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In Deephaven:
Skirmishes Near the Swamp

by ANN ROMINES

Sweet is the swamp with its secrets,
Until we meet a snake;
'Tis then we sigh for houses,
And our departure take
At that enthralling gallop
That only childhood knows.
A snake is summer's treason,
And guile is where it goes.

Emily Dickinson

In The Country of the Pointed Firs, Sarah Orne Jewett traces a woman's education by ritual, a coherent education in her connections to and distance from the circular life of a seaport town. Jewett's first book, Deephaven, published twenty years earlier, in 1877, is usually viewed as her initial attempt to grapple with the themes of her mature masterpiece, where "every element broached in Deephaven is . . . augmented and brought to highest pitch." Yet when I look again at this early book, built from sketches which Jewett began publishing in her twentieth year, I discover that Deephaven—despite its delicately elegiac tone—records a series of abrupt, abortive encounters with ritual. Again and again, the two young protagonists quietly crash into a transparent, unbreakable partition which protects them from the power, danger, and meaning of life in the village of Deephaven—which protects them, in fact, against fully experiencing their own lives. The older narrator of The Country of the Pointed Firs, of course, has an opposite experience: in ritual after ritual (funeral, visit, reunion, departure), partitions fall, and she must claim her kinship to the community of solitaries which she has entered as a visitor and which she must leave as a communicant. Her experience will have shape and meaning that she cannot evade. In Deephaven, we see Jewett and her characters moving through an "inchoate" series of false starts, starts which grow from two young women's half-conscious attraction to a ritualized world and from their vague intuitions of the dangers inherent in such a world.

2. Cary uses this term, p. 18.
Deephaven's narrator, Helen Denis, begins her account with these words: "It happened that the morning when this story begins I had waked up feeling sorry, and as if something dreadful were going to happen . . . . I have never known any explanation for that depression of my spirits, and I hope that the good luck which followed will help some reader to lose fear, and to smile at such shadows if any chance to come." Immediately we see a sensibility capable of perceiving a "dreadful" darkness—and also capable of a doggedly cheerful determination to ignore that darkness. Even though Deephaven will contain one funeral chapter titled "In Shadow," as well as a number of other chapters which might share that title, Helen chooses to recall her Deephaven summer as a streak of sunny good luck. Any troubling dreams are dispelled with smiles.

The Deephaven summer is initiated not by Helen but by her friend Kate Lancaster. Both girls (as they call themselves) are twenty-four, unmarried, genteely unoccupied; at the edge of an adulthood they are not wholly eager to claim. Helen's family is only her aunt and an absent Naval father; Kate's network of parents, siblings, aunts is spreading, loosing its taut, elastic hold on her life. Understandably, both girls are attracted to the protection of ritual, in the sense described by Ernest Becker: "The whole idea of ritual is the manmade forms of things prevailing over the natural order and taming it, transforming it, and making it safe."

Kate's mother owns a house in a declining port town, Deephaven, inherited from a recently dead aunt, Katharine Brandon. When everyone else in the Lancaster family has present occupations and obligations for the summer—camping in Michigan, business in London—Kate projects an adventure in retreat: she will set up temporary housekeeping in Deephaven.

When Kate summons Helen to invite her along, we can see from her greeting the almost ceremonious seriousness with which she regards her plan: "I hurried to the parlor . . . . I went up to her, and she turned her head and kissed me solemnly. You need not smile; we are not sentimental girls, and are both much averse to indiscriminate kissing, though I have not the adroit habit of shying in which Kate is proficient. It would sometimes be impolite in any one else, but she shies so affectionately" (pp. 37-38). And we also see that Kate, by "shying," is adept at fending off social conventions which she finds meaningless, at evading dead ritual. Real ritual, as in the kiss of greeting, is something they respect too much to debase. But both are well-schooled in protective conventions, and, as the book proceeds, we will see them receptive to Deephaven life when it intrigues or amuses or charms, but always ready (gracefully) to withdraw a chaste cheek from a too-intrusive touch.

3. Deephaven and Other Stories, p. 37. All further references to this work appear in the text.
As Kate unfolds her plan to Helen, she emphasizes its childlike delights: “For two little girls who were fond of each other and could play in the boats and dig and build houses in the sea sand, and gather shells, and carry their dolls wherever they went, what could be pleasanter?” (p. 38). So the girls plunge into their preparations, much enjoying the domestic bustle of planning provisions and “being housekeepers in earnest” (p. 40). But never do they seem to feel that they are doing more than playing house, building a sandcastle. They have each other, and they have two servants from the Boston Lancaster house, so they arrive at Deephaven—significantly, at sunset—in the midst of their own small transplanted and protective community. Never are they fully vulnerable to the buffeting of their environment; never is sexuality an acknowledged fact or problem for either.

