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Victorians and the Matriarchal Mythology:
A Source for Mrs. Todd

by SARAH W. SHERMAN

IN HIS essay, "The Poet," Emerson asserted that the seer is also a sayer, but women did not always possess names for what they saw . . . and sometimes the ability to say determines the ability to see. At the heart of The Country of the Pointed Firs is the narrator's recognition of Mrs. Todd, her growing reverence for the other woman's power and numinous presence. Over and over the narrator names that power, that presence. She describes Mrs. Todd as a "sibyl," as a "priestess of experience," as a "personification of some force of Nature." She compares her to Antigone, to Medea, and finally to "the ancient deities" themselves. Many critics have pointed out a mythic quality in Mrs. Todd. What I would like to do here is to trace some sources of this characterization, and to show how Sarah Orne Jewett's vision of her countrywoman drew on a highly self-conscious literary, even religious tradition: a tradition which gave Jewett the words to say it.¹

THAT America had, or even wanted, such a tradition of feminine religious symbolism was denied by none other than Henry Adams. In his famous chapter on "The Dynamo and the Virgin" from The Education he argued that an American Virgin would never dare rule. All our goddesses were dead or dying. According to Adams, Venus was forgotten even as a name


in the Boston of his boyhood, except, perhaps, as the derivation of venereal disease.\(^2\)

Literary critics have, I think, tended to accept Adams' judgement. However, my own quest revealed that literate Bostonians had been trying to resuscitate dead goddesses for decades. *The Atlantic Monthly*, which I searched from its first issue to 1900, yielded a wealth of information on pre-Christian goddesses and their rituals.\(^3\) This interest was perhaps kindled by Margaret Fuller's 1841 "Conversations on Mythology." According to Caroline Healy Dall, Fuller devoted two sessions to "Ceres, Proserpina, and Isis, as well as Rhea, Diana, and so on. . . ." By 1869, Thomas Wentworth Higginson felt obliged to apologize to his *Atlantic* readers for the familiarity of the subject. "The Greek Goddesses," he writes, "have been very fully discussed. . . . Their genealogies have been ransacked, as if they lived in Boston or Philadelphia."\(^5\) Despite the confusing proliferation of deities, a common theme links these discussions: the goddesses may be dead, but they wanted them back.

This theme raises some natural questions. First, if the goddesses were dead, who killed them? Henry Adams, of course, thought the Dynamo did it, but there were other culprits. One of the most popular villains was the Patriarchy. In surprisingly lyrical prose, J. J. Bachofen's *Das Mutterrecht* (1861) evoked a lost matriarchal world founded on the worship of benevolent earth goddesses.\(^6\) The matriarchs of this pastoral age invented the basic structures of civilization—agriculture, marriage, the home—before their rule was overthrown by jealous males. As the Father assumed power, the forms of a new spirituality took hold. The judgement of an otherworldly Jove or Yahweh replaced the nurturance of a chthonic Ishtar, Isis, or Demeter. But beneath the dominant culture the matriar-


\(^3\) I choose *The Atlantic Monthly* for several reasons. First, it was perhaps the most influential magazine for New England, if not American, writers. Second, it regularly published Jewett's work. Finally, through her relationship to Annie Fields, wife and then widow of the *Atlantic*'s publisher, Jewett was closely acquainted with its editors and regular contributors. Annie Fields' own poems, which occasionally appeared in the magazine, were also an important source, especially since she adapted mythic themes from both Greek and Latin sources. *Atlantic* articles researched for this essay include: H. M. Alden, "The Eleusinia," Part I, Vol. IV (September 1859); Alden, "The Eleusinia," Part II, Vol. VI (August 1860); Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "The Greek Goddesses," Vol. XXVII (July 1869); Higginson, "Sappho," Vol. XXVIII (July 1871); Lydia Maria Child, "The Intermingling of Religions," Vol. XXVIII (October 1871); B. W. Ball, "Woman's Rights in Ancient Athens," Vol. XXVII (March 1871). Related articles in the early 1870's include virtually the entire text of John Fiske's *Myths and Mythmakers* (1872; rpt. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1900); this book was dedicated to William Dean Howells, then an *Atlantic* editor (indeed, Jewett's editor). See, for example, John Fiske, "The Origins of Folk-Lore," Vol. XXVII (February 1871). The magazine also regularly reviewed works on mythology and the "higher criticism" of the Bible. See: Review of Conway's *Sacred Anthology*, Vol. XXXV (January 1875), 113; Review of Strauss' *Der Alte und der neue Glaube*, Vol. XXXI (March 1873), 367.

