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“This prim corner of land where she was queen”:
Sarah Orne Jewett’s New England Gardens

by GWEN L. NAGEL

Gardens play an important role throughout the development of American literature. From the Puritans, who saw their mission as the establishment of a new Eden or New Earth in the American wilderness, to those who came later and saw the potential for an American New World, North America represented a distillation of the Biblical and classical pastoral ideals. Henry Nash Smith has explored how the Western wilderness was perceived as a garden of the world, a pervasive and significant idea in American history and literature:

The image of this vast and constantly growing agricultural society in the interior of the continent became one of the dominant symbols of nineteenth-century American society—a collective representation, a poetic idea . . . that defined the promise of American life. The master symbol of the garden embraced a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labor in the earth, all centering about the heroic figure of the idealized frontier farmer, armed with that supreme agrarian weapon, the sacred plow.¹

Leo Marx has discussed how the New World garden was destroyed by industrial progress, and more recently Annette Kolodney has explored the role women played in domesticating the American West by planting gardens. Her revisionist history of the Western experience in *The Land Before Her* provides a useful guide to the nineteenth-century cultural landscape.² But all of these scholars are concerned with the expansive and mythic West. In the works of Sarah Orne Jewett, however, it is the Eastern garden, the New England garden, which may prove as significant a part of the nineteenth-century cultural landscape as the vast spaces that constituted the American West.

Gardens figure prominently in Jewett’s works from her earliest stories in *The Atlantic Monthly* to her masterpiece, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. Unlike Smith’s western wilderness, Jewett’s gardens are not agricultural paradises promising a great future, nor is their central figure the heroic farmer with his plow. Instead, Jewett’s “proper” New England gardens are usually small, tidy plots, confined by fences, associated with the past and not the future, and lovingly cultivated by women.

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The role of the garden in Local Colorism in general is related to a traditionally empathetic sense of place. Although Jewett used such things as manners, dialect, folklore, and local history to portray the character of her region, she also presents in her works an accurate articulation of the New England landscape, including the gardens. One only has to peruse the essays in *Country By-Ways* to discover that Jewett sees and experiences intensely the natural landscape of Maine. Her letters as well as her poetry suggest her intimate knowledge of the flora of her region and the role that gardens played in her life.

Jewett cherished her own garden in South Berwick. She once wrote to an acquaintance, “I hope you would like my own old house in a country village with a proper New England garden,” calling it, in another letter, “an old plot of ground where several generations have been trying to make good things grow.” John Eldredge Frost has described Jewett’s garden as “one of the most beautiful sights in South Berwick. The trellised arborway leading from the back door was covered with honey-suckle blossoms; the garden, circumscribed by box. Mignonette and petunias, larkspur and lilies, London Pride and French pinks, flowering currant and snowberry bushes, hollyhocks, roses, peonies, and asters abounded.” Frost also noted that Jewett and her sister Mary would breakfast in the garden, a fact corroborated by Mrs. Elizabeth Goodwin, former caretaker of the Jewett house who, as a child, often shared breakfast with Jewett. Richard Cary records that Jewett employed one full-time and one part-time gardener to maintain her extensive garden at the back of her house.

Flowers, both wild and cultivated, and gardens were a favorite topic in Jewett’s letters. She would record for a friend an early sighting of trailing arbutus or, in another season, write that she tucked in her marigolds at night to protect them from the frost. In a letter to Annie Fields she wrote, “Oh! the garden is so splendid! I never dreamed of so many hollyhocks in a double row and all my own!” To Sarah Whitman, the artist, she commented, “the garden is so nice—old-fashioned indeed with pink hollyhocks and tall blue larkspurs. You might make a sketch with but slight trouble, with figures of old ladies wearing caps in the long walks.”

Her appreciation for flowers and gardens was not confined to her native heath. Her letters from Europe are also dotted with references and often exuberant descriptions of landscapes and flowers, and she frequently sends sprigs of plants she’s seen to her friends at home, a flower from the Acropolis, for example. In one French château she records, “The...
château was ruined in the Revolution, but there is the dear lady's little
garden, as if she had gone to heaven and left it only last year."11 Jewett
here associates gardens with a woman, an equation she makes throughout
her fiction. In another letter, after the death of a friend, she describes her
visit to the dead woman's house: "She was there—all her atmosphere—her
books on the table, her flowers all in bloom..."12
These and other biographical sources reveal Jewett's intense fascination
with and sensitivity to gardens. Of equal concern, however, is the literary
function they serve in her fiction. Although her gardens (and wild places)
are rooted in fact, and thus provide her with setting, they serve more than
a mimetic function; they provide her works with a rich matrix of themes
that fall essentially into three pervasive motifs: the garden lost, the garden
under siege, and the garden possessed.
There is a sense in which the very idea of a garden is optimistic—any­
body who has ever planted a seed has to have at least some sense of opti­
mism about the future. But Jewett, in an important essay entitled "From
a Mournful Villager," and in scattered fictional pieces as well, emphasizes
the pessimistic side of the garden, the Edenic garden lost. The garden in
such works is not an emblem of fecundity and promise for the future but
of loss and death, Jewett's characteristic exploration of the mutability
theme.
"From a Mournful Villager," an essay first appearing in the Atlantic in
1881 and later that year reprinted in Country By-Ways, is an elegy for
treasured things, for a civilization that Jewett values but that is dying out.
The garden is an emblem of that loss. Jewett laments the demise of front
yard gardens and "the type of New England village character and civiliza­
tion with which they are associated."13 Further, she explicitly identifies
the New England front yard garden with women: "It was not man-like to
think of the front yard, since it was the special domain of the women,—
the men of the family respected but ignored it,—they had to be teased in
the spring to dig the flower beds..." (pp.124—25). This is perhaps the
single most important fact about the garden in Jewett's works: a garden
is feminine territory. Men may be useful working the soil but women
created and nurtured the garden. Jewett laments that the New England
garden was dying out in the wake of social change and she links the rights
of women with the fate of the garden:
The disappearance of many of the village front yards may come to be typical of the altered
position of women, and mark a stronghold on her way from the much talked-of slavery and
subjection to a coveted equality. She used to be shut off from the wide acres of the farm,
and had no voice in the world's politics; she must stay in the house, or only hold sway out
of doors in this prim corner of land where she was queen. No wonder that women clung to

