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Setting as Symbol
in Jewett’s A Marsh Island
by RANDALL R. MAWER

The great strength and principal appeal of local color fiction, that sub-genre of realism which during the last third of the nineteenth century exposed to an eager audience the details of life in America’s out-of-the-way corners, lay in the local colorists’ descriptive powers. Their presentation—sometimes painterly, sometimes sociological, often charming, occasionally grim—of provincial scenery, dialects, character types, and folkways was authentic and evocative. These writers were less successful, however, at handling plots. Especially in their novels but in their more characteristic short stories as well, the local colorists struggled, often vainly, to blend their “materials” with narratives of comparable freshness and interest. Only thus could they really involve their readers, inspiring in them more than a tourist’s regard for provincial worlds which these writers saw as microcosmically pertinent to mainstream American life but which could so easily be taken as merely quaint.

One local color novel which manages this blending is Sarah Orne Jewett’s A Marsh Island, a book little remarked and less praised even by that writer’s more enthusiastic critics.1 In it, story and setting are integral. The plot is conventional enough, unobtrusive, and not very compelling, but it is more than an irrelevant “thread”—to use the easy condemnatory metaphor—upon which the local materials are “strung”; provincial life is meticulously, lovingly described, yet every scene bears directly or symbolically upon the action. Together, the events and the place (geographical and social) where these events transpire illuminate the novel’s theme, the hard-won triumphs of loyalty to house and home.

Westward from the farm, beyond an expanse of almost level country, a low range of hills made a near horizon. They were gray in the drought, and bare like a piece of moor-land, save where the fences barred them, or a stunted tree stood up against the sky, leaning away from the winter storms toward a more sheltered and fertile inland region. The windward side of the Marsh Island itself was swept clean by the sea winds; it was only on the southern and western slopes that the

1. Richard Cary, Sarah Orne Jewett (New York, 1962), for example, finds the novel less than “auspicious,” principally because “Miss Jewett concentrates on place and people to the exclusion of dynamic action” (p. 131). The plot is “insufficient” and “bland,” the love interest only “perfunctory” (p. 141). In the same vein are Arthur Hobson Quinn, American Fiction: An Historical and Critical Survey (New York, 1936), pp. 325-326; and Margaret Farrand Thorp, Sarah Orne Jewett (Minneapolis, 1966), p. 32.
farmer's crops, his fruit trees, and his well-stocked garden found encouragement to grow. Eastward, on the bleak downs, a great flock of sheep nibbled and strayed about all day, and blinked their eyes at the sun. The island was a thrifty estate; going backward a little in these latest years, the neighbors whispered, but more like an old-country habitation than many homes of this newer world. The island was a thrifty estate; going backward a little in these latest years, the neighbors whispered, but more like an old-country habitation than many homes of this newer world.

This picture of *A Marsh Island*'s setting, the Owen farm and its environs, is typical in its emphasis on the contrast between the pleasant, self-sufficient "estate" itself and its hostile surroundings. The setting, Jewett told a correspondent, was modeled on parts of Essex County, Massachusetts. The homestead is "picturesque and enticing," the house "hospitable-looking" (p. 11). To a visitor, "There was not a more picturesque bit of country in America!" (p. 12). And a native agrees that "'it's as pretty a place here as 't is anywhere'" (p. 292). But "this farm, which covered a hill with its orchards and upland fields and pastures," is "like a high, fruitful island in [a] sea of grass" (pp. 10-11), the great tidal marsh that gives the place its name. Especially in the early autumn, the novel's time-present, the marsh is "sombre," the blue-water inlets and the green grass beside them vainly trying to make the "world...charmingly gay" as if they are "merry-making in a tottering and defeated kingdom" (p. 130). Beyond the marsh to the west the "gray, sad hills," where the "least wild creature could hardly find shelter...were like the telling of some sad, unwelcome news" (p. 129). To the south and east lie "great drifts of bleached white sand...a dead fragment of the world," and beyond these a forlorn, deserted orchard, its blasted trees still bearing the "withered, pathetic mockery of fruit" (p. 271). On all sides, the farm is besieged by wind and tide, sun, cold, and encroaching barrenness.

