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*Free Heron or Dead Sparrow:
Sylvia's Choice in
Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron"*

by RICHARD BRENZO

THE USE OF a juvenile narrator or a child's point of view seems especially common in American literature (*What Maisie Knew*, *Huckleberry Finn*, "I Want to Know Why"). This technique provides a unique, often humorous view of the foibles of adult society, and, more profoundly, portrays the struggles of the child as he or she grows and tries to form a relationship with that society. In this tradition is one of Sarah Orne Jewett's finest stories, "A White Heron," a thoughtful portrait of a nine-year-old girl who is suddenly forced to make a very difficult choice between a young man's approval and loyalty to herself and to nature. Because of the striking nature images—the forest, the pine tree, the heron, the hunted birds—and because of Sylvia's intense emotional response to the young hunter, a symbolic reading of the tale is inevitable, as most critical interpretations attest. Sylvia feels but cannot, of course, verbalize her awakening sexuality and growing self-awareness. However, Jewett's symbolic treatment universalizes and enriches the meaning of the girl's inner experiences.

Sylvia (her name derived from the Latin for "forest") is a recent transplant from "a crowded manufacturing town."¹ Her grandmother, Mrs. Tilley, has asked the girl to come live with her at her small farm in the Maine woods. Sylvia finds it "a beautiful place to live in" (p. 141), and becomes so familiar with the woods that she can follow paths she cannot see, and finally becomes identified with the woods: "it made her feel as if she were a part of the gray shadows and the moving leaves" (pp. 141–42). Since Sylvia is "Afraid of folks" (p. 140) anyway, the solitude of the sylvan life is no burden. Several images underscore the fact that she is a shy, intensely private person. She is associated with her grandmother's cow, who loves to hide in the woods, with a hop-toad who tries to hide under the porch, and above all, with the white heron who dwells in a hidden nest in a remote swamp.

The story begins in the evening, as Sylvia walks the cow home. Just as she is thinking of "the great red-faced boy who used to chase and frighten her" (p. 142), she is "horror-stricken" (p. 142) to hear a boy's "determined, and somewhat aggressive" whistle (p. 142). Before she can hide,

1. *Tales of New England* (1894; rpt. Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), p. 140. All subsequent references to the story will be from this text.

Sylvia is accosted by a young man carrying a rifle. This "enemy" (p. 142) asks her the way to the road in a "cheerful and persuasive tone" (p. 142). When she fails to answer, he explains "kindly" that he has been hunting birds, and needs "a friend very much" (p. 143). Sylvia is even more alarmed when he "gallantly" asks if he can spend the night at her home before going "gunning" (p. 143) in the morning. Jewett's language in this section establishes several of the themes and ironies developed later in her story. Sylvia's initial reaction to the young man is fear, partially sexual in nature, as the ambiguity of his requests indicates. His hunting of birds echoes Sylvia's memories of being chased by the frightening red-faced boy, which in turn is an obvious symbol for a fear of rape. At the same time, the girl's new acquaintance is actually "kind" and "gallant." Thus, Sylvia responds not only to what the youth is, but to what he (and his gun) represent; her fears have an internal as well as an external basis.

Interestingly, the author emphasizes Sylvia's sleepiness during this episode. Her awareness of external reality is blurred, so that her reactions are less objective and more emotional. Her waking consciousness is approaching a dream state. There is a dreamlike quality to much of the story's imagery.

Sylvia guides the young hunter to the homestead, where her grandmother's "long-slumbering hospitality" (p. 144) welcomes him to eat supper and remain overnight. It quickly becomes apparent that the youth is what he claims to be, a hunter of birds, an "ornithologist" (p. 147) who stuffs his specimens for display in his home. This also is a threatening idea for Sylvia, although the boy presents no overt physical danger. Her grandmother has already told the young man that "the wild creatur's counts her [Sylvia] one o' themselves" (p. 146), and that Sylvia is especially close to the birds of the forest. When the hunter asks if she has seen the white heron, her "heart gave a wild beat" (p. 147), for she has seen the bird in a bright, hot, swampy area, where her grandmother had warned her "she might sink in the soft black mud underneath and never be heard of more" (p. 148). Sylvia's identification with the things of the forest has moved from shadows and leaves to "creatur's," then birds, and finally the white heron. The fate of the heron is tied to Sylvia's own destiny.

A further association of girl and heron comes after the boy offers ten dollars to anyone who can show him the heron's nest. He speculates, "Perhaps it was only migrating, or had been chased out of its own region by some bird of prey" (p. 148). Of course this sentence can apply to Sylvia and her recollection of being chased by the red-faced boy in her first region, the city. At any rate, the ten dollars has its effect on Sylvia, arousing thoughts of the "many wished-for treasures" (p. 149) it could buy.

