March 1988

Domestic Troubles

Ann Romines

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 24, no.1, March 1988, p.50-60

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mkelly@colby.edu.
Domestic Troubles

by ANN ROMINES

Sarah Orne Jewett's finest fiction, with its housekeeping rhythms and its networks of women, is sometimes said to epitomize domestic literature. It offers "a model of women's culture" to which advocates of a feminist "gynocriticism," such as Elaine Showalter, are drawn.1 A recent effort at gynocriticism, Josephine Donovan's "Toward a Women's Poetics," suggests "structural conditions that appear to have shaped traditional women's experience and practice in nearly all cultures"; several of these conditions have to do with domestic work and ethos. Donovan concludes her essay with an illustrative and revealing discussion of The Country of the Pointed Firs.2

Donovan is one of a growing group of writers who urge that domestic work be studied seriously as an activity by which many women have shaped their lives. Kathryn Allen Rabuzzi, for example, argues that "housework as ritual enactment" allows a woman to "enact . . . her own psychic environment," and that education in such ritualized tasks "is one of the major ways that women . . . have been able to share in the entire community of women."3

Yet the idea of exploring domesticity as a special realm of women is fraught with problems and pitfalls for many readers. For example, Laurie Finke responded to Josephine Donovan's proposed feminist poetics by claiming that it was excessively structural, that it emphasized gender at the expense of race, class, and sexual orientation, and that it "threatens to recreate and valorize bourgeois values—domesticity, self-sacrificial nurturing, and silence—extending them to include women of all races, classes, and cultures."4 Finke is echoed by others, such as Katherine Ellis, who warns that "the ideology of domesticity is based on the assumption that women and children prefer dependency to productivity, or can learn to prefer it if the jobs available to them are sufficiently unrewarding and

2. Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature, 3 (Spring/Fall 1984), 264-65.
unrewarded." Ellis, writing in 1975, looks back with alarm at her own early passion for domestic fiction such as *Little Women*. And indeed, at the "first moment of feminist criticism," with its "assertion of continuity between women's experience of social and familial structures and their experience as readers," a woman reader might well approach a reading or re-reading of the classics of American domestic fiction with trepidation. She might return to *Little Women*, for example, to re-examine or dismantle a cherished or resented myth or to discover a literary text less or more artful than she had remembered. But on some level, many women at the threshold of a re-reading of *Little Women* must think, and with terror—what if I'm caught again?

The "first moment of feminist criticism" has been joined by a second, a third, perhaps even a fourth—and still that question has undeniable power. The problem of how to deal with domestic life remains one of the most hotly contested areas of feminist criticism. Women readers of American fiction are newly schooled in the strategies of resistance urged by Judith Fetterley. But when we (for I am one such reader) come to Jewett, Alcott, Stowe, Cather, Welty, and other women writers, we are moved to other kinds of resistance. For the very successes of this literature force readers to experience stresses and cycles which have been killing, demanding, and limiting for some women. The literature itself may become a part of the process by which domestic ritual is transmitted from woman to woman—it is perhaps no accident that, along with her recipe for marble cake, my grandmother gave me my first copy of *Little Women*.

However, the ultimate antidote to indiscriminate acceptance or rejection of the seductive, perpetuating powers of domestic literature is offered by that literature itself. The finest domestic fiction by American women offers a rich and complex scrutiny of what housekeeping has meant and can mean to women. It perpetuates a revealing, troubling, and liberating meditation on the making and keeping of shelters. In *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Sarah Orne Jewett makes such a meditation the center of an American masterpiece.

*The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) is about domestic life. In the course of a summer's visit, the nameless urban narrator, a middle-aged writer, is inducted into the ritualistic life of a Maine seacoast community, with her herbalist-landlady, Mrs. Almira Todd, as friend and guide. The book is an accretion of visits and routines; as Elizabeth Ammons observes, its structure is weblike, and its meaning accrues. It is also a

---

8. "Going in Circles: The Female Geography of Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*," *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 16 (Fall 1983), 93.
hypnotically compelling place for a reader to enter. At some point, most readers feel as the narrator does about her Green Island visit: "It was impossible not to wish to stay on forever."9

Yet Jewett has built into this very text a searching examination and critique of domestic life. Nowhere is this examination more complex and evocative than in the book's central episode: the visit from Mrs. Fosdick to Mrs. Todd which occasions the telling of the story of the hermit, "poor Joanna." A closer look at this sequence should indicate the depth and the rigor of Jewett's scrutiny of domestic life.