\(^5\) Caroline Healy Dall, *Margaret and Her Friends, or Ten Conversations upon the Mythology of the Greeks and Its Expression in Art* (Boston, 1895; the conversations themselves were transcribed in 1841), p. 41.

chal ruins remained, surfacing occasionally in a witchcraft scare or mysterious nursery rhyme. Bachofen thought this sequence was a universal, and inevitable, pattern in all cultures. Many nineteenth-century historians agreed with him, and his theory achieved a broad popularity which it still retains (although it has long been out of favor among professional anthropologists).7

T. W. Higginson's article, called simply "The Greek Goddesses," offers a strong case for restoring the Goddess. He opens with this epigram from Carew: "That heroic virtue / For which antiquity hath left no names / But patterns only, such as Hercules, / Achilles, Theseus."8 Women also needed such patterns—their own myths for their own virtues. For Higginson the culprit wasn't patriarchy, but monotheism. However, the result was the same, for as soon as monotheism took hold, "it instantly became necessary to say He or She in speaking of the Highest; and the immediate result was a masculine Deity, and the dethronement of woman."9 Religious life lost the expression of feminine spirituality and its connection to women's experience. Since Protestant Christianity was the most monotheistic religion, it was also the most impoverished. While he acknowledges the social oppression of Greek women, Higginson contrasts their spiritual wealth to American women's poverty: "In [Greek] temples the sexes stood equal, goddess was as sublime as god, priestess the peer of priest. . . . In Protestant Christian Churches, on the other hand, nothing feminine is left but the worshippers, and they indeed are feminine, three to one."10

According to Higginson, women fared better with Roman Catholicism; at least they had the Madonna. His fellow writers apparently agreed with him, since nineteenth-century American fiction is strewn with shrines to Mary. First, there's Hawthorne's The Marble Faun, where the motherless Hilda tends the Virgin's shrine in a crumbling Roman tower; her task is to keep the sacred flame alive. In Little Women, Amy, missing her Marmee, sets up a copy of Raphael's Virgin in a closet, where she sits and meditates on her faults. In Henry James' The Bostonians, Olive


Chancellor and Verena Tarrant retire to the pastoral village of Marmion, where their cottage displays two conspicuous photographs of the Sistine Madonna and a number of suspicious German books.  

While Henry Adams treats the Virgin as a disguised Venus, Higginson sees the Virgin as a survival of the ancient Greek Goddess, Demeter, whose rising-and-dying daughter (the vegetation goddess, Persephone) has been cleverly disguised as a rising-and-dying son. The emphasis may be important. Adams saw the Virgin's power as the power of reproduction, of female sexuality. Higginson, on the other hand, anxiously assures his readers that five of the six goddesses he describes are literally virgins. Venus herself is a virgin; Demeter conceives Persephone through an "in-effable idea"; only Hera is initiated—and she has to be, since she's married to Jove. In this cleaned-up pantheon, the important female trait is not sexuality, but maternity, expressed in the relation to the child, not to the husband. My own research suggests that many, if not most, Victorian women writers agreed with Higginson, rather than Adams. While Kate Chopin heralded a return of Aphrodite at the close of the century, more genteel women writers found the story of Demeter and Persephone a more compelling plot.

The myth's popularity stems, I believe, from its appropriateness as a paradigm of Victorian women's development. This story of a girl close to her mother, raped or seduced by a shadowy male, carried down to the Underworld, then restored to her grieving mother, may echo the experience of middle-class Victorian maidens who grew up in a domestic world ruled by women and continued, even after the wedding, to split their lives between the homosocial sphere of female kin and friends and the heterosexual sphere of marriage.  

The Eleusinian Mysteries—the Greek rituals associated with these goddesses—deepen this portrait. Originally a harvest festival, the Mysteries were celebrated every six years, in September. At their center is
Persephone’s giving birth to a divine child. In doing so her reunion with her mother is completed, for she is now a mother herself. Walter Pater and other commentators stress that Demeter and Persephone were, in a crucial sense, a “dual Goddess,” worshipped in their totality rather than their separateness. Their Mysteries were thought to affirm the continuity of generations and the triumph of life despite—not over—death. Recent analysts of the myth, such as Erich Neumann and Nor Hall, ascribe this curious fusion to the psychological dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship. Nancy Chodorow, for example, argues that female identity is defined not in opposition to the mother, but through connection. Ego-development may involve differentiation, even separation. However, maturity means the adult woman can “return” like Persephone to that sense of fusion, the communion which characterized her first bond to the mother.