The novel’s first chapter sets up Kate’s plan and transports the girls to Deephaven. Remaining chapters sketch various aspects of the town’s life; although we may think we observe a pattern of tentative growth in the visitors, that pattern will never crystallize.

Kate and Helen rapidly discover that Deephaven is dominated by two dwellings: the Brandon house and the lighthouse. The Brandon house is an aristocrat, in which the town’s less exalted citizens take a communal pride. It has been a focus for local life; a neighbor says: “I like to see the old place open; it was about as bad as having no meeting. I miss seeing the lights” (pp. 59–60). The Brandon house has been a kind of lighthouse, a beacon to the dignified past. Now that Katharine Brandon is dead, no Brandons remain to preserve her mansion. That task is left to the women of the village, especially a favorite friend of Kate and Helen’s, the Widow Jim. She is the woman of faculty, the domestic arbiter, in this book:

There must be her counterpart in all old New England villages. She sewed, and she made elaborate rugs. . . . and she went to the Carews’ and the Lorimers’ [local aristocrats] at housecleaning or in seasons of great festivity. She had no equal in sickness, and knew how to brew every old-fashioned dose . . . and when her nursing was put to an end by the patient’s death, she was commander-in-chief at the funeral . . . she sometimes even had the immense responsibility of making out the order of the procession, since she had all genealogy and relationship at her tongue’s end. (p. 61)

A ritual priestess, surely—with a fine nose for propriety. She may not be able to control time, but she has a ritualized response to each of its events, from celebration to death.

The bustling, ordering domesticity of Widow Jim and a few women like her is the strongest force in Deephaven; it is they who keep the “moth millers” and most of the rats out of the empty Brandon house. But what they preserve is largely past, not present. We usually see Widow Jim snug in her parlor, recalling bygone ceremonies. When she recalls a recent rite—a ministerial tribute to Katharine Brandon—it is with regret: “There wasn’t a blood relation there to hear it. I declare it
looked pitiful to see that pew empty that ought to ha' been the mourners’ pew. There! . . . p’r’aps nobody thought of it but me” (p. 59). For in Deephaven the cohesive family is breaking and broken, and rituals tend to reveal, not to mend, the fracture. Miss Katharine, the last childless survivor of a large, fragmented family, illustrates this. And from the Widow Jim we learn another crucial fact about Katharine Brandon: she died mad. “Her mind failed her, you know. Great loss to Deephaven, she was” (p. 58).

Childless Widow Jim herself illustrates the pitfalls of committing oneself to matrimony: she bears a dent in her forehead, put there by her alcoholic husband. Having been dealt such an appalling surprise, no wonder she now devotes herself to more certain matters. And she advises Kate and Helen to do likewise: “Don’t you run no risks, you’re better off as you be, dears” (p. 63). Widow Jim, despite her solidity and her comforting advice—which urges cozy stagnation—has already hinted at the limited power of ritual against human change and has reminded the girls that even the single life which she urges on them can offer no guarantee against a failed mind like that of Katharine Brandon. This is Helen’s first knowledge of Miss Brandon’s madness. And typically, she does not comment; she only records the Widow’s words. It is easy to overlook many of the defeats and disappointments Kate and Helen suffer in this book, for Helen’s narrative blithely refuses to acknowledge them with comment.

The other Deephaven beacon is the actual lighthouse, and it is dominated by another priestess, Mrs. Kew, to whom the girls are equally attracted. The lighthouse reminds them of this acute and engaging woman’s power to make a workable pattern out of the contradictory facts of her life. Mrs. Kew is Vermont-born, “a real up-country woman. . . . The sea doesn’t come natural to me, it kind of worries me” (p. 41). Yet she loved and married a sailor, and was able to keep him ashore only by moving with him to the lighthouse, at land’s end. She has paid for the man she wanted by living, for seventeen years, in the midst of the still-disquieting sea. Mrs. Kew has gone as far out to sea as a Deephaven woman can, yet her earnest farewell to the girls from Boston, at summer’s end, suggests the stringencies and deprivations of her life: “She told us that she loved us as if we belonged to her, and begged us not to forget her.” The girls are amazed—“We had no idea until then how much she cared for us . . . .” (p. 42).