By the time this episode occurs, the narrator has settled easily into her Maine summer and into her increasingly intimate friendship with Mrs. Todd; she has ceased to mention the demands of her own work, as writer, and has "been living in the quaint little house with as much comfort and unconsciousness as if it were a larger body, or a double shell, in whose simple convolutions Mrs. Todd and I had secreted ourselves" (p. 55). Now she is to be roused from thoughtless, private enjoyment of Mrs. Todd's housekeeping, and from the dangers of her own affectionate oversimplification of domestic village life. Mrs. Fosdick, an old friend who is, like Mrs. Todd, in her sixties, is eagerly welcomed by Mrs. Todd. She is reputed the "'best hand in the world to make a visit,' as if to visit were the highest of vocations" (p. 58). A widow and the last survivor of a large family of siblings, Mrs. Fosdick in her later years has apparently made a career of settling into other households, making other women more fully conscious of the value (and perhaps the precariousness) of their own domestic circumstances. She is a reminder of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's observation that visiting, "that endless trooping of women to each other's houses," was a centrally important domestic institution for nineteenth-century women.10 Mrs. Fosdick is neither retiring nor apologetic; she has no sense of her own marginality, and she cheerfully claims the best resources of a household as her due. On her arrival, she says to Mrs. Todd, "'I've been lottin' all the way on a cup o' that best tea o' yours. . . . I don't want none o' your useful herbs.' " And the narrator observes that this demand transforms an ordinary evening into an occasion of domestic "high festivity" (p. 57). Mrs. Fosdick knows how to fit into someone else's household without surrendering her identity and obliterating her needs. These are problems the narrator has herself been encountering, in Mrs. Todd's house.

And, since the domestic visit has become the narrator's sole apparent summer occupation, she is now put on her mettle; in Mrs. Fosdick she has a new rival and a new instructor. Positions in the household shift; some part of the burden of housekeeping becomes the narrator's own, as Mrs. Todd sends her to the kitchen to surreptitiously put on the kettle and stoke

As she performs housekeeping tasks for the first time under Mrs. Todd's roof, she finds her sense of proportion altered: “there were so few emergencies of any sort at Dunnet Landing that this one appeared overwhelming” (p. 50).

But as the visit proceeds, with much of tea, knitting, and conversation, interwoven with Mrs. Todd’s usual housework, the narrator comes to value it as much as the older women do. Observing Mrs. Todd with a contemporary, she has a fuller opportunity to recognize her unique wisdom. Obviously Mrs. Todd’s self-possessed and solitary housekeeping is not always a sufficient satisfaction, for she eagerly adjusts her routine to accommodate the boon of a domestic visit. She is “affectionate hostess” to both women, and the Fosdick visit provides her with an opportunity to reassure the anxious, jealous narrator that her friendship, too, is important. Thus the narrator sits contentedly with the other two, and “subjects of an intimate nature were no more withheld from my ears than if I had been a shell on the mantelpiece” (p. 59). Like the commonplace Victorian parlor ornament, which one might hold to one’s ear and hear the sea’s story, she becomes the perfect medium, through whom we encounter the tale of Joanna Todd.

Joanna’s history, encrusted with the two women’s memories, responses, changed views, and reports or surmises of the responses of others, is interspersed with the narrator’s own (mostly unspoken) responses and her account of the tale’s emergence, in the course of a stormy evening. In the air is the strong scent of the cough sirup Mrs. Todd has boiled that day — reminder of a harsher season soon to come, for “the time of gathering herbs was nearly over, but the time of sirups and cordials had begun” (p. 62). In other words, in the narration as well as the season, we have come to a moment of distilled, concentrated — and perhaps therapeutic — meaning.

On this evening, the narrator, newly confident, has herself assumed some of the domestic powers of a hostess: “I made a fire for the first time in the Franklin stove in my room, and begged my two housemates to come in and keep me company” (p. 62). As the evening’s conversation begins, Mrs. Fosdick brings up the name of a Joanna Todd, only to find Mrs. Todd unwontedly skittish and reticent. “‘I never want to hear Joanna laughed at’ ” (p. 65), she remonstrates, setting an almost sacramental tone. Mrs. Fosdick, less burdened with scruples, begins to lay out the rudiments of the story. Joanna Todd, a cousin to Mrs. Todd’s dead husband, was jilted by her fiancé. Distraught, she signed away her shore property and moved to small, barren Shell-heap Island, to live the rest of her life there, determinedly alone. Soon the two women are trading facts and speculations about Joanna, in response to the narrator’s discreetly neutral questions.