13. Sarah Orne Jewett, "From a Mournful Villager," in Country By-Ways (Boston: Houghton, Mif­
their rights in their flower-gardens then, and no wonder that they have grown a little careless of them now, and that lawn mowers find so ready a sale. The whole world is their front yard nowadays! (pp. 120–21)

Though an optimistic view of women’s status in 1881, this passage reveals some of Jewett’s ambivalence about women’s expanding domain. Women have been confined to the domestic arena—“this prim corner of land where she was queen”—and, though Jewett implicitly expresses pleasure that the feminine territory has expanded, she conservatively regrets that when a woman abandons her garden as she enters the wider world, she risks losing touch with important values in her personal and cultural heritage.

One of the reasons the garden is so valuable is that it is part of a woman’s heritage, in particular her English heritage, for many New England gardens are planted with “the little slips and cutting that had been brought over in the ship, and more carefully guarded than any of the household goods; I can see the women look at them fearfully when they came into bloom, because nothing else could be a better reminder of their old home” (p. 122). In the spring, Jewett continues, “every flower that bloomed was the child of a beloved ancestry” (p. 122). Thus the disappearance of the New England gardens signals a corresponding loss of inherited English traditions in an American society that was turning westward for its new values and national character.14

The confluence of social change for women and women’s own flagging interest in the work of gardening is related to the loss of women’s personal heritage and the nation’s heritage as well, a point that requires a recollection of American garden history. The lawn mower was invented in 1830 by an Englishman named Edwin Budding. It wasn’t until later in the century that lawn mowers became widely available; before they did, grass and weeds were cut with a scythe, or, in areas away from the house, by obliging sheep. The mass production of lawn mowers in the 1870s made feasible the kind of lawns and front yard landscaping familiar today. One historian of the American garden states that the lawn mower indeed created a “revolution in home beautification.”15

Jewett was of course right about the English heritage of New England gardens. The first American gardens were made mostly of European imports; settlers brought with them old world traditions, plants, fruit trees, seeds, and slips. New England gardens were notable for “an almost repressive austerity” in the seventeenth-century; they existed chiefly for food, condiments, and herbs for medicine and other purposes. Their utilitarian function outweighed any consideration for aesthetics; from 1620 until 1840 there was little change in garden design. Gardens were based on the medieval model, which was generally symmetrical with one

14. Jewett had already dealt with the conflict between English heritage and the western leanings of the nation in a subtheme of “A Lost Lover,” published in 1878.
central path. The beds were raised and the garden was near the house and enclosed by fencing. One commentator on American gardens indicates that some "sinful glimmerings of pleasure began to sneak in" to the garden in the eighteenth-century, but it wasn't until the mid-nineteenth-century that taste in American garden design changed. Influenced by the Englishman Lancelot "Capability" Brown (1715-1783), who defined new principles of landscape gardening in which the curve, rather than the straight line, became important, an American, Andrew Jackson Downing, wrote *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1841) that laid out principles of gardening for this side of the Atlantic. The basic shift was from the old-fashioned geometric or symmetrical garden to the curvilinear walkways with trees and shrubs. This was a more naturalistic style than the ancient garden designs. Old-fashioned flowers went out of style, and bluegrass became an ornamental crop.17

In a manuscript fragment of "From a Mournful Villager" Jewett writes of this shift in landscaping style: "There is a great deal to be said in its favour—its aims are admirable and it seeks to follow nature not to enslave her—the primness of a Dutch garden delights us with its quaint soberness and order—but the artist in gardening . . . is always a copyist, not a teacher. . . ." It is clear, however, Jewett's heart is with the prim Dutch garden: " . . . one clings fondly unless one is heart and soul a radical and iconoclast, to the old associations and familiar fashions of living. If one is a conservative by nature life is painful at times."

These changes were more notable in the landscape design in the South—New England was more conservative, clinging to the old-fashioned style—but as Jewett's comments indicate, the New England garden was imperiled. Interestingly, in the 1890s, ten years after "From a Mournful Villager" appeared, Charles Sprague Sargent, the first director of the Arnold Arboretum in Boston, gave impetus to the nostalgic movement to recapture the old-fashioned gardens. In *Garden and Forest* (1895) he called for a return to the old gardens and the use of favorite old flowers, but it was "the quality of the gardens and the mood that he remembered best, and he hoped" that the "dry young Americans" of the 1890s who, "he felt, scorned sentiment and seemed 'all for amusement and reform' " would come to appreciate old gardens as places for reflection and dreaming.19 Jewett's *Atlantic* piece seems to anticipate the 1890s revival of the "old-fashioned" garden.