This amazement indicates Kate’s and Helen’s failure to appreciate the full meaning of either Deephaven lighthouse. Although they camp delightedly in the Brandon house, and ransack its corners for diverting relics, they seem determined to reduce Katharine Brandon’s long, dignified life to a charmingly pathetic tale.

Although they are constant visitors with Mrs. Kew, their detachment from her world is also indicated when Kate, one day, plays local maiden
and gives a guided tour to some city shopgirls who are visiting the lighthouse on holiday.

"But it's such a lonesome place!" said one of the girls. "I should think you would get work away. I live in Boston. Why it's so awful quiet! Nothing but the water, and the wind when it blows, and I think either of them is worse than nothing." (p. 51)

Kate, enjoying the charade and probably savoring her superior appreciation of Deephaven's charms, makes no reply, but when the most earnest of the visitors stays behind to entreat her to escape to Boston, she is sufficiently touched to declare her position, as proper Bostonian only playing at lighthouse girl. "And she [Kate] held out her hand to the girl . . . when she noticed Kate's hand, and a ring of hers, which had been turned round, she looked really frightened" (p. 52). The naïve shopgirl who has taken Kate Lancaster seriously as a person whose life is committed to Deephaven is put firmly in her place by a (perhaps inadvertent) flash of social class. The girls both intermittently use such flashes of "superior" class or sophistication or erudition to stave off Deephaven, when it comes too close.

Yet they enjoy the lighthouse, especially the daily ritual of watching the sunset, with Mrs. Kew: "There was a little black boat in the distance drifting slowly . . . as if it were bound out into that other world beyond. But presently the sun came out from behind the clouds, and the dazzling golden light changed the look of everything, and it was time then to say one thought it a beautiful sunset; while before one could only keep very still, and watch the boat, and wonder if heaven would not be somehow like that far, faint color, which was neither sea nor sky" (pp. 52-53). But the limitations of the girls at the beginnings of their Deephaven summer are suggested by this passage's near-sentimental prettiness, its sense of a spectacle seen from a safe distance, and its tacit refusal to recognize the potential power and desolation of "the water and the wind, when it blows," which were so real and alarming to that Boston shopgirl. Mrs. Kew's life, also, has daily limitations, subtleties, and complications which her visitors will not acknowledge.

As the summer deepens, Helen and Kate try out local rites. First, church services, where they behave like spectators at a theater, clutching each other's hands in delighted amusement at a particularly antiquated costume, or at the quaint sound of a bass viol. Then tea with an aristocratic local family, the elderly Carews: an unmarried brother and sister, and a sickly widowed sister. They are especially enchanted to be included in the Carew household rite of family prayers, and apparently find nothing sad or ironic in the age or fragility of the family involved. Afterward, "we told each other, as we went home in the moonlight down the quiet street, how much we had enjoyed the evening, for somehow the house and the people had nothing to do with the present, or the hurry of modern life. I have never heard that psalm since without its bringing
back that summer night in Deephaven, and the beautiful quaint old room, and Kate and I feeling so young and worldly, by contrast, the flickering shaded light of the candles, the old book, and the voices that said Amen” (p. 76). Here is ritual as spectator sport; ritual as a kind of sympathetic voyeurism. By glimpsing and momentarily, partially, sharing the Carew family prayers, Kate and Helen—now out on the dark street, not confined in the old house—have gained self-definition. Free, “worldly,” “young,” they imagine themselves; able to walk into and out of whatever rituals they choose.

Another value of Deephaven for Kate and Helen is the fact that it provides an escape from the bustling post-war America which Jewett herself sometimes viewed with such alarm. The town “was not in the least American. There was no excitement about anything; there were no manufactories; no body seemed in the least hurry” (p. 84). The equivocal nature of Deephaven’s tranquility is especially evident in local men. Most of them have sailed around the world, and most of them, suffering from the decline of their industry, and their aging bodies, now hang around the deserted warehouses and fish for a modest living. The ritual act most typical of these men is the telling and retelling of stories, yarns from their seafaring days.

Kate and Helen, perhaps trying to touch a dimension of freedom in Deephaven beyond the household limitations imposed on women, seek out the old sailors’ stories, and provide an avid, if somewhat condescending, audience. But for every tale of lighthearted escapade Helen records, there are two contrasting tales of loss, of abrupt and violent death, of a life without the cushioning compensations of ritual. In one story, for example, an insult provoked a deadly blow, which led to an immediate hanging. The best the hanged man’s companions could do for him was to cut his body down and thrust it wordlessly into the sea. This is a far cry from the funerals superintended by Widow Jim, with their prescriptions and processions. Helen does not comment on the disparity—or the horror—implicit in such a tale.

