The Country of the Pointed Firs: A Novel by Saran Orne Jewett

Paul D. Voelker
Oct 25, 1907

Dear Miss Jewett,

I have been wanting for months to thank you - to let you know how enchanting I felt you. I felt your letter to be sincere and real. I have been busy, at work,

Il Palmerino

S Cervasio

Florence
Whom eulogize, that additional a pleasure.

is taking me with him for a month to Greece, where I never expected to go; a person I am going to a part near to Cairo.

Then is the back to two months from the Nile. When you receive this letter do not write to me yet. And don't be angry in home for other form. I am sending you this Souvenir with the letter to this Blown.

[Signature]

Y. [Name]
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THE COUNTRY OF THE POINTED FIRS:
A NOVEL BY SARAN ORNE JEWETT

By PAUL D. VOELKER

As Francis Fike has observed, Sarah Orne Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896) is now generally accepted as, at the least, a minor masterpiece, and a critic of the book need not spend his time proving its worth.1 There is some difficulty, however, in determining exactly what the book should be termed. Should it be referred to as a collection of short stories, a series of sketches, or something totally different? One thing is certain, however; critics have not experienced a similar indecision with regard to what the book should not be termed. Both F. O. Matthiessen and Margaret Thorp state quite clearly that it is not a novel.2 In the light of this observation, several critics have taken pains to elucidate to varying degrees the book's unity and structure and thematic content. Warner Berthoff has pointed to the book's basic organizing principle while Robin Magowan has ably analyzed interrelationships of what he terms "The Outer Island Sequence."3 Also, Hyatt Waggoner and Richard Cary have observed certain of the book's unifying principles, while Francis Fike has done an excellent job of relating the book's major unifying themes.4 Given then that the book has unity, structure, and thematic content, why hasn't it been accorded the stature of

2 Francis Otto Matthiessen, Sarah Orne Jewett (Boston, 1929), 101; Margaret Farrand Thorp, Sarah Orne Jewett (Minneapolis, 1966), 41.
a novel or, if length is a barrier, at least that of a novelle or novelette?

It seems reasonable to assume that the book has not been denied this stature because of its lack of plot. Today we are accustomed to "plotless" novels with their emphasis on character. Certainly the fact that the book is episodic in form is not sufficient to deny it the status of a novel either. In this respect, the book could always be related to the picaresque novel form. What does appear to be lacking is one significant element which we have come to expect in the novel—the growth and development of character. However, I hope to be able to demonstrate that this barrier to The Country of the Pointed Firs attaining the stature of a novel is, indeed, surmountable, and that the character in the book commonly referred to as the narrator is not the static non-participant as she has previously been represented. This is, of course, an unpopular position to take, but I hope the widespread contention that Miss Jewett could not write a conventional novel will leave room for the possibility that she may have been able to write an unconventional one.

In the first chapter of The Country of the Pointed Firs, "The Return," we are presented with the character of "a lover of Dunnet Landing," returning to the seaside village after having become enchanted with it "two or three summers before." It is interesting to note that this first chapter, in which we receive our initial impression of "the narrator," is not written in the first-person form which is used throughout the rest of the book: it is written from a third-person point of view. It is significant that this third-person narrator makes the comment that coming to know a town like Dunnet Landing "is like becoming acquainted with a single person" (2). At this point in her development, the first-person narrator cannot yet make such an observation. She does not know the town and, indeed, has no desire to know it. It is a vision from her "affectionate dreams" which she wishes to make use of but not become involved in. Only a third-person narrator can

6 Matthiessen, 101.
7 Sarah Orne Jewett, The Country of the Pointed Firs in The World of Dunnet Landing, 2. All quotations of the text are from this edition and are hereafter cited in parenthetical page references.
present us with this insight. Actually, the narrator’s comment, that getting to know a town is like getting to know a single
person, foreshadows exactly what is to happen to the first-
person narrator. Before finishing this chapter, Jewett makes it
a point to tell us that one of the first-person narrator’s precon-
ceptions is that the village possesses a “childish certainty of
being the center of civilization (2). The loss of the condescend-
ing attitude implied in the word childish, as opposed to child-
like, will be one of the chief indications of the growth of the
central character, the first-person narrator, hereafter referred
to simply as “the narrator.”

