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Reaching Lonely Heights: Sarah Orne Jewett, Emily Dickinson, and Female Initiation

by CAROL J. SINGLEY

ALTHOUGH Sarah Orne Jewett and Emily Dickinson were contemporaries, they exerted little influence on each other's writing. Jewett could not have read Emily Dickinson's poetry before the Higginson-Todd edition in 1890,¹ by which time she had published all of her work except *The Tory Lover*. Dickinson's most creative period (1858–65) was over before Jewett published her first short story in 1868. Yet in the work of these two writers we see portrayals of individual female growth that are strikingly similar. Both writers make use of initiation motifs in ways that are distinct from those commonly found in nineteenth-century literature. Their impulses toward self-definition were executed with a radical, quietly rebellious spirit that challenges our conceptions of initiation literature and female growth in the nineteenth century. Jewett and Dickinson, both innovators, posit a type of female initiation that may lead us to modify our definition of that literary subgenre.

Nineteenth-century American literature abounds with tales of initiation. Most of the canonical works, however, are about males: *Moby Dick*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," to name a few. Initiation tales share aspects of plot and theme: A young person, innocent and inexperienced, encounters unexpectedly challenging situations in which previously acceptable values are no longer adequate. In the confrontation with external, often corrupt forces, the protagonist must develop inner resources to come to terms with the world. The successful completion of the initiation rite depends on the protagonist's ability to make these necessary shifts in values. Often the protagonist's construction of a new scheme of values is facilitated by some knowing mentor, as in the case of young Robin in "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," who, after witnessing the public disgrace of his uncle, is persuaded by an unnamed "friend" to stay and make his own way in the town. The male protagonists of the above mentioned works undergo disrupting, often traumatic initiations, but they emerge from their experience not only more aware of themselves and the world, but able to choose or reject full participation in that world through an application of their new understanding.

1. *Poems by Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1890).

Nineteenth-century initiation tales for females differ greatly from these male prototypes. As Nina Baym has noted, much of the sentimental or domestic fiction that predominated in the nineteenth century follows a "formulaic" plot² in which a pampered heiress or harried orphan employs her inner resources to overcome evil, achieving a new social order, often through marriage. In nineteenth-century sentimental literature, female initiation might more properly be called indoctrination, a dutiful learning of a domestic script in which one's own values remain secondary to those of the male society. For example, in *Little Women*, Meg, Beth, Amy, and even recalcitrant Jo are persuaded that their healthy impulses for self-definition and independence are really vain and selfish tendencies that they must give up in order to receive a word of praise from Father, the March family patriarch. Jo remains the most interesting of the March heroines because, as Patricia Spacks points out, "she alone is in essential conflict with herself."³

Sarah Orne Jewett and Emily Dickinson reject the codified, sentimental initiation of their contemporaries. Neither do they emulate the male models. In Dickinson's poetry and Jewett's initiation story, "A White Heron," questioning values in light of a larger, predominantly male world is a critical, transforming event. The heroines of Jewett's and Dickinson's literary imaginations undergo intensely personal and ultimately socially alienating initiation experiences. These experiences entail first, a confrontation with and rejection of the capitalist, patriarchal world in favor of the natural world; second, an appropriation of the phallic power of that world for the protagonist's own special purposes; and third, compensatory spiritual insight and communion with nature as substitute for human—and especially male—affection. This initiation is both personal celebration and social critique, tinged with defeat as well as victory, for as much as the protagonist glories in her newly acquired natural and spiritual insights—gifts, in Dickinson's words, "given to me by the Gods"—⁴—she also laments the loss of social contact that this insight has cost her. Her initiatory experience exacts a kind of sexual or pre-sexual renunciation of the union of self with the male other. The female initiate in Jewett's and Dickinson's writing can not reconcile her own values and desires with those of the external male world. Her spiritual transcendence thus results in social isolation; she undergoes her initiation alone and remains alone at its conclusion, selecting silence and solitude rather than a compromise of her integrity.⁵ In Dickinson's own words, the female "Soul selects her own Society / Then—shuts the Door" (J 303). The privileged

2. Nina Baym, *Women's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and About Women in America 1820-1870* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1978), p. 12.