Time, too, impinging. The round of work, like the scenery, is pleasant enough, but each task is urgent. A principal crop, salt hay, must literally be snatched from the sea, reaped and loaded into hay-boats at ebb tide, floated to dry land at flood. While the men labor thus in the marshes (or fields or orchards), the women, back at the house, prepare supper, make warm clothes against the coming of winter, and watch the sun, trying to decide if enough of the day remains to scrub and dry the tinware and lard pots. Though the life is not easy, those who cherish it have their satisfactions. And they are shaped by it, for the better. The Owens and their retainers "were above the common level of society, and their character...bore much likeness to the uplifted Marsh Island itself" (p. 131). As the farm is fruitful and lovely, so the Owen clan—especially the patriarch Israel, his daughter Doris, and the shrewd housekeeper Temperance Kipp—radiate uncommon "simplicity," "generos-

2. *A Marsh Island* (Boston, 1885), p. 106. All further references are to this first edition and are indicated in parentheses in the text.
ity,” and “insight into human nature” (p. 131), qualities inextricably wedded to their “old-country” existence.

The simile goes further: as the farm is menaced by time, tide, and infertility, so the Owens’ style of life is “going backward” before the attacks of a modern world whose influences are as much a part of the novel’s map as their symbolic equivalents, the marsh, the hills, and the barren dunes. “‘Western fever’” (p. 38), the lure of cheap, easily worked trans-Appalachian land, has already carried off a treasured hired man and offers similar “enticements” (p. 97) to Temperance Kipp and to Dan Lester, the local farmer-blacksmith whose assumed betrothal to Doris, the Owens’ one remaining child, makes him heir apparent to the Owen lands. The eastern sea beckons, too, as Lester contemplates signing on for a fishing voyage. The ocean’s perils should not intimidate one of New England’s “race of farmer-fishermen, but in recent years “many a schooner . . . had been ploughed under by the great prow of a steamship” (p. 267). Another threat to the serenity and order of Marsh Island’s society has struck from the south. The Owens’ one son was killed in the Civil War, all but severing the bloodline (Doris’s two sisters having died in infancy) and spelling the end of the family’s name. “‘There’d been an Is’r’el Owen on the farm for near two hundred years, and now there ’ll never be another’” (p. 39), grieves old Israel. “‘I went out South and fetched him home to the old place’” (p. 38). Now the southern conflict is memorialized on the farm by young Israel’s grave, and by a new sense of insecurity: “‘We used to leave everything open in warm weather,’” old Israel tells a guest, “‘but times have changed since the war’” (p. 200).

Finally, from the world of vagrant thieves and steam navigation and westward migration—from the “newer” America whose homogeneous towns and cities have supplanted independent farms like this one as the “centre of civilization” (p. 26)—come the summer people, perhaps the greatest threat to the Owens’ way of life. Uneasily, temporarily residing in tourist hotels and lavish vacation houses, they make periodic raids on the local homes, buying (too cheap) the natives’ antiques, their butter, and their self-respect. A gentleman-farmer undermines the “thrifty” self-sufficiency of the Owens by contracting with them for hay (the Marsh Island was one of the reservoirs upon which the luxurious housekeeping depended for supplies” [p. 243]); indebted to the Marsh Islanders for an afternoon’s hospitality and help with a disabled carriage, another rich outlander embarrasses Tempy Kipp with an offer of cash. And it is still a third tired voyager’s “step [ping] ashore” onto the Marsh Island “out of the great current” (p. 110) of modern history which precipitates the action of the novel, a love story so simple, so conven-

5. Old Israel is wont to jest, “‘I’m owin’ only in name’” (p. 17), a condition surely imperiled by relying on the ephemeral summer population for part of the farm’s support.
tional, and so quietly told as to be, in itself, almost entirely undramatic. But the story of *A Marsh Island* does not exist in itself; rather it is a part of a place and time so vividly realized as to need only this single personal element to give them aesthetic coherence and bring them to dramatic life.