In the second chapter, the central character assumes the
role of narrator and the first-person form is used for the first
time. This initial usage indicates further the narrator’s precon-
ceptions of Dunnet folk and the distance which she must
yet progress: “my landlady professed such firm belief in her
thoroughwart elixir as sometimes to endanger the life and use-
fulness of worthy neighbors” (6, italics mine). The attitude
toward Mrs. Todd revealed in this observation contains an
element of condescending humor at the expense of Mrs. Todd
which will later be unworthy of the narrator. Such an atti-
dute, however, characterizes the narrator’s initial conception
of Mrs. Todd also expressed in the following passage: “it
seemed sometimes as if love and hate and jealousy and adverse
winds at sea might also find their proper remedies among the
curious wild-looking plants in Mrs. Todd’s garden” (5). Once
again, the gentle, condescending humor reveals itself in
the parallel “and” construction culminating in the non-parallel
rhetorical phrase “adverse winds at sea.” In the succeeding
paragraph to the above, the narrator goes so far with her
humor as to impute to the village doctor the motive of having
“counted upon the unfavorable effect of certain [of Mrs. Todd’s]
potions which he should find his opportunity in counteracting”
(5). It should now be clear that at this point in the novel,
the narrator does not understand either Mrs. Todd or Dunnet
Landing, a town in which the spirit of cooperation exempli-
fied by Mrs. Todd and the doctor is a commonplace. The
narrator regards the town and its inhabitants as she did in her
“affectionate dreams,” as essentially “quaint.” She views them
from the vantage point of a “cosmopolitan” Bostonian; the
people are provincial and childish and must be protected lest their fragile bubbles of provincialism shatter at the sound of a harsh word.

It is just such an attitude which initially keeps the narrator from refraining to help Mrs. Todd in her business. As the opening lines of the second chapter indicate, the narrator has found that Mrs. Todd's house is not the secluded retreat she had thought it would be. It is busy with the parade of local customers coming to see Mrs. Todd about remedies for their ailments. Business is so brisk that the narrator becomes an unwitting junior partner who is assigned to "answer all peremptory knocks at the side door" (7). The pleasures of this endeavor quickly captivate the narrator, and she finds that while thus engaged "the July days fly fast." However, the narrator soon feels guilty about receiving so much pleasure from such a simple occupation. Her Boston "conscience" sounds louder in her ears "than the sea on the nearest pebble beach," and she risks hurting Mrs. Todd's feelings enough to tell her that she must leave the firm because she has "a long piece of writing" which she is "bound to do" (8). Mrs. Todd naturally regrets this enforced separation and admits that she has taken advantage of the narrator, but did so with the belief that she could trust the narrator and that with time the narrator would "'gain judgement an' experience, an' be very able in the business.'" (9).

This comment with regard to her deficiencies is lost on the narrator who has decided that since her first retreat has failed she must try another. Before she can make this retreat, however, the narrator is taken into Mrs. Todd's confidence as she tells of her frustrated love for "one who was far above her" (9). This admission gives the narrator her first small insight into the dimensions and strength of Mrs. Todd's character, and she reacts by comparing her to "a huge sibyl" (10), the first image in a progressive chain which signals the narrator's development.

In the third chapter, the narrator acquires her second stronghold of retreat, the schoolhouse. In this section, we receive the first suggestion that the narrator is beginning to doubt the validity of retreating as she says, "Selfish as it may appear, the retired situation seemed to possess great advantages" (13,
At this point, we see a beautiful example of Jewett's subtle method of characterizing the narrator. The visual image of her hanging her lunch-basket on a nail as if she "were a small scholar" and then sitting behind the teacher's desk as if she were "that great authority" clearly reveals the difference between what she must learn to know about Dunnet Landing and what she believes she knows. By the end of the chapter the narrator has progressed to the point that she is feigning excuses to stay home from her writing desk in the schoolroom. She is slowly and unconsciously beginning to discover the difference between the truth of Dunnet Landing and the truth she is trying to capture in her writing.

