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The Double Consciousness of the Narrator in Sarah Orne Jewett's Fiction

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That Sarah Orne Jewett is a local colorist who reverences and yearns for both the personal past of childhood and the social patterns of past ages is, by now, a critical truism.¹ In her fiction Maine villages like Deephaven or Dunnet Landing serve as lone, dignified repositories of the values and manners of past ages whose existence is threatened by the encroachment of the sordid industrial towns of the future. Critics often stress the author's imaginative commitment to these towns which "represent to Miss Jewett a haven in a changing world, an island of permanence in a sea . . . of Victorian mutability."² However, Jewett's fiction is not simple, unqualified pastoral. No matter how nostalgic or naive her personal statements may be,³ Jewett in her most successful works creates a narrator whose perceptions and emotions are far more complex than has generally been recognized. Despite the attractiveness of the unchanging past to the narrator, her desire to retreat, to "fix" time, is undercut by the recognition — conveyed through the imagery — that change is often both necessary and salubrious. This struggle between the nostalgic or idyllic impulse and the realistic apprehension of the necessity of growth and change

² Wagoner, 67.
³ Jewett frequently expressed a desire to return to childhood. For example, she wrote to Sara Norton on her forty-eighth birthday: "This is my birthday and I am always nine years old," Annie Fields, editor, Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett (Boston, 1911), 125. She also wrote to William Dean Howells: "Berwick has grown quite uninteresting to me for once in its life, and everybody is distressingly grown-up, and I have 'nobody to play with.'" Francis Otto Matthiessen, Sarah Orne Jewett (Boston, 1929), 38. On this subject see Eugene Hillhouse Pool, "The Child in Sarah Orne Jewett," Colby Library Quarterly, VII (September 1967), 503-509.
manifests itself in a particular pattern of images in the fiction. One of the most obvious manifestations of the double consciousness of the Jewett narrator is her status as a summer visitor: an inhabitant of two worlds who is incapable of exclusive devotion to either one. For example, despite her love for Dunnet Landing, the narrator of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is a cosmopolitan city woman who departs at summer's end. The visit-pattern was established in Jewett's first work, *Deephaven*; it was, in fact, a prime motivating factor in the actual composition of the novel. In her preface to that work, the author proclaims that her writing was prompted by "the dark fear that townspeople and country people would never understand one another." In the novel itself, the young summer visitors preach enthusiastically about the virtues of small town life with its "simple dignity" (p. 161). Yet, these champions of country life must still acknowledge the value of the "outside world": "dignity" and "tradition" versus "usefulness" is the way the girls define the contrast between Deephaven and the rest of the world. "Stagnation" versus "life" is the imagistic definition of the same contrast.

*Deephaven* may be a quaint community, but it is also a slowly deteriorating one. The sandbar which is gradually blocking the mouth of the harbor and thus strangling the town's shipping trade is symbolic of the isolation of the town from the life around it. It is significant in terms of the images Jewett employs in her later fiction that here stagnation is expressed as a function of losing contact with the sea. While *Deephaven*'s immutability — "it seemed as if all the clocks had stopped" — may be attractive to the visitors, its effect on the inhabitants is not necessarily healthy. The people of the town, the reader is told, have been "doing over and over [for years] what they had been busy about during the last week of their unambitious progress" (p. 71). The phrase "doing over and over" suggests a ceaseless repetition of rather futile activity; their "unambitious progress" hardly seems "progress" at all. The village and the way of life it represents are clearly doomed.

in the face of the changing life outside. In some sense, the young narrator's celebration of the virtues of this way of life is an admission of its increasing obsolescence: if it is going to die, it must be eulogized. On the whole, then, the novel is an encomium to Deephaven which contains a few reminders of the limitations of its way of life buried in the imagery. In this early book, the decay of the town is not seen in the context of any larger pattern of social or historical change and, thus, the nostalgia is largely unqualified.

In 1877, Miss Jewett praised the Maine villages which were becoming obsolete; in the 1893 Preface to Deephaven, the older author views her previous attitudes with some reservations. Half apologetically, she explains the reasons for her earlier paean to small town life: "In those days, if one had just passed her twentieth year, it was easy to be much disturbed by the sad discovery that certain phases of provincial life in New England were waning... it was impossible [then] to estimate the value of that wider life that was flowing in from the great springs. Many a mournful villager felt the anxiety that came with these years of change" (p. 32, italics mine). Here, just three years before the publication of The Country of the Pointed Firs, Miss Jewett indicates her awareness that change can be ameliorative rather than destructive. Again, her association of water imagery with that "wider life" of change and growth anticipates her later fiction. In this Preface, Sarah Orne Jewett acknowledges that in a period of great social change relative values become distorted, extremities of fear as well as of adulation prevail. In such circumstances the past is all too easily romanticized: "It is as hard to be just to our contemporaries as it is easy to borrow enchantment in looking at the figures of the past" (p. 33). Thus, the author of the 1893 Preface and of The Country of the Pointed Firs displays a remarkable awareness of the complexity and the necessity of social change as well as of the positive values to be found in the "wider life" of the present.

