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Sarah Orne Jewett and "The Palpable Present Intimate"

Robert D. Rhode

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Henry James, in a personal letter to his younger fellow-New Englander, Sarah Orne Jewett, took the liberty of advising her to return to her New England subjects — to “come back to the palpable present intimate” that throbs responsive, and that wants, misses, needs you, God knows, and that suffers woefully in your absence.”¹ James was saying in 1901 what numerous subsequent critics² have since observed — that Jewett’s relationship to her material was exceptional, if not unique — that she illuminated it with a kind of magic or intuition not evident in the work of other local colorists of her generation. The purpose of this essay is to define the special power Jewett was alleged to possess, and to see how it enabled her to stand apart from most of her contemporaries in the use of native regional material.

To understand Miss Jewett’s unique contribution to the art of local fiction, it is necessary first to take note of her particular manner of employing setting as an element in narration. Some of Miss Jewett’s critics seem to feel that she succeeded as a novelist and story writer without really mastering the art — that she could manage neither characterization nor plot in the usual sense of the terms, and that she could not muster a serious interest in theme — at least not from the standpoint of social criticism or reform. Most critics, on the other hand, credited her with a special sensitivity toward, and an intimate knowledge of, her specialized material. They also recognized her other qualifications: aesthetic taste and judgment, imagination, power of concentration and discipline as a writer. Almost all of the elements of strength in her art, it may be noted, had little to do with character, plot, and theme, but much to do with the fourth quantum of narrative art — namely, setting.

All of the American local colorists, to a degree, were specialists in setting. Some, like Mary N. Murfree and George Washington Cable, distorted their fiction with lavish and sentimental descriptive backgrounds; a few, like Mark Twain and Hamlin

¹ Published in Ferman Bishop, “Henry James Criticizes The Tory Lover,” American Literature, XXVII (May 1955), 264.
² The most recent and comprehensive study is Richard Cary’s Sarah Orne Jewett (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1962).
Garland, used setting organically rather than obtrusively. They were able, through their skill in the management of setting, to add historicity — or credibility — to their fiction and thus to increase the total impact of their art. Jewett could not produce a story, as she herself admitted, that did not rely almost entirely on setting power — in the broadest sense of the phrase — to carry the burden of the narrative.

There are, of course, several ways in which setting can be used to function in a story. It can be background or ornament, with little or no connection with the action of the story, except perhaps to reinforce or accentuate, like music for theatrical drama, the mood of a story. Setting may also be used as an adjunct to characterization; that is, it may serve to interpret characters, to motivate them in their actions, or symbolize or foreshadow the situations or status of characters. A third typical function of setting — and this is perhaps the most intensive function — is its representation in a personified form, in which it often rivals or usurps the conventional role of character.

Though setting generally plays a secondary rather than a major role in great works of fiction, it must be granted that a sufficient and appropriate intensification of setting can be sufficient, as was the case with Jewett, to sustain a high level of reader interest in a story and thus to make up for weaker or underemphasized plotting and characterization. Many of Miss Jewett’s stories are so slightly plotted, however, that it is impossible to analyze precisely the functions of their settings in terms of narrative structure.

There are ample instances in Miss Jewett’s stories of conventional local-color descriptions. Her enthusiasm for New England fauna and flora occasionally trapped her into artistic excesses of descriptive catalogues and scenic painting, especially in her Deephaven period. But by 1896, the date of The Country of the Pointed Firs, she had come to recognize the superiority of developing setting by brief suggestion and implication rather than by lengthy description. But more important, she was developing an awareness of nature as a living force rather than as an inanimate, amorphous background.

Miss Jewett’s feeling for nature has been appropriately compared with Wordsworth’s and also with Hardy’s, but neither comparison is an exact one. She has more humor than either, and is more at home amid the commonplace. She was aware of
dark environmental and sociological forces being exerted upon her rustic characters, but, as already said, she was not conspicuously interested in reform, either to improve man so that he might survive, or to conserve an environment in which he might postpone his extinction. She recognized that nature — in the form of trees, water, and wind — was virile and waiting to repossess the land that the New Englanders, a dying society, must ultimately relinquish. She accepted the world as she found it: "we can use its forces, and shape and mould them, and perfect this thing or that, but we cannot make new forces" (Country By-Ways, 101). Through long struggle the New Englander was adapted to his environment, at least to the old one, now dying out. He was magnificent in his struggle, and his posture of hardiness, in Miss Jewett’s stories, is not blurred by sentimentality or melodrama.

