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"The Only Rose": A Central Jewett Story

by CHARLES W. MAYER

HAVING pictured a New England in decline, Sarah Orne Jewett is usually seen as the guardian of a past culture who is intellectually and emotionally dependent on memories and uneasy in a contemporary world of time and change. She is described eloquently as presiding over a community's "flush of dying" or being bent on a "quest for permanence" to be found in the country life of former days.¹ Recently she has been explained as a writer in conflict who created unresolved tensions between the attractions of an unchanging past and the necessity for growth and change or, similarly, between the "lost life of childhood" and an aggressive adult world.² Such approaches, invaluable when showing how a sense of the past was crucial to the success of her regional pictures, seldom make allowances for her highly developed sense of the destructive or debilitating powers of the past over those who live for it or in it and are unable, as a result, to live vitally in the present. Nor do they always recognize how surely she knew that, although the past is dead, the memory of it is not, and may enrich life by helping us to seal the bond between generations and make commitments of the heart. This vision of the past, dependent on Jewett's appreciation of the act of living, is important in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) and in the chapters added after her death. The same vision, too, is very evident in the decade of achievement leading up to that book when nearly all of her finest stories were written.³ It is illustrated best, perhaps, by "The Only Rose" (1894), one of the last things published in that culminating decade.

I

NUMEROUS figures of isolation inhabit the world of Dunnet Landing. Although the dreams and illusions they hold are often felt to be agents

1. Warner Berthoff, "The Art of Jewett's *Pointed Firs*," *New England Quarterly*, XXXII (1959), 51; Paul John Eakin, "Sarah Orne Jewett and the Meaning of Country Life," *American Literature*, XXXVIII (1967), 510.

2. Catherine Barnes Stevenson, "The Double Consciousness of the Narrator in Sarah Orne Jewett's Fiction," *Colby Library Quarterly*, XI (1975), 1; Theodore R. Hovet, "America's 'Lonely Country Child': The Theme of Separation in Sarah Orne Jewett's 'A White Heron,'" *Colby Library Quarterly*, XIV (1978), 170-71.

3. Nine of the eleven stories chosen by Willa Cather as Jewett's best (*The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1925]) and all ten singled out by her chief scholar, Richard Cary

of their survival, the cost to the quality of their lives is very great. The chief example among these creatures, all of whom seem obsessively dominated by their personal past, is "Poor Joanna," who was crossed by love and elected to spend the rest of her life on half-sterile Shell-heap Island. According to the sharp-tongued Susan Fosdick, Joanna "acted just like a bird when its nest is spoilt."⁴ The author seems to share Mrs. Fosdick's pity and also her opinion that Joanna was "a great fool" (p. 65). Joanna believed that her "unpardonable sin" for having wicked thoughts toward God made her unfit to live (p. 70). Having once reveled in social intercourse, in her isolation she developed the grim streak of her mother and turned away even from those who cared about her most. The point seems to be that the only unpardonable sin committed by Joanna was the self-imposed exile that resulted in such waste of life.

Joanna's opposite is Almira Todd. Also denied the man she loved, she moved not to the physical and moral isolation of an off-shore island but to the mainland and a life filled with commitments of the heart. One of the key chapters of the book is entitled "Where Pennyroyal Grew." On Green Island, itself often called the symbol of life, the pennyroyal grows abundantly on a secret headland "where the deep sea broke with a great noise" (p. 48). This place for Mrs. Todd is the living heart of memory.⁵ Here she ritualistically brings to the narrator the ancient daguerreotypes of her family, showing her mother as a lovely girl in a quaint dress (pp. 47-48). And here she often came with the husband who was later lost within sight of that same headland. Nathan died before he knew that she had never loved him: "But this pennyroyal always reminded me, as I'd sit and gather it and hear him talkin'—it always would remind me of—the other one" (p. 49). Everywhere in the book pennyroyal is present, being the favorite herb gathered by Mrs. Todd in her role as self-appointed assistant to the doctor. There may be doubt about the medicinal effects of her pennyroyal but none whatever about its power for bringing her into close sympathetic contact with friends and neighbors. Associated with Mrs. Todd's most deeply felt memories, pennyroyal becomes symbolic of the conversion of memories into sublimating emotions that elevate and sustain her generous spirit.

Such conversions make possible pledges of love that may be followed by bold actions. On the morning of William's wedding, for instance,

(*Sarah Orne Jewett* [New York: Twayne, 1962], p. 157), were published in this single decade (1886-95). Stories appearing on both lists are "A White Heron," "The Flight of Betsey Lane," "The Dulham Ladies," "Miss Tempy's Watchers," "The Guests of Mrs. Timms," "The Town Poor," and "The Hiltons' Holiday."

