

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 9
Issue 4 *December*

Article 4

December 1970

The Country of the Pointed Firs: A Pastoral of Innocence

David Stouck

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

Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 9, no.4, December 1970, p.213-220

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.

Colby Library Quarterly 213

It seems to me that the brilliance of Miss Jewett's method is the very fact that this development is charted so subtly; it is not insisted upon, but it is there. Miss Jewett's use of poetic devices and symbolism as well as her episodic construction and first-person narrative would almost seem to enable the novel to be classified as lyrical; but in terms of character development, a novel it is—a fully realized work of fiction with form, unity, and character development.¹⁵

15 In looking over the four additional Dunnet Landing stories included by Green in his collection, it seems to me that Miss Jewett is not only expanding her various themes, but that, particularly in "A Dunnet Shepherdess," she is trying to reveal more clearly the change which her narrator undergoes. I have not specifically alluded to these four stories for my interpretation. Like Green, I see their chief value in their revelation of Miss Jewett's ability to create a "fictional world" and in their use as a means to deepen, expand, and clarify her themes. It would seem useless to argue as to whether they should be included in the body of *Pointed Firs*. In spite of weak arguments to the contrary, they do not seem to have fit into Miss Jewett's conception of her overall plan; otherwise she certainly would have included them herself. They are helpful keys, but not necessary adjuncts to a complete understanding of the novel.



THE COUNTRY OF THE POINTED FIRS:
A PASTORAL OF INNOCENCE

By DAVID STOUCK

"After all, it is change that is so hard to bear, change grows every year a harder part of our losses." — Sarah Orne Jewett (Letter to Annie Fields, 1882)

EVER SINCE WILLA CATHER, in the preface to the 1925 edition of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, judged it to be one of three American books which had "the possibility of a long, long life," criticism has been attempting to define more accurately the qualities which make this work a classic of its kind, and which suggested to Miss Cather that it should rank with *The Scarlet Letter* and *Huckleberry Finn* in importance.¹

1 Willa Cather, editor, *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories* (New York, 1956), 12. All textual references are to this edition and appear in parentheses after each quotation unless the context is obvious.

214 Colby Library Quarterly

In the light of the present corpus of American fiction her judgment must appear somewhat arbitrary, although it is obvious that she wished, in part, simply to praise a book in which she took particular interest by comparing it with two novels which were then its best-known predecessors. Unfortunately her statement has not always been understood in this context, and Miss Jewett's book has either suffered badly from the comparison, or has profited from it in an equally misleading fashion. Miss Cather's judgment may, however, lead to more profitable approaches in understanding *The Country of the Pointed Firs*; she may have recognized in all three books the treatment of a mode with which she herself was much concerned, namely the pastoral. Since Miss Jewett's work clearly belongs to this mode, while the other two books use it as a motif, the problem is to discover what distinguishes *The Country of the Pointed Firs* from other pastorals.

As a literary mode the pastoral describes a retreat both in time and place to an enclosed green world. This retreat expresses man's dream of an ideally ordered and independent existence, and his desire to escape from the complex realities of social ills and natural process (change, decay and death). In his essay "The Oaten Flute," Renato Poggioli suggests a useful distinction between two kinds of pastoral: that of innocence and that of happiness. In the pastoral of happiness the bucolic landscape represents a place of erotic fulfilment, while the pastoral of innocence is essentially a domestic idyll presented in terms of old age rather than youth. Poggioli cites Ovid's tale of Baucis and Philemon as the archetype (*Metamorphoses* VIII).² Miss Jewett's pastoral clearly belongs to the latter type, for as has often been remarked, the world of Dunnet Landing is curiously a world of old people in which sexuality plays no part. The exclusion of this element of natural process points to another concern of pastoral: its constant preoccupation with the arresting of time and change. But if pastoral seeks to present a vision of life held in stasis, it nevertheless

2 Renato Poggioli, "The Oaten Flute," *Harvard Library Bulletin*, XI (May 1957), 147-184. See also Robin Magowan, "Pastoral and the Art of Landscape in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*," *New England Quarterly*, XXXVI (June 1963), 229-240. Magowan studies the formal techniques used by Miss Jewett in depicting the pastoral landscape, comparing it to impressionist painting, but does not go on to examine the final implications of this landscape or its effect on the narrator.