The new scientific notions of man embattled with his environment, a product of American Darwinism, which took an unrelenting hold on James Lane Allen, had little effect on Miss Jewett. Her response to her rural environment was more emotional than rational, and she was not preoccupied with scientific or sociological processes of heredity and environment. Her sense of literary art, as well as her humanity, saved her from the errors of James Lane Allen and other contemporary local colorists who followed the Darwinians into the fallacy of portraying man in deterministic, depersonalized processes. Quite to the contrary, Miss Jewett seems to have accepted the idea of "forces" in nature as merely part of the conventional teleological world of contemporary Christianity. Her strong characters — usually women — were free agents, with a strong will to be themselves, within the limits set by natural law, divinely decreed.

The secret of Miss Jewett’s success as an artist lies in the techniques which she developed for handling her settings. Like Emily Dickinson, she had “learned to think New Englandly.” The relationship of people to place is not one of cause-and-effect, but rather of identity. Man and environment merge, with the result that people are portrayed in so low a key as to be immersed into landscape, background, and tradition; and at the same time the settings are vitalized by a vague sense of humanity. There is ample evidence that the power of personification, often exercised at the subliminal level, accounts for much of Miss Jewett’s extraordinary skill as a setting specialist.
Though a large majority of Miss Jewett's stories are mere descriptive sketches of scenes and people, they are highly charged with human interest. "It is but seldom, as yet," she realized, "that people really care much for anything for its own sake, until it is proved to have some connection with human-kind" (Country By-Ways, 4). She does not allow her descriptive muse to stray from the character situation, as do some local colorists. Skilled at creating human interest by personifying natural objects, Miss Jewett showed an advancement in two respects at least: first, she breathed life, so to speak, into the most omnipresent of natural objects, the New England trees and flowers; second, she aroused a deep sympathy for these creations by assuming a fresh and personal companionship with them in an intimate, unaffected style like Henry Thoreau's.

Miss Jewett's personifications of local fauna and flora are reminiscent of Allen's best work minus the symbolism, but she is superior to him in constancy of viewpoint. She wrote to Annie Fields at various times that "hepaticas are like some people, very dismal blue, with cold hands and faces"; that "There is nothing dearer than a trig little company of anemones in a pasture, all growing close together as if they kept each other warm, and wanted the whole sun to themselves besides"; that she is "neighborly with the hop-toads" and "intimate with a big poppy"; and that she has been carrying on a sort of silent intrigue with "a very handsome little bee" who "understands things" and knows she "can do him no harm."3 In "Cunner-Fishing," a Deephaven sketch, she has one of her characters observe that

the more one lives out of doors the more personality there seems to be in what we call inanimate things. The strength of the hills and the voice of the waves are no longer only grand poetical sentences, but an expression of something real, ... (Deephaven, 186-187).

There is no end of strange personalities among Miss Jewett's trees. "In Shadow," another Deephaven piece, contains a description of some gnarled pitch-pines which "looked like a band of outlaws; they were such wild-looking trees. They

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3 Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett, ed, Annie Fields (Boston, 1911), 41, 45, 119.
seemed very old, and as if their savage fights with the winter winds had made them hard-hearted” (Ibid., 206)

The pines in “A Bit of Shore Life” (1879):

lifted their heads proudly against the blue sky, . . . and I admired them as much as they could have expected. They must have been a landmark for many miles to the westward, for they grew on high land, and they could pity, from a distance, any number of their poor relations who were just able to keep body and soul together, and had grown up thin and hungry in the crowded woods. But, though their lower branches might snap and crackle at a touch, their tops were brave and green, and they kept up appearances, at any rate, these poorer pines (Old Friends and New, 253).

Also there were

four jolly old apple trees, . . . which looked as if they might be the last of a once flourishing orchard. They were standing in a row, in exactly the same position, with their heads thrown gayly back, as if they were all dancing in an old-fashioned reel; and, after the forward and back, one might expect them to turn partners gallantly. I laughed aloud when I caught sight of them; there was something very funny in their looks, so jovial and whole-hearted, with a sober, cheerful pleasure, as if they gave their whole minds to it. It was like some old gentlemen and ladies who catch the spirit of the thing, and dance with the rest at a Christmas party (Ibid., 254).

The narrator is especially partial to a family group of poplars —

a little procession of a father and mother and three or four children out for an afternoon walk, coming down through the field to the river. As you rowed up or down they stood up in bold relief against the sky, for they were on high land. I was deeply attached to them, and in the spring, when I went down the river for the first time, they were always covered with the first faint green mist of their leaves, and it seemed as if they had been watching for me, and thinking that perhaps I might go by that afternoon (Country By-Ways, 30).

