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The Shape of Violence in Jewett's "A White Heron"

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Let us imagine that we live in a culture where time is a cycle, where the sand dollar lies beside its fossil (as it does). Where everything is seen to return, as the birds return to sight with the movement of the waves. As I return to the beach, again and again.

Imagine that in that returning nothing stands outside; the bird is not separate from the wave but both are part of the same rhythm. Imagine that I know—not with my intellect but in my body, my heart—that I do not stand separate from the sand dollar or the fossil; that the slow forces that shaped the life of one and preserved the other under the deep pressure of settling mud for cycles upon cycles are the same forces that have formed my life; that when I hold the fossil in my hand I am looking into a mirror... We are aware of the world as returning, the forms of our thoughts flow in circles, spirals, webs; they weave and dance, honoring the links, the connections, the patterns, the changes, so that nothing can be removed from its context.1

And now let us imagine that into this web—into this timeless cycle of birds and waves—walks a man with a gun.

I start with this quotation from the witch Starhawk because I want to suggest that “A White Heron,” on one level an interesting but “easy” story about the irreconcilable conflict between opposing sets of values: urban/rural, scientific/intuitional, civilized/natural, masculine/feminine, on a deeper level represents as radical—as sinister—a challenge to complacent heterosexual ideology as do the imaginings of a witch such as Starhawk. Indeed, it will be my contention that the arguments of “A White Heron” and of Starhawk, “birds” separated by a century (Jewett’s story was published in 1886, Starhawk’s book in 1982), have things in common. Specifically, after talking briefly about “A White Heron” as creation myth and as historical commentary, I will be arguing three things: that “A White Heron” is a story about resistance to heterosexuality; that the form Jewett adopts to express her idea is, quite appropriately, the fairy tale; and that despite her protests to the contrary Jewett

ELIZABETH AMMONS shows in this fiction her ability to create conventional “plot”—that is, to use inherited masculine narrative shape—when she needs to.

Perhaps the most obvious meaning of “A White Heron” comes from the female creation, or re-creation, myth Jewett offers. The story presents a little girl whose world is entirely female. No brother, father, uncle, or grandfather lives in it; the men have feuded and left or died. Only she and her grandmother inhabit the rural paradise to which the child was removed after spending the first eight years of her life in a noisy manmade mill-town, the strongest memory (and perfect symbol) of which is a “great red-faced boy who used to chase and frighten her” as she walked home through the streets at night. In the country with her grandmother she is safe. Named Sylvia (Latin for “woods”) the girl feels that “she never had been alive at all before she came to live on the farm” (p. 228). Her grandmother says: there “never was such a child for straying out-of-doors since the world was made!” (p. 228). Clearly Sylvia is nature’s child, a pristine or first female, repelled by the city but so at home in the woods that the birds and animals share their secrets and the earth itself, her true grandmother, embraces her with gentle breezes and soft lullabies. Walking home through the woods one night (compare this with the experience she remembers from the city), she listens “to the thrushes with a heart that beat fast with pleasure” and senses “in the great boughs overhead . . . little birds and beasts . . . going about their world . . . [and] saying goodnight to each other in sleepy twitters. . . . It made her feel as if she were a part of the gray shadows and the moving leaves” (p. 229). As her grandmother boasts, “the wild creature’s counts her one o’ themselves’” (p. 230).

The whimsical and yet serious incarnation of this magical “natural” place to which the child has been restored, appropriately by her maternal grandmother, is a cow. Symbol of bountiful female nurture—a cow is a walking udder, a warm mobile milky mother (of a different species from us to be sure, but as this story shows, difference in species is not an important distinction to make in life)—the cow represents what the city is not and what the woods, healthy, wild, domestic, maternal, stands for in “A White Heron.” In fact, Jewett opens the story by concentrating on the bond between this exaggeratedly female animal and her “little woods-girl” (p. 229). The two of them, the mature female (Mistress Moolly the cow) and nine-year-old Sylvia, amble together through the woods away from the western light (which means toward the rising moon, the heavenly body associated with women) in a wending nightly ritual of hide-and-seek that is almost a dance, the two partners know their steps so well. Played with

the wild but milky Mistress Moolly, this game of finding each other, situated as it is at the very opening of the story, serves as a metaphor for the whole realm of matrifocal happiness into which Jewett draws us. In this world females—human, bovine, it does not matter—can find each other. They can live together in fertile self-sufficiency and contentment, much as Jewett herself, of course, lived happily with her sisters and women friends within a complex and satisfying network of female support and intimacy into which men might wander, like the nameless intruder in this story, but always as strangers and never to stay.