The tale begins when, on a sketching expedition, artist Dick Dale takes up lodging as a paying guest with the Owens and ends (but for a brief, happily-ever-after postscript) when he departs after a few weeks' stay. As a representative of the outer world menacing Marsh Island, Dale is more idealized than typical. Orphaned young, reared by relatives who never became close, much-traveled, and entirely rootless, Dale is and knows himself to be an "unlocalized... disestablished human being" (p. 184), a "foreigner" and "interloper" (p. 254) in whatever place he briefly settles. His legal residence is New York (the social and cultural capital of the new nation), but he does not vote in that city's elections. His friendships are warm enough but casual, his paintings good but (mostly) unfinished. He has money, education, wit, taste, talent, and charm, but no sense of purpose which could put these gifts to good use.

Little wonder that the stable, elemental life of the Owen farm should appeal to such a man, or that his stay among these people should make him a better man and artist. Treated as part of the family—he bears a resemblance to the dead son whose room he occupies and through whose eyes (Dick fancies) he learns to look about him—Dale absorbs a bit of the Owens' self-respect and contentment with their lot. ("You have to be put into an honest place like that to know anything of yourself," [p. 230], says Dale toward the end of his sojourn.) He returns to the city promising to vote in the next election and bearing a trunk-load of paintings, the best he has ever done, which will earn him acclaim in a show later that year. In return for his new maturity, the cultivated young visitor enhances by his admiration the Owens' appreciation of the beauty of their native landscape, the fitness of their simple way of life, the primitive grace of their old-fashioned house and furniture.

In the meantime, though, danger arises and conflict begins, for Dale and the natives momentarily misread the lessons they have to teach one another. All but inevitably in Jewett's fiction, when country folk encounter more "civilized" people it is in order that each group shall learn from the other the sufficiency of its own given set of circumstances. For localite and cosmopolite, the moral is the same: to each his own. The only sin is discontent, envy of the well-to-do by the poor, pity of the benighted by the enlightened, and so on. Dick Dale's growing regard for the Owens should (and eventually does) lead him to practice their
virtues in his own sphere. But for awhile he mistakes his figurative kinship with the family for a duty to make the tie literal. Specifically, he falls a little in love with Doris Owen. After an innocent yet emotionally hazardous outing with her, Dick "felt . . . as if he must use all his powers of resistance if he would keep himself apart" from these rural "surroundings." "Did fate mean to graft him to this strong old growth [the farm], and was the irresistible sap from that centre of life already making its way through his veins?" Was he "at the mercy of a possible system of spiritual economies, so that he was to be held to a spot that was lacking in what he might supply" (p. 184)? (Even at his most infatuated, Dale recognizes how wrong it would be to marry Doris. He is as "out of place" [p. 254] on the farm as Doris would be anywhere else, yet to have her, Dick knows, he must take her "away from her own world—, that would be the trouble" [p. 205]).

The natives, too, are capable of delusion. Aware of the young outsider's affection and grateful for his condescension, Doris toys with thoughts of loving Dick. Her mother encourages the romance, for, never content with Marsh Island, she sees a match with Dick as Doris's passport to the "better things" (p. 150) she has always longed for. And Dan Lester, Doris's appropriate mate to be, overrates Dale's charms, assuming that Doris must find them irresistible and growing wildly jealous, thereby almost losing the young woman's love.