Colby Library Quarterly 215

ultimately recognizes the inevitable truth of mutability: *Et in Arcadia ego*. It is the extent to which the narrator or central character is consciously aware of this truth which determines the extent to which a reconciliation with time is finally achieved.

The Country of the Pointed Firs is written in the first person, so that the focus of our attention is naturally on the narrator. But throughout the book the narrator turns our attention away from herself and towards the landscape and the people that she sees. She tells us only two things about herself: that she is a summer tourist on the coast of Maine, and that she is a writer, a gentlewoman of letters, to use the idiom of her time. However, although she tells us nothing more about herself, and very little about her thoughts and feelings, a great deal is implied by the way she presents her experiences. In the brief opening chapter she describes her return to the New England coast: "After a first brief visit made two or three summers before in the course of a yachting cruise, a lover of Dunnet Landing returned to find the *unchanged* shores of the pointed firs, the same *quaintness* of the village with its elaborate conventionalities; all that mixture of *remoteness*, and *childish certainty* of being the *centre* of civilization of which her affectionate *dreams* had told" (13, my italics). Here she is expressing a desire to return to a world that is secluded, one that is associated with a child's sense of security, and one whose first virtue above all is that it is unchanged. It is also a world significantly identified with the narrator's dreams, so that Dunnet Landing, with its summer tranquility, its sheep and rustic inhabitants, is at once a pastoral retreat and a landscape of wish-fulfilment. The desires which it fulfils are those of childhood, and the field of vision sustained throughout the book is controlled by the narrator's instinctive wish to return to this innocent and happy state.³

It is true that the narrator changes as the book proceeds;

3. This idea is put forth by Richard Cary in his book, *Sarah Orne Jewett* (New York, 1962): "Although Miss Jewett's expressed purpose was to inform the world about her home district and its inhabitants, she is not a local colorist pure and simple." Her writing is further controlled by two significant traits: "Intellectually, her fondness for re-creating the past; emotionally, her regressive desire to remain a child" (18-19). Eugene Hillhouse Pool, "The Child in Sarah Orne Jewett," *Colby Library Quarterly*, VII (September, 1967), 503-509, further illustrates the idea from Miss Jewett's work and letters, but does not explore the implications of the metaphor within the imaginative dimensions of the fiction itself.

216 Colby Library Quarterly

she loses her shyness and self-consciousness and becomes an accepted member of the Dunnet Landing community.⁴ At first, all she desires is privacy: Mrs. Todd's house is described in the second chapter as appearing to be "retired and sheltered enough from the busy world, behind its bushy bit of a green garden." But even here her desire to write and escape social contact is so strong that she takes refuge in the little schoolhouse on the hill overlooking the village, where she is in a position of elevated detachment, able to take control of her surroundings. She sits at the teacher's desk "as if I were that great authority" (18). Nevertheless, the schoolhouse is a lonely place, and after hurrying there from a funeral service, she watches the procession go by on the lower road without her, wishing for a companion and reflecting that she does not really belong to Dunnet Landing. For the first and only time in the book, her sudden sense of alienation turns her thoughts back to the world she has left:

For the first time I began to wish for a companion and for news from the outer world, which had been, half unconsciously, forgotten. Watching the funeral gave one a sort of pain. I began to wonder if I ought not to have walked with the rest, instead of hurrying away at the end of the services. Perhaps the Sunday gown I had put on for the occasion was making this disastrous change of feeling, but I had now made myself and my friends remember that I did not really belong to Dunnet Landing (21)

This "disastrous" situation changes, however, after her visit to Mrs. Todd's mother and brother on Green Island. As its name suggests, Green Island is the very core of the pastoral retreat, where the narrator at last glimpses the changeless, timeless world she longs for. Here she experiences "that sense of liberty in space and time which great prospects always give" (46), and feels it "impossible not to wish to stay on forever." She takes great pleasure in her sympathetic meeting with Mrs. Blackett and her shy son William, with whom, significantly, she identifies strongly. It is William, a person as retiring and