As an artist, Sarah Orne Jewett could not fully surrender herself to the longing for the "Deephaven way" or for the undisturbed happiness of childhood; therefore, the narrative voices in many of her works evince a double awareness. The story, "A White Heron," provides a paradigm of the tensions
and opposing forces to be found in The Country of the Pointed Firs. In this story the town girl, Sylvia, who has been newly introduced to country life is confronted by the conflicting claims of her new life or her old, of darkness or light, of the movement West into the forest or East into the sea, and finally of friendship with a man or with a bird. The attempt to resolve these conflicts leads Sylvia to a crucial choice about her own future development. The most commonly held interpretation of the story regards Sylvia's decision to shield the bird from the hunter as a gesture of allegiance to country life: a choice of "Nature" over "Friendship." However, an examination of the imagery surrounding the bird and the young hunter reveals that Sylvia's choice is both different and more complex than this view suggests.

The young ornithologist offers the lonely child friendship but it is a friendship that constricts Sylvia, rendering her passive and dependent: "she did not lead the guest, she only followed, and there was no such thing as speaking first. The sound of her own unquestioned voice would have terrified her — it was hard enough to answer yes or no when there was need of that" (p. 150). The young man with his "aggressive whistle" and his gun is a kind of land spirit who imprisons — stuffs and preserves — the free creatures he claims to love. The child is disturbed by this aspect of his character: "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" (p. 149). Like the forest from which he emerges, the hunter offers a kind of security but a security that limits freedom. Friendship with him would restrict Sylvia to the land: her loyalty to him, we are told, would have "served and followed him and loved him as a dog loves" (p. 158, italics mine).

The white heron, on the other hand, is associated with open sunny places and with the sea which Sylvia frequently "wondered and dreamed about" (p. 148). To her sea and bird represent what is untamed, mysterious, expansive, and free. But, such freedom has danger as its corollary. The place where the heron makes its nest is also the place where "grandmother

5 Eakin, 522.
6 Sarah Orne Jewett, Tales of New England (Boston, 1886). All references to "A White Heron" are from this edition.
had warned her that she might sink in the soft, black mud underneath and never be heard of more” (p. 148). To know the mystery and independence of the bird requires a kind of courage which the Sylvia of the story’s opening does not possess—the courage to climb the tall pine tree which provides a view of sea and bird. Sylvia’s climbing of this tree, prompted to a large extent by her desire to please the young hunter by finding the heron for him, represents a rite of passage from the safe world of childhood to the precarious, lonely, self-determined world of adulthood.7

The narrator highlights the psychological importance of Sylvia’s action by making the reader share her anticipation on the eve of the adventure, her progress through the forest, her first breathless view of the “huge tree asleep . . . in the paling moonlight” (p. 152), and finally her step by step ascent of the awesome tree. The use of phrases like “utmost bravery,” “dangerous pass,” “daring step,” and “brave, beating heart of the solitary gray-eyed child” (p. 153) encourage the reader to join the narrator’s admiration for this test of courage and determination.

When the top is finally reached, Sylvia standing “trembling and tired but wholly triumphant” reaches a new awareness. The first reward for her trial of strength is a view of the longed-for ocean: “Yes, there was the sea with the dawning sun making a golden dazzle over it” (p. 154). Again, the sea offers a healthy corrective to the land-locked consciousness. This initial vision of the sea awakens Sylvia to the limitless possibilities that exist outside the dark forest: “truly it was a vast and awesome world” (p. 155). Furthermore, the elated girl experiences a new sense of freedom achieved through her courageous ascent and symbolized by her identification with a bird: “Sylvia felt as if she too could go flying away among the clouds” (p. 155). Her unity with the object of her quest, the white heron, is made clear in the story as the bird reenacts the ascent of the girl “like a pale star” above the darkness of the forest: “. . . a white spot of him like a single floating feather comes up from the dead hemlock and grows larger, and

7 Cary, Sarah Orne Jewett, 101-103, suggests in his fine discussion of this story that Sylvia “undergoes a rite of initiation, an arduous journey to self-discovery and maturity.”
rises, and comes close at last . . . for the heron has perched on a pine bough not far beyond [Sylvia’s]” (p. 155). The newly independent girl and the bird which embodies her freedom share “the sea and the morning together.” To betray this bird to the hunter would be to negate the victory she achieved through her climb and to regress to the world of childish dependence. It would make her a spirit of the land, like a dog, rather than a spirit of the air or the sea, like the bird.