At the beginning of the next chapter, the narrator makes another retreat to the schoolhouse to escape from participating in the funeral procession of Mrs. Begg, another woman who did not care for the town. As she watches the procession from her high, schoolhouse window, she reveals her increased understanding of Mrs. Todd by observing that "hers was not affected grief" (16). As this chapter reaches its conclusion, the narrator makes further progress in her development by regretting the intentional separation from the community she has achieved by absenting herself from the procession. As she sits at her desk trying to continue her writing, she finds that her sentences have "failed to catch these lovely summer cadences" (18). (One cannot help thinking that she is trying to write one of the many romantic historical novels of that period, the type of novel characterized by Matthiessen as "quiet and harmless, for it's thoroughly dead." As a result of this failure of her creativity, the narrator realizes that she has made the townspeople remember that she "did not really belong to Dunnet Landing." As a consequence, she seeks to turn back to the outside world of Boston "which had been, half unconsciously, forgotten" (18-19), and wishes for a companion.

The answer to the narrator's wish arrives in the following chapter under the guise of Captain Littlepage, whom she had just observed in the funeral procession. This elderly emissary from the outside world is a former sea captain who spent his lonely hours reading the poets. His favorite work is Paradise Lost because "'it's all lofty, all lofty,'" but he admits with
reservation, "'Shakespeare was a great poet; he copied life, but you have to put up with a great deal of low talk'" (21). The narrator readily welcomes this breath of air into the doirdrums of her schoolhouse. She is fascinated by his character and his possible antecedents, but her romantic conjecturing is interrupted by the Captain's seemingly realistic account of how he lost his ship. Such factual events from the life of a real person are, at this point in her development, unwelcomed by the narrator, and she begins to find such realism "a little dull" (26). Her boredom is relieved, however, when the Captain begins to discourse on the socio-economic factors affecting the life and "decline" of Dunnet Landing. This interest, reminiscent of the belligerent man in Wilder's Our Town who queries Editor Webb about the town's social problems, is the expected response of the cosmopolitan traveler yet unaware of the enduring human truths to be found in Dunnet Landing or Grover's Corners.

Now that the Captain has captured his auditor's interest, he is prodded to continue his yarn about his shipwreck and Gaffett's Island, "'a kind of waiting-place between this world an' the next'" (39). It is interesting to note that at this point the Captain observes that while isolated in the Arctic, his taste in poets changed. "'Shakespeare was the king; he has his sea terms very accurate, and some beautiful passages were calming to the mind'" (34). For a character from Dunnet Landing, it is normal that a religious poet like Milton would not be "calming to the mind," for as Francis Fike observes, "formal religion is not portrayed as a live option in Pointed Firs."9 The point of this little episode, which is lost on both the Captain and the underdeveloped narrator, is that a poet of life, like Shakespeare, contains greater impact and truth than a poet of " loftiness" like Milton. Only when the narrator comes to understand this and embraces all the truths of Dunnet Landing will she be able to create true literature.

At this stage in her development, however, the narrator is not interested in such observations. She is more interested in the Captain's tale of the way-station which, when finally discovered for all time, will let us know with "'Certainty, not conjecture'" (23), where we go after death. This hope of

9 Fike, 484.
Captain Littlepage's aligns him with the modern scientist who seeks to remove the element of mystery from life. It is the same point of view which motivates the narrator's interest in the socio-economic background of Dunnet. The identity of the two characters' points of view is clearly demonstrated by the Captain's disparaging remark that the inhabitants of Dunnet Landing, "'In that handful of houses fancy that they comprehend the universe'" (24). This statement, a clear echo of the narrator's conception of the town in the first chapter, reveals the attitude toward the town which she must repudiate before her development is complete.

After leaving the Captain with his invitation that she visit him one day, the narrator meets Mrs. Todd. At this time, when the narrator is still under the spell of Gaffett's Island, her eye is first attracted to Green Island. "The sunburst upon that outermost island made it seem like a sudden revelation of the world beyond this which some believe to be so near" (45). As Robin Magowan has correctly noted, this sentence reveals that at this moment Green Island is to the narrator as Gaffett's Island is to Captain Littlepage, but only for a moment. Although she momentarily sees the island as a promise of a waiting-place for the dead on this earth, her belief is shattered by Mrs. Todd's revelation that her mother, Mrs. Blackett, lives there. In the world of Dunnet Landing, an earthly waystation for the dead is of no concern. As Hyatt Waggoner puts it, "[What must be] perceived as essential is life lived meaningfully." And the narrator receives a first impression of this idea which is evidenced by the new appellation which she gives to Mrs. Todd. Whereas she had previously likened her to a sibyl, a mere prophetess or enchantress, she now elevates Mrs. Todd to the position of "caryatide" (48), a priestess in the temple of Diana, the helper of women. By such benchmarks of the increasingly higher esteem in which the narrator views Mrs. Todd is her progress as a developing character mapped.