4 This has been argued also by Paul John Eakin among others in his essay, "Sarah Orne Jewett and the Meaning of Country Life," *American Literature*, XXXVIII (January 1967), 508-531. In his opinion the narrator changes so that she is both part of the community and apart from it, and is therefore able to understand and present the values of country living. The suggestion here, as in Pool's essay, is that the narrator retains a balanced perspective.

childlike as herself (she refers to him as "an untraveled boy") who takes her to a height on the island where she is able to experience this sense of timelessness. The sympathy she feels with Mrs. Blackett and William is expanded to the larger community at the Bowden family reunion where the narrative comes close to feeling "like a true Bowden" (98).

The narrator, then, does change as the book proceeds. She does achieve a sense of belonging, but this change is one which depends on her continued presence in Dunnet Landing. It is doubtful whether it has any relevance to the "outer world," for it is necessary to take into account the eccentric nature of the community to which she has attached herself. As I have suggested above, Dunnet Landing represents to the narrator a place of retreat, a place where she can live once again as a child. Here she has no contemporaries; all the characters she describes are old in relation to her, like parents and grandparents. Though we are not told that Mrs. Todd has any children, she is described by the narrator as a large, maternal, authoritative woman, of whom she is slightly in awe; and in her extreme old age, Mrs. Blackett has for the narrator the idealized quality of a grandmother. With the exception of the teen-aged Johnny Bowden, who rows the boat to Green Island, the men are all aging, and in some respect, failures. They pose no reminder of sexuality; William's courtship of Esther Hight, though full of strong feeling, is devoid of sexual passion, and their childlike innocence is symbolized by the lamb which Esther carries to her wedding. The men are sometimes given curiously feminine traits. Mrs. Blackett says of William that he has been both son and daughter to her, and the widower, Elijah Tilley, who mourns for his "poor dear," spends the winter days in his chair knitting.

This is the community to which the narrator comes to belong, but even here she never asserts her own identity in relation to other characters. She is an observer and a confidante to the old people in Dunnet Landing, but she tells neither them nor the reader anything more about herself. Like a child at their feet, she listens to their stories and reminiscences, reveling in the security offered by their age. We are made aware of her character only by the persons and events that elicit her sympathy, people like poor Joanna, who has withdrawn to the

218 Colby Library Quarterly

safe seclusion of Shell-heap Island and the Queen's twin, whose lives are vignettes of loneliness and isolation. Significantly the narrator feels that she and Mrs. Todd are truly friends when Mrs. Todd tells her about the death of her husband; the bond is one of loss and sorrow.

Although she is very ready to sympathize, however, the narrator never enters into a reflexive relationship with anyone in the community. No dramatic conflict disturbs the static, changeless world she has created: the book consists of visits and storytelling, and any action, such as Joanna's jilting or Mrs. Todd's bereavement, takes place in the memory of the storyteller.

Though the fiction follows the chronology of a summer's visit, and several of the old people complain of changing times, the narrator emphasizes the timeless quality of life at the landing. Repeatedly she uses classical images to describe the appearances and the attitudes of the characters: Mrs. Todd is compared to a sibyl and a "force of nature" with her knowledge of herbal mysteries, and after she has described the death of her husband her solitary figure is compared to "Antigone alone on the Theban plain" (49); Mrs. Hight has the features of a warlike Roman emperor, and Esther is likened to Atalanta; and the Bowdens at their reunion are compared to the ancient Greeks celebrating a victory. Similarly, Mrs. Hight's speech suggests to the narrator "some faint survival on the Maine Coast of the sound of English speech of Chaucer's time" (124). Only at the close of the book does passing time prevail, and with the end of the summer the narrator must leave Dunnet Landing. We are again reminded of her childlike quality and her sense of alienation in the adult world: "At last I had to say good-by to all my Dunnet Landing friends, and my homelike place in the little house, and return to the world in which I feared to find myself a foreigner" (158). Reluctantly, she passes her last days "as a miser spends his coins" (157).