What Jewett found to lament in "From a Mournful Villager" was the

18. Cited from manuscript MS Am. 1743.5(4) in the Houghton Library, Harvard University.
loss of the garden and corresponding loss of old-fashioned provincial life, exemplified in part in the old social ritual of visiting. She suggests that the development of this tradition coincided with the increased importance of the garden:

Perhaps the parlor, or best room, and a special separate garden for the flowers were two luxuries of the same date, and they made a noticeable change in the manner of living,—the best room being a formal recognition of the claims of society, and the front yard an appeal for the existence of something that gave pleasure,—beside the merely useful and wholly necessary things of life. (pp.123-24)

Jewett goes on to recall two old women, both dead, whom she associates with gardens and who exemplify a dying way of life. One old woman she remembers was an exemplar of gracious hospitality and a lover of the garden. When this elderly hostess from South Berwick died, her body was carried down the long, wide walk, between the tall box borders which were her pride; and all the air was heavy and sweet with the perfume of the early summer blossoms; the white lilacs and the flowering currants were still in bloom, and the rows of her dear Dutch tulips stood dismayed in their flaunting colors and watched her go away. (p. 133)

Jewett’s pathetic fallacy here enhances the close link between this woman and her garden. She forecasts that the death of such old women will be not only a great loss to social traditions but to the garden itself, a symbol of past culture. 20

Jewett concludes her piece with a recollection of her grandmother’s death in language notable for the Edenic imagery of loss. Jewett recalls her own “trials and sorrows in [the] paradise” of her grandmother’s garden, and she mourns any destruction caused by her careless enthusiasm. She recalls her “sin” of breaking treasured flowers, “a beautiful, dark-blue fleur-de-lis” and the bud of a “cherished tea-rose” (p. 136). Small sins, perhaps, but as a child Jewett learned that her carelessness could cause destruction, and when she was chastised she recalled that “for many days afterward I was bowed down with a sense of my guilt and shame” (p. 137). The Edenic imagery when Jewett recalls the death of her grandmother conveys the sense of loss of the garden paradise and the culture associated with it. Instead of destroying gardens, girls must become “worthy successors” to their grandmothers, preservers of nature and, specifically, their gardens. Since women had authority in their gardens and had been entrusted with their guardianship, they must bear the responsibility for their neglect or disappearance and the way of life associated with them: Modern women who neglect the garden and its concomitant values are, by extension, just as guilty as the destructive child in her grandmother’s Edenic garden.

Prior to the publication of “From a Mournful Villager” in 1881,

20. Jewett corresponded with Alice Morse Earle, whose Old Time Gardens (1901) expressed nostalgia for the old-fashioned gardens.
however, Jewett was using the image of a ruined garden in her fiction to signal the death of a woman or the loss of important values. Miss Chauncey of *Deephaven* is devastated by the loss of her cherished family home. The house, empty of its treasure, is in danger of collapsing, but the old woman bravely keeps up the illusion of the past in the ruins of the present. Fortunately for her, Miss Chauncey is oblivious to the change in her fortune:

To herself she was still Miss Chauncey, a gentlewoman of high family, possessed of unusual worldly advantages. . . . She had no idea of the poverty of her surroundings when she paced back and forth, with stately steps, on the ruined terraces of her garden; the ranks of lilies and the conserve roses were still in bloom for her, and the box borders were as trimly kept as ever. . . .

This woman's loss and devastation, even her mental disorientation, are mirrored in her ruined house and garden. Almost twenty years later when Jewett tried her hand at a portrait of the fallen Southern aristocracy in "A War Debt," she employed the garden to reflect the loss. The ruins of an old plantation garden dominate the landscape in the story:

They crossed the old garden, where some ancient espaliers still clung to the broken brickwork of the walls, and a little fruit still clung to the knotted branches, while great hedges of box, ragged and uncared for, traced the old order of the walks. The heavy dew and warm morning sun brought out that antique fragrance, — the faint pungent odor which wakes the utmost memories of the past. . . . Here and there, under the straying boughs of the shrubbery, bloomed a late scarlet poppy from some scattered seed of which such old soil might well be full. It was a barren, neglected garden enough, but still full of charm and delight, being a garden. There was a fine fragrance of grapes through the undergrowth, but the whole place was completely ruined; a little snake slid from the broken base of a sundial. . . .

The snake in this garden and the blooming poppy suggest a fallen Eden, a lost paradise, an appropriate ambience for the old plantation where a pair of broken but still noble southern aristocrats live out their lives amidst the destruction of war. Indeed, southern gardens were in fact a casualty of war.

At issue in Jewett's lost gardens is a nostalgia for the past. Paradise — either cultural or personal — has been destroyed. "Lady Ferry" (which also predates "From a Mournful Villager") captures the same sense of mutability and loss that characterizes "From a Mournful Villager" and presents as well the end of childhood's innocence.

Lady Ferry is a very old woman who seems to embody "the accumulated history of ten centuries of culture." It is appropriate that Marcia, the young narrator of the tale, first meets Lady Ferry in the "enchanting moonlighted" garden, the pride of [her uncle and aunt's] place, for the old woman is closely aligned with gardens and flowers throughout

the story. For example, when Lady Ferry stops near the young girl, the old woman stands “still as the flowers themselves” (p. 192). The girl frequently sees or meets Lady Ferry at night pacing the flagstones of the garden (pp. 194, 212), and when she first goes to meet Lady Ferry in her rooms, the old woman is looking down at the garden (p. 202). On this occasion Lady Ferry is wearing a dress “figured with bunches of dim pink flowers; and some of these flowers looked to me like wicked little faces. . . . I looked at the faded little imps, until they seemed as much alive as Lady Ferry herself” (p. 203). Marcia also notices a “curious fragrance” (p. 203) which emanated from Lady Ferry’s old clothes, another characteristic she shares with the flowers. As a living vestige of the past, Lady Ferry seems to have a remarkable capacity for survival. But like the garden flowers she is aligned with, she too is subject to death and decay.

In this story a seasonal frame, as reflected in the state of the garden, buttresses the mutability theme and forecasts the changes brought by time. For example, after Marcia’s first walk in the early summer garden her uncle promises to give his niece a border and some plants of her own. When Marcia finally bids farewell to Lady Ferry in the garden “some dried autumn leaves swirled about the old woman’s feet” (p. 220).