One Victorian example of this Eleusinian plot is Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1869). At her wedding, the oldest daughter, Meg, pulls away from her new husband immediately after their vows. She wants to save “the first kiss for Marmee.” After the birth of her twins, Meg declares that they have made her “more one” with her mother. The book itself closes with a chapter called “Harvest Time.” We see Marmee enthroned in an apple orchard receiving tributes from her three daughters, all of whom are now mothers. Beth, the daughter who has died, is resurrected in the child who bears her name.

However the Dual Goddess and her Mysteries represented more than a paradigm of female development. Nineteenth-century commentators from Bachofen on stress the difference between the matriarchal and patriarchal ethos. The matriarchal goddesses were supposed to remain closer to the earth. Unlike the transcendent deities of patriarchy, these divinities sympathized with their worshippers’ immediate concerns. Hence Demeter’s “human” grief for her lost daughter. Her Mysteries celebrate spirituality, but it is a spirituality embedded in natural processes. Unlike Christ, Persephone never leaves the cycles of birth and death behind. After the fall of matriarchy, according to Lydia Maria 14. Nineteenth-century discussions of the Mysteries include: Bachofen (cited above); Walter Pater, “The Myth of Demeter and Persephone,” *Fortnightly Review* (January and February, 1876); H. M. Alden, “The Eleusinia” (cited above). Of contemporary analyses, George E. Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969, © 1961) is perhaps the most complete.


Child, whole nations still turned to the Mother, asking her to intercede, to temper the Father's judgement with mercy.  

Thus women weren't the only ones needing the goddess. Another strong, and closely related, theme running through these discussions is that America itself needs her. Sentimentalist writers, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, argued that America needed a more nurturant, more maternal deity. H. M. Alden believed that we needed a religion closer to the earth and more respectful of its processes. And there often seems to be a covert association between the green world obliterated by patriarchal civilization and the female domestic sphere—a pastoral haven in an increasingly industrialized world. For example, Margaret Coxe's *Young Lady's Companion*, a popular Victorian advice book, tells the new housewife that she is the priestess of a shrine "more sacred than Delphos."

Many of the authors claiming America's need for the Goddess—Margaret Fuller, H. M. Alden, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Mathilda Joslyn Gage, T. W. Higginson—close their argument by invoking a vision of the matriarchal mother re-enthroned beside the patriarchal father. Together the couple ushers in a new age of peace and justice. The close of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's 1891 speech, "The Matriarchate, or Mother-Age" (cited above), is a good example of this ultimate moment when "the united thought of man and woman will inaugurate a just government, a pure religion, and a happy home; a civilization at last in which ignorance, poverty, and crime will exist no more. . . .”

Here again a popular choice for reinstatement as national—or at least New England—goddess was Demeter. The reasons for this choice are complex, but one may be an important shift in the way some New Englanders saw themselves. The Boston of Henry Adams' ancestors saw itself against an Old Testament background—the Puritans were the new Israel—but by the mid-nineteenth century many Boston writers saw their city as the Athens of America. (Such comparisons abound in the pages of the *Atlantic*; one writer even turns the analogy around and describes 4th and 5th century Athens as "in some marked respects a community of New England Yankees, prematurely appearing in the recesses of the Eastern


Mediterranean.

Now the preeminent rituals of ancient Athens were the Eleusinian Mysteries, which survived for two thousand years. But, as Walter Pater's 1876 article on "The Myth of Demeter and Persephone" points out, Demeter and her rites were actually alien "to the genuine traditions of Greek mythology," relics of "... that older religion, nearer to the earth, which some have thought they could discern behind the more definitely national religion of Homer." Slowly, the goddess gained the interest and love of the Greeks, "becoming finally the central and most popular subject of their national worship." Judging by my sources it's clear that several writers hoped that she might enjoy a similar success in Yankee New England.