Read historically, this Adamless Eden represents a response—mythic, spiritual—to the dramatic changes taking place in the lives of middle-class white American women toward the turn into the twentieth century. On the one hand, the middle-class nineteenth-century ideology of separate masculine and feminine spheres excluded women from competition and success in the public arena—medicine, commerce, high art, and the like. The ideology of separatism severely confined and limited women. At the same time, however, as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg points out in her classic study of middle-class, white, nineteenth-century female friendship in America, separatism strengthened women by honoring female bonding and intimacy. As Smith-Rosenberg explains, "women . . . did not form an isolated and oppressed subcategory in male society. Their letters and diaries indicate that women's sphere had an essential integrity and dignity that grew out of women's shared experiences and mutual affection and that, despite the profound changes which affected American social structure and institutions between the 1760s and 1870s, retained a constancy and predictability."

Smith-Rosenberg's identification of the 1870s as the beginning of the end of this period of continuity for women highlights the fact that "A White Heron," written in 1881, celebrates the ideology of separatism at the time historically that it was beginning to fall apart. As Josephine Donovan notes, the story speaks to "the profound ambivalence women of the late nineteenth century felt as they were beginning to move out of the female-centered world of the home into male-centered institutions." Sylvia confronts and is tempted by the possibility of a new and traditionally masculine ethic for women. The hunter invites her to participate in his project. She can, like her sisters in the ranks of stenographers and typewriters smartly decked themselves out in shirtwaists and suit jackets to invade the nation's offices and boardrooms, bastions of male privilege and power previously off limits to women, identify with men. She can join the great masculine project of conquering and controlling ("harnessing") nature and agreeing on money as the best measure of worth and

most effective medium of exchange between human beings. She can, in short, even though she is female, join in the great late nineteenth-century game of buying and selling the world.

She can—but she won’t. Sylvia, and clearly Jewett as well, finds in the ideology of female separatism, despite its limitations, a better environment for women than that offered by the new ideology of integration, or identification with masculine values. The older ideology values compassion over profit and cooperation over competition. While the perfect bird for the ornithologist is a dead one, the perfect bird for the child is alive. Sylvia, choosing the past over the future, the bird over a ten dollar gold piece, says no to the temptation represented by the glamorous young scientist so eager to make a girl his partner. In the last paragraph the narrator concedes that the choice is not easy: “Were the birds better friends than their hunter might have been, — who can tell?” (p. 239). The young stranger with a gun is beautiful and powerful. “He can make them rich with money; he has promised it, and they are poor now. He is so well worth making happy” (p. 239). The stranger has great allure: the future is tempting. Indeed, Sylvia’s grandmother is converted. But Sylvia is not. She may change when she is older; of that we cannot be certain. But the moment this story captures is the moment of her resistance. The moment of her saying no.

That resistance, I now want to argue, is not simply historical, not simply a matter of saying no to shirtwaists and coffee breaks. It is a matter of Sylvia’s saying no to the erotic stirrings she feels for the handsome young man. Sylvia’s resistance, in other words, is resistance to the institution of heterosexuality itself, which as Adrienne Rich explains with great care in “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” is the sine qua non of patriarchy. Rich argues: “If women are the earliest sources of emotional caring and physical nurture for both female and male children, it would seem logical, from a feminist perspective at least, to pose the following questions: whether the search for love and tenderness in both sexes does not originally lead toward women; why in fact women would ever redirect that search; . . . and why such violent strictures should be found necessary to enforce women’s total emotional, erotic loyalty and subservience to men.” Rich urges scholars to examine “the societal forces that wrench women’s emotional and erotic energies away from themselves and other women and from woman-identified values” and states bluntly that “heterosexuality, like motherhood, needs to be recognized and studied as a political institution.” Prescribing and enforcing heterosexuality, she argues, is the essential task of patriarchy. Without that manipulation of women into transferring emotional and erotic allegiance from the mother to a man the system would crumble. Women would be