3. Patricia Spacks, *The Female Imagination* (New York: Avon, 1975), p. 125.

4. Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), no. 454. All poems cited hereafter in parentheses are from this edition, which is identified as J.

5. Lynne M. Patnode notes similar patterns of "loss and compensation" in her comparison of Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and Emily Dickinson's poetry ("The Compensations of

“One” selected by the soul in this poem is most likely oneself, or as much oneself as any significant other.⁶

Jewett opens “A White Heron” with young Sylvia’s placid walk with her cow through fields and streams toward the farmhouse she shares with her grandmother. This tranquility is shattered by the “clear whistle,” “determined and somewhat aggressive,” of a young hunter searching for birds.⁷ The young man represents the progressive, capitalist, and acquisitive society that Jewett so fervently wishes to keep from intruding upon the simpler rural life. Sylvia herself has been saved from urban hazards. Happily situated at her grandmother’s farm, she now enjoys the luxury of “wistful compassion” for a “wretched geranium” (3) she has left behind in the stultifying city. The hunter’s presence is a direct and violent threat to Sylvia’s natural way of life, an intensification of an older fear that she sustained when she lived in the crowded manufacturing town. The “red-faced boy who used to chase and frighten her” (5) is reincarnated in the form of the hunter; both threaten the girl’s innocent and Emersonian communion with nature. Thus Sylvia hangs her head “as if the stem were broken” (6) when the hunter speaks to her, loses her sensitivity to the confused frog whose safety she is threatening, and finds herself lured by the offer of cash for disclosure of the heron’s whereabouts.

In a multitude of poems by Dickinson, the speaker also identifies herself with nature, becoming an intimate respondent privileged to know nature’s ways. These poems range from simple celebrations (“The Bee is not afraid of me. / I know the Butterfly” [J 111]) to more complex contemplations of possessing all of nature (“Before I got my eye put out” [J 327]). Dickinson sets up the same antithesis between the natural self and the outer world that Jewett describes in “A White Heron.” For example, in a poem with uncanny parallels to the Jewett story, Dickinson captures the misery and confinement of a life too crowded and noisy:

I was the slightest in the House—
 I took the smallest Room—
 At night, my little Lamp, and Book—
 And one Geranium—

Solitude in the Work of Emily Dickinson and Sarah Orne Jewett,” *Colby Library Quarterly*, XIX [Dec. 1983], 206–14). Patnode focuses on mature females, whose experiences parallel those of Dickinson’s child persona and young Sylvia in important ways. Mrs. Todd, for example, rejects “the nineteenth century’s expectations for widowhood”; each woman in *The Pointed Firs* uses her solitude, brought about by a “rejection of or by the male world,” as an opportunity “for discovering an inner strength . . . that allows her to transcend her circumstances . . .” (206, 207).

6. While it is true that Sylvia, like Mrs. Todd and many of Jewett’s other characters, lives in pastoral harmony with a nurturing older woman, it is interesting that the woman is Sylvia’s grandmother, not her mother. There is a significant break in the chain of maternal connections in this story. Additionally, the grandmother, whether for practical or sentimental reasons, wants Sylvia to disclose the heron’s whereabouts and “fretfully rebukes” (21) her for her silence, thus underlining Sylvia’s aloneness in her dilemma. It is in this sense that Elizabeth Ammons aptly refers to the earth, not the person, as Sylvia’s “true ‘grand mother’” (“The Shape of Violence in ‘A White Heron,’” Sarah Orne Jewett Conference, Westbrook College, June 17, 1985; also in this issue of *CLQ*). Similarly, in Dickinson’s poetry one finds no emphasis on maternal connections or nurturance.

7. Sarah Orne Jewett, *A White Heron and Other Stories* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1886), p. 3. All further page references to this work appear in parentheses in the text.