Years later when Marcia returns to the scene of her childhood she walks around the garden: “I could hardly trace the walks, all overgrown with thick, short grass, though there were a few ragged lines of box, and some old rosebushes; and I saw the very last of the flowers,—a bright red poppy, which had bloomed under a lilac-tree among the weeds” (p. 225). As a young girl Marcia had innocently believed the rumors that Lady Ferry would live forever, but as this ruined garden, the sight of the abandoned house, the death image of the poppy, and the graves in the family burying-ground all suggest, Lady Ferry is dead. At the heart of this story is the inevitability of change and death, not only for an old woman and her garden, and for the traditions and culture that Lady Ferry represents, but also for Marcia’s child-like vision of the world, a vision that accepts the possibility of immortality for Lady Ferry and that could believe flowers on the old lady’s dress were alive. But garden paradises, both fictional and real (and emblems of an imperiled culture), Jewett warns her readers, are subject to time and decay. Only successive generations of younger women can preserve the garden and the culture that is threatened.

Of course not all of Jewett’s gardens are in ruins; some are threatened but salvageable. An imperiled garden in Jewett is usually endangered by one of three things: nature itself—other seeds or weeds or the wilderness encroaching on abandoned gardens; neglect of the gardener; or the indifference or hostility of men toward either the garden itself or the woman who tends it.

In “Bold Words at the Bridge,” Jewett treats the theme of the garden under siege with humor. The story is a comic portrait of two Irish im-
migrants, Bridget Connelly and Mary Dunleavy, who tend adjoining gardens. One plants watermelons and the other pumpkins; each blames the other for sabotaging her crop. Mrs. Dunleavy contemplates moving, but she's unable to bring herself to leave the most important thing in her life: “I've no heart except for me garden, me poor little crops is doing so well; thanks be to God, me cabbages is very fine.” 24 When a goat eats some of her prized flowers, she muses on their loss: “The seed had been sent her from the old country, and this was the first year they had come into full bloom. She had been hoping that the sight of them would melt Mrs. Connelly's heart into some expression of friendliness, since they had come from adjoining parishes in old county Kerry” (p. 125). The garden is valuable not only because it is the source of feminine pride but also because it is the repository of cherished seeds from the Irish homeland, a link with her past. When the two feuding neighbors are finally reconciled they are reunited, appropriately, over the fruits of their gardens. Although the theme is treated humorously, this story suggests that because women invest much of themselves in their gardens any infringement on that territory by an indifferent or hostile outsider may be met with vigorous protest. A garden can become embattled territory for women who maintain a tenacious hold on their rights in their small, backyard dominions.

In “The Town Poor,” the once independent Bray sisters are forced by poverty to leave their “neat little village house” 25 to go to live “like captives” in the back rooms of another woman's house (p. 48). One of the few things they manage to salvage from their old home are some morning-glory seeds from their old garden, but the chickens destroy them when they sprout. These women’s meager attempts at gardening suggest both their wish to preserve the memories of their home and to cultivate a corner of “foreign” territory that is theirs alone. The image of the uprooted morning-glory sprouts effectively suggests the sense of displacement the two sisters feel at losing their home and their lack of any territory they can call their own.

Very often it is a man who poses a threat to the garden. John Ashby, in “Miss Debby's Neighbors,” for example, destroys his mother’s flowers when he foolishly attempts to move her house to another location. Miss Debby recalls: “I was coming by with mother, and she said it made her feel bad to see the little strips of leather by the fore door where Mis’Ashby had nailed up a rosebush once.” 26 The irreverence the son displays for the house and garden betrays his disrespect for his mother since they are so closely identified with her.

Another man who threatens a garden is Mr. Hayden in “A Second Spring.” When Martha Hayden dies, her flower bed is left to her husband’s care, but because he is inept in this foreign territory, the flower bed overgrows with weeds,27 and Mr. Hayden finally has to send for another woman to set things straight both inside the house and in the garden.

Miss Ann Dunning in “A Garden Story” also discovers that men are not to be trusted in her garden. “She would not have a man about that part of her small domain—not she!” Once when she did allow a man to weed her garden, she “found the top of one of her best lilies and nearly all the sprouts of her favorite mist plant lying with the pit-weed and rag-weed on the garden walk.”28 The appropriate successor or companion to her in this feminine enterprise of gardening is another woman—in this case a young girl from the city.

Gardens both reflect the nature of their caretakers and affect the quality of life of the people who tend them. Jewett was echoing an idea current in the popular magazines and journals of the times in this story: gardens were seen as a healthy antidote to the evils and pollution of city life.29 Late in the century city allotment gardens were advocated for disadvantaged city children to give them a healthful contact with nature. In “A Garden Story,” Ann, the country woman, participates in a summer program which brought orphans from the city to the country for a week. The orphan, Peggy, is later adopted by Ann, but not until she has made a plea to save the thinned out plants from Ann’s garden to send to Boston friends confined to a hospital. The young orphan proves her virtue by her response to the country garden.

Jewett didactically treats the idea that the garden is an index to the character of its mistress in an early story for children, “Half Done Polly,” in which the title character’s sloppiness at housekeeping and gardening has dire consequences. Jewett was reflecting another popular sentiment: the character of a gardener is reflected in the garden she keeps. In a recent history of nineteenth-century American gardens, Patricia Tice records how children’s books and even tableware reinforced the idea that gardening “was an ideal pastime since it taught the value of work.”30 Catherine Beecher extolled the merits of gardening for children: “few understand their value in the training of the young. . . . Every child should cultivate flowers and fruits to sell and to give away, and thus be taught to learn the value of money and to practice both economy and benevolence.”31 The equation between the garden and the morality of its gardener stems in part from the American belief in the agrarian ideal. Agrarianism on the

29. Tice, pp. 20–22.
30. Tice, p. 20.
31. Tice, p. 22.
domestic scale—gardening—"became a method for preserving traditional values and teaching them to the young" (Tice, p. 18).