Mrs. Fosdick supposes that Joanna’s withdrawal was the natural result of losing the domestic life she had planned toward: “she acted just like a
bird when its nest is spoilt" (pp. 65-66). Some of the older women's keenest questions, still fresh after more than thirty years, are about housekeeping, about how Joanna survived without the simple comforts which surround them now:

"Almiry, what did she do for clothin' when she needed to replenish, or risin' for her bread, or the piece-bag that no woman can live long without?"

"Or company," suggested Mrs. Todd. . . . "There must have been a terrible sight o' long winter evenin's that first year." (p. 58)

The narrator has been indulging in gently supercilious reflections on village life which confirm her status as sophisticated foreigner in Maine. Now her silent thoughts on Joanna are far more self-consciously lofty than the older women's homely questions; she meditates "upon a state of society which admitted such personal freedom and a voluntary hermitage. There was something medieval in the behavior of poor Joanna Todd" (p. 69). As Mrs. Todd launches into an account of her one visit to Joanna on the island, the narrator falls silent and the two older women draw "closer together . . . talking on, quite unconscious of a listener." They indicate, too, that this story demands years of renewed reflection for comprehension: "'I see it all now as I couldn't when I was young'" (p. 69).

Suddenly, at a suspenseful point in Mrs. Todd's narrative, there is a knock at the door: someone wanting a remedy for a sick child. The women, who have been singlemindedly intent on the tale, are now pitched into multiple awareness: their domestic circle, centered by the bright stove, must contend with the dark rain and waves outdoors and with the present urgent needs of another household (indeed the persistent smell of cough sirup underlines the further fact of needs to come). Now the narrator does not slip into lofty historical abstraction; instead she emphatically imagines Joanna's feelings: "what separation from humankind she must have felt, what terror and sadness, even in a summer storm like this!" When Mrs. Todd re-enters the room, the physical circumstances dramatize the minimal division between the outer dark and their warm circle; she has "a mist about her from standing long in the wet doorway, and the sudden draught of her coming beat out the smoke and flame from the Franklin stove" (p. 73). Because of the interruption, the cosy room seems an even more desirable shelter. Yet memory, weather, and circumstance combine to show how equivocal this shelter is, how easily its comfortable present inhabitants might find themselves outside, elsewhere.

Mrs. Todd resumes the tale of her visit, offering Joanna's own explanation of her retreat: she had "committed the unpardonable sin" by the "wickedness" of her thoughts toward God in her disappointment, and thus hadn't "'got no right to live with folks no more. . . . tell them I want to be alone.'" Mrs. Todd has already observed that Joanna had come to resemble her mother, who "'had the grim streak'" (pp. 74, 76). The narrator does not speak again; Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Fosdick con-
tinue, with deep sighs and lengthening pauses. Mrs. Fosdick, who with her cheerful modernity has become a foil for Mrs. Todd's more profound and cyclical views, urges that a case like Joanna's must be a thing of the past: "the world's bigger and freer than it used to be." But for Mrs. Todd, character is, as ever, fate: "No, Joanna was Joanna, and there she lays on her island" (p. 78). It is her fatalism and her stalwart respect for Joanna's unknowable self which end the night's talk.

Apparently, Joanna anticipated a household "nest" so passionately that, when she lost the prospect, she turned away from all shore comforts, punishing herself in the cruelest way she knew. And yet—there is some suggestion that, like her mother before her, Joanna desired this separation; she said, "I want to be alone." Mrs. Todd describes Joanna's island housekeeping, with braided rush mats and sandals, flowers "in shells fixed to the walls...so it did look sort of home-like." Alone, she wore a pretty dress: "she must have kept it nice for best in the afternoons" (p. 74). This is housekeeping performed for its own sake: is Joanna's life a rejection or an apotheosis of domesticity? The very title of this chapter, "The Hermitage," raises similar questions: does it refer to the hermit Joanna's house, or to Mrs. Todd's, where these three single women are sheltering now? Or to both? Is a hermitage anti-domestic or quintessentially domestic?