In “A Winter Drive” (1881)

The white birches look out of season, as if they were still wearing their summer clothes, and the wretched larches which stand on the edges of the swamps look as if they had been intended for evergreens, but had been somehow unlucky, and were in destitute circumstances. It seems as if the pines and hemlocks ought to show Christian charity to those sad and freezing relations (Ibid., 164).
The narrator’s particular friend is a solitary tree which is a great delight to me, and I go to pay it an after­noon visit every now and then, far away from the road across some fields and pastures. It is an ancient pitch-pine, and it grows beside a spring, and has acres of room to lord it over. It thinks everything of itself, and although it is an untidy house-keeper, and flings its dry twigs and sticky cones all around the short grass underneath, I have a great affection for it. . . . The old tree is very wise, it seems that much of the world’s business is great foolishness, and yet when I have been a fool myself and wander away out of doors to think it over, I always find a more cheerful atmosphere and a more sensible aspect to my folly, under the shadow of this friend of mine (Ibid., 179).

“Farmer Finch” (1885) contains some very striking tree-folk:

As one caught sight of the solemn audience of black and gloomy cedars that seemed to have come together to stand on the curving hill-sides, one instinctively looked down at the leveled arena of marsh-land below, half fearing to see some awful sacrificial site or silent combat. It might be an angry company of hamadryads who had taken the shape of cedar-trees on this day of revenge and terror . . . . The little trees stood beside their elders in families, solemn and stern (A White Heron and Other Stories, 38).

In “A Neighbor’s Landmark” (1894), which has more plot than most Jewett stories, two tall pines play a silent character role of considerable importance. They have been serviceable in guiding seamen into port; “they felt their responsibility as landmarks and sentinels” (The Life of Nancy, 256). In a weak moment John Packer forgets how they have served his people and his ancestors and sells them to a conscienceless lumberman. The community circulates a petition to save the lives of the Packer Pines, but in the meantime old Packer himself regrets his sudden promise and rows home across the bay just in time to prevent their “murder.”

“I should miss them old trees,” he said; “they always make me think of a married couple. They ain’t no common growth, be they, Joe? Everybody knows ’em. I bet you if anything happened to one on ’em t’other would go an’ die. They say ellums has mates, an’ all them big trees” (ibid., 261).

Miss Jewett’s bird and flower characters are so much overshadowed by her tree patriarchs that they may easily be over-

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looked. Occasionally there is a magnificent personification of some of the smaller plants, as in this selection from "An October Ride" (1881):

I passed some stiff, straight mullein stalks which stood apart together in a hollow as if they wished to be alone. They always remind me of the rigid old Scotch Covenanters, who used to gather themselves together in companies, against the law, to worship God in some secret hollow of the bleak hill-side. Even the smallest and youngest of the mulleins was a Covenanter at heart; they all had put by their yellow flowers, and they will still stand there, gray and unbending, through the fall rains and winter snows, to keep their places and praise God in their own fashion, and they take great credit to themselves for doing it. I have no doubt, and think it is far better to be a stern and respectable mullein than a straying, idle clematis, that clings and wanders, and cannot bear wet weather. I saw members of the congregation scattered through all the pasture and felt like telling them to hurry, for the long sermon had already begun (*Country By-Ways*, 105-106).

As this and the preceding examples show, Miss Jewett sometimes introduces her wood folk not as mere figures of her poetic fancy, but as creatures of rather durable personality. Such personifications do not spring wholly from figurative speech; they are fruit of the author's conviction that trees are sentient beings, not differing from human beings except in language. Wild things do have a language of their own, she believes, and it is our fault, not theirs, that so few of us can understand it. If we would forget our conceit and make a serious effort, we might be able to bridge the language breach that separates us from the thought of these creatures.

Who is going to be the linguist who learns the first word of an old crow's warning to his mate, or how a little dog expresses himself when he asks a big one to come and rout his troublesome enemy? How much shall we know when the pimpernel teaches us how she makes her prophecies of the weather, and how long we shall have to go to school when people are expected to talk to the trees, and birds and beasts, in their own language! What tune could it have been that Orpheus and Amphion played, to which the beasts listened, and even the trees and stones followed them to hear? Is it science that will give us back the gift, or shall we owe it to the successors of those friendly old saints who talked with birds and fishes? (*Ibid.*, 4-5).