When Jewett extends this idea to works for adults she does so much more subtly. A final story that deals with the indifference of a man to a woman's garden is "Marsh Rosemary." Before marrying, the independent and capable Ann Floyd had tended her "gay little garden," but after her marriage she is overworked (her husband is no help to her) so she relinquishes the garden responsibilities to her husband. And because he is indifferent to it, the garden degenerates: "The young cabbages and cucumbers were nearly buried in weeds, and the currant bushes were fast being turned into skeletons by the ravaging worms. Jerry had forgotten to sprinkle them with hellebore, after all, though she had put the watering-pot into his very hand the evening before." While viewing the remains of her garden, Ann finally recognizes the flaws in her husband's character. He, meanwhile, slinks off to the orchard and contemplates hoeing "the old girl's garden stuff by and by," but instead he falls asleep "while the weeds grew at their own sweet will, and the currant worms went looping and devouring from twig to twig" (pp. 104-05). The contrasts in Ann's and Jerry's character are metaphorically suggested by the kinds of gardens they keep. In this ill-matched marriage, which eventually ends when Jerry deserts Ann for a younger woman, the husband's personal degeneracy, as well as his disregard for his wife, is expressed by his neglect of her garden.

These gardens are under siege, imperiled by neglect or by men, but the majority of gardens in Jewett's works are not lost Edens, nor are they threatened and slipping away from the control of women. Jewett's own image of the New England woman's garden, "this prim corner of land where she was queen," expresses the idea of jurisdiction and rule as well as the limitations of a woman's domain. A few of Jewett's women characters are relatively powerless, but their flourishing gardens give evidence that they can at least assert themselves in a "corner" of their lives.

That even the youngest of Jewett's women may exercise power in a garden plot is revealed in "The White Rose Road." In this sketch the gardener is a very young girl who, though she gets assistance from men, is free to control the composition of her garden:

There were all sorts of things growing there, as if a child's fancy had made the choice,—straight rows of turnips and carrots and beets, a little of everything, one might say; but the only touch of color was from a long border of useful sage in full bloom of dull blue, on the upper side. I am sure this was called Katy's or Becky's piece by the elder members of the family. One can imagine how the young creature had planned it in the spring, and persuaded the men to plough and harrow it, and since then had stoutly done all the work herself. . . .

The girl's selection of plants is idiosyncratic (Jewett wonders what the girl

The daughter in “The Landscape Chamber” lives in a decayed house on a neglected farm with a parsimonious father who prevents her from maintaining the house. In the midst of dreary, neglected barns, other outbuildings, and the house, however, the narrator notices “with surprise that the front yard had been carefully tended; there were some dark crimson roses in bloom, and broken lines of box which had been carefully clipped at no remote period.” When the narrator confronts the pathetic looking woman of the house, the miser’s daughter, she records, “I was instantly drawn toward her, in warm sympathy: the blooming garden was hers. . . . ”

The narrator contrasts the daughter’s concern for the garden with the tyrannical father’s indifference to the land “which was growing wild bushes at its own sweet will, except for a rough patch near the house, which had been dug and planted that year” (p. 92). The flower garden, not the utilitarian garden, is the daughter’s territory, and the care she gives it is a repudiation of her father’s neglect of the estate. When the narrator leaves the unhappy pair their responses to her suggest their opposing values: “I well remember the old man’s clutch at the money I offered him, and the kiss and the bunch of roses that the daughter gave to me” (p. 114). The only means the daughter has of expressing her generous spirit is by giving gifts from her garden, an act which is, in effect, a protest against her father’s parsimony.

The garden serves as a source of expression for another powerless woman in “A Bit of Shore Life” in which the self-confident and resourceful Hannah West dominates her more delicate and unassertive sister, Cynthia. Cynthia is the beautifier; Hannah makes things work. Hannah, who plays an assertive role in the family is physically larger than Cynthia and is described in terms of commerce and control: “She was a tall, large woman, had a direct, business-like manner, —what the country people would call a master smart woman, or a regular driver. . . . ”

Hannah had a “brusque, downright way” about her (p. 257) and was “the capable business member of the household, and she had a loud voice, and went about as if she were in a hurry” (p. 255). Her sister Cynthia is timid and ineffectual except in her garden. When the narrator meets her she sees that Cynthia was “one of the faded-looking country-women who have a hard time, and who, if they had grown up in the midst of a more luxurious way of living, would have been frail and delicate and refined, and entirely lady-like. But, as it was, she was somewhat in the shadow of her sister, and felt as if she were not of very much use or consequence in the world, I have no doubt” (p. 255). Though she can only metaphorically express
her desire for a voice in the household by making "pretty things," Cynthia has found a sphere for herself outdoors. When the narrator accompanies her into the woods they stop in her garden: "It was a gorgeous little garden to look at, with its red poppies, and blue larkspur, and yellow marigolds, and old-fashioned sweet, straying things,—all growing together in a tangle of which my friend seemed ashamed. She told me that it looked as ordered as could be, until the things begun to grow so fast she couldn’t do anything with ’em" (p. 264). Unlike the authoritative Hannah, who governs the functional aspects of life, Cynthia rules in her special way in the flower garden. Her domain is not regimented but expressive of her personality: the flowers in her garden spill freely out of their boundaries. Were Hannah to be in charge of the garden, it would probably be symmetrical, regimented, and purely utilitarian, much as the early settlers’ gardens were.