Although the choice of bird over man leads to loneliness for the girl, it is the inevitable loneliness which accompanies independent selfhood. When the narrator expresses some uncertainty at the story’s end about the wisdom of Sylvia’s decision (“Were the birds better friends than their hunter might have been — who can tell?”), it is because she recognizes the pain associated with maturity. Sensing the narrator’s ambivalence, Paul Eakin comments: “If the story obviously celebrates a triumphant allegiance to country life, the unrestrained eloquence with which its author expresses her sense of the loss of companionship and love which the girl sustains is, nevertheless, striking and disturbing.”

Eakin is right about the existence of the tensions, but wrong, I believe, about their source. In the story, the restrictive but safe world of childhood is opposed to the open-ended but insecure world of the heron and the sea. Knowing well the limitations of the one as well as the emotional cost of the other, the narrator cannot wholeheartedly endorse either alternative. If the forces of growth and change seem to triumph in “A White Heron,” theirs is a victory tempered by pain. But, as the imagery of the story indicates, the “wider life” (bird, sunshine, and ocean) is the essential and vital opponent of the narrow, changeless life (darkness and forest).

Jewett’s major work, The Country of the Pointed Firs, is fraught with the same past-present, childhood-maturity, timelessness, land-sea tensions as Deephaven and “A White Heron.” However, the book’s first person narrative structure requires that values and attitudes be fully dramatized: explicit questions like that at the conclusion of “A White Heron” are replaced by carefully elaborated image patterns which suggest the perspective from which the narrative should be viewed. In the novel, the distinction must be made between the experience-

8 Eakin, 522.
ing “I” who responds immediately to a situation and the author who structures the experience to yield a deeper, more complex series of insights. In *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Jewett employs the same water imagery that she used in *Deephaven* and “A White Heron” to suggest the “wider life” and the more sophisticated vision which must supplement the Dunnet Landing point of view. In this novel, the sea is not only the actual economic mainstay of the community, it is also a symbol of the alternatives to the Dunnet Landing way of life which are offered by the “outside world” and the future. Through the strategic placement of the image of the sea, the author creates a situation in which the timeless peace of Dunnet Landing is praised at the same time as the forces of change and diversity are acknowledged as necessary correctives to that way of life.

The narrator’s journey to Dunnet Landing at the novel’s opening is a pilgrimage backward in time to a remembered place, which the narrator with “childish certainty” feels to be “the center of civilization” (p. 13). In the narrator’s mind, the town is an almost mythical realm where time is so telescoped that the personal past can be recovered: for example, not only can the narrator relive some of her own earlier days but Mrs. Blackett can believe that her childhood took place only yesterday (p. 98). Former ages are continually present in this Maine town in which the inhabitants speak the English of Chaucer’s day and the air is redolent with “something in the forgotten past” (p. 141). Because time has so little apparent meaning in this unique world, age is an ambiguous measure: old age here resembles nothing so much as childhood. For example, William Blackett though sixty-five years old is as shy as any sixteen-year-old and behaves like a helpless boy under the ministrations of his sister, Mrs. Todd. As Mrs. Todd remarks: “Land sakes, you’d think he’d get over being a boy some time or ’nother, gettin along in years as he is” (p. 113). Similarly, in this community mother is often younger in her ways than her daughter; hence, Mrs. Blackett calls her child “an old lady” (p. 39). Since the community is so deeply

9. *Sarah Orne Jewett, The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories*, selected and arranged by Willa Cather (Garden City, N. Y., 1956). All references are from this volume.
rooted in the past, the whole society is still, in a sense, in its childhood days.