A younger, orphaned ex-sailor, Danny, is used to illustrate the pathos of a man without a domestic anchor; he tells wistful tales of a nun who cared for him in a hospital, and of a lost “kitty” which seems to have been the closest thing he’s had to a wife: “I never went into Salem since without hoping that I should see her. I don’t know but if I was a-going to begin my life again, I’d settle down ashore and have a snug little house and farm it. But I guess I shall do better at fishing” (p. 91). Women, with their ritual domesticity, may have learned to wrest some satisfaction and meaning from a landlocked life; men cannot.

Stories from another beached sailor, old Captain Sands, reveal that he has developed a special, compensatory sensitivity to the supernatural. His accounts of feats of prediction and divination, of dream-omens, especially fascinate the girls, and back in the Brandon house, they drift...
“into a long talk about the captain’s stories and those mysterious powers of which we know so little” (p. 129). Their conversation vacillates between admitting the possible influence of such uncontrollable powers in their own lives, and placing them at a safe and interesting distance. Kate makes scholarly references to Greek mythology; Helen connects such forces with “simple country people” (which she and Kate assuredly are not) who “believe in dreams, and . . . supernatural causes” (p. 130). Remember that Helen began the book with an account of a dream-omen which she has not been able to forget, but will not believe. The conversation ends with Kate’s equivocal comment: “The more one lives out of doors [as they have been doing] the more personality there seems to be in what we call inanimate things.” She tries to attribute this “personality,” this animate meaning, to the hand of God writing in “the book of Nature.” But the trite and pious explanation does not really touch the mysteries of the old captains’ tales, and the girls retreat to a cautious and reflective silence—ending as they bar “the great hall door,” shutting out the inexplicable “out of doors,” and go “upstairs to bed” (p. 131). They are always shutting themselves into or out of a house, or a story, or a world—never can they risk staying inside or outside Deephaven’s various shelters, for long.

During their visit, Kate and Helen observe two attempts from outside to revitalize Deephaven with ritual. But both end by illustrating the community’s frailty. First, a circus comes to the area, and Deephaven turns out in force. Kate and Helen take as their special guest Mrs. Kew, who devotes “her whole mind to enjoyment” (p. 100). It is not really the circus which most pleases Mrs. Kew; it is the assembled company, the communal nature of the occasion. Both she and Kate reminisce about circuses in their pasts: this ritual both confirms and denies the passage of time and change. Kate says to Helen: “Doesn’t it seem as if you were a child again? . . . I am sure this is just the same as the first circus I ever saw. It grows more and more familiar, and it puzzles me to think they should not have altered in the least while I have changed so much, and even had time to grow up” (p. 104). This reflective comment indicates the considerable capacity for sympathy and understanding which Kate does possess; it also indicates the puzzlement which the girls have been unable to escape even in Deephaven: what is the relation of their changing lives to the seemingly unchanging patterns of rituals?

But grotesque incidents qualify the pleasure of the circus day, especially the three women’s parting stop at a sideshow, to see “The Kentucky Giantess.” The fat woman, who has never seen Kentucky, turns out to be an old neighbor of Mrs. Kew’s, Marilly, who “used to be spare.” Her husband, she tells them,

“took to drink and it killed him after awhile, and then I began to grow worse and worse, till I couldn’t do nothing to earn a dollar, and everybody was a-coming to see me, till at last I used to ask ’em ten cents apiece, and I scratched along somehow till this man came
around and heard of me, and he offered me my keep and good pay to go along with him... [her married son's] wife don't want me. I don't know's I blame her either. It would be something like if I had a daughter... I believe I'd rather die than grow any bigger. I do lose heart sometimes, and wish I was a smart woman and could keep house. I'd be smarter than ever I was when I had the chance, I tell you that!” (pp. 106-107)

Here we see, in the midst of the circus gaiety, another house and family shattered by weakness, and are forcibly reminded of the formidable power of domestic discipline which has kept a woman like the Widow Jim (who also had an alcoholic husband) from being reduced (or inflated) to this woman’s state. The Giantess illustrates the helpless vulnerability to change which Kate earlier hinted at in her own life. She cannot even control her huge, traitorous body. And by the chance of having borne a son and not a daughter, she is cut off from the imagined comfort of a daughter’s female household. Even the competent Mrs. Kew is powerless now to do anything for her old neighbor. She considers inviting her out for a visit—but “‘she’d sink the dory in a minute. There! seeing her has took away all the fun,’ said Mrs. Kew ruefully” (p. 108). The hard-won domestic equilibrium of the lighthouse is not accessible to the likes of a Kentucky Giantess.

