March 1986

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Recommended Citation
Colby Quarterly, Volume 22, no.1, March 1986, p.36-42

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Rituals of Flight and Return: The Ironic Journeys of Sarah Orne Jewett's Female Characters

by MARILYN E. MOBLEY

IN LIGHT OF Sarah Orne Jewett's expressed affection for the rural vil­
lages of Maine, it might seem inconsistent that she so often uses flight
imagery to describe the real and imaginative journeys of her female
characters. Though seemingly contradictory, this characteristic imagery
belyes an ambivalence toward her native region,¹ and demonstrates an
unflinching admiration for its self-reliant women. Challenging the notion
that range is masculine and that confinement is feminine,² Jewett por­
trays women who continually contemplate and/or embark on journeys
outside the confines of their rural domestic communities. While a dif­
ferent form of flight predominates in each text, certain patterns emerge
in her numerous references to birds, holidays and excursions that signify
Jewett's attempt to acquaint her readers with the range of experience
available to her New England women.³ The most significant of these
patterns—the flight from one's environment to the outside world and the
inevitable return home—has the mythic characteristics of ritual and
reveals Jewett's complex response to this region, to its women and to her
own role as a regional writer. Although inevitable, the return is not a
resignation to limitations or failure, but a heroic expression of the desire
to remain connected to one's cultural roots; thus, like flight, it is an act
of self-affirmation.

With the exception of The Country of the Pointed Firs, "A White
Heron"⁴ presents the most dramatic example of Jewett's flight motifs.
Sylvia's initiatory journey occurs simultaneously on three levels: physi­

cally, as an actual adventure, imaginatively, as a "voyage" of discovery, and
symbolically, as a passage from ignorance to knowledge. Although the
story begins with a description of her as content and secure within her
rural setting, Sylvia craves more space than her grandmother's home pro­
vides. Consistent with the pastoral resonances in her name is her grand­
mother's description of her as a "great wand'rer" (164) with whom wild

¹. Rebecca Wall Nail, " 'Where Every Prospect Pleases': Sarah Orne Jewett, South Berwick, and the
Importance of Place," in Critical Essays on Sarah Orne Jewett, ed. Gwen L. Nagel (Boston: G. K. Hall,
1984), pp. 185-98.
⁴. Sarah Orne Jewett, The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday
Anchor, 1956). All parenthetical references in the text to "A White Heron," "The Hiltons' Holiday," "The Flight of Betsey Lane" and Pointed Firs are to this reprint edition.
creatures and birds easily identify. Therefore, more significant than the “dream of love” (167) that the ornithologist arouses is the “spirit of adventure” that his inquiries about the white heron inspire.

If the “dream of love” is short-lived, it is because her greater desire is to reach the vantage point where she could “see all the world” (167). Thus, Sylvia does not consider the journey up the tree as a dangerous physical feat, but as a rewarding flight to a greater range of experience, knowledge and freedom. In language customarily attributed to male characters and male quests, we learn of Sylvia’s “utmost bravery” in undertaking such a “great enterprise” (168–69). Her journey culminates in two epiphanies: first—the feeling that, like the birds, “she too could go flying” (169), and second—her discovery of the heron’s secret nest (169–70). Thus, the portrayal of Sylvia is not only heroic but triumphant.

The nature of her triumph—successfully making the solitary passage from ignorance to knowledge of the world—rehearses the traditional metaphor for the initiatory experience in American literature. If we understand initiation as the first existential ordeal, crisis or encounter with experience in the life of a youth, or more simply as a “viable mode of confronting adult realities,” then we might say Sylvia undergoes an initiation. Yet the traditional pattern of the initiatory journey—that of separation or departure, trial, communication of communal secrets, and return to the community—is not what we have in this story. Although Sylvia returns to her home, her departure has been both real and imaginative, both complete and abortive. In realistic terms, she moves upward but not outward. Only figuratively and psychically does her journey broaden her horizons.