The nature of Miss Jewett's book is perhaps best illustrated by comparing it to another pastoral, one by Willa Cather herself. In both *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and *My Antonia* the narrators are found in pastoral retreats which take them back to the world of childhood. But in returning to the landscape of the past, where Antonia still lives, the adult narrator

Colby Library Quarterly 219

in Miss Cather's book discovers the source of his present discontent (in his betrayal by the "town" values he has accepted) and is able to reconcile himself to the passing of time and to urban life through this awareness and understanding. At the moment of leaving the pastoral retreat the narrator experiences "the sense of coming home to myself, and of having found out what a little circle man's experience is."⁵ Here the circle image represents the final integration of the childhood and adult worlds, but in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* there is no equivalent image to suggest that a unity of experience or, indeed, any reconciliation with the outer world, is possible for the narrator. The chapters which Miss Jewett added to the original book describe yet another return to Dunnet Landing, as if she cannot bear even a fictional departure. She refers to the "constant putting aside of preference to yield to a most unsatisfactory activity" which life in town demands, and sees "the complexity and futile ingenuity of social life" as a "conspiracy" against her happiness. When she returns to Dunnet Landing, it is a return to the innocent simplicity of the pastoral retreat: "the first salt wind from the east, the first sight of a lighthouse set boldly on its outer rock, the flash of a gull, the waiting procession of seaward-bound firs on an island, made me feel solid and definite again, instead of a poor, incoherent being. Life was resumed, and anxious living blew away as if it had not been. I could not breathe deep enough or long enough. It was a return to happiness" (147).

Miss Jewett herself remained for most of her life in the South Berwick country where she was born. In writing to a friend of a visit to a town where she had stayed as a child, she says that she always finds her childhood going on there as if she had never grown up at all. "I go by the house where I went to school aged eight, in a summer that I spent with my grandmother, and feel as if I could go and play in the sandy garden with little dry bits of elm-twigs stuck in painstaking rows. There are electric cars in Exeter now, but they can't make the least difference to me!"⁶ It is interesting to note her ability to ignore the change that has taken place in Exeter. By a similar process of exclusion, Miss Jewett presents us with a

5 *My Antonia* (Cambridge, 1961), 371-372.

6 Jewett to Sara Norton in Annie Fields, editor, *Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett* (Boston, 1911), 132.

pastoral which retains the constant perspective of innocence. Unlike the river scenes in *Huckleberry Finn*, or the Salem to which Hawthorne's narrator returns in the introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, the landscape of Dunnet Landing in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* represents the totality of the narrator's desired experience. The lasting achievement of the book stems, in fact, from the emotional ambiguity evoked in the reader towards this experience. Constantly aware of the impossibility of regaining such innocence, we are drawn in spite of ourselves into the charmed circle of Dunnet Landing and its inhabitants; unlike the narrator, we can never quite evade the poignant realization that we have already passed beyond it.



*THE TORY LOVER, OLIVER WISWELL, AND
RICHARD CARVEL*

By HELEN V. PARSONS

EARLY IN HER writing career Sarah Orne Jewett was asked to provide a novel to be serialized in the *Atlantic Monthly*, but she declined. She felt that she had no dramatic talent and could not sustain a plot. She adhered to this opinion when, twenty-six years later, she was urged once more to contribute a long story to the *Atlantic*. At this time, however, her old friend Charles Dudley Warner, editor of the *Hartford Courant* suggested that she consider writing an historical novel with Berwick for its setting. This idea appealed and, against her better judgment, she turned aside from her sketches of country people and everyday happenings in coastal Maine to produce *The Tory Lover*.

Although Miss Jewett was eager to preserve the historic Berwick names and places, they became pawns which she rearranged and shuffled to embellish a fiction. Hamilton House, actually built in 1787, was presented as a reality in 1777; Jonathan and Mary Hamilton became brother and sister instead