II

Jewett appears to have read Walter Pater's essay on the myth of Demeter and Persephone in 1876. She probably came to it through Annie Fields, who had just written her own adaptation of the myth in "The Return of Persephone," dedicated to her mother. I believe that Pater showed Jewett how to make the connection between rural Maine—her literary material—and the matriarchal goddesses. Here, for example, is Pater on the origins of the goddess and the culture which produced her:

... the story of Demeter [is] the peculiar creation of country-people of a high impressionability, dreaming over their work in spring or autumn, half consciously touched by a sense of its sacredness, and a sort of mystery about it. ... The temper of a people engaged in the occupations of country life, so permanent, so "near to nature," is at all times alike; and the habitual solemnity which Wordsworth found in the peasants of Cumberland, and the painter Francois Millet in the peasants of Brittany, may well have had its prototype in early Greece.

And so Maine could be to Boston what early Greece had been to Athens. As the narrator says of Mrs. Todd, "she might have walked the primeval fields of Sicily; her strong gingham skirts might at that very moment bend

21. Pater, Greek Studies, pp. 81, 102. Atlantic readers were apparently so barraged with descriptions of Demeter's mysteries that H. M. Alden opens his 1859 article, "The Eleusinia," with yet another elaborate apology for the familiarity of his subject: "What did the Eleusinian mean? Perhaps, reader, you think the question of little interest. 'The Eleusinia! Why. Lobeck made that little matter clear long ago; and there was Prophryr, who told us the whole thing was only an illustration of the Platonic philosophy. St. Croix too—he made the affair as clear as day!' [But] the question is not so easily settled, my friend, and I insist ... that you have an interest in it" (Alden, p. 295).
22. Annie Fields' poem, "The Return of Persephone," was published privately in 1877. It was also included in Under the Olive (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1880). In this later edition the poem was footnoted with lengthy extracts from Walter Pater's "The Myth of Demeter and Persephone," which had appeared in Fortnightly Review (January and February 1876). Jewett certainly read Annie Fields' poem, with the Pater commentary, since she wrote Annie Fields, "I have been reading Under the Olive a good deal ... and I can't begin to tell you how beautiful it is to me and how helpful. I long to hear you read from it again ..." (Sarah Orne Jewett to Annie Fields, Thursday afternoon, June 1882, n.p., Houghton Library, Harvard University). While this letter confirms an 1882 reading of the poem, Jewett may have known "The Return of Persephone" earlier, and the Pater essay, since she mentions having heard Annie Fields read some of her work aloud, and this piece was published during the time the two women were becoming friends.
23. Pater, Greek Studies, pp. 103-04.
the slender stalks of asphodel . . . instead of the brown wind-brushed
grass of New England.”24

Pater’s influence can be seen most clearly in the close connection be­
tween his analysis of Demeter and Jewett’s characterization of Mrs.
Todd. Descended from even more ancient fertility goddesses, Demeter is
still “the goddess of the dark caves, and not wholly free from monstrous
form . . . . She knows the magic powers of certain plants, cut from her
bosom, to bane or bless . . . and herself presides over the springs, as also
coming from the secret places of the earth.”25 Here readers of Pointed
Firs should recognize some of Mrs. Todd’s attributes. First there is her
size. Mrs. Todd is big, and at times her outlines even seem to expand.
Then there is her association with magic herbs. At one point the narrator
covertly watches as Mrs. Todd cuts a mysterious plant under the
moonlight. At yet another point Mrs. Todd stops to “talk” to a young
tree; she communicates through sympathy. The tree, she says, has a living
spring—some people do too.

Mrs. Todd is not herself a mother. However, she shares Pointed Firs
with her mother, Mrs. Blackett, who is always “the queen” at the annual
Bowden Reunion. Together, the two women function as a kind of “Dual
Goddess.” Significantly, Mrs. Todd’s name, from the German, means
Mrs. Death, an echo of Persephone’s own identity as the wife of Hades.
However, Mrs. Blackett’s name has similar echoes. The overlapping of
identities which marks the Eleusinian Mysteries also appears in Pointed
Firs: Mrs. Todd often regards Mrs. Blackett with a mother’s indulgence
while Mrs. Blackett keeps until ancient age the freshness of a child’s spirit.
Both embody the matriarchal ethos. Although self-sufficient, Almira
Todd retains the capacity for communion. Unlike the ineffectual Patriar­
chal representative, Reverend Dimmick, she has the power to enter into
another’s sorrow, and to reveal her own. Her moral judgement is founded
less upon abstraction than awareness of human connection. Thus, while
never a biological mother, Almira Todd’s maternal sympathies range
beyond her kin to encompass a whole community, finally the narrator
herself.

