

September 1980

"That One Talent": The Vocation as Theme in Sarah Orne Jewett's *A Country Doctor*

Malinda Snow

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

Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 16, no.3, September 1980, p.138-147

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.

"That One Talent": The Vocation as Theme in Sarah Orne Jewett's *A Country Doctor*

by MALINDA SNOW

SARAH ORNE JEWETT'S novel *A Country Doctor* (1884) never achieved the popular and critical success of her *Country of the Pointed Firs* or that of her finest short stories. While there can be no doubt that *A Country Doctor* lacks the marks of the masterful craftsmanship Jewett brought to other works, it is unfortunate that the novel has been the subject of so little careful scrutiny. Though not entirely successful, it is an unusual work, interesting in itself and at the same time offering the reader a fuller understanding of Jewett's talents and capabilities as an artist. It is neither a typical local-color narrative nor a typical novel of manners; lacking local color's primary focus on local scene and culture, it also lacks the usual plot of the novel of manners. Whereas the novel of manners frequently presents a heroine who proceeds through a series of social encounters to a marriage that concludes the narrative, *A Country Doctor* presents a heroine, Nan Prince, who is one of the first heroines in fiction to attain a profession while choosing against marriage.¹ Nan's choice has led some readers to treat the novel as "imaginative autobiography," saying that Jewett's father, a physician, is surely the model for Nan's guardian Dr. Leslie, and that Nan is based on Jewett herself, with the medical vocation replacing the literary one.² Recently, the novel has attracted the attention of a reader who, noting its unusual plot and striking heroine, has labeled the work "transitional" between "misogynist" and "pre-feminist" writing, on the one hand, and "feminist," on the other.³ While both these approaches are valid, it seems to me that neither sheds much light on the way Jewett uses Nan's calling thematically in the novel; and, thus, that neither sheds much light on the structure of the novel, on its success or failure as a novel. What I want to do here is examine the related themes of the "gift" or talent and the calling, describing their presentation in *A Country Doctor* and noting the complication that ensues because the central

1. *A Country Doctor* is not the first work of fiction to describe a woman doctor. Arthur Hobson Quinn favorably compares it to William Dean Howells' *Dr. Breen's Practice* (1881) and to Elizabeth Phelps Ward's *Doctor Zay* (1882). See *American Fiction: An Historical and Critical Survey* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1936), p. 325.

2. Such an approach is taken, for instance, by Richard Cary, *Sarah Orne Jewett* (New York: Twayne, 1962), p. 138.

3. Ellen Morgan, "The Atypical Woman: Nan Prince in the Literary Transition to Feminism," *The Kate Chopin Newsletter*, II (1976), 33.

character is a woman. Thus I hope to consider the novel itself while at the same time suggesting a tradition to which it bears comparison because of its thematic content.

The tandem themes of the gift and the calling often develop out of a plot whose central conflict is between the "gifted" or "called" hero and some person or circumstance that would prevent his attaining his calling. These themes appear frequently in western literature and in all the major genres, from the epic to the drama and even the lyric. Indeed, Milton's sonnet "On His Blindness" is a fine and succinct statement of the hero's struggle against circumstance. Other works—*The Aeneid* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, for example—show heroes whose struggles are with additional people rather than with inanimate fate or chance alone.

Traditionally, if women appeared in "calling" literature as principals, they played the role of spoiler. Cleopatra and Dido have no callings. They are (witting or unwitting) temptations set in the paths of those who do. The occasional woman who does feel a calling—Joan of Arc, for example—is treated in literature as her own spoiler. The majority of strong-willed, decisive women in such literature appear on the side of love; their goal is marriage, not Hesperia. In this sense they resemble the heroine of the novel of manners, whose ultimate goal also is marriage. Nan Prince is neither a spoiler nor a traditional heroine who seeks and attains marriage. She is the Aeneas-like figure with special gifts, who gradually understands her vocation and attains it after a struggle. There is a potential spoiler in the novel, but he is a man. Jewett has inverted the traditional roles and led her heroine away from marriage. Thus the narrative resembles other literary treatments of the theme of the vocation more closely than it resembles the novel of manners.