Cynthia and the miser’s daughter turn to their gardens to gain a sense of self worth and to counteract forces external to themselves, two very dominant people in their lives. In contrast, two of Jewett’s characters must meet the assaults of their own consciences. When Lydia Dunn of “A New Parishioner” and Joanna Todd of The Country of the Pointed Firs are betrayed by men, their anger is not directed outward to their betrayers but inward against themselves. Each woman turns to her house and garden as a psychological refuge where she can assuage her sense of guilt or shame and begin to rebuild her self-respect.

In “A New Parishioner,” Henry Stroud, a former suitor of Lydia Dunn and member of a disreputable family, returns to his native parish, and all of the villagers except Lydia welcome him back warmly. She finally comes very close to ignoring her instincts and almost accepts him as a suitor again, but she is saved from disgracing herself when he is taken away to face charges for breaking the law. When the villagers compliment Miss Dunn for her perspicacity about the scoundrel Stroud, she is tormented by the thought that she too had almost succumbed to the charms of a dishonest man. She (and Miss Dunn prides herself most on her good judgment) transfers her loss of self-respect to hard work in her house and garden:

It was fortunate that she found so much to do inside her house and out, and everybody said that her front yard was the handsomest in Walton that summer. . . . [but] sad thoughts often assailed her, and could not be driven away either by a double diligence in her solitary housekeeping, or by her painstaking care that the garden pinks and lilies should be untroubled by weeds. 36

For Lydia Dunn, increased attention to the house and garden is a cathartic exercise, an attempt to relieve herself of the pressures of her internal punishment. Her garden is a psychological refuge where she can work out

her deep feeling of shame and guilt; through hard work, she transforms her humiliation into beauty her neighbors can enjoy.

After her lover leaves her for another, Joanna Todd moves to Shell Heap Island, an inhospitable piece of land “off the throughfares” where even sheep cannot thrive. This retreat offered Joanna a solitary life of penitence for what she considered her “unpardonable sin” (p. 112), but its harshness is mitigated somewhat by her garden. Mrs. Todd recalls a visit to the island: “It did look sort of homelike and pleasant with wild mornin’glory vines trained up: an’ there was a plot o’ flowers under the front window, portulacas and things. I believe she’d made a garden once, when she was stopping there with her father, and some things must have seeded in” (p. 114). Psychologically, Joanna’s island retreat represents a return to the past. Her father had owned the island, had built the small house on it that Joanna occupies, and had brought his daughter there when she was a girl. Hence, her island home is a kind of sanctuary and her retreat to it represents a return to the garden world of childhood. When the narrator makes her pilgrimage to Joanna’s island years later, the only traces of its previous tenant are the stones of her house’s foundation and “a single faded sprig of much-enduring French pinks” (p. 132).

Thus two women plagued by guilt, Joanna and Lydia Dunn, and two dominated women, Cynthia West and the miser’s daughter, turn to their gardens to find relief from powerful forces, either internal or external. All four women have restricted voices (Lydia and Joanna impose silence on themselves) and the garden provides a means of expressing emotions that they cannot otherwise utter.

There are several Jewett characters, however, who use their gardens to express not guilt or unconscious protests against decay or restriction but affection and love. In “Miss Sydney’s Flowers,” for example, Miss Sydney owns an old home on a now busy city street. When the construction of a city street opens her greenhouse garden to public view, Miss Sydney is distressed. But the garden is beneficial to the city dwellers who view it. The beautiful flowers help draw customers for Mrs. Marley, a poor candy seller (for Miss Sydney, the personification of the encroaching mercantilism of the city), and they have a benign effect on the businessmen and tired shop girls who pause to look at them. Some who look are inspired to philanthropy, and one man is even deterred from “a plan of wicked mischief by the sight of a tall, green geranium, like one that bloomed in his mother’s sitting-room way up in the country.” As in “A Garden Story,” a garden, even a city one, has a salutary effect on those who come in contact with it. As for Miss Sydney, she gradually emerges from her isolation when she discovers the effect her garden has on others. And


38. Sarah Orne Jewett, “Miss Sydney’s Flowers,” in Old Friends and New, p. 150.
when she contributes her garden flowers to the children's hospital (to which she had previously donated large sums of money) and promises to visit the children, she finally learns a more human style of altruism. The garden in this story, an element of a patrician heritage encased in glass and hidden from view, becomes the means for Miss Sydney to move beyond selfishness to greater human involvement. The major metaphor of the story suggests the close link between a woman and her garden and the progression of the action: "the seeds of kindness and helpfulness began to show themselves above the almost empty garden of her heart."

The garden is thus a force for moral good—both in city and countryside. "A Garden Story" is a kind of country version of "Miss Sydney's Flowers." Though Miss Dunning of the former story shares her beloved flower garden with many in her country village, it is not until she invites a city child to live with her and shares even the "leavings" of her garden—the rescued seedlings that the child can't bear to destroy—with the patients in a Boston hospital, that she learns to fully give of herself.

Other women, like Marthy Peck in "Decoration Day," a story about a community's memorial to its war dead, express affection through their garden flowers. Marthy goes at dawn to the grave of an old lover to leave "nosegays of spring flowers, daffies and flowering currant and red tulips."39 Hers is a personal remembrance, the flowers a token of her desire to make amends to the dead man who had loved her and whom she had once refused to marry.