For local people, Joanna Todd became an object not only of curiosity but of real concern, and perhaps of quiet identification. Joanna has been dead for twenty-two years, but visitors still make the difficult landing at her island, and a path is beaten to her grave. Although the narrator receded into silence as Joanna's tale emerged, she becomes principal actor of the final chapter on Joanna. In it, she makes a solitary pilgrimage to Joanna's Shell-heap grave, and attests to her own kinship. No longer is Joanna's retreat categorized as "something medieval;" instead, she concludes, "we understand our fellows of the cell to whatever age of history they may belong" (p. 82). The chapter ends as the narrator hears distant laughter from a pleasure-boat. "I knew, as if she had told me, that poor Joanna must have heard the like on many and many a summer afternoon, and must have welcomed the good cheer in spite of hopelessness and winter weather, and all the sorrow and disappointment in the world" (p. 82). Here the narrator has completed an almost absolute identification with Joanna—"I knew, as if she had told me," she asserts—but with a transformed Joanna, her maternal "grim streak" subdued, who could take pleasure from distant laughter.

Before Mrs. Fosdick's visit, the narrator's responses to the domestic rituals she encountered in Maine were extreme and over-simplified. First, like a dutiful daughter, she became so caught up in Mrs. Todd's household industry, the herb business, that she entirely abandoned her own profession, and a large part of her selfhood. Then she resolutely hired the schoolhouse for a writing hermitage, abandoning Mrs. Todd
during the day, and thus trying out a life pattern more commonly enacted by men. But in the schoolhouse she felt bereft and locked away from the heart of the village life, like someone who “did not really belong to Dun-net Landing” (p. 15). Next, when Mrs. Todd invited her on the first of their mutual expeditions, to visit her mother and brother on Green Island, the narrator was totally enchanted by the peaceful domestic life she encountered there, and invested it with idyllic sweetness, ignoring, for the moment, its stringencies.

But Mrs. Fosdick’s visit initiates a complex interchange through which the narrator begins to move beyond her oversimplification of domestic life. She tries out various roles and positions. Visitor herself, she has one model in Mrs. Fosdick, “best hand in the world to make a visit.” But she also begins to share with Mrs. Todd the role of hostess, and then she becomes a hostess in her own right, as she kindles a fire and beckons the others into her own room. Sometimes she seems as passive as an empty, lifeless object, the shell on the mantelpiece, as when she falls silent during the completion of Joanna’s tale. But her absorption of that tale empowers her to become active pursuer of Joanna’s legend, in her own pilgrimage, and finally even to become, like the other storytellers, a creator of Joanna, as she confidently asserts her knowledge of Joanna’s private thoughts.

The much-debated form of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* subtly and dynamically conveys the narrator’s growth. The book comprises about seven major episodes, such as the Green Island visit and the Bowden family reunion. Usually these episodes have a certain narrative unity (most were first published separately) that would justify one’s viewing the book as a series of short stories. But connections among the episodes, continuities of character, place, and — most notably — the narrator’s development, give *The Country of the Pointed Firs* the unity we may associate with a novel. Yet it lacks the pattern of complication and climax, the sense of accomplished external action, that we are accustomed to finding in nineteenth-century fiction. The events of this book will occur again and again, as domestic tasks do. Just as the Bowden reunion comes around every summer, Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Fosdick have discussed Joanna again and again, over the past years. But repetition does not mute the urgency with which they mine her story. In village lives as circumscribed as their own, validity and meaning are found by going in deeper, through the boredom and triviality of repetition, toward the hidden understanding that must be approached cyclically.\footnote{Rabuzzi discusses these qualities of housework.} Mrs. Todd, who leads the most domestic and the most physically circumscribed life of the three women, most fully apprehends this, and she, like Jewett, sees it as a distinctively female way of feeling. She tells the narrator that an old male lover “‘has forgot our youthful feelin’s, I expect, but a woman’s heart is different;
them feelin's comes back when you think you're done with 'em, as sure as spring comes with the year’ ” (p. 8).

After *The Country of the Pointed Firs* was published, Jewett discouraged readers from thinking of the book as a finished artifact, an accomplished plot. For she came back to it four times in the six years which remained in her writing life, with four major stories. All return to characters and themes already introduced, deepening and extending their implications. Three of the stories (“The Queen's Twin,” “A Dunnet Shepherdess,” and “The Foreigner”) seem to re-enter the time frame of the book, the months of the narrator's summer visit, thus suggesting that, in the continuum of a cycle, one can move both backward and forward in time. The fourth story, “William's Wedding,” on which Jewett was at work at the time of the accident which ended her professional life, is set in the spring following the narrator's autumn departure from Dunnet Landing, with which *The Country of the Pointed Firs* ends. Whichever direction one might take in time, Jewett demonstrated, one could return to Dunnet Landing and re-enter a domestic life, shaped by women, which offers unique insights and satisfactions. (Indeed, Jewett had already suggested this by titling the first chapter of the book “The Return.”)