The novel is built upon a series of conversation scenes, in which characters are presented and out of which themes emerge. The themes of the gift and the calling are introduced and sustained by this means. The reader who examines the novel carefully, in fact, will discover that every major conversation scene bears the reader forward closer to the thematic center of the novel. No conversation, in short, is a mere touch of local color or characterization for its own sake. It is true that on some occasions, however, especially at the beginning of the narrative, a reader might be deceived as to Jewett's purposes and question the necessity of a scene. The first critic of *A Country Doctor*, Marie Thérèse Blanc, was so deceived. She found fault with the author for introducing what appeared to be digressions. The scene she found especially troublesome comes early in the novel when Jewett describes the return of Nan's mother, Adeline, to the house of her own mother, Mrs. Thacher. Adeline, a restless girl who had sought her fortune in a nearby mill town, married against her family's wishes, and was widowed, has come home to die. Carrying her infant daughter, she stops at a river's edge, hesitates, then turns away. She makes her way to the doorstep of her

mother's house where she falls; the scene shifts and we discover the old woman in conversation with her neighbors Mrs. Martin Dyer and Mrs. Jacob Dyer. "Naturellement," concludes Madame Blanc, "le lecteur est impatient de savoir quel remords, quel désespoir a porté cette infortunée d'abord vers la rivière, puis, par une subite réaction, vers l'abri de son enfance, depuis longtemps abandonné, mais il lui faudra avant cela pénétrer dans la ferme et, longuement, patiemment, écouter force comérages en vieil anglais du cru, tel que l'écorchent les paysans."⁴

The gossip of the old ladies, however, is no digression. It is in their conversation, in fact, that the idea of the "gift" first appears in the novel. Jewett's story is not of Adeline: Nan's mother is introduced briefly here only to serve as a point of contrast with Nan herself. What Jewett shows is the difference between eccentricity and genuine giftedness. Clearly, Adeline is an eccentric, as the Dyer ladies establish for us with a bit of gossip behind the back of their hostess. Mrs. Martin Dyer remarks,

"Her ambitions ain't what they should be, that's all I can say."

"If she'd got a gift for anything special, now," continued Mrs. Jake, "we should feel it was different and want her to have a chance, but she's just like other folks for all she felt so much above farming." (p. 6)⁵

Nan's father, likewise, is impractical and hasty, but different from his wife in that he had a real talent and squandered it. A former shipmate describes the young ship's doctor, in another conversation scene: "Yes, he was a very bright fellow, with a great gift at doctoring, but he was wilful, full of queer twists and fancies, the marry in haste and repent at his leisure sort of young man" (p. 96). Unlike her parents, Nan shows discipline and patience. Jewett offers the parents as foils for the child, making us more aware of Nan's genuine talent and—as an adult—steadiness in her use of it.

The mature heroine's attaining of her goals occupies the second half of the novel. During the first half, that which describes Nan's childhood, the focus is not only on Nan but also on Dr. Leslie, her guardian after the death of her grandmother. His awareness of his ward's inclination and his search for the way best to serve it prepare us for the second half of the novel, in which Nan, having acknowledged her calling, en-

4. "Le Roman de la Femme-Médecin," *Revue des Deux Mondes*, LXVII (February 1, 1885), 614-615. I translate Madame Blanc's comments as follows: "Naturally the reader is impatient to know what remorse, what despair, has brought this poor woman first to the river, then suddenly to her childhood home, which she left long ago. It will be necessary for him, before that, to enter the farmhouse and, slowly, patiently, listen to a lot of gossip in the rough English of the country folk."

Madam Blanc's lengthy review is the occasion for a discussion of much more than Jewett's novel; the French critic, who wrote under the pen name "Th. Bentzon," comments at length upon changing social patterns, changing perceptions of femininity, and the effect these changes will have on the treatment of women in fiction. A literal translation of only those portions of the review bearing directly upon Jewett's work has been published by Archille H. Biron, "Madame Blanc's 'Le Roman de la Femme-Médecin,'" *Colby Library Quarterly*, VII (1967), 488-503.

5. All parenthetical references are to *A Country Doctor*, ed. Kenneth S. Lynn (New York: Garrett Press, 1970).

counters challenges and conflicts in her pursuit of it. Jewett makes the novel more appealing and plausible by allowing Nan to discover gradually what her friends and the reader already knew. Indeed, the first sign (to the reader) of Nan's gift comes early in the character's childhood when she successfully treats a turkey's injured wing. Mrs. Thacher's neighbors remark to Dr. Leslie upon the skill of the treatment, and he muses, "I should like to see how she managed it. . . . If she shows a gift for such things I'll take pains to teach her a lesson or two by and by when she is older" (p. 63). The course proposed by the doctor, however, is not so easily begun; he grows cautious, fearing to force the child into a path not of her own choosing.