I never spoke—unless addressed—
And then, 'twas brief and low—
I could not bear to live—aloud—
The Racket shamed me so— (J 486)

Unlike Sylvia, the speaker in this poem remains confined, and the poem ends hopelessly with “—I had often thought— / How noteless—I could die—.” The speaker’s death is both insignificant and premature: like an unfledged bird, she will die before she sings a note of poetry. The impulse to flee industrial and social life is also strongly evident in “Where bells no more affright the morn—” (J 112). In this poem the speaker’s fears are directly linked to patriarchy; her wish is for “nimble Gentlemen” to be “forced to keep their rooms—” and for no more of “Father’s bells.” Employing imagery resembling that in Jewett’s story, the speaker implores the deity for escape, for permission to climb “where Moses stood” to “view the Landscape o’er.” Again, echoing Jewett’s evocation of the “red-faced boy who used to chase and frighten,” Dickinson advances a natural and spiritual vision that is free of male threat: “Not Father’s bells nor Factories / Could scare us any more!”

In Jewett’s story, male power is symbolized by the hunter’s gun. Instinctively repelled by its annihilating capability, Sylvia nevertheless tries to reconcile her attraction to the hunter with her aversion to his single-minded drive to stalk, kill, and preserve the beautiful birds of the woods: “Sylvia would have liked him vastly better without his gun; she could not understand why he killed the very birds he seemed to like so much” (12). Sylvia never does understand the logic that governs the hunter’s actions, even when regret over losing his companionship competes with her sorrow over “the sight of thrushes and sparrows dropping silent to the ground, their songs hushed and their pretty feathers stained and wet with blood” (22). In a chilling and parallel poem, Dickinson also contemplates the power of the gun and its male ownership. In “My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—” (J 754), Dickinson seeks to understand the weapon by merging her identity with it. The gun—the speaker herself—is “identified” and “carried away” by a male “Owner” who then uses her to victimize the female species: “And now We roam in Sovereign Woods— / And now We hunt the Doe—.” In a bitter, almost sardonic account Dickinson describes the gun’s deadly efficacy, but in the final stanza she makes absolutely clear the price of her gun-identification. Possessing the “power to kill” but not “the power to die,” the speaker is locked into endless dependency and agony.

The central tension in “A White Heron” comes from Sylvia’s desire to please the young hunter and at the same time remain faithful to nature. Jewett heightens this tension by investing the conflict with sexual overtones. Although only nine years old, Sylvia watches the hunter with “loving admiration”: “the woman’s heart, asleep in the child, was vaguely thrilled by a dream of love” (12). In frankly sexual language Jewett

describes the pair as they move together through the woods: "They pressed forward again eagerly, parting the branches . . . the young man going first and Sylvia following, fascinated, . . . her gray eyes dark with excitement" (12-13). Sylvia's decision to climb the pine tree, then, begins as a tribute to romantic love, as a service to the young hunter she wants so desperately to please. In this role, however, she is a follower rather than initiator or leader. Jewett writes, "She did not lead the guest, she only followed, and there was no such thing as speaking first" (13).⁸ It is only in the very act of climbing, and in the realization of what lies at the top of the climb, that Sylvia gains the confidence to act for herself rather than for others. It is Sylvia's assumption of an active, autonomous role that begins to set "A White Heron" apart from other nineteenth-century texts about female growth.