“William's Wedding,” the final story, begins with the narrator's sense that, back in Dunnet Landing, she is inhabiting the full dimensions of her selfhood; her first glimpse of the community “made me feel solid and definite again, instead of a poor, incoherent being. Life was resumed, and anxious living blew away as if it had not been. . . . It was a return to happiness” (p. 213).

One final aspect of the form of this book which is relevant to its pervasive rhythms and to the Joanna episode in particular is Jewett's practice of dividing her episodes into smaller, titled units. The Joanna episode, for instance, is spread through four chapters of four to ten pages each. These small units, and the stop-and-start rhythm they create, replicate on yet another level the interruptible, repetitive, yet cumulative qualities of domestic life.

Chapter titles are particularly telling in this sequence. First, “A Strange Sail” introduces Mrs. Fosdick. The clear, purposeful image of the sail brings the possibilities and dangers of a larger world into the Todd house, which the narrator has found cosily shell-like and deceptively “simple.” “Poor Joanna” initiates Joanna's tale, taking its title from the epithet which all three women use—one which suggests their pity for Joanna and perhaps implies that the essence of her situation can be captured in such a summarizing phrase. The chapter ends at the point in Mrs. Todd's narrative of her island visit where Joanna appears directly for the first and only time, standing in the doorway of her island shack. Her commanding image overpowers the simplifying epithet.

This break between chapters is heightened by Jewett's beginning the next chapter, “The Hermitage,” with the sudden interruption by Mrs.
Todd’s customer. Now the emphasis moves from “peculiarities of character” to a more abiding subject, in which all three women are deeply involved: the nature of shelter. Throughout this chapter the narrator sits silent. But in the last Joanna chapter, she takes all of the accrued weight of the previous chapter with her, as she extends the communal explorations of the fireside conversations in a solitary attempt to put herself, physically and emotionally, in Joanna’s place: “On Shell-heap Island.”

Joanna Todd’s story, as it emerges within these chapters, is a parable of an ordered female life taken to extremes of self-sufficiency. There is no question but that Mrs. Todd, Mrs. Fosdick, and the narrator find this parable deeply relevant to their own lives. Joanna’s history raises the most deeply troubling of questions: Is her “eniled domesticity anything more than the waste of a life?”12 A “yes” or “no” answer to that question might provide welcome resolution and release. But Jewett’s book simply will not allow such a response. The one thing the three storytellers—and we—can surely know is that Joanna’s example validates something in themselves, and pushes them beyond unreflective comfort toward hard and necessary questions about their own female lives.

Recent speculation on the origins of domestic life as we know it suggests that housekeeping, as a specialized, solitary female activity, developed in seventeenth-century Holland, concurrently with the concept of interior life, “the deepening human recognition that the sense of reality exists within.”13 According to Witold Rybczynski, “homely domesticity depended on the development of a rich interior awareness, an awareness that was the result of the woman’s role in the home.”14 One of the great distinctions of The Country of the Pointed Firs is Jewett’s portrayal of the inter-relationships of the domestic and psychic aspects of interior life. The three women, variously involved in housekeeping, separately and jointly relate and create the story of Joanna Todd. That story is their communal and individual heritage, but its core is a fiercely private life which they will never fully explain—or forget. Mrs. Todd’s house and the domestic ritual of the Fosdick visit provide the medium for this richly meditative experience.

On many levels, then, the Joanna Todd chapters take deep advantage of the possibilities of domestic life and literature. In Mrs. Todd’s shell-like house, domestic intimacy and privacy flourish simultaneously, as the women excavate and invent Joanna’s story. The narrator is hostess and guest, insider and outsider, housekeeper and hermit. Joanna’s tale pushes her to meditate on the dangers and necessities of housekeeping as that woman felt them and as she must confront them herself.

The most compelling questions which emerge from this meditation are

---

12. The question comes from my colleague at George Washington University, Judith Plotz, who helpfully read a draft of this essay, as did another colleague, Christopher Sten. My thanks to both.
about the relation of domesticity and solitude—questions with special relevance for a writer, whose work demands privacy. Mrs. Todd's delightful mother, who has never lived alone, is perplexed by "how Joanna lived without having nobody to do for, getting her own meals and tending her own poor self day in an' day out" (p. 69). For these three single women, such questions have even more immediacy and application.