But by the time they arrive back in Deephaven, Mrs. Kew has regained her cheerfulness, and parting, tells the girls that “she should have enough to think of for a year, she had enjoyed the day so much” (p. 109). A successful ritual, as the circus has partially been, has an echoing power: memory. And memory is especially crucial to a life as isolated as Mrs. Kew’s.

The other ritual of this chapter is a temperance lecture for young men—“On the Elements of True Manhood”—delivered at great and boring length by an obliviously enthusiastic travelling orator, to a tiny audience composed of women, small children, and a few doddering graybeards. The situation may suggest the desperation of some Deephaven women, who will attend any gathering, and the paucity or weakness or indifference of local men. No one goes so far as to put a contribution in the lecturer’s collection plate, and for Kate and Helen, the whole affair first seems a fiasco and a laugh. But next morning, they grow “suddenly conscious of the pitiful side of it all,” and dispatch an anonymous contribution to the lecturer, “anxious that everyone should have the highest opinion of Deephaven” (p. 111). They have become the dutiful preservers of proprieties which no one else in Deephaven finds it necessary to defend; they are protecting their chosen retreat against complicating truths which they themselves have already, reluctantly glimpsed.

Perhaps it is these confounding complications which, in the three chapters which precede the book’s conclusion, push Kate and Helen to range out beyond the town itself, and to discover some of the desolation of the surrounding hill country, almost impossible to farm profitably.
We have seen the girls becoming slightly and cautiously more reflective as the book has proceeded; now Helen cannot close her eyes to the cramping, lethal narrowness of such country lives. "It is all very well to say that they knew nothing better, that it was the only life of which they knew anything; there was too often a look of disappointment in their faces, and sooner or later we heard or guessed many stories." But she is still careful to detach herself and Kate from the implications of such lives: "We used to pity the young girls so much. It was plain that those who knew how much easier and pleasanter our lives were could not help envying us" (p. 153).

Widowed Mrs. Bonny, the first countrywoman Kate and Helen meet, is a sturdy survivor. Her tiny upcountry house is cluttered with poultry and dusty oddments; she is most definitely not an immaculate housekeeper. The Boston girls, with their ladylike ways, are rather taken aback by the Bonny menage. Perhaps housewifely niceties do not apply in the stringencies of upcountry life? But Mrs. Bonny proves her worth, and indicates some of the spirit which has preserved her, when she condemns the sham of a revival meeting. No dishonest ritual for her:

"I wa'n't a-goin' to set there and hear him [a histrionic testifier] makin' b'lieve to the Lord. If anybody's heart is in it, I ain't a' goin' to hender 'em; I'm a professor, and I ain't ashamed of it, weekdays nor Sundays neither. I can't bear to see folks so pious to meeting, and cheat yer eyeteeth out Monday morning. Well, there! we ain't none of us perfect; even old Parson Moody [her alltime favorite] was round-shouldered, they say." (p. 137)

This woman's unsentimental, wholehearted consistency abandons the rigid distinctions (between town and country, between Deephaven and themselves) which Kate and Helen are trying to enforce. Outdoors and indoors mingle in her life, just as the chickens amble through her kitchen. She's willing to allow human inconsistencies: "ain't none of us perfect." And the girls are fascinated—but they tend to see her as an undomesticated "character," a comic figure. "There was something so wild and unconventional about Mrs. Bonny that it was like taking an afternoon walk with a good-natured Indian" (p. 139). They may admire and accept her knowledge of the woods, but they can't quite come to terms with the unconventionality of her household, and they manage to avoid ever tasting Mrs. Bonny's cooking! For Mrs. Bonny cannot be shut into or out of a house or a sex-determined pattern. The "good-natured Indian," at home in forest and in kitchen, bears no sexual designation.

We encounter another upcountry household in "In Shadow," the finest sketch in Deephaven. In early summer, Kate and Helen met a frail farm family, quite lacking in Mrs. Bonny's obdurate strength, with appealingly "thin and pitiful" (p. 141) children, and hard-working, honest parents. When the girls return in late October, with gifts for the children, they find that both parents have died. First the wife. Then, without
the necessary female anchor, the husband "was sore afflicted, and . . .
didn't know what to do or what was going to become of 'em with winter
comin' on, and . . . he took to drink and it killed him right off" (p. 147). Kate and Helen arrive just before this man's sparse funeral; both
are "more startled than I can tell" (p. 143). Startled, because they have
almost blundered into real and present shadows: "We wondered how we
should have felt if we had gone further into the room and found the
dead man in his coffin, all alone in the house" (p. 146).