As the inhabitants of Dunnet Landing are close to their childhood and the past, so too the narrator longs in this environment to return to the safety of a childhood state. Mrs. Todd's house which is the last one in town (and thus the farthest from the sea) becomes a kind of secure, prenatal retreat for the narrator: "I had 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. 53). The intimations that the narrator has re-established a mother-child relationship at this stage of her life are borne out by Mrs. Todd's protective care of her "darlin" and the narrator's happy acceptance of a submissive role. Although the narrator reports a resentment against anything which might intrude upon her secure retreat in the house (p. 53), she also displays an uncertainty about whether she wishes to be a protected child or an independent adult. For example, when the narrator leaves her "double shell" it is to perform the adult activity of writing in a schoolhouse which commands a view of the sea and which receives constant sea breezes. In this place so full of childhood associations, the narrator acts out the struggle between her desire to retreat in time and her impulse to live as an adult in the present: entering as a "small scholar" with a lunch pail, she nonetheless seats herself with a feeling of superiority at the teacher's desk. Having asserted her maturity against the pressures to regress, the narrator reports that she feels "most businesslike" (p. 19). Thus, when she is out of Mrs. Todd's house and in the presence of the sea the narrator assumes her adult role. So too, at the novel's end she leaves the timeless town to head "out seaward" (p. 160) to the world of time and change.

At the opposite pole to the town's remembrance of things past are the reminders of change, movement, and the pressure of the future which the narrator includes in her description of Dunnet Landing. At several points, the complaisant "land vision" of life is interrupted by a sea breeze or the sight of the sea — signals of the narrator's consciousness of the "wider life" that Dunnet Landing has not yet dreamed of. In
this Maine village, life-on-land is the life of perpetual childhood-in-age; maturity, on the other hand, is often a quality to be earned by the experiences and adventures of life on the sea. As Warner Berthoff points out: “the one remaining hope of manhood is to break away into the great world.”¹⁰ For instance, in Jewett’s story “By the Morning Boat,” the protagonist Elisha can earn his manhood only by leaving his mother and heading out for the big frightening world on the morning boat. The sea as the realm of ultimate trial and hard-won victories often causes sorrow to those who do not venture from the land. It claims the men of women like Mrs. Todd, Mrs. Begg, and Elisha’s mother. Because it is perilous, the sea is a terrifying and demanding force in the lives of the inhabitants of Dunnet Landing, but it is a force essential to the growth and imaginative freedom of the land community. Captain Littlepage points this out: “I see a change for the worse even in our town here; full of loafers now, small and poor as it is, who once would have followed the sea, every lazy soul of ‘em. . . . I view it, in addition, that a community narrows down and grows dreadful ignorant when it is shut up to its own affairs, and gets no knowledge of the outside world” (p. 25, italics mine). Thus, paradoxically, the realm of continual change which keeps the community healthy and open-minded according to Captain Littlepage is also the realm of mortal danger to man and of potential destruction of the community’s way of life. The tensions evident at the end of “A White Heron” exist here as well: which is the preferable course, security and stagnation or peril and growth?

Near the middle of the novel, there are a number of references to the relationship between the sea and the town in terms that recall the sea’s symbolic role in some of Jewett’s earlier works. Mrs. Todd advises the narrator: “You can always live well in any wild place by the sea when you’d starve to death up country” (p. 64). Later, as the narrator and Mrs. Todd plod through the desolate marshes to visit the “queen’s twin” the narrator observes that the “better houses,” those that have survived in this harsh land, are those “that had some hold on the riches of the sea” (p. 127). Of course, these remarks could be taken in an exclusively literal sense; however, a symbolic

¹⁰ Berthoff, 38.
interpretation of them seems to be justified by the passage which immediately follows this observation. The narrator meditates that the land belongs "by right to the forest" and will eventually be reclaimed by it if the life-sustaining relationship with the sea is not properly maintained. Again, sea and land are symbolic poles representing two different modes of existence. Without the actual riches and the symbolic freedom of the sea, the land regresses into a primitive state. Without the danger, the change, and the limitless possibilities of the sea, man himself regresses mentally and physically. Significantly, Esther, the innovative Dunnet shepherdess, who is bound to the past by an infirm mother but nonetheless looks forward to a future life with William Blackett, pastures her sheep on a hill far inland which has a surprising view of the sea (p. 128). Far from the shore, this woman keeps herself young through the contemplation of future possibilities; she is visually and symbolically in touch with the sea.