The next day Sylvia and the boy go on a hunting expedition. Now the girl loses "her first fear of the friendly lad" (p. 149), but she is still unable to understand "why he killed the very birds he seemed to like so much"

(p. 149). Although she would like him better without his gun, she accepts his gift of a jackknife, thus associating herself with his own capacity for violence and bloodshed. Eventually her feeling for him becomes "loving admiration. She had never seen anybody so charming and delightful; the woman's heart, asleep in the child, was vaguely thrilled by a dream of love. Some premonition of that great power stirred and swayed these young foresters" (pp. 149–50). The sexuality and self-awareness beginning to stir within Sylvia are adult emotions; however, their subconscious aspect is underlined by "asleep" and "dream."

Sylvia is moving from an idea of sex as purely frightening and destructive, to a realization that generosity and kindness are also part of the male temperament. The author takes pains to show that the hunter has these virtues. Other traits are revealed by his words and actions. He is willing to devote considerable time and energy to his goal of shooting particular birds. He persuades with charm, and with gifts. He is described as a scientist, and although he enjoys the beauty of birds, he wants that beauty to be under his control and constantly accessible to him. The young man has become somewhat detached from his violent impulses, which he expresses through his love of shooting. Undoubtedly he is kind, gallant, and friendly, and these characteristics give him far more influence on Sylvia than a "great red-faced boy" could have. Yet he is a person determined to possess what he wants. This mixture of charm and forcefulness justifies Sylvia's continued ambivalent feelings towards him.

The tale's climax comes early the next morning, when Sylvia steals from her bed to find the nest of the white heron. For a lookout tower she plans to use "a great pinetree . . . the last of its generation" (pp. 150–51). Sylvia is sure she will see the whole world, and the nest as well, from the top of the tree. The girl believes this adventure will bring "triumph and delight and glory for the later morning when she could make known the secret! It was almost too real and too great for the childish heart to bear" (p. 151). These last words suggest Sylvia feels herself on the verge of a transcendent experience, or perhaps a vision, more suited for an adult. And the author adds a cautionary note: "Alas, if the great wave of human interest which flooded for the first time this dull little life should sweep away the satisfaction of an existence heart to heart with nature and the dumb life of the forest!" (p. 152).

Sylvia is about to make a choice between two modes of living, thinking, and feeling. Clearly, what is at stake here is not only the heron, but Sylvia's own being. In the words of Richard Cary, "To divulge the secret of the heron would be to divulge the secret of self; to destroy one would be to destroy the other."² For Sylvia, betraying the heron would mean giving up her closeness to the forest, a closeness which is a profound, essential part of her identity. But to satisfy the boy's wishes, such a betrayal will be necessary.

2. *Sarah Orne Jewett* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1962), p. 102.

Paul John Eakin sees Sylvia's scaling of the pine tree as a symbol of knowledge and experience.³ Cary terms it a "rite of initiation leading to self-discovery" (p. 102). Fittingly, the climb takes place at dawn. The great tree is not only a road to knowledge and self-discovery, but also symbolizes the enduring strength of the past, not Sylvia's past in the stifling industrial town, but an ageless, archetypal past.

The way was harder than she thought; she must reach far and hold fast, the sharp dry twigs caught and held her and scratched her like angry talons, the pitch made her thin little fingers clumsy and stiff as she went round and round the tree's great stem. . . .

The tree seemed to lengthen itself out as she went up, and to reach farther and farther upward. . . . It must truly have been amazed that morning through all its ponderous frame as it felt this determined spark of human spirit wending its way from higher branch to branch. Who knows how steadily the least twigs held themselves to advantage this light, weak creature on her way! The old pine must have loved his new dependent. (pp. 153-54)

There is a sexual relationship indicated here between the hard, lengthening stem and the girl who grips and encircles it. The sex act is the most profound way of representing Sylvia's love of and identification with all of nature. At the beginning of her climb the twigs catch her—another reminder of the pursuit of the red-faced boy and the hunter's shooting of birds. But later, the tree becomes a friend who aids her ascent, as well as a father-lover with a new "dependent." Her subconscious fears of sex are lessened as a result of her climb.

At the end of her ordeal, Sylvia is, understandably, "trembling and tired but wholly triumphant, high in the treetop" (p. 154). Looking out towards the east, she sees not only the sea, but two hawks whose soaring makes her feel "as if she too could go flying away" (p. 155). To the west, she sees farms, villages, and churches, "a vast and awesome world" (p. 155). Atop the symbol of the past, she views, in the present, the world of nature and of men. For once in the story, these spheres are united in a total vision which is unmistakably spiritual and mystical.

But "was this wonderful sight and pageant of the world the only reward for having climbed to such a giddy height?" (p. 155). After this revelation of nature and mankind, Sylvia looks downward into the forest, her own habitat, to see the white heron, "like a single floating feather . . . with steady sweep of wing and outstretched slender neck" (p. 155). This glimpse sustains the grandeur and serenity of her earlier vision. The heron is an essential part of Sylvia—her animus, her soul, or her sexuality, or all three. Yet the serenity of mood is fragile: "an arrow of light and consciousness from your [Sylvia's] two eager eyes" (p. 156) might make him disappear. Here again, the dreamlike, subconscious quality of Sylvia's perceptions is stressed. The heron calling to his mate presents an image of

3. "Sarah Orne Jewett and the Meaning of Country Life," *American Literature*, XXXVIII (Jan. 1967); rpt. in Richard Cary, ed., *Appreciation of Sarah Orne Jewett: Twenty-nine Interpretive Essays* (Waterville, Maine: Colby College Press, 1973), p. 214.

a calm, harmonious marriage, far different from the relationships with the hunter and the red-faced boy.