4. *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), pp. 61-62. All succeeding references to this edition are included in the text by page number only.

5. Francis Fike, in "An Interpretation of *Pointed Firs*," *New England Quarterly*, XXXIV (1961), 486-88, notices that Mrs. Todd reveals her grief while "standing in a patch of pennyroyal, as if to emphasize those healing resources which come from within the very source of grief." Later Fike identifies memory as one of the human resources possessed by the characters, although he stresses its power of helping people survive nightmares or withstand grief instead of its power of transforming and enriching lives.

Mrs. Todd expects her brother's sailing boat to dodge around among the islands so that, characteristically, he can avoid being seen, when she suddenly exclaims, "There he comes, and he's strikin' right in across the open bay like a man!" And "he's bent his new sail" (p. 150). Then the narrator quotes St. Teresa's maxim that "the true proficiency of the soul is not in much thinking, but in much loving . . ." (p. 151). Mrs. Todd's appreciation of William's joy is not simply the result of blind love (she is critical of his faults) but of her knowledge of his former suffering uniting with her own memories of a love that became an agony. The second reference to St. Teresa, "The happiness of life is in its recognitions" (p. 151), suggests that Jewett understood perfectly what Henry James meant by the phrase, "felt life." When William saw his Esther for a few hours once a year, he always went with a lotion of pennyroyal on his cheeks, spread there by a sister whose "recognitions" prompted her to mark these moments of release almost religiously with the pennyroyal emblem.⁶

This central vision is present in two of the author's important stories, "The Dulham Ladies" (1886) and "The Hiltons' Holiday" (1893). Dissimilar in subject and tone, they are complementary in theme, the first showing the negative power of the past over those who fail to recognize time or the changes it brings, the second showing the positive power of the past when people become poignantly conscious of time and its significance to their lives. The Dobbin spinsters in "The Dulham Ladies," suspecting that they are no longer treated deferentially by society, as in their youth, try to regain their "lost ascendancy" by ignoring the passing years and altered circumstances (p. 199). We may see a kind of quaint innocence in their purchase of ridiculous frizzes to cover thinning locks, and feel Jewett's sympathetic or tolerant humor softening the famous verbal irony with which their follies are recorded. On the surface the author's view seems to be similar to that of the maid Hetty, who says that the old ladies believe their wigs have set the clock back forty years, "but if they're pleased to think so, let 'em!" (pp. 206-07). Yet, as Cary has hinted, the tone is not tender or gentle and has serious implications.⁷ The assumption of social pre-eminence by the "Dobbin girls" results from their blind allegiance to a dead past. Totally dependent when the formidable mother was alive, they lack personal resources with which to face reality and are ill-prepared for old age, potentially, Jewett always avers, a time for richness and growth. Because their remembered glory is not converted into an interest in the life around them, memory feeds but the dead husks of their girlish selves.

6. Hyatt H. Waggoner, in "The Unity of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*," *Twentieth Century Literature*, V (1959), 72-73, is fascinated by the second quotation and finds it to be as close to an explicit statement of theme as exists in the book.

7. *Sarah Orne Jewett*, p. 116. Not all readers agree. Margaret Farrand Thorp, in *Sarah Orne Jewett* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1966), p. 36, thinks "the story is somewhat less effective than it might be because the author is too obviously present pointing out the humor of their errors."

The past is put to a very different use in "The Hiltons' Holiday." This story has an obvious contrast between the Hilton daughters, who represent conflicting values, country and city; but the central focus is different. It is shared by Katy, the youngest girl, and the father, John Hilton, who together are involved in a process of gaining a sense of the unity and continuity of life—past, present, and future. John, farming the land farmed by his father before him, has lost his only son (p. 290). He overcomes feelings of loneliness and broken ties during a simple one-day excursion to town, where he puts Katy into contact with her cultural and personal past, thus creating a chain of awareness and sympathy—backward to his mother's time, forward to Katy's. This chain is forged by a series of incidents in which time becomes a living thing: a glimpse of the academy where the vibrant grandmother, before dying so young, prepared to be a teacher; meeting a distinguished judge, the grandmother's fellow scholar of long ago who now sees her live again in Katy; a talk with an oldtimer, a survivor of a lost world who longs "to be there 'long o' the rest o' the folks"; and, finally, as the greatest triumph, sitting for a photograph in which all their joy of the day is mirrored: the girls' "eager young faces would forever shine there" (pp. 298-304). These cameo scenes create for Katy the idea of a past. Eakin has intelligently associated the trip with the stability of social order and a stationary pattern of existence,⁸ but from another point of view it brings Katy into a world of time and makes her conscious of the value of experience and memory. The day will nourish the life of one who already "lives right with herself" (p. 291) and help her face the future with sensitivity and appreciation.

