write.' She lived for a great many things."⁸ But while Sarah Jewett did not possess the fierce dedication of an author given to nothing but writing, neither was she a dilettante.

⁸ Willa Cather, *Not Under Forty* (New York, 1936), 85.

506 Colby Library Quarterly

The tension between the child life and the adult life, between psychological desire and physical reality, seems to have its resolution, as far as Miss Jewett's sympathies are concerned, in the short story "A White Heron." Here, Matthiessen remarks in his biography, Miss Jewett dramatizes her essential conflict in the decision little Sylvia must make between the white heron and the affable young hunter. Sylvia is obviously young Sarah. Both enjoy the world of nature and the gay freedom of childhood, and neither was born in nature, but rather introduced to its lore at a later age. Sylvia is as Sarah would like to think of herself, and the problem Sylvia faces is the same Sarah faced. Sylvia knows a secret: the location of the nest of the white heron. She holds a precious thing, something very dear to her, just as in her heart Miss Jewett holds her father and his love. And the young man wants this thing. As Sylvia elects to keep her private and meaningful secret, so is she choosing for Miss Jewett too. As Matthiessen says of Sylvia, "She is truer to nature than to the potential lover she is dimly aware of in the young hunter,"⁹ so it is true that Sarah Orne Jewett also repudiates the offer of mature, passionate love that would be inherent in any acceptance of herself as a mature woman. She chooses, psychologically, to remain a child with Sylvia. Perhaps this is one of the reasons, then, that "A White Heron" is so consistently hailed as one of the best of Miss Jewett's short stories: because it is the expression of a situation closely paralleling her own personal problems, and thus contains her deepest feeling and surpassing attention.

It is perhaps easier now to understand why in Miss Jewett's work there is so little of great passion, why her towns are peopled with persons beyond violent emotion, and why, whenever there is talk of outstanding love or hate, as in Mrs. Todd's or Elijah Tilley's case, the occurrence of the passion takes place outside the story. It is because Miss Jewett had in herself chosen a more restrained emotional life. She had chosen to go as far as friendship, the middle area between aloofness and love. Thus she fails, as she does in "Jenny Garrow's Lovers," her first published work, when she attempts to work with powerful emotions. It is the passionless, or rather passion-spent, province of her father and the elderly person with which she is truly, and only, at home.

Matthiessen, 83.

Colby Library Quarterly 507

When Miss Jewett's father died, she made a new companion of Mrs. Annie Fields, the wife of Boston publisher James T. Fields. The two women were perfect complements. They were both doctors' daughters, and they had both lost their fondest companion; in Miss Jewett's case her father, and in Mrs. Fields's case her husband. Annie Fields wrote of Miss Jewett that "After her father's early death she loved to go into his office to consult his diary; she knew his papers, his books, his medicines—nothing that belonged to his mind or his work was foreign to her."¹⁰ Demonstrating her sense of his presence and influence, Miss Jewett could write five years after her father's death, "Today is father's birthday. . . I wonder if I am doing at all the things he wishes I would do, and I hope he does not get tired of me."¹¹ The death of this man who had such a potent effect on her writing, as well as her life, and who gave her so much valuable advice, was a tremendous blow to Miss Jewett. It was the sundering of her strongest emotional attachment.

Many of her characters find themselves in a similar position. Joanna's lover, who left her when she was comparatively young, was so important to her that upon his disappearance she removed to Shell-Heap Island. Elijah Tilley spends most of his time, and indeed all of Miss Jewett's visit, reminiscing about his deceased wife. And in the reader's discovery of Mrs. Todd's lover and the nature of their relationship is revealed the woman's immense self-forgetfulness. Mrs. Todd never let him know she had ceased to love him. . . .