Like its setting in place and time, the story of A Marsh Island is worked out in cartographical terms. The events themselves take much of their significance from the places they happen, a fact repeatedly emphasized by the language of the narration. Thus the three most dangerous encounters between Doris and Dick take place away from the house, one in the fields, one in the marshes, one on an outing to the nearby town of Sussex where Doris plans to "tease Dan a little" (p. 127) by flaunting Dick's company. Thus Dan Lester, upset by Doris's refusal of his offer to walk her home (in this carefully contrived context, both offer and refusal have symbolic weight), goes "crashing through the bushes as if he meant to take the straightest way toward his own home" (p. 103): he knows that his jealousy is driving him "farther away from his happiness than ever" (p. 158); but after a later rebuff he again compulsively plunges away from the Owen farm "down the long road, the long, long road, into the dreary darkness" (p. 198). (About his future son-in-law's mortified avoidance of Doris, Israel Owen proverbially remarks, "'Hot haste makes a long road back'" [p. 261]).

In the meantime, Doris Owen makes another symbolic journey, this
time not with Dale but in the saner company of her father, to the sea­side estate of the gentleman-farmer mentioned above. While Israel is bargaining with the estate’s manager, Doris wanders over the beautiful, park-like grounds of the place. “One might say... that she had been confronted with a materialization of her vague ambitions and hopes.” The “shapes of luxury and worldly consequence” surrounding her are “by no means without power” (p. 246), are, indeed, “enticing” (p. 244), but Doris resolves to put “such silly dreams of splendor” (p. 247)—dreams, that is, of a life in this world, Dick Dale’s world—aside, to assert her loyalty to Dan Lester and to her proper home.

This faith must be tested on one more journey. In the pre-dawn hours of the next morning, Doris strikes out across the dangerous marshes toward Westmarket, bent on declaring her love to Dan and preventing his headstrong flight from her on the fishing schooner. “Outside the silent house,” Doris feels “outside all protection and precedent also, as if she had been launched off the face of this familiar earth, and must find her way unwelcomed and unheralded through space” (p. 268). Across the “dead,” “still” expanse of marsh, over the dunes which “seemed to be planted there as a barrier, raised by an enchant­ment” (p. 270), through the barren orchard she makes her way, the country around her “like a picture of the misery and emptiness of the girl’s future, if her lover went away to sea” (p. 271). She finds Dan, and all is made right with his declaration: “‘I love the ground you step on, darlin’ ’ ” (p. 276). The rectitude of the country lovers’ mutual choice even Dick Dale has to grant. Taken away from the Marsh Island by Mrs. Winchester, his aunt and former guardian, Dick has been warned by the old aristocrat that his affection for Doris endangers the happiness of all concerned. “Was Mrs. Winchester wrong or right?” wonders Dick, who at last concludes, “Her horizons might indeed be contracted, but her directions were as true as the compass” (p. 233). All delusions are routed. Doris will wed Dan, and the two will live at the Marsh Island, keeping up the old ways, their ways; Dick will return to the city, a place which his rural sojourn has taught him to regard as his proper home.

The connection between plot and setting is clearest in Jewett’s develop­ment of two sets of symbols. Recurrent references to the Owens’ “clock-room” and its giant timepiece locate the “centre” of the farm’s actual and moral “life” with perfect precision; and allusions to the myth of Eden re-emphasize the threats to virtue and happiness encroaching upon the farm’s borders.

As the Owen farm is central to a large expanse of New England landscape, and the house central to the farm, so the clock-room sits precisely in the middle of all, embodying the purest goodness.8 The house,
after all, is large enough to accommodate delusions—like Martha Owen’s misguided pride in her “best parlor,” a room whose ugly modernity is a measure of the woman’s disloyalty to her assigned sphere, and Dick Dale’s belief that he can have the best of two worlds, made material in his conversion of a disused spinning-room into a studio (furnished with Owen cast-offs which only he perceives as “antiques”). No such perversions have touched the clock-room, with its entirely (but unstudiedly) old-fashioned furnishings, its “general aspect of rural dignity and self-respect” (p. 18). The place is a sort of New England Greenwich, for “in the old days the Owens’ tall clock had served as a frequent and formal excuse for the appearance of various sociable acquaintances. A clock of such high rank must necessarily rule all timekeepers of lesser degree . . . ; and once in a while somebody would still ask, with noticeable humility, for the right time, or set the hands of a cumbersome silver watch, by way of tribute, in the clock-room” (p. 188). As the farm rises above surrounding waste-lands, as the Owen clan exceeds their neighbors in old-fashioned virtue and resistance to pernicious progress, so this “monarch of the clock-room” (p. 19) rules all the region’s chronometers, keeping its own time and that time the right one for this place and these people.