Mrs. Bickford in "The Only Rose" also leaves flowers on graves as a personal memorial to three dead husbands, but this story, one of Jewett's finest, is a humorous treatment of the difficulties one woman has of expressing herself through her garden. Mrs. Bickford is blatantly unsympathetic to flowers and gardens. Flowers in the house give her a headache, but she dutifully keeps a rose, a geranium, and a Jerusalem cherry-tree on her kitchen window sill. (This paltry garden is reminiscent of the tired geranium that passed for a city garden in "A White Heron.") When Mrs. Bickford's sister, who is "a great hand to raise flowers"40 gives her a large bouquet, Mrs. Bickford decides to make her annual visit to her three husbands' graves, an impulse that is perhaps motivated more by the desire to get the flowers out of her house than to preserve their memories. Wishing to be impartial, Mrs. Bickford sorts her sister's flowers into three identical piles, but one red rose blooming in her kitchen "garden" throws her into confusion. The single rose, suggestive not only of the meagerness of Mrs. Bickford's garden but of a dilemma, "had ceased to be merely a flower, and had become a definite symbol and assertion of personal choice" (p. 148). Mrs. Bickford turns to her neighbor, Miss Pendexter, for

assistance as she reviews her husbands' respective virtues and decides who among them is deserving of the only rose.

Miss Pendexter serves as a foil to the prosaic Mrs. Bickford, for she was "a cheerful, very gay little person, who always brought a pleasant flurry of excitement" (p. 129). Basic character differences between the widow and the spinster are imagistically suggested by their contrasting gardens. Unlike Mrs. Bickford, who gives her three plants "unsympathetic but conscientious care" (p. 128), Miss Pendexter "had only a tiny strip of land behind her house, but she always had something to give away, and made riches out of her narrow poverty" (p. 135). Miss Pendexter says of her garden: "A garden's a sight o' care, but I don't begrudge none o' the care I give to mine. I have to scant on flowers so's to make room for pole beans... A few flowers gives me just as much pleasure as more would... You get acquainted with things when you've only got one or two roots. My sweet-Williams is just like folks" (p. 135). Unlike the often married but prosaic Mrs. Bickford, Miss Pendexter is a spinster and a romantic at heart who holds her garden in high esteem. She is so impressed with the beauty of Mrs. Bickford's rose that she momentarily forgets herself when she sees it (p. 132). She knows immediately what Mrs. Bickford learns only after a troubled afternoon of soul searching: Albert is the appropriate recipient of the rose (p. 148).

Though Mrs. Bickford wants to bestow the rose, a conventional symbol of love and thus a symbol of her preference among three dead husbands, her indecision causes her to forfeit the romantic gesture. She leaves the placement of the rose in her young nephew's hands, and John, a lover like Miss Pendexter, decisively appropriates the rose for his sweetheart. Although she finally realizes Albert is her personal choice, she loses her chance to make her rose, and by extension, her garden, a means of personal expression. On the other hand, Miss Pendexter, who is generous with the products of her garden (p. 135), is able to express herself through her garden. It might be said in Mrs. Bickford's defense, however, that she understands the symbolic import of bestowing her rose, for her deliberations provide her with an unsettling afternoon. She has no such problem with the flowers given to her by her sister, however; she dutifully and matter-of-factly separates them into three identical piles for, as products of another woman's garden, they are not charged with the personal significance of her garden's only rose.

What Mrs. Bickford is unable to express with her rose, Mrs. Todd expresses through her herbs in the final scene of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. When the narrator is about to depart from Dunnet, Mrs. Todd, filled with emotion, goes off by herself to avoid the final goodbye. She leaves some gifts for the departing narrator on the kitchen table, however, and among them is "a neatly tied bunch of southernwood and a twig of bay" (p. 210). These offerings are the appropriate gifts of an herbalist, and they allow the reticent Mrs. Todd to express herself through the lan-
guage of herbs. The gift of bay is Mrs. Todd's acknowledgement of the narrator's literary talents and her wish for her friend to achieve glory or inspiration. Bay is, of course, the leaf of the laurel tree, an evergreen which was woven into wreaths to crown poets and heroes in ancient Greece and Rome. Greek legend also has it that a leaf of laurel placed beneath a pillow would bring inspiration "since the leaves were the means of communicating with the spirit of prophets and poets." Southernwood has a couple of applicable meanings. One tradition has it that the herb implies constancy; Mrs. Todd's gift of this herb expresses, perhaps, the abiding nature of her affection as well as the more general knowledge that the narrator has come to discover in Dunnet: there is something permanent in a world of time and change. Southernwood is also called lad's love and boy's love; it was popular in courting bouquets. Maiden's ruin, yet another name, is related to its apparent use as an aphrodisiac. The southernwood from Mrs. Todd's garden more than likely serves as an expression of love and faithfulness to her departed friend.

This is not the first time Mrs. Todd has given a gift of a sprig of herbs. When she visits Joanna she brings Nathan's coral pin (the gift she later gives to the narrator) and "picked her a bunch of fresh lemon balm" (p. 65). Balm has been used for ages as a wound dressing, and, interestingly, the Arabs introduced it as a medicinal herb for the treatment of depression. John Parkinson, in *Paradisus* (1629), has written, "The herb without all question is an excellent helpe to comfort the heart . . . " Thus, lemon balm traditionally signifies sympathy, a sentiment that is consistent with Mrs. Todd's loving nature and compassionate attitude toward Joanna. Her gift of balm expresses her desire to comfort Joanna and is in sharp contrast to the callousness of the minister, who brings the woman no words of relief.