free to remain woman-identified, emotionally and erotically, throughout life. For patriarchy to work society must realign woman's original, "natural" emotional/erotic attachment to her same-sex lover, mother—a complicated maneuver that Jewett, no less than Rich, understands.

Seen in this light "A White Heron" represents an anti-bildungsroman. It is a rite-of-passage story in which the heroine refuses to make the passage. Choosing the world of her grandmother over the world of the alluring young man, Sylvia chooses not to pass over into the world of adult female sexuality as it is defined by the culture. The nine-year-old child, a girl about to enter puberty, refuses to enter into the transaction that everyone—the hunter, her grandmother—expects her to make.

"A White Heron" says that heterosexuality requires the female to offer up body itself as prey. All Sylvia has to do is offer up the body of the bird—a free, beautiful creature like herself—to the hunter and she will receive in return money, social approval, and the affection of a man. Clearly the heron in this story symbolizes the heroine, and the exchange Sylvia is expected to make at the age of nine, with her heart set throbbing by the handsome young man, is the transition from childhood to the threshold of womanhood, the wrench from little girl identification with the mother (in this case the maternal earth itself) to big girl identification with a man. Sylvia is expected to offer her freedom, her true nature, indeed life itself to a predator, who will pierce, stuff, and then own and admire the beautiful corpse. (Ornithology as a metaphor for male heterosexual predation is one of the brilliant strokes of "A White Heron." The combination of violence, voyeurism, and commercialism contained in the gun-wielding science, the goal of which is to create living death, is chilling.)6 Tempted—and Jewett does make the hunter with his money and charm and social privilege tempting—Sylvia says no.

In "A White Heron" Jewett creates a threshold story about choosing not to step across. Sylvia won't give the bird over to the hunter, won't give her self over to him, won't enter the body-for-money bargain the culture expects of her. She chooses the world of her grandmother, a place defined as free, healthy, and "natural" in this story, over the world of heterosexual favor and violence represented by the hunter.

Jewett's choice of a fairy tale to tell this story of resistance is perfect since one major purpose of the classic, white, western fairy tale is to teach heterosexuality.7

To illustrate, let me sketch the standard female coming-of-age story of fairy tale. A girl is stolen, taken, or in some other way separated from her

6. Richard Brenzo reads the profession similarly when he says that, symbolically, the ornithologist represents the choice for Sylvia of being "caught, raped, killed, stuffed, and put on display in a man's house." See "Free Heron or Dead Sparrow: Sylvia's Choice in Sarah Orne Jewett's 'A White Heron,' " Colby Library Quarterly, XIV (1978), 41.
mother and removed to live a lonely life (often deep in a secluded woods) where her only friends are birds and animals and her caretaker is an old woman. Until puberty the heroine stays in this magical and emphatically female world. (Rapunzel lives in the country with only the witch for company; Little Red Riding Hood journeys back and forth between her mother and grandmother; even Snow-White surrounded by men dwells in an ultra-domestic, “natural” place where the men are literally littler than the female.) Then near or at puberty the prince arrives: handsome, rich, heterosexual. His job is to rescue the heroine. He is to carry her away from this sylvan world, now carefully defined by the story-teller as wicked, aberrant—the realm of the dark, the evil, the overpossessive mother: in short, the witch. The tale ends—we’ve all read it: “Cinderella,” “Rapunzel,” “Little Snow-White,” “Little Red Cap”—with the virile prince (often he is a hunter) delivering the heroine from this perverse same-sex realm into the luxury and “safety” of the heterosexual world.