Nan's own consciousness of her gift and her resolution to become a doctor come after her basic schooling ends. To be sure, she had entertained some childhood ambitions but had put them aside as she grew up. Her knowledge of her calling comes late and long remains unstated, while Dr. Leslie waits tactfully, doing or saying nothing to push her: "She had hoped that Dr. Leslie would help her; he used to talk long ago about her studying medicine, but he must have forgotten that, and the girl savagely rebuked society in general for her own unhappiness" (p. 164). Nan's unhappiness arises out of the new responsibility of making a difficult decision for herself. Once made, though, the decision facilitates her enrollment in medical school.

Jewett makes it clear that Nan is not the unknowing (or knowing and loving) dupe of Dr. Leslie: not led, certainly not forced, to study medicine. Were Nan such a duped heroine, she would lose much of the unusualness she possesses. She might be, instead, a pale likeness of Hawthorne's Beatrice Rappaccini and not the heroine of a "calling" narrative.⁶ In another conversation scene, Dr. Leslie explains to a friend his reasons for allowing his ward her freedom: "I have seen too many lives go to pieces, and too many dissatisfied faces, and I have heard too many sorrowful confessions from these country deathbeds. . . . And if I can help one good child to work with nature and not against it. . . . I shall be glad" (p. 106). Thus the doctor manifests his desire to let Nan follow her inclinations and not influence her unduly.

The heroine's attendance at medical school marks the conclusion of the first half of the novel and initiates the second. Interestingly, the medical school itself is not described at any length; Nan's attendance is treated briefly, even summarily. The author does shift the setting from Oldfields, where Nan grows up, but not to Boston and the school. Instead, we follow Nan on her first visit to her aunt, Miss Prince, her

6. "Rappaccini's Daughter" is in many ways a more interesting point of contrast to Jewett's novel than are such works as that by Howells cited earlier. Whereas Howells' novel concentrates on details of medical practice, Hawthorne's tale focuses on the effect of professional zeal on private lives. This is also Jewett's focus, although her characters are the temperamental opposites of Hawthorne's. See *Mosses from an Old Manse*, X, Centenary Edition, ed. William Charvat, et al. (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1974), 91-128.

father's sister. Here develop the love-duty conflicts we expect in the traditional "calling" literature. The pace of the narrative quickens; the scenes focus upon Nan and George Gerry, the spokesman for love; and the action appears to be moving towards marriage as a conclusion.

Marriage seems for the moment a plausible end to the novel because, while Nan ably defends herself against the objections her aunt and her aunt's friends have to her calling, she seems less able to deal with George Gerry. She enjoys his company and falls in love with him gradually, growing aware of her love too late, it appears, to stop herself from proceeding to marriage, the next logical step.⁷ The first-time reader may indeed be deceived, finding himself relieved yet surprised when Nan refuses George's proposal: surprised because of the easy logic of a conclusion involving marriage; relieved because the subtler thematic structure underlying the plot has continued to develop the calling and thereby to prepare for the novel's actual conclusion.

As in the first half of the novel, Jewett uses conversations to develop her theme. Where the earlier conversations had been friendly and agreeable in tone, however, the later ones are contentious, showing different characters trying vainly to persuade the others of their opinions. Whereas the subject of conversation in the first half of the narrative had been the rightness of following one's natural inclinations and "working with nature," that of the second half is the unnaturalness of Nan's goal. Whereas in the first half of the narrative everyone had been concerned to support and encourage Nan, in the subsequent portion Nan is challenged and hampered in her course. One of her chief adversaries is Mrs. Fraley, matriarchal and opinionated, respected and feared by her acquaintances. Convinced that woman can have only one genuine vocation, she argues, "I have done my best to serve God in the station to which it has pleased him to call me" (p. 280). Nan responds, "Would you have me bury the talent God has given me, and choke down the wish that makes itself a prayer every morning that I may do this work lovingly and well?" (pp. 282-83). Mrs. Fraley's argument, of course, is based on the traditional religious view of "woman's place." That Nan does not accept this argument has led Ellen Morgan to call Jewett's heroine an "atypical woman." Jewett, says Professor Morgan, "is not asking her readers to see Nan as Woman, and to open the professions to women. She is asking the reader to see in Nan an exception to the rule of her kind, as a woman who should not be obliged to accept a traditional woman's role because she is atypical of her sex."⁸ In one sense, Professor Morgan is right: Jewett is not making Nan a symbol of all women; the novel is not a polemic. In another sense, though, I must disagree