Sylvia's climb to the top of the old pine is a virtual appropriation of the traditional role of the phallus. In this climactic scene, Sylvia is not only an active participant in nature, she is master of her natural world and her own will. Again the language is sexual, but this time Sylvia is primary, "mounting" the tree with "tingling, eager blood coursing the channels of her whole frame" (15). The tree, "lengthening itself out as she went up" (15) resists her advances, catching and scratching her "like angry talons" (16) before finally surrendering to her power: "The old pine must have loved his new dependent. More than all the hawks, and bats, and moths, and even the sweet voiced thrushes, was the brave, beating heart of the solitary gray-eyed child" (17). This sexual advance is then transformed into a spiritual enlightenment, the tree, rising "like a monstrous ladder reaching up, up, almost to the sky itself" (15) resembling the metaphoric ladder reaching to heaven in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing*.⁹ "Wholly triumphant," her face "like a pale star" (18), Sylvia witnesses the broad expanse of the sea, symbolic not only of worldly possibility but of spiritual rebirth. The crowning glory to this victorious moment is the visitation of the sought-after white heron, a resurrected spirit itself which "like a single floating feather comes up from the dead hemlock and grows larger, and rises" (19). Sylvia's experience at the top of the tree is more than the usual communion with nature. It involves a deep and radical change in consciousness, for Sylvia learns not only to see nature but to see *with* nature. After spying the "white spot" of the heron, Jewett issues an impassioned plea: "And wait! wait! do not move a foot or a finger, little girl, do not send an arrow of light and consciousness from your two eager eyes, for the heron has perched on a pine bough not far beyond yours" (19).¹⁰ This special experience radicalizes Sylvia's

8. Dickinson also writes of an extravagant, costly, and doomed effort to reach the beloved one in "I did not reach Thee" (J 1664). In this poem the speaker sets out to cross deserts and sea, but her quest is thwarted by death.

9. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Minister's Wooing* (Hartford, Conn.: The Stowe-Day Foundation, 1978), p. 87.

10. I am thankful to Sarah Sherman for the insight that "in a Hegelian sense, the story reveals nature seeking to know itself, see itself through human eyes. . . . Consciousness and light are described as

outlook. No longer willing to subvert her own values to those of the hunter, she chooses to remain silent, protecting the heron and her own integrity.

Dickinson's poems, although generally less overtly sexual,¹¹ nevertheless situate the speaker alone in nature, often in the role of neophyte or privileged intimate engaged in some exploration of nature's secrets or privy to its mysteries. Sometimes the poet adopts a boy persona, granting herself permission to actively explore her world in ways forbidden to the female (J 196, 251, 689, 1201, 1487). Like Jewett, Dickinson describes an initiate who is on a difficult but ultimately rewarding quest, and like Jewett, she expresses this quest through images of birds, climbs, and the sea. Dickinson's use of birds to express timidity, joy, or mystical links between heaven and earth are varied and rich (J 240, 248, 254, 774, 1723, to name a few). In the following poem, Dickinson celebrates a timeless communion with nature in a solemn ceremony that parallels young Sylvia's awe when she witnesses the majestic heron against the backdrop of the sea:

The Sun went down—no Man looked on—
The Earth and I, alone,
Were present at the Majesty—
He triumphed, and went on—

The Sun went up—no Man looked on—
The Earth and I and One
A nameless Bird—a Stranger
Were Witness for the Crown— (J 1079)

The sacred moment witnessed by the bird and the speaker in this poem is devoid not only of human presence, but of male presence, emphasized by Dickinson's repetition, "no Man looked on—," in both stanzas. These transcendent states in nature, also richly conveyed in the poem, "When we stand on the tops of Things— / And like the Trees, look down—" (J 242), occur from a vantage point of great physical height that underlines both the speaker's privileged status and the extraordinary effort and sacrifice required to learn nature's secrets. Like Jewett, Dickinson details the struggle to achieve this height. She emphasizes this painstaking progress in the poem, "I gained it so—" (J 359):

I gained it so—
By Climbing slow—
By Catching at the Twigs that grow
Between the Bliss—and me—

destructive arrows. The narrator implies that Sylvia should seek not mastery through them, but aim for communion instead" ("American Persephone: Sarah Orne Jewett in Context," diss., Brown University, 1983, p. 270). Annis Pratt writes that Sylvia "becomes an element in [nature]" (*Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1981], p. 19), and that her "naturalistic epiphany," similar in some ways to that of Stephen in Joyce's *A Portrait of an Artist*, is a "quest of a special identity" and "fuller understanding of the self" ("Women and Nature in Modern Fiction," *Contemporary Literature*, XIII [1972], 478).