One of the most interesting links between Pater’s essay on the dual
Goddess and Mrs. Todd is his analysis of Demeter “humanized.” Search­
ing for the lost Persephone, the grieving mother veils her divinity, disguis­
ing herself as an old peasant women. On her wanderings she comes to the
house of Metaneira, wife of the prince of Eleusis. Metaneira fails to
recognize the goddess, yet takes her in as a nurse for her infant son. Pater
particularly admired a Greek statue of this disguised goddess, a massive
sculpture which united her monumental presence with a “profound pite­
ousness”:

the wandering woman, going grandly indeed, as Homer describes her, yet so human in her anguish, that we seem to recognise some far descended shadow of her in the homely figure of the roughly-clad French peasant woman, who in one of Corot's pictures, is hasting along under a sad light, as the day goes out behind the little hill.26

Pointed Firs echoes the images, sometimes the very rhythms of Pater's description. Mrs. Todd rises, "grand and architectural," before the narrator, who, in this passage, portrays her as another incarnation of the wandering woman. The setting is a field on Green Island, overlooking the sea:

Mrs. Todd looked away from me and presently rose and went by herself. There was something lonely and solitary about her great determined shape. . . . It is not often given in a noisy world to come to a place of great grief and silence. An absolute, archaic grief possessed this country-woman; she seemed like the renewal of some ancient soul, with her sorrows and the remoteness of a daily life, busied with rustic simplicities and the scents of primeval herbs.27

Pater may also have inspired Jewett's adaptation of the pastoral poets, especially Theocritus. The divinity who broods lovingly over the landscape of Theocritus's Idylls is Demeter, "holding poppies and handfuls of corn in her two hands."28 Here Pater translates a passage describing two shepherds on their way to the goddess's "homely feast":

Many poplars and elm-trees were waving over our heads, and not far off the running of the sacred water from the cave of the nymphs warbled to us; in the shimmering branches the sun-burnt grasshoppers were busy with their talk, and from afar the little owl cried softly. . . ; the bees flew round and round the fountains, murmuring softly; the scent of late summer and of the fall of the year was everywhere. . . .29

How close this is to the scene of the Bowden Reunion, also a kind of harvest festival and a celebration of generations:

There was a wide path mowed for us across the field, and, as we moved along, the birds flew up out of the thick second crop of clover, and the bees hummed as if it still were June. . . . The plash of water could be heard faintly, yet still be heard; we might have been a company of ancient Greeks going to celebrate a victory, or to worship the god of harvests in the grove above.30

As she takes part in this procession the narrator is "strangely" moved:

. . . we were no more a New England family celebrating its own existence and simple progress; we carried the tokens and inheritance of all such households . . . and were only the latest of our line. We possessed the instincts of a far, forgotten childhood; I found myself thinking that we ought to be carrying green boughs and singing as we went.31

And so they come to the sacred grove of the Bowdens, with its majestic trees and cool shade. The association with the groves of Diana and

27. Jewett, p. 49.
Demeter may not be accidental. The Reunion is held on August fifteenth, traditionally the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin. As nineteenth-century scholars knew, this feast replaced an earlier rite sacred to Diana. Moreover, as the narrator remarks, the Bowden Reunion was usually held in mid-September, days once reserved for Demeter's feast and the Eleusinian Mysteries themselves.

Pater's essay first appeared in 1876, in the English periodical, Fortnightly Review. Jewett was then revising the Atlantic sketches which became her first book, Deephaven. She was also getting to know Annie Fields, who was writing The Return of Persephone. In a later footnote to that poem, Fields quoted at length from Pater's essay. One of Jewett's additions to Deephaven reveals the influence of both sources. In this new passage Deephaven's heroines, two young literary ladies from Boston, stay up late one night retelling the myth of Demeter and Persephone (their translation appears to be Pater's).32 They also speculate on the myth's relevance to the small Maine village where they are spending the summer. Unfortunately, the effect is rather like a Chatauqua lecture: the goddess stays abstract and the discussion sounds like Pater warmed-over. However, by Pointed Firs Jewett had brought the goddess to life.