For Kate and Helen, the most affecting thing about this family's situ­
ation (a situation not entirely unlike their own, although they do not say
so) is that it is now "broken up, and the children to be half strangers to
each other" (p. 146). Kate sees the dead farmer as a pitiable victim:
"like a boat adrift at sea, the waves of his misery brought him in against
the rocks, and his simple life was wrecked" (p. 146). In Helen's earlier
description of the sunset, the "little black boat" was an anonymous
fleck in the composition of a seascape; now, months later, when Kate
uses the same boat figure, it is tied to a particular (although still seen in
terms of her own stereotype of "simplicity"), helpless human life.

The girls climb the rocks above the farmhouse, to have a good view of
the walking funeral procession: "We said how much we should like to
go to that funeral . . . but we gave up the idea: we had no right there,
and it would seem as if we were merely curious, and we were afraid our
presence would make the people ill at ease, the minister especially. It
would be an intrusion" (p. 145). This statement, though much qualified
by Helen's self-conscious awareness of the class difference between her­
self and Kate and these farm people, is probably the clearest evidence of
growth in Deephaven. The funeral has a power of its own; participation
is a right earned by caring and connection. To waltz in and out of it, as
they have done with so many Deephaven rituals, would "be an intru­
sion."

So, from a distance, Kate and Helen hear the funeral music, and see
the transforming power of the ritual: "Before the people had entered
the house, there had been, I am sure, an indifferent, business-like look,
but when they came out, all that was changed; their faces were awed by
the presence of death, and the indifference had given place to uncer­
tainty" (p. 148). Helen and Kate, as they watch and talk, try to fend off
that uncertainty: they quote Shakespeare; they contrast their own com­
fortable financial situation with the precariousness of up-country life;
they extol the necessity of Christianity. But the funeral itself, the uncer­
tain reality, continues to compel their attention: "there was something
piteous about this; the mourners looked so few, and we could hear the
rattle of the wagon wheels. 'He's gone, ain't he?' said some one near us.
That was it,—gone" (p. 148). All of Helen's cultivated observations
have somehow missed the mark—this passing stranger, who belongs to
the upcountry world, has made the essential observation. Helen's role,
as spectator, is but to recognize and to affirm it.
Back in Boston a year later, Helen still cannot shake the memory of that country funeral. And typically, her last thought of it is in terms of the house, a shelter abandoned, locked and empty and riteless as the Brandon house will soon be, again: “I think today of that fireless, empty, forsaken house, where the winter sun shines in and creeps slowly along the floor; the bitter cold is in and around the house, and the snow has sifted in at every crack; outside it is untrodden by any living creature’s footstep. The wind blows and rushes and shakes the loose window sashes in their frames, while the padlock knocks—knocks against the door” (p. 149).

Mrs. Bonny may have endured because she is a “professor”; the unnamed farmer of “In Shadow,” lacking her powers, could not finally summon up the strength to “profess.” And the third, last native of the Deephaven environs whom Kate and Helen meet, Miss Sally Chauncey, has survived only by a negative profession. “‘Ah, they say everyone is ‘dead’ nowadays. I do not [and will not] comprehend the silly idea!’ said the old lady, impatiently” (p. 154). Family, fortune, and position gone, Miss Sally has no defense but denial.

Rituals are one means by which Miss Chauncey feeds her disbelief. She reassures herself by recounting past rites, by maintaining old forms, entertaining callers to her tumbledown house in her former elegant manner. As Kate and Helen wait for their hostess, they furtively investigate her house:

So we went into the great hall with its wide staircase and handsome cornices and paneling and then into the large parlor on the right, and through it to a smaller room looking out on the garden, which sloped down to the river. Both rooms had fine carved mantels . . . and in the cornices we saw the fastenings where pictures had hung,—old portraits, perhaps . . . . The [servant] girl did not remember, only it would all fall through into the cellar soon. But the old lady was proud as Lucifer, and wouldn’t hear of moving out. The floor in the room toward the river was so broken that it was not safe. . . . Three old hens and a rooster marched toward us with great solemnity when we looked in. The cobwebs hung in the room, as they often do in old barns, in long, gray festoons; the lilacs outside grew close against the two windows where the shutters were not drawn, and the light in the room was greenish and dim. (p. 153)