But Mrs. Todd's herb garden is more than a means of expressing words and feelings she cannot or will not verbalize. It is, first of all, like many gardens in Jewett's works, distinctive. Mrs. Blackett says of it: "Oh, what a poor, plain garden! Hardly a flower in it except your bush o' balm!" (p. 79), and the narrator, more kindly says, "It was a queer little garden and puzzling to a stranger, the few flowers being put at a disadvantage by so much greenery . . . " (p. 14). The idiosyncratic nature of Mrs. Todd's garden is expressive of the woman's character and special gifts. She is an heir to the knowledge of the ancient Greeks, her garden a "rustic pharmacopoeia." Mrs. Todd's garden is the center of her life and, to the narrator's dismay at times, it and her kitchen seem to be the center of the village. She, like early women settlers, furnishes the skills and supplies for

simples from her garden, but she is unwilling to be confined by its fences. Mrs. Todd possesses her garden, and she is self-possessed enough to range freely through the landscape. She is the epitome of the Jewett heroine who is in close harmony with nature and who moves comfortably outside the limited domain of the garden. Mrs. Powder in “Law Lane” speaks for such women when she says:

“Gimme pasture-lands rather’n the best gardins that grows. If I can have a sweet-briar bush and sweet fern pauch and some clumps o’ bayberry, you can take all the garden blooms. Look how folks toils with witch-grass and pusley and gets a starved lot o’ poor sprigs, slug-eat, and all dyin’ together in their front yards, when they might get better comfort in the first pasture along the road. I guess there’s somethin’ wild, that’s never got tutored out o’ me. I must ha’ be’n made o’ somethin’ counter to town dust.”

There’s something wild that never gets tutored out of Mrs. Todd as well. Mrs. Blackett explains: “She’d been very restless if she’d had to continue here on Green Island. You wanted more scope, didn’t you, Almiry, an’to live in a large place where more things grew?” (p. 51). Mrs. Todd is the antithesis of the reclusive Joanna and shares with other Jewett heroines like Mrs. Powder, herbalists like Miss Bonny and Mrs. Goodsoe, and Nan Prince, a close relationship with nature and a preference for land outside their garden fences. Such women, and Sylvia is perhaps but a younger version of the type, make, in effect, gardens of the fields and woods around them.

Mrs. Todd, unlike Joanna, lives very much in the present as a practitioner of folk medicine for the village of Dunnet Landing. She is able to preside over the physical and spiritual conditions of her neighbors in part because of her relationship with another woman from the past. Mrs. Todd's garden contains some plants that are the vestiges of a friendship she had shared with a woman years before. In “The Foreigner” Mrs. Todd reveals to the narrator that the wife of Captain Tolland taught her much of her lore: “She taught me a sight o’ things about herbs I never knew before nor since; she was well acquainted with the virtues o’ plants.” Mrs. Todd also recalls: “Years an’ years after she died, there was some o’ her flowers used to come up an’ bloom in the door garden. I brought two or three that was unusual down here; they always come up and remind me of her, constant as the spring” (p. 284). The preservation of the garden plants and their lore and uses over the years preserves another woman’s expertise and memorializes this relationship from the past.

Other women in Jewett’s works are collectors like Mrs. Todd, and they carefully select and gather the plants for their gardens from neighbors and friends. The gardens they create (like the ancestral museums of their houses) become living collections rich with personal associations to the past. In “The White Rose Road,” Jewett writes about the “carefully

tended" flower gardens along a country road, which are "not made by merely looking through a florist's catalogue, and ordering this or that new seedling and a proper selection of bulbs or shrubs; everything in a country garden has its history and personal association. The old bushes, the perennials, are apt to have most tender relationship with the hands that planted them long ago. There is a constant exchange of such treasures between the neighbors, and in the spring, slips and cuttings may be seen rooting on the window ledges." The hard-worked woman who invests time in her "little plot of pleasure ground" does so not only out of love for the flowers but also because the garden she creates is a repository of living evidence of the special bonds between her and her neighbors. In a sense, a woman fashions an emblem of her own history of personal relationships when she creates a garden.

In many ways the garden in Jewett is a paradox: the garden is a landscape of loss and death, of the ruins of culture and of childhood innocence. It is a landscape of life and continuance in a mutable world. Her women—widows, spinsters, mateless, solitary, almost always past childbearing—manifest fecundity in their gardens and find renewal in the perpetuation of the cherished seeds of their mothers. Jewett's garden is also a landscape of identity, of autonomy. To some Jewett women, the cultivated garden is a welcome sanctuary, a retreat, whose fences do not diminish the significance of their personal assertions of will. Voiceless, some of the women find expression in gardens which become a landscape of the self and an emblem of human connectedness.

Jewett wrote in "An October Ride": "I suppose every one can say, 'I have a little kingdom where I give laws.' Each of us has truly a kingdom in thought, and a certain spiritual possession. There are some gardens of mine where somebody plants the seeds and pulls the weeds for me every year without my ever taking a bit of trouble." When later in the sketch she discovers the ruins of an old New England farm and claims it for herself, she says: "I remembered the Enchanted Palace and the Sleeping Beauty in the Wood, and it seemed as if I were on the way to it, and this was a corner of that palace garden" (p. 42). Jewett is the prince for her kingdom; as a writer and recorder of New England she animates sleeping or dying worlds. Her work is a means of preserving her treasured ancient women, their houses and their gardens, and the values associated with them. Like her friend Celia Thaxter, who coaxed a stunning beauty out of the rocks at Appledore, Jewett responded to the transience of her New England by taking spiritual possession of the lives and landscapes around her. Her women gardeners protect the old and the irreplaceable; they

47. Pp. 268-69.
48. Such is the case for an unnamed Virginia woman in "The White Rose Road" who would "go afoot many miles over those rough Virginia roads, with a root or cutting from her own garden, to barter for a new rose or a brighter blossom of some sort, with which she would return in triumph" (p. 270).
stand as guardians of a valuable but vulnerable heritage bequeathed to them from their ancestors, and as guardians of their own dignity and autonomy.

It is with particular grace that Jewett could speak of the span of her own life as a journey back home to a cherished landscape—her own house in South Berwick and its garden: “I was born here and I hope to die here leaving the lilac bushes still green, and all the chairs in their places.”

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