These traditional fairy tales in which a sexy young man saves a sexually awakening heroine from an ugly witch assert the triumph of heterosexuality over matrisexuality. They show the transformation of the maternal realm, via the witch, into a sick (that is, a dangerous) place for a girl to stay past puberty. The normal, “healthy” thing to do is to follow a man out of it.

In obvious ways Jewett’s story fits this paradigm. When “A White Heron” opens we meet a little girl who has been separated from her mother and taken to live in a lonely cottage deep in a woods. There her only friends are her grandmother and the birds, plants, and animals who have become her companions. Especially there is the cow, who plays hide and seek with Sylvia and is her “valued companion” (p. 227); but also there is the toad Sylvia plays with on the cottage path the night the young man comes (a jocular version of the young man himself on Jewett’s part?), the heron and his mate, and the tree, personified as “his” (p. 236), which Sylvia climbs to see the bird. (I will return to the gender of both the tree and the bird.)

The woods, the lonely cottage, the grandmotherly caretaker, the isolated heroine, the humanized plants and animals: Jewett sets the stage perfectly for the rescuing prince to appear. And he does. As in conventional fairy tales (“Rapunzel,” for example) Sylvia is at first afraid of him. Significantly, he shows up immediately following her memory of the ugly red-faced boy who “used to chase and frighten her” in town (p. 229). Still in the grip of this memory, the “little woods-girl is horror-stricken to hear a clear whistle not very far away. Not a bird’s whistle, which would have a sort of friendliness, but a boy’s whistle, determined, and somewhat aggressive.” Sylvia feels that “the enemy had discovered her” (p. 229). But then, true to traditional fairy-tale transformations, the girl quickly overcomes her fear of the handsome stranger who, as if by magic, has dropped into her world. It takes only one day until Sylvia “watched the young man
with 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" (p. 233). Sylvia is ready to realign her passionate energies: she will offer up the bird to the stranger. She will cooperate in his project of making blood drip from its body so that he can stuff, own, and admire the carcass as "his."

Thus far Jewett's story follows fairy-tale logic, but only thus far. Having evoked the classic female rite-of-passage drama of fairy tale, Jewett proceeds to deconstruct the very story she evokes. She writes her own fairy tale about female rite of passage and the theme she dramatizes, in contrast to inherited tradition, is resistance to the passage prescribed.

Supplied with all the appropriate totems and symbols (the deep woods, the symbolic animals, the pre-pubertal age of nine) Sylvia moves right to the brink of the passage into heterosexuality. She even enacts ritualistically that passage—journeying away from her grandmother's house to the outer edge of that maternal space, the place where it stops and some other territory begins. There, in unmistakably phallic imagery, Jewett shows her climbing a huge pine which seems "to lengthen itself out" as she mounts (p. 236) and causes her body pain as she embraces it and climbs. At the top of this ascent which sends "tingling, eager blood coursing the channels of her whole frame" (p. 235) she is able to see new worlds and societies (the sea, ships), and she has a glorious glimpse of heterosexual harmony (the herons). The journey into this new region is difficult but breathtaking. Sylvia is "well satisfied" (p. 238). Enacted symbolically and in nature the passage into heterosexuality looks marvelous.

But that journey, Jewett's story insists, is not the journey available to women in real life or in real time. The tree Sylvia climbs is very unusual. It holds in its majestic branches fragile nests; along its mighty arms run all sorts of living creatures. Jewett tells us that the pine "was like a great main-mast to the voyaging earth," and clearly it is sentient and caring. "It must truly have been amazed that morning through all its ponderous frame as it felt this determined spark of human spirit [Sylvia] creeping..."
and climbing from higher branch to branch. The old pine must have loved his new dependent. More than all the hawks, and bats, and moths and even the sweet-voiced thrushes, was the brave, beating heart of the solitary gray-eyed child. And the tree stood still and held away the winds that June morning while the dawn grew bright in the east" (p. 236). In contrast to this lover, the male encountered by Sylvia in real life kills things. He is committed not to supporting life but to conquering and destroying it. The tree, Jewett is careful to tell us, is "the last of its generation" (p. 234). It is a relic from the past, an imagined possibility, an unrealistic (after all it is not even human) encounter.