Miss Jewett's world is peopled almost exclusively by characters who are past their youth. In *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, for instance, the only non-middle-aged persons of any significance are teen-age Johnny Bowden, who serves only as an aid to the plot in helping Captain Bowden ferry Mrs. Todd and Miss Jewett out to Green Island, and Joanna, who is nonetheless treated as a mature woman and is by no means in any of the normal categories of human behavior. In a sense this plurality of ages comes from the fact of New England itself, that in Miss Jewett's time, as now, the young had departed, had moved on since the environment held no future for them

¹⁰ Fields, 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

508 Colby Library Quarterly

after the death of shipping. But the interest in age also comes from Miss Jewett herself. As she writes to her friend Mrs. Sarah Wyman Whitman, "I look upon that [older] generation as the one to which I really belong."¹² Her glance is turned to the times gone by, the times that were good for the coast of Maine. Sarah Jewett speaks in terms of remembrance and memories, which is, of course, what her characters' stories are. Yet the aging men and women that figure so predominantly in her work are really at a place in their lives that is essentially a midpoint. They have left youth, and thus also the capacity for great action and passion, but they are nowhere near the total inaction and senility of mind and body that comes with old age and the nearing of death. They are terribly active people. Mrs. Todd is forever traveling about the countryside, William Blackett and Elijah Tilley are always out fishing in their boats, and superannuated Mrs. Blackett is still able, with her son's help, to turn their large rug. These are not the truly aged of New England, who sit placidly rocking in long rows on the porches of the state hospitals.

Dr. Leslie, one of the central characters in Miss Jewett's *A Country Doctor*, is a good example of the paradoxical old-young person. It is said of him towards the close of the book that he "was acknowledged to be an old man at last, though everybody still insisted that he looked younger than his age, and could not doubt that he had half a lifetime of usefulness before him yet" (331). Though in truth quite elderly, he is thus located at middle age, and it is the Jewett vision that places him there, for in this state he may serve as both a father and a kind of lover for Nan. When Nan chooses the life of a doctor, and thereby repudiates the proffered love of George Gerry, she is demonstrating a preference for Dr. Leslie in spite of the alternative of a contemporary male. The older person, such as Dr. Leslie, is at the center of the major Jewett fictions in which, in some guise or other, the author appears. Dr. Leslie obviously represents Miss Jewett's father. And although in *Deephaven* and *The Country of the Pointed Firs* the central older personage is a female, this is only to be expected. For Sarah Orne Jewett to travel about with a man at the age at which she portrayed herself would be socially indecent. However, Mrs. Kew is definitely a superior and important figure,

¹² *Ibid.*, 111.

Colby Library Quarterly 509

just as is Mrs. Todd. Both of them are the mediums through which the author is introduced to the environment of the story, and from which Miss Jewett gains much of her invaluable information. They are the principal repositories of knowledge in the area, and act as mentors to the inexperienced Miss Jewett, just as Dr. Leslie aids Nan. Regardless of sex, the *child* metaphor holds.



INDEX BENEFACTORUM

Without fanfare, the Colby Library Associates, now thirty-two years old but more vigorous and prolific than ever, contributes through its voluntary dues an always enviable brand of materials to the Division of Rare Books and Manuscripts. Our collections of Jacob Abbott and Mosher Press volumes, among the largest extant, are directly due to the interest displayed and the resources supplied by the Associates; the John Masefield collection, initiated through a generous gift of first editions by an individual Associate, has been nurtured to its present eminence by the general membership; and our increscent accumulation of microfilms pertaining to the works of authors we collect is totally indebted to the Associates' devotion.

Follows a necessarily partial list of other acquisitions made by benefit of CLA in the past several months: twenty-seven microfilms on Thomas Hardy, Kenneth Roberts, William Dean Howells, and E. A. Robinson; three foreign editions of Kenneth Roberts novels; first and limited, signed editions of Violet Paget (2), Robert Nathan, Booth Tarkington, Willa Cather, E. A. Robinson, John Masefield (10); manuscripts or letters by Henry James (2), Sarah Orne Jewett, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, E. A. Robinson (6), John Masefield (2), Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Laurence Housman (4), Nathaniel P. Willis (4), Kate Douglas Wiggin (10), Elizabeth Akers Allen, Margaret Deland (2), and Laura E. Richards.