Into this shadowy space, where solemn chickens and festooned cobwebs mock the house’s past of ceremony and civility, where lilacs, once part of an ordered garden, have gone wild and threaten the rooms with their rank green, comes Miss Chauncey, “an elegant woman still” (p. 152). Unconscious of the decay around her, she entertains her young guests with tales of her coming-out party in this house, and urges them to stay for a tea which does not exist. When her guests ask her to read from the Bible for them, Miss Sally Chauncey “opened the great book at random and read slowly, ‘in my father’s house are many mansions’; and then, looking off for a moment at a leaf which had drifted into the window recess, she repeated it: ‘In my father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so I should have told you’ ” (p. 157).

Miss Chauncey’s house is much like the Brandon house in style. It
also resembles Mrs. Bonny’s house in its dilapidation and its closeness
to the world outdoors—even its indoor chickens. But Mrs. Bonny
accepts and thrives on the mix; Miss Chauncey denies and defies it, liv­
ing now in the “many mansions” of her memory. In some ways, her
house has remained her “father’s”; she has never summoned up the rig­
orous female power (like Mrs. Kew’s) which would allow her to see, to
order and to possess this dwelling as it really is. For Sally Chauncey,
ritual is compounded with evasion, not the truth-telling which gave the
upcountry funeral its force and value. Her holy text locates human rich­
ness and possibility within mansions, but does not indicate that the time
is the present, the house is crumbling, and its legal owner is not her
father but her female self.

No character speaks more directly to the situation of Kate and Helen,
themselves inhabiting an inherited house, than Sally Chauncey. And her
story is the only one which Helen continues beyond the boundaries of
the Deephaven summer. In winter, news reaches Boston of Miss Chaun­
cey’s death. A well-meaning neighbor finally induced her to leave her
“uninhabitable” house. “But her fondness for her old house was too
strong, and one day she stole away . . . and crept in through the cellar,
where she had to wade through half-frozen water, and then went up­
stairs, where she seated herself at a front window and called joyfully to
the people who went by, asking them to come in and see her, as she had
got home again” (p. 157). She never recovered from the illness induced
by this excursion. Miss Chauncey had nowhere to turn but back: to the
shelter and the rituals of her youth, to a denial of change which was
itself denied by that change she refused to admit: death. Kate and Helen
came to Deephaven in a similar spirit, imagining they could again be
“two little girls,” playing with their dolls on the shifting sea sand.

The shelters which Kate and Helen have observed in their outland
forays have all seemed somehow flawed, and have made Deephaven
community, which contains both lighthouse and Brandon house, an
even more precious haven. In the final chapter, “Last Days in Deep­
haven,” Helen attempts to catalog all the various details of the summer
which she has not mentioned elsewhere. But she does not acknowledge
that all the outland extremities they have observed are also present, in
embryo or fully grown, in Deephaven. Although Katharine Brandon’s
house still stands, its fate is uncertain: Kate’s family may sell it. And
Miss Katharine, when she died, was as mad as her friend Sally Chaun­
cey. The Widow Jim, sans house and inheritance, could be sturdy but
slipshod Mrs. Bonny. The alcoholism and spiritless displacement of the
dead farmer are seen in any number of Deephaven men. Rituals—calls,
circus, storytelling, etcetera—may have helped to preserve Deephaven’s
strength, but they have also revealed its human weaknesses.

Nevertheless, Kate and Helen depart charmed: “we said over and
over again how happy we had been, and that it was such a satisfactory
summer” (p. 160). They are delighted with their efforts at domestic rite—at playing house—and think they’ve made considerable progress. On their arrival at Brandon house, Kate showed Helen “a great square figure” in the carpet, where as a child-visitor she “used to keep house . . . with her dolls for lack of a better playhouse” (p. 44). But by summer’s end, Helen assures her, she has expanded into the mistress of the whole house, not just a circumscribed carpet-square: “It used to seem to me that Miss Brandon was its mistress; but now it belongs to you” (p. 162). For Kate and Helen this is a crucial statement, for they tend to see a woman’s house, her domestic structure, as an essential part of her identity: “we always liked to see our friends in their own houses” (p. 61). (Male friends, by contrast, are usually visited outside their houses.)