7. The situation in the first part of the novel, in which Nan comes gradually to understand and accept her medical vocation, comes to mind again, but with a negative turn, when we read of her gradual realization of her love for George and her rejection of him.

8. "The Atypical Woman," p. 34.

with Professor Morgan's conclusion. Nan is certainly *not* "atypical of her sex"; she is, rather an "atypical" heroine. Nan's womanliness asserts itself throughout the second portion of the narrative; were she not a "typical" woman, she would not attract George, not fall in love with him, and not feel any conflict when she refuses him. She is an atypical heroine in her refusal of George, but surely a typical woman in stirring his proposal.⁹

Nan's argument against George and Mrs. Fraley (like Mrs. Fraley's against her) is couched in religious terms. It is not the biblical definition of woman's place that Nan invokes, however, but the religious foundation of the ideas of the calling and the talent. This defense is perfectly traditional. Western literature, with its biblical and classical roots, offers many analogues. The American Protestant tradition, following its English Puritan sources, emphasized the idea of devotion to the calling no less than Vergil, in a similar manner, had emphasized the *pietas* of his hero.¹⁰ In the case of Jewett's heroine, though, one biblical tradition, that of "woman's place," is warring with another, that of the talent and the calling.

George Gerry bears our particular interest because he represents, for Mrs. Fraley, Miss Prince, and others opposed to Nan's medical career, a proper and indeed divinely ordained course for Nan to choose. To her vocation, however, he represents a threat; and to Nan herself he makes a sharp contrast (as her parents did earlier in the novel). Unlike Nan, George has no sense of his own proper course of action. Jewett describes him as restless in his present place, that of a small-town lawyer, but too cautious to leave that place: "He was honestly dissatisfied with his surroundings, and thought himself hardly used by a hindering fate. He believed himself to be most anxious to get away, yet he was like a ship which will not be started out of port by anything less than a hurricane" (p. 288). His uncertainty and unhappiness show George to be less decisive than Nan, leading Richard Cary to dismiss him as a thin character: "George is a two-dimensional cardboard figure who cannot impress upon Nan 'that he was a man and she a girl.' It is no wonder she votes for medicine instead of marriage. Miss Jewett's maidenly bias undercut the issue before it could be fought on its own merits."¹¹ Professor Cary,

9. Likewise, I cannot agree with Professor Morgan's conclusion that "*A Country Doctor* is a labored and only partially successful attempt to convince the reader . . . that [Nan] by nature is unsuited for marriage." This is not Jewett's purpose. Clearly, Nan is "suited" for marriage so well that she gives it serious consideration; her "nature" in no way opposes it. Yet she wants something else and chooses it. Jewett is, indeed, quite successful at showing the difficulty of the choice.

10. J. Paul Hunter, *The Reluctant Pilgrim* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), discusses the religious traditions of spiritual autobiography, of "calling" and "guide" literature that he finds to be the matrix of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. As he draws his conclusions, Hunter speculates that the English religious traditions with which he is concerned have also influenced American fiction: "Shaped by intellectualized Puritans like Hawthorne and Melville, the Puritan novel found not only a more satisfying temporal climate but a more perfectly realized form . . ." (p. 211). Professor Hunter's suggestion is significant in its implications for nineteenth-century American fiction, including the work of Sarah Orne Jewett.