11. Notable exceptions are "Come slowly—Eden!" (J 211) and "Wild Nights—Wild Nights!" (J 249).

The poem concludes with the speaker's transformation as a result of receiving a moment's "Grace." Her values changed, wealth is now measured in natural terms and is a gift she is determined to retain:

Look, how I clutch it
Lest it fall—
And I a Pauper go
Unfitted by an instant's Grace
For the Contented—Beggar's face
I wore—an hour ago—

Finally, Dickinson defines the sea as both a symbol of earthly possibility and heavenly expanse in many of her poems. For example, in "And if the Sea should part" (J 695), she makes an explicit connection between the sea and spirituality, likening it to "Eternity."

Both Jewett and Dickinson describe problematic initiation experiences, celebrating the joyous accomplishment of the female striver but lamenting its high price. Neither writer conceives of a female who can satisfy her desire to be one with nature and at the same time respond to the call for social participation and conformity. Thus Jewett issues the command, "No, she must keep silence!" (J 20) to reinforce her heroine's decision not to disclose the heron's hiding place. Similarly, Dickinson writes in a letter to Judge Otis Lord: "dost you know that 'No' is the wildest word we consign to Language?"¹² The high cost of initiation is fully articulated in each writer's work. In the closing lines of "A White Heron," Jewett queries, "Were the birds better friends than their hunter might have been, — who can tell?" (21) even after she has defended her heroine's decision not to have "served and followed him and loved him as a dog loves" (22). Dickinson, in "I Showed her Heights she never saw —" (J 446), finds not even another female sympathetic to learning of her "Secrets — Morning's Nest," ending her poem with a dejected, emotional plea, "With *me*" — I said — "With *me*?" The initiation experiences of Jewett and Dickinson are in a sense *refused* initiations, the young female declining the final phase of *rite de passage*. The refusal, however, represents a positive assertion of will, an active and autonomous choice. Both Sylvia and the speakers in Dickinson's poetry also gain a priceless inner awareness — of themselves and of nature — even though they may return to their original external point of departure. Thus the last scene of Jewett's story is a mirror image of the first scene, with Sylvia leading the loitering cow home at the end of day. Similarly, events in Dickinson's poetry are often expressed conditionally or hypothetically, as in "As if the Sea should part" (J 695). In the work of both writers, the inner awareness is most important, and the crucial question is whether the gain in consciousness is worth the price paid.

Both Sarah Orne Jewett and Emily Dickinson were innovators, writers ahead of their time who possessed visions of female growth far more vital

12. Millicent Todd Bingham, ed., *Emily Dickinson: A Revelation* (New York: Harper, 1954), p. 82.

and autonomous than those permitted by nineteenth-century roles for women. In their writing, the female initiate works through and with nature to achieve understanding, but finding no reception for her new-found insights, she must make nature her permanent retreat. This withdrawal, while respecting woman's strength and integrity, may not fully answer the need for social integration, and it may lock her in a child-like but strained world of innocence.¹³ A rejection of patriarchal norms, an assumption of the active role reserved for males, and an infusion of natural and spiritual energy comprise a new kind of female initiation, but not a completely resolved one. Rather, Jewett and Dickinson open the search for ways that woman may eventually integrate self, nature, and society.

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13. In life as well as in literature, Jewett and Dickinson maintained a distance from men and male social interactions, with Jewett establishing intimate relationships among nourishing communities of women and Dickinson retreating in her Amherst home to a life of solitude and poetry. Neither married, and both sometimes wished to cling to the safety of childhood, recognizing the cost of making adult ventures into the world. Jewett, on her forty-eighth birthday, wrote in a letter to Annie Fields, "I am always nine years old" (*The Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett*, ed. Annie Fields [Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1911], p. 125). For discussions of Dickinson's "little girl pose," see Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979), and John Cody, *After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1971).