Other stories from this fruitful time are relevant. In "The Flight of Betsey Lane" (1893), memories of her long service to a cherished family inspire the elderly Betsey to run away to the Philadelphia Exhibition, where her imagination and sympathy are "a delightful contrast to the indifferent, stupid crowd that drifted along, with eyes fixed at the same level" (p. 188). In a somewhat later story, "Martha's Lady" (1897), the result is similar, although this idealized action lacks the credibility of Betsey's. A clumsy housekeeper, stirred by the happy spirit of a lady who took an interest in her, lives a long life of inner beauty and value, fed constantly by the memory. Another contrast to the waste of lives imprisoned by the past is "Miss Esther's Guest" (1893), in which two old people show that it is never too late to find love if we are receptive to experience and trusting of the heart when accidents throw us together. Finally, in a story that remained uncollected until 1971, "The Growtown 'Bugle'" (1888), Jewett expresses in a subtle way her belief that the life we have is to be lived now and here, by showing that a woman, ironically named Prudence, misses life altogether when she

8. "Sarah Orne Jewett and the Meaning of Country Life," pp. 510-11.

commits her fancy and her purse to a town way out in Kansas she has never seen. Her interest begins as a whim and ends as an obsession. The shattering recognition at the end helps identify this story as Jewett's "Beast in the Jungle."⁹

II

"The Only Rose" is an admired story, but little or nothing has been done to define its art or its relationship to the other works of Jewett's maturity. With its strong conflict, rich interpenetration of character and action, and sustained tension ending in a moment of illuminating significance, it remains one of the most modern of her stories. Although the form is not typical of her highly pictorial, undramatic art, the theme captures accurately and vividly the vision I have been describing in the other works.

The story is in two sections. In the first, a well-to-do widow is arranging the flowers of early spring into bouquets of "absolute impartiality" (p. 222) for the graves of her three dead husbands. A single red rose blooms in the window, but Mrs. Bickford cannot decide which of the bouquets deserves it most. Disregarding the comment of a friendly neighbor, ". . . they're all in a better world now" and "can't feel such little things or take note o' slights same's we can" (pp. 222-23), she is racked by indecision: to her last husband she owes "recognition" because he found her poor and left her comfortable; to her second husband, Mr. Wallis, she owes "amends" for disapproving of his foolish inventions that kept them in poverty; to her first husband, Albert, whom she married for love when both were little more than children, she feels neither indebted nor forgiving (pp. 228-29). In the second part Mrs. Bickford sets out on a visit to her sister's attended by her favorite nephew, the burying grounds being along the way; but still unable to decide about the rose, the poor woman has lost all spirit for the holiday. Learning, however, that John is engaged to be married to his childhood sweetheart, she becomes excited and at the cemetery lets her impetuous nephew carry the flowers to the grave, thus giving the rose up to "fate" (pp. 229-31). John returns, the red rose "gay in his buttonhole." When he says, "I can give it to Lizzie," Mrs. Bickford laughingly accepts this verdict. The resolution of the conflict is expressed in her final words: "My first husband was just such a tall, straight young man as you be. . . . The flower he first give me was a rose" (pp. 231-32).

On one level this deceptively simple tale develops a conflict of conscience through the protagonist's efforts to weigh and determine her moral debts to departed spouses. Yet the isolated, retarded pattern of her daily life reveals a deeper tension between the fretful intellect that

9. See *The Uncollected Short Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett*, ed. Richard Cary (Waterville, Maine: Colby College Press, 1971), pp. 124-31.

looks to the dead past for answers and spontaneous feelings that open the valves of the heart and enable memory to illumine and enrich life instead of tormenting and confusing it. Supporting this view is Jewett's quite subtle use of Mrs. Bickford's house to suggest that, within it, life is arrested or flowing meagerly, cut off from the springs of vitality—passionate feelings—and guarding its owner from the natural rhythms of life outside.