In the next chapter, the narrator, with Mrs. Todd and Johnny Bowden, sets out on the turn of the tide for her first visit of the summer—the series of visits being a unifying ele-

10 Magowan, 421.
11 Waggoner, 375.
ment noted by Richard Cary, but also a key to the progress of the narrator's development. On the boat ride to the island, reminiscent of the last part of Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, the narrator's position as an outsider is signaled by Johnny's "contemptuous surprise" when she reveals her ignorance of William's signal flag. Upon arriving at the island and meeting Mrs. Blackett, the narrator is amazed at the old woman's youthfulness, as if she promised a great future, and was beginning, not ending, her summers and their happy toils. This is the narrator's first confrontation with "life lived meaningfully," and it is a mark of the growth she must yet undergo that she wonders why Mrs. Blackett "had been set to shine on this lonely island of the northern coast".

In the following chapter, the narrator is a recipient of more of Mrs. Todd's personal history. She reveals her feeling for her dead husband, Nathan, and how he died without knowing of her first love. The profoundness of Mrs. Todd's humanity and depth of feeling call forth from the narrator the remark, "she might have been Antigone alone on the Theban plain". Thus, the narrator now elevates Mrs. Todd from the position of resembling a servant of a mythic god to the role of identity with a heroic mythic figure. At this point, the narrator has fully realized the goodness and truth of Mrs. Todd. She has elevated her completely from her initial view of the herbalist as a quaint natural healer. This realization of the strength and truth of Mrs. Todd is the narrator's first step in becoming fully acquainted with Dunnet Landing and emerging as a developed character.

At the end of the Green Island episode, the narrator comes to cherish and, indeed, wish to take part in the life of Green Island. Her sensitivity has reached the point where she can see a new wonder in the way William sings what to us must probably remain often a platitude, "Home Sweet Home." She can see the simple peace and beauty of Mrs. Blackett's rocker by the window. As she says, "It was impossible not to wish to stay on forever at Green Island".

But our narrator has not yet completed her growth. While she is ready to embrace the aspect of Dunnet Landing she finds

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12 Cary, 150.
13 Ibid., 146.
on Green Island, she is primarily intrigued by the literal fact that it is an island, seemingly remote and isolated. She is not yet ready to embrace all of Dunnet Landing life. The visual image of the shell on Mrs. Blackett’s mantlepiece becomes the dominant symbol of the Joanna Todd-Mrs. Fosdick chapters which follow. As the narrator observes at the beginning of this section, she has been quite happy living in Mrs. Todd’s house. From now on we hear no more remarks about her schoolhouse retreat. She is content in her landlady’s house, “as if it were . . . a double shell” in which she had secreted herself (88). The announcement of the imminent arrival of Mrs. Fosdick, however, makes the narrator suffer “much from apprehension.” She does not desire to be removed from her new-found comfortable retreat, and she views with skepticism Mrs. Todd’s attitude that Mrs. Fosdick’s ability to visit is a real virtue “as if to visit were the highest of vocations” (90).