Sylvia's vision is interrupted by the chattering of the catbirds, and soon she struggles down the tree. As she walks back to the house she wonders what the youth will think when she tells him "how to find his way straight to the heron's nest" (p. 156). Yet when she sees him she cannot give away the location. Sylvia thinks of the great pine's "murmur" and the harmony she felt with the heron, and "she cannot tell the heron's secret and give its life away" (p. 158). Why? The author's ironic question whether the girl will "thrust aside" the advances of the "great world . . . for a bird's sake" (pp. 157-58) cannot be taken at face value. Since the heron's secret is Sylvia's own, to sell that secret to the young man for ten dollars would be prostitution, in several respects. The holiness of her communion with the heron transcends monetary considerations.

And yet the story is not quite over. Sylvia has seen the "great world" as an "awesome" totality as she sat in the great pine, but she has also seen it in the form of the young hunter. She can never regain her childish contentment. Despite her loyalty to the woods and the heron, she would have "served and followed him [the hunter] and loved him as a dog loves!" (p. 158). And perhaps because of her symbolic ascent of the tree, "She even forgot her sorrow at the sharp report of his gun and the piteous sight of thrushes and sparrows dropping silent to the ground, their songs hushed and their pretty feathers stained and wet with blood" (p. 158). The images of defloration and death are no longer frightening, even if they are still strong. She continues to hear the boy's whistle, yet she remains a "lonely country child" (p. 158). And the author, at the end, urges "woodlands and summer-time" to bring their "gifts and graces" and "secrets" to compensate for the "treasures" Sylvia has lost (p. 158).

In light of the story's ending, it is difficult to evaluate Sylvia's experience. She has been true to herself and properly so; her vision is too intense and significant to be traded away. Her glimpse of the heron is also a glimpse of a perfect, harmonious marriage. We cannot regret her decision to reject the young hunter's offer, since her yearning for him is depicted as servile and unhealthy. Yet there is also sadness and a sense of loss here. Perhaps the union of the two herons can only symbolize an inner harmony (which Sylvia lacks at the end of the story), not an actual marriage, which may mean a choice between a charming young hunter or a violent "red-faced boy." Her association with the woodlands cannot entirely replace heterosexual, human love, even when the relationship with the woodlands has sexual undertones. At the same time, Sylvia's vision from the top of the pine tree has literally broadened her horizons by showing the vastness of nature and its juxtaposition with human society. Perhaps she will not always have to lead an isolated life in a small area of the forest. The young man's haunting whistle is a constant reminder to Sylvia of the amorous mysteries of the adult world.

So the tale ends with Sylvia's conflicting emotions unreconciled. Several critics have seen this fictional conflict as a reflection of a similar struggle within Jewett herself. One such critic is Eugene Hillhouse Pool, who suggests the white heron represents the author's love for her father. The story thus shows how Jewett "chooses psychologically to remain a child with Sylvia." Pool believes the author, as well as Sylvia, "repudiates the offer of mature, passionate love that would be inherent in any acceptance of herself as a mature woman."⁴ Paul John Eakin feels the tale's symbolism is inadequate for expressing Jewett's "unresolved feeling." "The image of violation and death provides an interesting contrast to the vision of life and beauty which the heron represents" (*Appreciation*, pp. 213, 214). Concurring with Pool, Ann Douglas Wood views Jewett's own rejection of marriage not as a sign of independence but as a shunning of adulthood,⁵ although she does not cite "The White Heron" in support of her opinion.

Does Sylvia reject "adulthood," "mature, passionate love," or "an image of violation and death"? This reader's analysis of the story supports Eakin's view. There is a type of dominating, threatening lover, represented in this story by the young hunter, and Sylvia's ambivalent feelings towards him are understandable. She is both attracted by his charm and repelled by the ruthlessness beneath it. She feels a need to be someone's servant—and to be loyal to herself above all. No doubt Jewett presents a particularly unfavorable view of love and marriage in this tale. She gives Sylvia no glimpse of a male who might respect her privacy and wholeness. Her only choice is to allow herself to be caught, raped, killed, stuffed, and put on display in a man's house, a provocative satirical image of the condition of late nineteenth century wives. Who can blame Sylvia, if, like Jewett, she makes the painful decision to reject this role and preserve her integrity and independence?

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4. "The Child in Sarah Orne Jewett," *Colby Library Quarterly*, VII (Sept. 1967); rpt. in Richard Cary, ed., *Appreciation*, p. 225.

5. "The Literature of Impoverishment: The Women Local Colorists in America 1865-1914," *Women's Studies*, I, No. 1 (1972), 14.