The realistic encounter is the hunter, the ornithologist — the male who expects Sylvia to participate in his project of killing, stuffing, and appropriating the beautiful bird. Obviously the heterosexual experience existing for Jewett’s heroine in real life derives not from nature but from invented human values of conquest, profit, and ownership. Stated simply, what Sylvia can choose, can literally buy into, is a system of carnal exchange in which the female represents game — the prized carcass — in the material power struggle between males.

This explains, I think, why the heron is male. In the first place, of course, it might simply be too obvious to make the bird female. The equation between Sylvia and the heron is clear enough without making them both female (its whiteness and her virginity, the wildness of them both, their closeness to nature and their shyness, etc.). The difference in gender makes Jewett’s symbolism a little less blatant. Far more important, however, the maleness of the heron calls attention to the fact that the heterosexual contest as defined by the human male finally exists not between male and female, but between male and male — with the female as bait, weapon, spy. In heterosexual materialist society (which is what the alluring bird-stuffer represents) males aggress on each other — kill each other off (as the hunter wishes to kill the heron) — through the female, whose job it is to execute and display not her own but a man’s authority and superiority. Loyal to “her” man, the “good” woman helps carry out his assault on other males by finding out and carrying back the enemy’s secrets, breaking up his home, and luring him into deadly space where “her” man can eliminate him — all of which is exactly what the ornithologist expects Sylvia to do for him.

Finally, of course, the heron is male in Jewett’s story because ultimately the heterosexual contest is not simply through the female, but for her. The competition exists to establish which male will “win” the female. This game gets played in “A White Heron.” Who will win Sylvia’s allegiance, the heron or the hunter? Ironically, by showing the heron victorious, Jewett shows victory falling outside and antithetical to the human system the hunter, the introducer of the game, imports into the woods. In the

end, when the male bird “wins” Sylvia’s loyalty (even though he is oblivious to it—or so we assume), the victory translates into a victory—a “win”—for antimasculine values, for the values of Mother Earth.

As a fairy tale “A White Heron” argues against the maturation script assigned by the culture. To renounce matrisexual bonds for heterosexual love, this story says, is not to follow nature, as traditional fairy tales so artfully—and we should notice, nervously—insist. It is to ally oneself against nature, even against life. (Were Sylvia to follow the script the hunter and her grandmother promote, the heron would be dead.) Heterosexuality in “A White Heron” is no better or worse than matrisexuality. Nature contains both. What is bad—wrong—is the lie perpetuated in fairy tale after fairy tale that the human institution of heterosexuality is either natural or good, or for that matter inevitable. That fairy-tale fiction, Jewett’s rewrite says, is a masculine plot. Literally. Which is why, I want to suggest in conclusion, Jewett could but usually chose not to write conventional “plot.”

“A White Heron” has plot. Although Jewett lamented as a young writer, in a famous bit of posing, that she could not construct plot, “A White Heron” shows that she very well could and would. She wrote to Horace Scudder at the Atlantic Monthly when she was twenty-four: “But I don’t believe I could write a long story as . . . you advise me in this last letter. 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. It seems to me I can furnish the theatre, and show you the actors, and the scenery, and the audience, but there never is any play!”

“A White Heron” not only shows Jewett’s considerable dramatic talent; it conforms to classic inherited western plot structure. Sylvia lives happily with her grandmother (exposition). A stranger arrives who wants her to violate her own principles and show him where the heron nests (conflict). She falls in love with that stranger (complication). She decides she will deliver the bird to him (climax). She reverses that decision and loses the man’s flattering attention (resolution). The story, dramatically organized in terms of protagonist and antagonist, contains all the elements of conventional linear plot development: exposition, conflict, complication, climax, resolution. Indeed, structure could hardly be tighter. “A White Heron” is an almost perfect example of traditional “mainstream” western narrative structure.