11. *Sarah Orne Jewett*, p. 141.

however, is about to make the same mistake that Professor Morgan made. George is an atypical hero (in that he does not win the hand of the heroine), but not an atypical *man* and a "cardboard figure." Indeed, the two characters are threats to each other because they do love, and because each one's immediate ambition cancels that of the other. It is true, though, that George shows up badly in comparison with Nan. This showing up of the man is one of the results of Jewett's reversal of the usual situation. George himself knows that Nan has outshone him, as we see in a scene in which Nan uses her medical skills while he stands by, squeamish. Stopping at a farmhouse to ask for water while picnicking, they discover the farmer with a dislocated shoulder, which Nan successfully replaces. "The young man," says the narrator of George, "did not like to think of the noise the returning bone had made. . . . He felt weak and womanish, and somehow wished it had been he who could play the doctor" (p. 266). The reversal of roles here serves Jewett's purposes, but surely it cannot be said to make George "two dimensional." The young man's consternation, in fact, adds dimension to him as a character.

Nan's skill and her calling give her an advantage over George, but his love gives him an advantage over her as well. She finds herself aroused to struggle against George's love and what it represents for her future: "On the very evening of her battle for her opinion at Mrs. Fraley's she had been suddenly confronted by a new enemy, a strange power, which seemed so dangerous that she was at first overwhelmed by a sense of her own defenselessness" (p. 299). The danger is that of being forced to digress from or stop altogether her pursuit of her goal. Jewett previously described a scene in which an old sailor explains to Nan the nautical meaning of *to foul*:

"Fouled, we say aboard ship, when two vessels lay near enough so that they drift alongside. You can see what havick 't would make for ten to one they don't part again till they have tore each other all to shoestrings; the yards will get locked together. . . . I've sometimes called it to mind when I've known married couples that wasn't getting on. 'Tis easy to drift alongside, but no matter if they was bound to the same port, they'd 'a' done best alone." (p. 254)

Neither the old sailor nor Jewett herself, of course, is making a blanket argument against marriage. In fact two characters in the novel—Nan's aunt and Mrs. Fraley's daughter—are portrayed as unhappy because they did not marry.¹² Nan's choice against marriage, however, is made easier by her growing understanding that she and George Gerry should only "foul" each other, that their goals are mutually exclusive. Thus Nan's advantage, devotion to her goal, proves stronger than hope in love, George's advantage.

Shortly before choosing, Nan attends a play with George and Miss

12. Of Miss Fraley the narrator says that her life was "blighted because it lacked its mate, and was but half a life in itself" (p. 304).

Fraley. Domestic comedy, like the novel of manners, presents marriage as a happy resolution to conflict. Jewett's reader, though, realizes that the play ironically reverses the situation in this novel; and Nan, as she watches, finds the domestic plot heightening her own anxiety: "For as the play went on and the easily pleased audience laughed and clapped its hands, and the tired players bowed and smiled from behind the flaring footlights, there was one spectator who was conscious of a great crisis in her own life, which the mimicry of that evening seemed to ridicule and counterfeit" (p. 304). George, on the other hand, "had never been so happy as that night" (p. 305), and he thinks of proposing until he senses Nan's anxiety and puts it off. When he does propose, it is in a boat, and Nan refuses him as she wraps the tiller cords "around her hands unconsciously" (p. 323).

The refusal is not the novel's last scene. When Nan returns to Dr. Leslie and Oldfields, she walks out to her grandmother's farmhouse, now abandoned, unknowingly following the same path that her mother had followed when she came home to die. Nan's return, however, unlike her mother's, is not a defeat. Rather than death, she has life to look forward to. Thus we have come full circle from the opening scenes, in which Nan's parents were described as having ruined their lives, to this point, at which their daughter says, "O God, I thank thee for my future" (p. 351).

The conclusion of the novel manifests what is one of Jewett's most attractive characteristics as a writer: her treatment of subject is honest. *A Country Doctor* truthfully portrays the *agon* of human experience. The feminist reader might wish that Jewett had made her heroine a more articulate advocate for women's rights, but such advocacy is out of character for Nan and her ethos; and it would ring shallow and false in the narrative. Virginia Woolf is entirely right in her conclusion that "it is fatal for any one who writes to think of their sex."¹³ The romantic reader might wish that love had triumphed, but that it did not is artistically more satisfying. Jewett pulled back from the easy, expected conclusion and wrote the right one, the one that grows naturally out of her portrayal of character. As Barbara Hardy has pointed out, the "happy ending" involving marriage is a kind of fantasy, and "the return to fantasy" is a fault in narratives that have previously shown their characters resisting fantasy.¹⁴ *A Country Doctor* comes closer to the truth of experience than either the feminist's or the romantic's version of the events would.