In spite of the narrator’s fear, Mrs. Fosdick soon arrives, and it is a mark of the narrator’s progress that she is bothered by being barred from the initial conversation of Mrs. Todd and her guest. She readily makes a friend of Mrs. Fosdick, however, as soon as they are introduced and have a quiet chat. As a result of her new-found acquaintance, the narrator learns the story of Joanna Todd, the recluse of Shell-heap Island. The narrator learns that Joanna, like Almira Todd, was disappointed in love, but that she, unlike the courageous Mrs. Todd, did not remain a member of the active world. As an outgrowth of the story of Joanna’s hermitage, the narrator learns to a degree how much the island and the mainland are interrelated. She finds that despite Joanna’s desire for solitude as a penance for committing the unforgivable sin, “‘There was a good many old friends had Joanna on their minds’” (107). The narrator also learns that contrary to her own thought, Mrs. Blackett does not live a solitary life on Green Island. It was Mrs. Blackett who got Joanna to promise to call if she was ill, and it was Mrs. Blackett who was with Joanna when she died. The section ends with clear evidence that the narrator is breaking out of her shell as she makes her first solitary visit in the neighborhood, a visit to dead Joanna’s grave; and it is a measure of the narrator’s growth that she does not condemn or

14 Magowan, 424.
condescend to Joanna as a provincial eccentric, but rather sees the universal truth that, "in the life of each of us... there is a place remote and islanded" (132). In empathizing with Joanna Todd's retreat without accepting it, the narrator takes one more step on her way to knowing Dunnet Landing.

The next section of the novel deals with the Bowden reunion. Once again the narrator must make a visit and meet new people. But it is a measure of her growth that she is apprehensive that Mrs. Todd will not ask her to go. The narrator is so overjoyed with the prospect of the trip that she readily suggests changing into her best clothes. This is certainly not the same character who was apprehensive of Mrs. Fosdick's visit a few chapters before. In actuality, the narrator's trip to Shell-heap Island is the turning point in her growth. She has changed from a person who contracts and retreats into one who expands and embraces. This change in the narrator is visually symbolized by Jewett at the end of this chapter when she causes the narrator, on her way to fetch the horse, to pass by Captain Littlepage seated behind his closed window. It is significant that although she waves at the Captain, he does not see the narrator. Symbolically, he is aware of her repudiation of his view of Dunnet Landing which is evidenced by the fact that she has failed to visit him.

On the trip along the road to the Bowdens', the narrator is further impressed by the fact that Mrs. Blackett has not islanded herself from society. She is impressed and amazed as "one revelation after another was made of the constant interest and intercourse that had linked the far island [of Mrs. Blackett] and these scattered farms into a golden chain of love and dependence" (149). Similarly, Mrs. Todd's statement that "'if one house is frying [doughnuts] all the rest is'" (148), reveals the interdependent continuity of all the surrounding countryside, as continuous as a ring of doughnut itself.

The reunion can be seen as the climax of the narrator's development. It is here that the narrator comes "near to feeling like a true Bowden" and parts "from certain new friends as if they were old friends," and it is here that she comes to realize that one of the chief attributes of Dunnet life is, as Francis Fike has already observed, "memory," or "the treasure of a new remembrance" (180). The evidence of her
awareness and acceptance of the truths of Dunnet life is given when she refers to the group of the Bowden reunion as possibly identical with “a company of ancient Greeks going to celebrate a victory, or to worship a god of harvests in the grove above” (163).

In this image of festal Greeks we see that the narrator has so grown and developed that she can elevate all the inhabitants of Dunnet Landing and its environs to the same level to which she raised Mrs. Todd when she identified her with Antigone. Ironically enough, with this very image she has claimed for Dunnet Landing the status of “the centre of civilization,” a position which she readily chuckled at as we saw in “The Return.” Thus, by using this image, she has repudiated the “cosmopolitan” condescension toward Dunnet Landing which she originally shared with Captain Littlepage. As she noted at the time, he looked “as if the world were a great mistake and he had nobody with whom to speak his own language or find companionship” (143). It is this very idea with which our narrator is now equipped to come to terms. She can now see that the world is not a great mistake, that there is no reason to hope for a certain revelation of a new kind of “life” on this earth in some barren arctic waste. There is also no reason to retreat into schoolhouses to write dead literature about a supposedly better world. All that one could want in terms of freedom, fellowship, peace and happiness is here if one only breaks out of his shell and comes into bare contact with the teeming sea of life.