Indeed, if we were to focus solely on the flight or departure itself, it might seem that we have simply another character who attempts to “transcend” the conditions of her rural life. Instead, in Sylvia’s return and refusal to reveal communal secrets is a departure from the traditional initiation pattern. Sylvia’s refusal to reveal the location of the heron’s nest confirms that the journey not only gives her knowledge of the outside world but also courage to reject that world and protect her own. Thus, just as her journey has been a heroic act, so is her decision to deny “the great world . . . for a bird’s sake” (170–71). It is a liberating experience that empowers Sylvia to protect the “essential human values” and her harmonious relationship with nature that the hunter threatens. Her ritual
of flight and return is not so much a "coming of age" as it is a growing into consciousness.\textsuperscript{10} Despite the realities and the triumphs of Sylvia's ordeal, "A White Heron" remains a highly symbolic, almost metaphysical story. Consequently, Jewett's preoccupation with the need to know the world and the village,\textsuperscript{11} and the city and the country appears in oblique terms. In "The Hiltons' Holiday" and "The Flight of Betsey Lane," this same preoccupation is apparent, but it takes on less symbolic, and more explicit, realistic hues. The journeys are therefore horizontal rather than vertical, emphasizing the complimentary needs for self-affirmation and connection to others. For example, the Hilton girls' father suggests their excursion into town as a "treat" or opportunity to "know the world" and "see how other folks do things" (292-93), while their mother advocates the virtues of the country. Her less than enthusiastic response to the proposed trip is emphasized by her stasis in the rocking chair and her questioning "why folks want . . . to go trapesin' off to strange places when such things is happenin' right about 'em" (294). Her words invoke Jewett's own ambivalence toward this region's concomitant self-sufficiency and deprivation.\textsuperscript{12}

The characterization of the Hilton girls illustrates how the journey can actually blur the distinctions between town and country. Before the journey, the depiction of the two sisters represents the traditional dichotomy between the female who readily accepts the confines of hearth and home and the one who does not.\textsuperscript{13} While Susan Ellen is described as a "complete little housekeeper" (291), Katy is described as one who ventures "out o' doors" to "hark . . . [to] bird[s]" (292). Ironically, the "holiday" trip to town transforms both girls. When they return, their mother perceives that both "children looked different . . . as if they belonged to the town as much as to the country" (304). Their transformation suggests that a woman need not deny one to enjoy the other, but that she could affirm both. But it is not that the journey itself transforms the girls, but rather that the journey as an excursion into the past changes them. It is in town that the girls learn their family history, listen to the memories of the town's elderly and have their picture taken with their father. Thus, the journey is into the past as a valuable investment in the "riches of association and remembrance" (304) from which they would continually draw on the road to self-discovery.

In short, flight and return are not mutually exclusive experiences, but are the affirmation of desire in Jewett's women. The circularity of the journey does not signify the impoverishment that some have suggested;\textsuperscript{14}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[10] Machann, p. 1470A.
\end{footnotes}
instead, it signifies the ritualistic pattern of desire, expectation, fulfillment and desire that characterizes the cycle of human experience. In this sense, Jewett is very modern.15 But as a woman writer, she illustrates that the desire that accompanies a woman's return is not to subdue objects to her own purpose as a man does, but to reconnect and share with the community from which she departed.16 Accordingly, the Hilton girls, whose lives have been enriched by the day's excursion, share their experiences with their mother, and by so doing, enrich her life as well.

This leads us to "The Flight of Betsey Lane," for the expedition of this elderly spinster is somewhat similar to the excursion of the Hilton girls. But unlike their trip to town, initiated by their father's invitation, Betsey Lane's journey to Philadelphia is inspired by a long hoped for opportunity to "see something of the world before she died" (174). The By-fleet Poor-house, where she resides, has ironic undertones of being both a prison and a haven. Its inhabitants, referred to as "inmates," do not lament their situation, but actually like "the change and excitement" that their winter "residence" provides (172). Yet, as the youngest of the three spinsters, Betsey Lane seeks greater excitement than the poor-house offers. The opportunity to realize her dream comes in the form of one hundred dollars, a sum which furnishes her with a "sense of her own consequence" (179) that is much like the urgent "wish for wings" that Nina Auerbach contends is characteristic of the spinster as hero.17 Thus, we are prepared for her disappearance to be described as a discovery that she "had flown" (182), and for her departure to be termed a "flitting" (183) and an "escape" (185). In other words, flight has connotations of independent choice, unlimited potential and bird-like freedom from captivity.

While the journey of her friends to search for her is termed a "fruitless expedition" (192), her journey is thoroughly productive. In strictly personal terms, it provides her with much-desired escape from narrow circumstances, with knowledge of the world (almost literally, in that the Centennial she attends is the equivalent of the World's Fair), and with a sense of rejuvenation and fulfillment. Yet her return points to another sense in which her excursion has been productive. When she informs her friends that she has brought each of them a "little somethin' " (192), her words signify more than the material tokens of friendship she gives them. These words also suggest the greater gifts of spiritual renewal she wishes to offer by sharing her journey with them. Again, the female hero's return is characterized by the urgent desire to share and reaﬁrm communal ties that is almost as urgent as the previous desire to take flight. In sum, Betsey Lane's return also has powers of transformation: it transforms the three friends from mere bean-pickers into a "small elderly company . . . [of]

triumphant” women (193). Enriched vicariously through their friend’s journey, these women find it easier to endure the realities of their meager existence.