While praising Jewett's steady, clear-sighted approach to her material, though, the reader must also admit that *A Country Doctor* falls short of unqualified success. The author's greatest difficulty appears to be with the length and complexity of the novel form. Jewett's technique is,

13. *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1957), p. 181.

14. "Towards a Poetics of Fiction: 3) An Approach through Narrative," *Novel*, II (1968-69), 12-14.

in one sense, impeccable. No scene is wasted; conversations and other actions all serve the major themes. The structure of the novel is carefully worked out to support the themes (as the circular effect created by the first and last scenes demonstrates). Yet the reader is likely to come away disappointed by a certain thinness in *A Country Doctor*. Just as there is only one major set of themes, there is only one major character; every other person introduced becomes, in some way, either a foil for or a pendant to the character of Nan. Jewett herself realized that she had little skill at writing long narratives; commenting on the prospect of writing a long work, she admitted to Horace Scudder: "In the first place, I have no dramatic talent. The story would have no plot. I should have to fill it out with descriptions of character and meditations."¹⁵ While *A Country Doctor* demonstrates more dramatic skill than Jewett allows herself here, one must say that her general evaluation of her abilities is accurate. When reading the novel one has the sense of a writer not knowing precisely how to fill out empty spaces. There are no interesting digressions—Madame Blanc to the contrary—and no subplots. One misses the richness of a well-made novel; and one tires of the narrative voice, occasionally tedious and prosy as Jewett writes "meditations" and attempts to make transitions that a better novelist would have accomplished more dramatically and deftly. *A Country Doctor* is, in fact, the work of a masterful writer of short stories who was not able to adapt her technique altogether successfully to novel writing. Whereas in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* each chapter becomes, in effect, a separate and self-contained unit, like a short story, the chapters of *A Country Doctor* lack discreteness. Jewett has attempted to construct the entire novel as one might construct a short story, with one central set of themes and one dominant character. The tact and economy that mark her short stories and give them their beauty, however, have not served her so well as a novelist.

Counterpoint and complexity of development are not Jewett's talents; she is master of plain statement. Often she recalled her father's advice, "Tell things *just as they are*";¹⁶ and to a young writer who sought her guidance she said, "Don't write a 'story' but just *tell the thing*."¹⁷ It is interesting to note that Jewett was sympathetic to the religious group called the Shakers, and that on several occasions she made visits to her friends in the Shaker Colony at Alfred, Maine, where she admired the way of life and the handiwork.¹⁸ Jewett's writing, in fact, resembles the work of the Shakers: based on principles of economy and efficiency, it

15. The letter is dated July 13, 1873. Sarah Orne Jewett, *Letters*, ed. Richard Cary (Waterville, Maine: Colby College Press, 1967), p. 29.

16. This advice is mentioned in a letter to Laura E. Bellamy, August 31, 1885, and again to Andress S. Floyd, November 11, 1894 (*Letters*, pp. 52 and 90).

17. Letter to John Thaxter, June 11, [1899], (*Letters*, p. 120).

18. For more details on Jewett's friendship with the Shakers, see her letters to Elder Henry Green (*Letters*, pp. 106 and n., 109, 113, 114, 126, and 131).

eschews ornament and complexity, deriving its beauty from integrity of design and simplicity of structure.

While asserting that Jewett fails, as a novelist, to provide us with sufficient counterbalances for her central themes and for her heroine, though, we must also admit that this novel, flawed as it is, intrigues the reader with its inversions and variations of familiar situations: the heroine (not hero) feels called to and attains a profession; the heroine refuses the eligible gentleman who proposes to her—indeed she thanks God that she has done so. Not a traditional novel of manners, perhaps not even a successful novel at all, *A Country Doctor* commands our attention as a notable attempt to work a quite untraditional twist on some traditional situations. The novel is both new and not new; its presentation of the themes of the gift and the calling is entirely traditional; its author's choice of central character is new. The reader who sees Jewett's narrative as veiled autobiography is, therefore, ignoring the most notable structural device of the work. And the reader who remarks at Jewett's unconventional treatment of her heroine without also remarking at the conventions upon which Jewett plays variations fails to see the reason for the unusual heroine, and thus stands ready to misinterpret the work. An accurate interpretation, including a straightforward acknowledgment of the novel's shortcomings, must be based on a careful examination of theme and character.

Georgia State University
Atlanta