From the beginning of the novel, the clock is an active character, with extraordinary powers of divination and communication. As interloper Dick Dale, having sprained his ankle, convalesces in the clock-room, “The tall clock ticked excitedly, as if it were not pleased with this intrusion.” Later, as Doris Owen sets out on a walk that will eventually lead her into Dale’s company, “the old clock ticked louder than usual, as if it were calling her back: ‘Don’t—Do—ris—don’t—Do—ris’” (p. 173). Later still, after Dan and Doris have had a serious falling out, the family sits in the kitchen because “the clock-room was a trifle damp, and for some reason or other a little cheerless” (p. 224). Finally, on the eve of Doris’s errand to retrieve Dan from Westmarket, “The old clock ticked in a more leisurely fashion than ever . . ., as if to keep a check upon the excited household . . . . Some younger timekeepers might
be saying, Hurry, hurry! but this was one that said, Wait, wait!” (pp. 263-264). (Could it be that the gifted timepiece knows Lester has decided not to ship out the next morning—so that though Doris must make her journey, haste is unnecessary?)

More subtle and playful—and hence more effective—than the rather heavy-handed symbolism of the clock-room is Jewett’s use of the Eden myth to underscore the danger represented by Dick Dale’s presence. To Dale, the Marsh Island is a “paradise” (p. 287), and Doris is “grateful” to this stranger within the gates for teaching her by his own delight to see the beauty that she had never half understood” (p. 177). At least three times, Dale is associated with serpents. On the day he arrives, the hay-makers come upon a snake in the marshes. When Jim Fales, a garrulous hired-hand, suggests to Dan Lester that Doris may find the stranger attractive, Lester’s face shows his chagrin, and Fales ventured to say satirically that he thought [Dan] had seen a snake” (p. 89). Dale himself identifies the source of his power to inspire “silly dreams of splendor” in Doris and her mother: remembering the gaudy life he has left behind him in the city, he quotes Emerson’s “Ode Inscribed to W. H. Channing”—“Things are of the snake” (p. 110). There may even be a touch of the serpentine in Dick’s pose when, on that nearly disastrous Sunday, Doris comes upon him in the marshes: “he lay, sound asleep, at his lazy length” (p. 171). Uncharacteristically, Doris has stayed away from church that day, and, Eve-like, she must face temptation.

Then, cunningly, Jewett turns the allusive tables. The serpent in this reworking of the tale becomes Jim Fales, the gossipy hired-hand. At apple-picking time, Fales works high in a tree near the window of Dale’s studio, where the young artist sits trying to read—and to put thoughts of Doris out of his mind. Fales tosses him an apple and then begins to talk to Doris, renewing in Dick the “temptation” (p. 205) to woo her. Perhaps significantly, Dale does not eat the apple proffered by Fales. Like Doris Owen and Dan Lester, he resists wickedness, defined in A Marsh Island as dissatisfaction with one’s fated home, circumstances, and station in life. There will be no fall, no casting out from happiness of any American Adam or Eve, because ultimately the three characters at the points of the novel’s love triangle obey Jewett’s rules and find their proper homes. For another generation, at least, the Marsh Island farm will remain Edenic, preserved from the natural and human attacks of a less happy world.

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11. Emphasis added.