The opening passages read very like some of D. H. Lawrence's in conveying through natural details a sense of isolation and suspension. Mrs. Bickford's large house stands alone just where the village ends, "looking down the road with all its windows" (p. 218). Behind these windows sits the old lady, her flower pots still on the ledge, although it is already early summer and others have put theirs out long ago. The flowers suggest a mechanical, though dutiful activity: "They rarely undertook to bloom, but had most courageously maintained life in spite of their owner's unsympathetic but conscientious care" (p. 218). Later we see that her housework is performed scrupulously but dully, without joy or pleasure (p. 222). By degrees Mrs. Bickford emerges as a lonely, complaining, careworn, not unkindly woman, given to fits of silence, though always glad to be entertained or "taken off her own hands" (p. 219). She is reflective but seems to lack the inner resources that might nourish and sustain her, as her opposite number, the gay, sympathetic Abby Pendexter, seems to suspect. The house, the proof of her escape from poverty into comfort and safety, binds her to the past and gives her a prickly compunction to honor that past. For instance, she complains of the care her house costs her, while seeming to be jealously conscious of her right to it (p. 218). It protects but troubles her. Nature, on the other hand, attracts and threatens. Mildly hypochondriacal, Mrs. Bickford won't have a garden because she must avoid the morning sun and because flowers in a close room give her a headache. Her fear of the sun is belied by the rolled-up curtains that always make her kitchen a "blaze of light" (p. 221). And her objection to flowers in the house quite ignores the possibility of enjoying them uncut. It is clear that she is afraid of nature because it is associated with intense passion suppressed throughout the long years of her two loveless marriages.

Through the motives of her central character Jewett has created an interesting association between conscience and comfort. Mrs. Bickford, in her security and ease, can forgive one husband who made her life hard and feel grateful to another who brought about her present state. By dwelling obsessively on the past, however, she has translated these feelings into stiff moral obligations that have little to do with reality: "I never done right by him," she says of the man whose rickety contrivances never worked right, except once when he succeeded in making a self-perpetuating butter churn even though the cow they depended on was completely dry (pp. 223-24). The other man, the saintly Bickford

himself, was both enervated and boring and seems like Wallis to have taken as much as he gave in marriage: he "done everything by rule an' measure. . . . he was a very dignified appearing man; he used 'most always to sleep in the evenin's, Mr. Bickford did" (pp. 225-26).

The falseness of Mrs. Bickford's position is revealed when she can give no convincing reason for wanting to pick the rose and cause herself such trouble in the first place (p. 222). Something deeper than the carping mind makes her do it, of course. Her rose is a red one, the symbol of passionate love, and though she has not yet consciously thought of it, a rose was the first flower given her long ago by Albert, who, hearty and vigorous, was so different from a punctilious Bickford or a feckless Wallis. Of Albert she says, "I thought the world was done for me when he died" (p. 226). After subjecting her other husbands to the dissecting intellect, she thinks, "And then there was Albert" (p. 228), stopping because the reasoning mind or the moral conscience can take her no further. Although spontaneous feelings interfere repeatedly with the habitual processes of rumination, superficial reason is still dominant at the end of the first section when the romantic Abby is told by Mrs. Bickford that she is better off having failed to win the man she loved, for "a single woman's got her liberty" (p. 228).

The sureness with which Jewett has developed her character's inner struggle allows the recognition scene to unfold with perfect naturalness and credibility. In the carriage with her nephew, Mrs. Bickford at first continues to be alienated from nature, having a "contracted and assailed feeling out of doors"; but soon she feels the reassuring companionship of youth—the young son of her other sister is her favorite in that family—and begins to feel easy and "protected." Presently she learns of John's love affair and is roused into a "comfortable self-forgetfulness" (pp. 229-30). Thus, by bringing her away from the house, youth has brought her out of morbid imprisonment in the past, and now the news of love brings her back to nature: "I know who I do hope's got the right one," she murmurs when John disappears with the flowers (p. 231). Moments later, when she sees the rose in his lapel, she has come, finally, to the human bond: "She thought of Albert, and the next moment tears came into her old eyes. John was a lover, too" (p. 232). The fretful self is quieted by the knowledge of the heart that love is always now, whether its name is Albert or John, and by a heightened sense of the continuity of life from one generation to the next, a feeling vital to old folks in so much of Jewett's fiction.

As at the start, there is something Lawrencian about Mrs. Bickford's illumination.¹⁰ Does it matter that her visit is a carefully planned event orchestrated by her sister's family for eliciting a formal blessing from a

10. Also Joycean. For instance, the nature of the epiphany, though not its effect, is much like that experienced by Gretta in "The Dead."

woman of property with no child of her own? The memory of love has been pushing itself into her consciousness—possibly for a very long time. Now it comes flooding forth, allowing her to escape the tyranny of a narrow reason in which the instinctive dictates of the heart have been ignored. Late in her life Jewett wrote to her young friend, Willa Cather, about a writer's conscience: "You must find your own quiet centre of life, and write from that to the world. . . ." ¹¹ She was thinking of the writer's rather solitary lot but added, "in short, you must write to the human heart. . . . And to write and work on this level, we must live on it. . . ." So it was that Jewett associated her own quiet centre—and that of her characters as well—not with some nostalgic vision of the past or uninvolved view of the passing scene but with a full commitment of the heart to the human life that flowed around her.

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11. *The Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett*, ed. Annie Fields (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), p. 249.