That traditional inherited structure strikingly resembles the perceptual mode of men described by some modern psychologists. In In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development (1982), for example, Carol Gilligan explains that male and female developmental journeys and goals are not the same; we are taught to take different routes and to arrive at contrasting destinations. She finds that “while men repre-

sent powerful activity as assertion and aggression, women in contrast portray acts of nurturance as acts of strength” and says that men and women, translating these different definitions of successful development into pictorial images, tend to visualize their lives in very different terms. “The images of hierarchy and web,” Gilligan says, “drawn from the texts of men’s and women’s fantasies and thoughts, convey different ways of structuring relationships and are associated with different views of morality and self.” They “inform different modes of assertion and response: the wish [of men] to be alone at the top and the consequent fear that others will get too close; the wish [of women] to be at the center of connection and the consequent fear of being too far out on the edge.”12 As I have argued elsewhere, conventional western written narrative such as Jewett lamented not being able to reproduce corresponds in important ways to the hierarchical mode described here by Gilligan. Created by men, standard dramatic structure is linear (starts at one point and moves forward to another point); pinnacle-oriented (moves by stages or steps, often clearly identifiable, to a climactic top point); asymmetric (the high point usually occurs between the middle and the end); and relationally exclusive rather than accumulative (relationships compete with and replace each other to keep the action moving forward). The result is narrative structure that works on a ladder principle: action and tension mount as we progress through the fiction to its climax, its high point, situated close to the end.13

This traditional, masculine, narrative progression precisely describes the shape of “A White Heron,” a story about rejecting patriarchal prescriptions. In effect Jewett literally moves Sylvia through the very plot the girl must decide whether or not to be part of. To use Gilligan’s images: onto Sylvia’s world of web, a pattern grounded in affectional reciprocity rather than aggression, is superimposed a new pattern: one of hierarchy or ladder. Based not on relationality but on aggression,14 this pattern is essentially masculine. Whereas Sylvia has been accustomed to meandering in loops and spirals with Mistress Moolly the cow, upon the stranger’s arrival she is thrust into a new structure. It is one that formally, in the way it literally mounts toward its climax, reproduces the ethical and psycho-sexual journey that a girl heading into puberty is supposed to take. She is supposed to abandon her matrisexually structured life for a phallically dictated one. In “A White Heron” Sylvia tries the new pattern out. When she climbs the tree she actually scales the story’s climax: content and form coalesce completely. Jewett makes Sylvia the protagonist of a plot classically masculine in its tight linear, climax-oriented structure.

After testing the pattern, after putting on the male-focused identity expected of her and traveling along the plotted line laid out for girls in heterosexual patriarchal culture, Sylvia resists. She returns to her circles of earthbound meanders with the cow—as does Jewett. Having perfectly reproduced traditional male-defined narrative structure she writes against it in her ultrafeminine last paragraph, full of flowery, personal invocations and hovering apostrophes. This flossy feminine paragraph rips the fiction formally very much as Sylvia’s contrasting rhetoric—her complete silence—has already torn up the hunter’s plot. Thematically and formally the conclusion of “A White Heron” rejects the shape of violence—the masculine plot—it has reproduced in order to challenge.15

“This is my birthday,” Jewett wrote in 1897 at the age of 48, “and I am always nine years old.”16 To be nine years old in Jewett is not to be “arrested.” It is to be poised on the edge of the most important decision a woman makes in life, whether or not to stay in the magical yet “natural” realm of the mother. In fairy tale terms, that is the realm of the witch and deciding to stay not only means deciding against the prince; it means deciding in favor of the witch. That figure in a nine-year-old, to come full circle and quote Starhawk as I end, is not a midwife or a hag. “She is the Maiden, the Virgin . . . belonging to herself alone, not bound to any man. She is the wild child, lady of the woods, the huntress, free and untamed—Artemis, Kore, Aradia, Nimue. White is her color.”17 Sylvia, Jewett’s fairy tale says, is her name.

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15. For a book-length deconstructionist reading of Jewett’s story which offers as a feminist interpretation the psychoanalytic (and unquestioningly heterosexual) thesis that at the heart of this story is a “secret father/daughter relation” (p. 114), a thesis based on the “surmise” that the story’s narrator is paternal (p. 102), see Louis A. Renza, “A White Heron” and the Question of Minor Literature (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1984).