But the reader may not be so willing to grant that Kate Lancaster is mistress of Brandon house. Winter is coming, the winter which the dead farmer could not bear to face; the sea more and more frequently flashes treachery. And Helen and Kate retreat (or advance?) to the conventions of the city; they are “willing to admit that we could be as comfortable in town, and it was almost time for sealskin jackets” (p. 165). Kate will never be committed to, imprisoned in, defined by Brandon house as her dead aunt was. (And Helen, of course, has never been more than a sympathetic guest.)

On a final round of goodbye calls, the girls try to pretend they will return next year. But they know they won’t. The evanescence, the limited demands of Deephaven’s ceremonies have been among the summer’s charms. They’ve savored the sense of being “placed” in this definable community, if only by virtue of Kate’s ancestry. Yet Boston has always been only a train ride away, and they’ve had a constant stream of city visitors, to admire their rustic discoveries.

When they arrived, they felt that the past of Brandon house could never have been as complex or as vital as their own present lives; one of Kate’s final comments (on parties with city visitors) sounds the same arrogantly elegiac note: “I think there had never been such picnics in Deephaven before, and I fear there never will be again” (p. 162). When they leave for Boston, the girls carry among their vacation souvenirs a youthful portrait of one of Kate’s ancestors, who seemed to them “solitary and forlorn” and “imploring” among the staid elders of the surrounding portraits. “She was soon afterward boxed up, and now enjoys society after her own heart in Kate’s room in Boston” (p. 47). Youth, including their own, must be rescued. (Although note that Kate’s Boston world is diminished from a house to a room.) Kate and Helen have learned the art of escape (to Boston, to Deephaven, to and from the rituals of both places), but they have not yet begun to master the arts which the lives and rituals of Mrs. Bonny, Widow Jim, and Mrs. Kew might have taught them—acceptance, and endurance.

The “simple” rituals and routines of Deephaven, which Kate and
Helen thought would be a retreat from change and uncertainty, have instead offered an education in the stringencies, complications, and constant demands, as well as satisfactions, of being human anyplace. But the visitors have not really accepted or admitted the offer of this knowledge. Self-protected, and self-insulated to the last, they return to Boston in the same mood of naïve delight in which they arrived. The transparent partition has not shattered. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that the partition has sustained a few cracks, which Kate and Helen refuse to acknowledge. In the words which end the book, Helen, in Boston, imagines a return to Deephaven in some distant, probably impossible future. Typically, she visualizes a sunset:

I should like to walk along the beach at sunset and watch the color of the marshes and the sea change as the light of the sky goes out. It would make the old days come back vividly. We should see the roofs and the black chimneys of the village, and the great Chantrey elms look black against the sky... . Turning, we should see the lighthouse lamp shine out over the water, and the great sea should move and speak to us lazily in its idle, high-tide sleep. (p. 166)

Town houses: lighthouse: trees: sea (which, Helen now knows, does not always sleep). All the elements are there. But, even in this imagined landscape, all Helen Denis can do is observe from the edge, and walk by. Like Miss Chauncey, she inhabits an imagined Deephaven, a remembered mansion. The last word we heard from Miss Chauncey was death. The last word from Helen is not too dissimilar: “Sleep.”

Jewett reread Deephaven in the nineties, when she was working on the “Pointed Fir sketches.” She did not then disown Helen Denis, but felt very far removed from her—although still related by blood: “I felt as if I had come to be the writer’s grandmother. I liked it better than I expected. It is the girliness that gives it value... . It is curious to find how certain conditions under which I wrote it are already outgrown.”

And in The Country of the Pointed Firs, she strips her new, nameless narrator of the conditions which allowed Kate and Helen to reject much of what Deephaven offered: their youth, their companionship, their proximity, their self-conscious condescension, their family house. Deephaven and the village of the Pointed Firs, Dunnet Landing, are similar. But this new, older woman, like her creator, has learned not to be Helen Denis. She shares Helen’s attraction to and suspicion of rituals. But she must walk directly into and out of them; she cannot, like Helen, walk by. Late in The Country of the Pointed Firs, Mrs. Todd, the wise woman of Dunnet Landing, says to the narrator, her guest and friend: “Dear... how you do understand poor human natur!” Helen and Kate are not without the potential for such understanding, as their tentative sympathies show. But they refuse the risks and rewards offered

them in Deephaven's rituals; they refuse to acknowledge both the sustaining power and the crippling sexual dualism perpetuated in the houses where they have been visitors. The lessons implicit in their refusal are surely a part of the material from which Jewett later built her most moving and most fully realized book. For Helen Denis, awakened, could well become the woman who narrates *The Country of the Pointed Firs*.

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