Jewett returned to the Demeter-Persephone theme during the writing of Pointed Firs for several reasons. First, she had just finished preparing a new edition of Deephaven (published in 1893); therefore she had certainly reread the earlier passage on the myth. Coincidently, the Pater essay also reappeared, collected in his 1894 Greek Studies. Further, Annie Fields was working on a new collection of poems based on classical themes, The Singing Shepherd (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1895). That Annie Fields was also thinking about this particular myth is confirmed by her inclusion of a poem entitled, "The Mysteries of Eleusis." Another important literary influence was probably Alfred, Lord Tennyson, one of Jewett's heroes, whom she visited in England in 1892. Tennyson had recently published his own adaptation of the myth in Demeter and Other Poems (London and New York: Macmillan, 1889). Finally, a more personal influence was the death of Jewett's mother in 1891. While there is no room here to discuss the impact of this event, it did lead Jewett to reflect deeply on the relationship of mothers and daughters.33 Significantly, Jewett entitles the first chapter of Pointed Firs, "The Return," a phrase which echoes Annie Fields' earlier poem.

32. Sarah Orne Jewett, Deephaven and Other Stories (1877; rpt. New Haven, Conn.: College and Univ. Press, 1966). Compare, for example, this passage from Pater: "Then Demeter manifested herself openly. She put away the mask of old age . . . and the spirit of beauty breathed about her . . . the long yellow hair descended waving over her shoulders, and the great house was filled as with the brightness of lightning" (Pater, Greek Studies, p. 88). Here is Deephaven: "I always thought that part of the story beautiful where Demeter throws off her disguise and is no longer an old woman, and the great house is filled with brightness like lightning, and she rushes out through the halls with her yellow hair waving over her shoulders . . ." (Jewett, Deephaven, p. 130).

To demonstrate Jewett’s achievement in her greatest work, I will end by taking the passage from the Homeric Hymn which the two young women in Deephaven find most beautiful and showing how it is reenacted in Pointed Firs. First I will quote from Pater’s translation from the Homeric Hymn, then I will turn to Pointed Firs.

The passage which Kate Lancaster singles out describes Demeter in Eleusis. Here the Homeric poet shows Demeter entering the house of Metaneira: “. . . Demeter crossed the threshold, and, as she passed through, her head rose and touched the roof, and her presence filled the door with a divine brightness. Still they did not wholly recognize her. . . . She refused to drink wine, but tasted of a cup mingled of water and barley, flavoured with mint.” (Some of you may recognize Mrs. Todd’s mint and the potion that she makes for the narrator of Pointed Firs.) “Then Demeter manifested herself openly. She put away the mask of old age, and changed her form, and beauty breathed about her. A fragrant odor fell from her raiment, and her flesh shone from afar. . . .”  

And now I will quote from Pointed Firs. This passage is taken from the opening chapter, entitled “The Return.” It describes the moment when the narrator first begins to sense a numinous quality in Mrs. Todd.

I do not know what herb of the night it was that used sometimes to send out a penetrating odor late in the evening, after the dew had fallen, and the moon was high, and the cool air came up from the sea. Then Mrs. Todd would feel that she must talk to somebody, and I was only too glad to listen. We both fell under the spell, and she either stood outside the window, or made an errand to my sitting-room, and told, it might be very commonplace news of the day, or, as happened one misty summer night, all that lay deepest in her heart.

As Mrs. Todd reveals “all that lay deepest in her heart,” the narrator listens and her sympathy deepens—until the very form of Mrs. Todd seems to change before her eyes:

She stood in the middle of a braided rug, and its rings of black and gray seemed to circle about her feet in the dim light. Her height and massiveness in the low room gave her the look of a huge sibyl, while the strange fragrance of the mysterious herb blew in from the little garden.

In the Homeric Hymn Metaneira fails to recognize Demeter, but in Pointed Firs the narrator is prepared by her tradition to see, and does. The reenactment of the myth can be seen most clearly in the transfiguration of Mrs. Todd; her massive form seems to expand, with an effect almost like an aura or a halo. Then there is the fragrance which accompanies the revelation and the shadowy circles which echo Demeter’s chthonic origins. Finally there is the moonlight and the sounds of the sea which penetrate the room. To me, the beautiful thing here is how quiet this scene is, how restrained. It was these fully-realized moments of vision

34. Pater, Greek Studies, pp. 87-88.
35. Jewett, Pointed Firs, pp. 16-17.
and transfiguration which led Willa Cather to call *Pointed Firs* a classic. They show how Jewett brought the search for the goddess to fruition. But it wouldn’t be quite right to say that *Pointed Firs* brought the goddess back to life. Jewett showed her readers, ever so quietly, that the goddess never died, she never even went away—they simply lacked the words to see her.

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Durham