In the penultimate chapter of the book, “Along Shore,” the narrator gives clear evidence of her own growth through an action. One day after the Bowden reunion while walking along the shore, she meets Elijah Tilley, who serves as a foil to Captain Littlepage. Unlike Littlepage, Tilley puts no faith in some yarn about an afterlife here on earth. He erects a memory to his “poor dear” in this life and continues to live as fully as he is able. In spite of his bereavement, Elijah accepts life for what it is. He accepts the fact that the fish don’t “feel like bitin’ every day” (190) and that his “poor dear” had to die. “Such things ain’t for us to say; there’s no yes and no to it” (204). It is a mark of the narrator’s growth that she accepts Elijah’s invitation to visit and does visit him at home.
the very same day, not putting off the invitation as she did Captain Littlepage's.

That afternoon the narrator makes her first visit to a living Dunnet resident without Mrs. Todd. The narrator has now completely broken out of her shell. She has learned the art of visiting which she had previously viewed with skepticism. She is now able to listen patiently and intently and with genuine interest to another sea captain's history, but one which lacks all the lurid details of Captain Littlepage's. She can now appreciate such a history for the genuine insight into a human being and the "life meaningfully lived" which it reveals. The fact that the narrator is now a member of Dunnet Landing is demonstrated by Elijah's remark about her fishing ability. "'I see you drop a line yourself very handy now an' then'" (204). This is not the same woman who amazed Johnny Bowden with her ignorance of William's signal flag. At the end of this visit, her mind is not pestered by a silly idea of a "waiting-place" on Green Island as it was when she left Captain Littlepage. This hope for a certainty is replaced by a genuine wonder and uncertainty as to where "'Poor dear [is] . . . and what she knows of the little world she has left'" (205).

In the last chapter, "The Backward View," the narrator is prepared to depart, her development complete. It is not necessary for the third-person narrator to return, for the views of Miss Jewett and "the narrator" are now identical. It is no longer necessary for the narrator to remain in Dunnet Landing once she has learned its value, although as is suggested in "William's Wedding" she may have to come back for refreshment. It is with knowledge of the narrator's growth that Mrs. Todd leaves her Joanna's coral pin. The gift is given the narrator, as it was given back to Mrs. Todd, given to one who will never turn her back on Dunnet Landing, one who can appreciate and participate in all that Dunnet life has to offer, which is, in spite of Captain Littlepage's disbelief, that it does comprehend the universe.

It is hoped that this presentation has sufficiently detailed the character development of the narrator of Pointed Firs. By focusing on the progress of her visits and the sequence of her mythic similes and metaphors with regard to Mrs. Todd, I have tried to chart adequately the growth of her development.
It seems to me that the brilliance of Miss Jewett’s method is the very fact that this development is charted so subtly; it is not insisted upon, but it is there. Miss Jewett’s use of poetic devices and symbolism as well as her episodic construction and first-person narrative would almost seem to enable the novel to be classified as lyrical; but in terms of character development, a novel it is—a fully realized work of fiction with form, unity, and character development.  

15 In looking over the four additional Dunnet Landing stories included by Green in his collection, it seems to me that Miss Jewett is not only expanding her various themes, but that, particularly in “A Dunnet Shepherdess,” she is trying to reveal more clearly the change which her narrator undergoes. I have not specifically alluded to these four stories for my interpretation. Like Green, I see their chief value in their revelation of Miss Jewett’s ability to create a “fictional world” and in their use as a means to deepen, expand, and clarify her themes. It would seem useless to argue as to whether they should be included in the body of Pointed Firs. In spite of weak arguments to the contrary, they do not seem to have fit into Miss Jewett’s conception of her overall plan: otherwise she certainly would have included them herself. They are helpful keys, but not necessary adjuncts to a complete understanding of the novel.

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THE COUNTRY OF THE POINTED FIRS:  
A PASTORAL OF INNOCENCE 

By David Stouck

"After all, it is change that is so hard to bear, change grows every year a harder part of our losses." — Sarah Orne Jewett  
(Letter to Annie Fields, 1882)

Ever since Willa Cather, in the preface to the 1925 edition of The Country of the Pointed Firs, judged it to be one of three American books which had “the possibility of a long, long life,” criticism has been attempting to define more accurately the qualities which make this work a classic of its kind, and which suggested to Miss Cather that it should rank with The Scarlet Letter and Huckleberry Finn in importance.  

1 Willa Cather, editor, The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories (New York, 1956), 12. All textual references are to this edition and appear in parentheses after each quotation unless the context is obvious.