To Mrs. Fosdick, gregarious and domestically adaptable, Joanna's tale is a puzzle, for which she invents solutions out of her own nature. For example, she assumes that Joanna must have assuaged loneliness by "makin' folks" out of her only livestock, her hens. The narrator follows Mrs. Fosdick's example when she asserts her "knowledge" that Joanna heard and "welcomed the good cheer" of laughter from pleasure-boats. For herself, the narrator is discovering in Dunnet Landing how to balance private experience with a communal, domestic life. Sociably, intrusively, she assumes such a solution for Joanna, too.

Mrs. Fosdick's model is easier to follow than Mrs. Todd's (although the narrator has moved toward Mrs. Todd's cyclical view in her conclusion that Joanna is not a "medieval" phenomenon, but a person with kinship to people from any historical period). Mrs. Todd is the only one of the three women to have actually seen Joanna on her island. Then a young woman newly married, she "entreated" Joanna to come ashore with her and join her domestic world. But now Mrs. Todd knows what Mrs. Fosdick has not realized and what the narrator is loath to learn: that the deepest mysteries of human character will remain impenetrable, however often we return to mine them; that "Joanna was Joanna, and there she lays." What Mrs. Todd has gained from her meditations on Joanna is self-knowledge—and wisdom.

It is that wisdom which keeps Mrs. Todd's housekeeping from rigidity or self-importance, and makes her house a hermitage where one may live both as reflective hermit and sociable woman. Significantly, the Joanna Todd story is the only one of the book's major tales which is told under Mrs. Todd's own roof. And it provokes the gravest, most intense, and most revisionist response from the narrator. Newly enlightened and newly vulnerable, she is ready next to move outward into the crowning ritual of the Bowden reunion. Then, after the cautionary example of Elijah Tilley's obsessive and static housekeeping, in which the process-oriented fluidity of "female culture" is denied, she must receive her final lesson from Mrs. Todd.

As the narrator prepares to depart at summer's end, she finds her "affectionate hostess" unwontedly brusque. The fond narrator, full of her newfound sociability, runs after Mrs. Todd to speak her goodbyes. But Mrs. Todd turns her back and walks silently out of the house and away—

15. "The Foreigner," a later tale concerned with relationships among women and the nature of isolation, is also narrated in Mrs. Todd's house.
exactly as Joanna walked away from Mrs. Todd herself, at the end of their visit on Shell-heap Island. Even in a woman as socially and domestically accomplished as Mrs. Todd, there is an inner, unknowable hermit-self—"strangely self-possessed and mysterious" (p. 131), as she appears to the narrator in her last glimpse of her friend. Leaving the village, the narrator carries Mrs. Todd’s gifts, reminders of her own double heritage. With a collection of domestic necessities—herbs, lunch, and basket—she also receives a hermit’s heirloom: the coral pin which belonged to Joanna Todd.16

The Joanna chapters illustrate the triumph of Jewett’s mature style. Her first book, *Deephaven* (1877), written in her twenties, had been a partial failure because she had not yet found a style or perspective flexible and incisive enough to undertake an earlier series of domestic investigations. As opposed to Dunnet Landing, Deephaven was finally a closed world; its narrator-visitor never really located or experienced its domestic rhythms, and thus she and her companion left the town as they arrived, as romantic voyeurs.17 Jewett never returned to the world of *Deephaven* after the book’s publication, as she did to Dunnet Landing.

The careers of other major American women writers are also marked by this search for a style which might accommodate their deepening examination of domestic life. The last stage of Willa Cather’s search, for example, is apparent in *Shadows on the Rock* and *Obscure Destinies*. Eudora Welty’s two novels embodying domestic rituals—*Delta Wedding* and *Losing Battles*—span nearly thirty years. And we see her, like Jewett, evolving a style which will show forth those rituals in all their voracious danger and necessity.

Such writers are finally the answer to women readers’ domestic troubles. In chapters such as Jewett’s Joanna Todd sequence, the everyday materials of domestic life are invested with the urgency they bear in female lives. There, domesticity is neither valorized nor trivialized; instead, it stands forth as a complex and problematical medium of consciousness. To such works, readers must bring what the best women writers do: vigilance, acuity, and a respect for the complexity of consciousness, wherever it may thrive.