Motifs of flight and return take on their greatest complexity in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. From the merging of the narrator’s story with that of the other characters comes a depiction of Dunnet Landing as both “prison” and “paradise” (37). Men, such as Captain Littlepage, indict this region for its insularity and narrowness (25). But the women see it as “a complete and tiny continent and home” (40). They also provide the flux and vitality that allows the village to survive. Whether it is the daily expeditions of Mrs. Todd, the excursion of Mrs. Blackett to the family reunion, or the flight of Joanna Todd from the community to her self-imposed exile, the ironic journeys of these women sustain the life of this “female landscape.” Of all the characters, however, Mrs. Todd and the narrator best illustrate the thematic and structural significances of flight and return.

Mrs. Todd embodies the spirit of the land. While others have been occupationally displaced from the land by industrialization, she survives as a folk herbalist who not only thrives on the soil for her livelihood but moves among her neighbors as one who, like them, “grew out of the soil.” Because of her multiple roles as “land-lady, herb gatherer and rustic philosopher” (35), she is more mobile than any of her neighbors. While her trips to gather herbs resemble flight as the freedom of mobility and independence, the journeys to the homes of friends and relatives seem to be flight as escape from solitude or as an excursion from routine. Yet regardless of how often she travels or how much she enjoys administering to the needs of others, she religiously returns to her solitary residence. Thus, while she is depicted as resourceful, heroic and self-reliant, she nevertheless seems tragically alone and imprisoned in “a narrow set of circumstances [which] had caged [her] . . . and held [her] captive” (95). On the other hand, she unselfishly shares with others as if, the narrator observes, she had “been set on this lonely island . . . to keep the balance true, and make up to all her . . . neighbors for other things which they may have lacked” (47). In that she seems to keep some mythic balance between past and present “ . . . as if some force of Nature . . . gave her cousinship to . . . ancient deities” (137), Mrs. Todd seems larger than life. When she reminisces about her husband, she retreats into herself and seems tragically human and heroic at the same time. In fact, her grandeur inspires the narrator to compare her to “Antigone” and to view her as a “renewal of some historic soul” (49).

The existential leap from old-fashioned, rustic simplicity to the grandeur and complexity of myth is a crucial one. Myth, an inherently complex narrative that fuses the natural with the supernatural, recalls the value of ritual to give expression to unconscious desires and to affirm our faith in human potential. In the parallel to Antigone is the suggestion that Mrs. Todd heroically affirms this potential at the same time that she must tragically concede to the existence of forces she cannot control. The allusions to classical texts direct us to the universality and complexity of country people and commonplace experience that the narrator grows to comprehend and respect.

The female character who gives unifying perspective and aesthetic complexity to *Pointed Firs* is the narrator. In her mutual roles as visitor/observer and resident/participant, she comes to know the “world” and the “village” in the fullest sense. Her visit is actually a “Return”—as the title of the first chapter informs us—to a rural haven of simplicity or an “unspoiled place”; yet, it is also a flight from an urban prison of complexity and “unsatisfactory normality.” In her role as visitor, she journeys from detached ignorance and superiority to involved acceptance and finally to enlightened understanding. Nowhere is this clearer than at the Bowden reunion where she shifts from first person singular “I” to first person plural “we” (90) to describe that communal celebration. In her role as narrator, she becomes the unifying device that gives thematic and structural continuity to the novel. Her recognition that she cannot remain at Dunnet Landing but must return to Boston, conveys, as does the final chapter title, “A Backward View,” that the ultimate reward for the journey out is the opportunity for growth and fulfillment of desire; concurrently, the reward for the journey back is the reservoir of remembrance, self-discovery and renewed desire. Neither journey precludes the significance of the other. The narrator’s writing aesthetically affirms both the journey of flight and the journey to return, and thus, preserves what Henry James refers to as “the palpable present.” In other words, art can continually shape and recreate the journey.

In the fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett we have just that—art continually recreating the journey. By using the rituals of flight and return in carefully devised circular narrative structures, she exposes the ironies that characterized the lives of many rural women in her time. On her own literary journey, Jewett discovered that she need not be limited by the

local color medium; instead she could transform it through her essentially affirmative vision. Indeed, she journeyed beyond the artistic confines of local color into the comprehensive landscape we associate with myth. The achievement of her fiction is that she does not deny the contradictions that emerge, but seeks instead to hold them in balance before us.

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