The sea which serves as a principle of life, growth, and future possibility in this novel also symbolizes, on occasion, the range of options open to human beings. In these cases, the narrator uses the sea to give a broad perspective on the dilemma of an individual by suggesting the larger alternatives to that person's particular — usually restrictive — "choice of life." For example, when the lovelorn recluse of Shell-heap Island, Joanna Todd, refuses all succor from the mainland, Mrs. Todd reports it thus: "Then she seemed to have said all she wanted to, as if she was done with the world and we sat there a few minutes longer. It was real sweet and quiet except for ... the sea rollin up on the beach" (p. 70). In light of the other symbolic uses of the sea in this book, it is not unlikely that the sea is meant to serve here as a symbolic backdrop to Joanna's renunciation of all future hope and proud isolation of herself on an island whose name suggests the emptiness and futility of her life. The sea represents an openness of possibilities, a promise of change and growth which contrast with Joanna's self-limiting, moribund way of life. This reading of the sea symbolism is buttressed by the narrator's account of her visit to Shell-heap Island after Joanna's death. As she views the ruins of Joanna's world pondering both the girl's fate and the similar isolation which all men may suffer, the narrator receives a message from
a sea breeze — the sound of happy compatible young voices. Joanna’s self-imposed loneliness is here seen in dramatic contrast to the rich solidarity of some lives; the wisdom of her retreat is called into question by its juxtaposition to the wider life represented by the sea. The narrator understands Joanna’s desire to bury herself on Shell-heap Island because she herself feels the impulse to retreat to the “double shell” of Mrs. Todd’s house. However, she resists this impulse, choosing both in the school and at the novel’s end to accept the harsher, broader world of adulthood. In the moment on the island as in those other moments of choice, the sea epitomizes the forces that oppose narrowness and quiescence.

It should be clear by now that Jewett employs symbolism and imagery to enrich and complexify her fiction. The struggle of conflicting impulses in Deephaven or “A White Heron” is crystallized in The Country of the Pointed Firs as the tension between the claims of the land and those of the sea. The sea may threaten Dunnet Landing’s life but it is necessary to the survival of a fully mature version of that life. Although Sarah Orne Jewett dreaded change,11 she fully understood its value. Her portrait of the ideal retreat, the Blacketts’ “Green Island,” achieves through its imagery a dynamic equilibrium between the principles of changelessness and change.

The Blacketts’ island has been called Jewett’s golden age pastoral.12 At first glance this green island to the East does seem to be an unvarying paradise: it appears to the narrator “like a sudden revelation of the world beyond this” (p. 33). However, further examination reveals that the island’s life is sustained not by isolation from movement and growth but by participation in a ceaseless dialectic with the sea. Green Island gains its livelihood from the ocean and offers its inhabitants a continual, unhindered prospect of the vast expanse of ocean surrounding it: a prospect which gives the viewer a “sense of liberty in space and time” (p. 46). The island is open in a way

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11 In a letter to Annie Fields, Jewett lamented: “After all, it is change that is so hard to bear. Change grows every year a harder part of our losses.” Fields, Letters, 14-15.
12 Robin Magowan, “The Outer Island Sequence in Pointed Firs,” Colby Library Quarterly VI (June 1964), 421. Magowan claims that “In the Green Island chapters ... One notes the twin ideals of the contented mind and that simple country life which in pastoral is associated with a vanished Golden Age.”

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that the Todd's house, the forest of Sylvia, or the self-centered retreat of Shell-heap Island are not. Green Island stands as a paradigm of the eternal struggle between water and land, between timelessness and time, between the static and the dynamic. Locked in an unending battle with the ocean's eroding waves, it is "a quiet island in the sea, solidly fixed into the still foundations of the world, against whose rocky shores the sea beats and calls and is unanswered" (p. 120). This stable but continually threatened piece of land resolves the conflicting desires for a peaceful haven which also maintains a close relationship with the vitality of the sea. Neither the protean and persistent "enemy," the sea, nor its "solidly fixed" antagonist, the land, can ever win a total victory and thus stagnation is not possible.

Although Sarah Orne Jewett feared change and revered those people or locales which were rooted in the past, her best art is not the art of naive nostalgia. As is clear to even the most casual reader, Dunnet Landing or Deephaven life is often wearying, lonesome, narrow, and economically constrained. Often only imagination or hope can render life in these communities bearable as is evident from the behavior of Elijah Tilley, Captain Littlepage, or the queen's twin. Despite her love for the manners, customs, and personalities of the old Maine way of life, Miss Jewett's intellectual and aesthetic perceptions would not allow her to ignore or belittle the inescapable forces of the modern world outside those vacation villages. Therefore, she built into the imagistic texture of her work those principles which were to counter her desire to dwell upon the charms of a timeless imaginative retreat. As Berthoff points out, this paradox of consciousness evident in Jewett's work is common to many late nineteenth-century American authors who tried to establish the permanence of materials and ways of life that they knew were doomed. That Miss Jewett could encompass in her art both the desire for permanence and the recognition of the limitations upon such a longing, that she could, moreover, balance and objectify these conflicting impulses through the use of land-sea imagery is a testament to the range and control of her fiction.

13 Berthoff, 52.