In "A Winter Drive" Miss Jewett pauses in train of thought to reveal a philosophical basis for her conviction; and, incidentally, to reveal her occult knowledge:
There was an old doctrine called Hylozoism, which appeals to my
far from Pagan sympathies, the theory of the soul of the world, of a life
residing in nature, and that all matter lives; the doctrine that life and
matter are inseparable. Trees are to most people as inanimate and
unconscious as rocks, but it seems to me that there is a good deal to
say about the strongly marked individual characters, not only identified
with a home, or a familiar bit of landscape or an event in history, but
of those that are crowded together in forests. There is a strange like­
ness to the characteristics of human beings among these, there is the
same proportion of ignorant rabble of poor creatures who are struggling
for life in more ways than one, and of self-respecting, well-to-do, digni­
fied citizens. It is not a question of soil and of location any more than
it is with us . . . .

It is impossible for one who has been a great deal among trees to
resist the instinctive certainty that they have thought and purpose, and
that they deliberately anticipate the future, or that they show traits of
character which one is forced to call good or evil. How low down the
scale of existence we may find the first glimmer of self-consciousness
nobody can tell. . . . Man was the latest comer into this world, and he
is just beginning to get acquainted with his neighbors, this is the truth
of it (Ibid., 169-170).

From this point Miss Jewett observes that the primitive pagans
were wrong in inventing an imaginary race of spirits to inhabit
the trees. Trees have their own souls and personalities that are
analogous to, but not identical with, those of human beings.
For this reason, she points out, “the true nature and life of a
tree can never be exactly personified” (Ibid., 170).

Because of the absence of plots in most of her stories, Miss
Jewett’s personifications cannot be shown to have a dramatic
function, yet they stand on an equal basis with many human
characters serving as points of interest. Only occasionally does
she attempt to lend a personality to nature as a whole. Though
she sometimes uses, in a conventional way, the “mechanistic”
phraseology of modern natural science, she never resigns her
complete faith in a conventional teleological and dualistic world,
in which the forces of nature are roughly identified with the will
of the Author of the Universe. She may say casually that
“Nature repossesses herself surely of what we boldly claim,”
but she does not neglect to add, in the same paragraph: “But it
is only God who can plan and order it all,—who is father to
his children, and cares for the least of us” (Ibid., 102-103). The
impact of modern natural science upon her mind may have
stimulated her curiosity in botanical and biological knowledge,
but always she conceived of natural law as "the thoughts which He writes for us in the book of Nature" (Deephaven, 187). Her taste for the mystic aspect of plant life was hardly comparable to that of Allen, but occasionally a note of this kind is struck, as in a forest in "The Gray Man," where

There is everywhere a token of remembrance, of silence and secrecy. Some stronger nature once ruled these neglected trees and this fallow ground. They will wait the return of their master as long as roots can creep through mold, and make way for them. The stories of strange lives have been whispered to the earth, their thoughts have burned themselves into the cold rocks.4

Innumerable examples and comments by the author herself support the conclusion that the personification of landscape is clearly the most distinctive feature of Miss Jewett's landscape art. Yet there is a second, less important, feature that deserves to be noted in passing, and that is her use of a time dimension,5 which adds depth to her scenes and thus reinforces the weight of her settings. Not being a dramatic artist, Miss Jewett did not create immediacy by a sudden emotion or by dramatic intensity. Like Wordsworth she presents "emotion recollected in tranquility," suffused by time and subsequent growth. She might have described Dunnet Landing with Coleridge's description of Tryermain: "The spring comes slowly up this way." The tempo of grief and forgetfulness, the emotions associated with Miss Jewett's bleak Maine landscapes, is slow, like the seasons of nature. The washing of ocean storms upon lonely islands, the snowstorms' encroaching upon winter forests, and lush summer green erupting upon the lonely farms — such changes are on a geological rather than a diurnal time scale.

Against such a temporal background, the stubborn Maine folk cling to their ways; the encroachment of modern technology, however certain, is very slow. In fact, there is almost no progress except decay, a kind of solemn death march as the process of civilization is reversed. Miss Jewett's superiority as a regional writer was achieved by the dimension of depth in her scenes.

4 A White Heron and Other Stories, 25; see also The King of Folly Island, 211, and The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett, ed, Willa Cather (Boston, 1925), 213.
A sense of tradition highlighted her people and gave meaning to their actions.

In conclusion, it may be stated that Sarah Orne Jewett's ability to create "the palpable present intimate" was primarily derivative from a highly developed skill in her management of setting as an element of narration. In one sense she was a typical local colorist writing in the vogue of her generation. At the same time, she was successful in a more classical and abiding sense: she achieved a dimension of permanence and depth through a highly creative and novel use of setting — an element that is rarely raised to foremost importance in a story without a derangement of narrative equilibrium. Miss Jewett accomplished, mainly through her personifications of nature, a quality of personality that compensated for her lack of suspenseful drama. Having succeeded where many of her contemporary local colorists failed, she made a contribution to the art of fiction quite apart from her contribution to the body of the literature of New England.