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Sylvia as Hero in Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron"

by KELLEY GRIFFITH, JR.

BUT WHAT shall I do with my 'White Heron' now she is written? She isn't a very good magazine story, but I love her, and mean to keep her for the beginning of my next book."¹ When Sarah Orne Jewett wrote these words to a friend, the *Atlantic Monthly* had rejected her story "A White Heron," and she was puzzled about its artistic merit. But after it appeared in a collection of her stories in 1886, it immediately attracted compliments from friends and fellow writers.² Since then, it has become her most anthologized and best known story.³ I feel that the key to both the *Atlantic's* puzzlement and the story's wide appeal is its handling of the hero archetype. Sylvia, the protagonist, becomes a traditional hero who makes a quest after a much desired object. The *Atlantic* editors probably did not know what to make of this work of fantasy from a normally down-to-earth local color realist. But the story is much more than a simple fantasy. For Jewett, it seems to have been a personal "myth" that expressed her own experience and the experience of other women in the nineteenth century who had similar gifts, aspirations, and choices. And for modern readers its implications are even broader.

The hero archetype has been ably treated by a number of writers,⁴ but the definitive treatment is probably Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Campbell draws the hero's basic story from his survey of myths, tales, rituals, and art from all over the world. The hero's career, he says, has three main parts. In the first, the "Departure," the hero receives a "call to adventure." By a seeming accident, someone or something invites the hero into "an unsuspected world," into "a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood."⁵ Often he receives supernatural aid from a "protective figure" who helps him in his adventures.⁶ In the second part of the hero's story, the "Initiation," the hero crosses a dangerous "threshold" into a strange, fluid, dreamlike world where he undergoes a succession of trials.⁷ The climax of

1. Sarah Orne Jewett, *Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett*, ed. Annie Fields (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), p. 60.

2. For example, Mary E. Wilkins' comment, recorded in F. O. Matthiessen, *Sarah Orne Jewett* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1929), p. 83.

3. Richard Cary, *Sarah Orne Jewett* (New York: Twayne, 1962), p. 101.

4. See W. H. Auden, "The Quest Hero," in *Perspectives in Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Sheldon Norman Grebstein (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), pp. 370-81, and Lord Raglan, *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1937).

5. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: World, 1949), p. 51.

6. Campbell, p. 69.

7. Campbell, pp. 77, 97.

these trials is the hero's victory over all opposition. Sometimes this victory is accompanied by a mystical vision that shows the hero something of the life-creating energy of all existence.⁸ The third part of the hero's story is the "Return." Because of his victory, he now has a "boon" to bestow upon those he has left behind.⁹ The trip back to his homeland can be arduous, but once back he has a choice and a problem. He can withhold or bestow his boon, whatever he wants.¹⁰ And he must somehow integrate, if he can, his transcendental experience with the "banalities and noisy obscenities" of his old world.¹¹

This summary of Campbell's archetype fits "A White Heron" exactly. "A White Heron" is the story of Sylvia, a nine-year-old girl, who goes in quest of an exotic, almost miraculous bird. She herself has unusual gifts. Since coming from a "crowded manufacturing town" to live with her grandmother deep in the forest, she has become, as her name suggests, a "little woods-girl,"¹² a forest nymph. Her closeness to the forest and to the forest creatures is phenomenal. "There ain't a foot o' ground she don't know her way over," her grandmother says, "and the wild creatures counts her one o' themselves. Squer'ls she'll tame to come an' feed right out o' her hands, and all sorts o' birds" (p. 9). Her tale begins when the unexpected breaks into her life—a young hunter whistles and emerges from the shadows into her pathway. She is frightened but leads him home where her grandmother promises him a night's lodging. After supper, he explains that he collects birds—kills and stuffs them—and that he wants particularly to find a white heron, rare to the area, that he had glimpsed only a few miles away. He offers ten dollars to anyone who might help him find its nest. Sylvia's heart beats wildly, for not only would the ten dollars buy "many wished-for treasures," but she has herself seen the same white heron. This, to use Campbell's terms, is her "call to adventure." The next day she tags along behind the hunter, grows increasingly fond of him, and decides to find the heron's nest.

At this point, Jewett tells us that a "great pine tree, . . . the last of its generation," stands at the edge of the woods taller than any other tree around (p. 14). This tree, we come to learn, has magical properties. Sylvia has often thought that from the top of this tree one could see the sea, something she dreams of doing. But now the tree means more. Not only could one see "all the world" from its top but the white heron's "hidden nest" as well (p. 14). The next morning, the "Initiation" part of Campbell's archetype begins. She steals out of her house before daybreak and goes to the tree, "the monstrous ladder reaching up, up, almost to the sky itself" (p. 16). Her "threshold" is a white oak that just reaches the lowest branches of the pine tree: "When she made the dangerous pass from one tree to the other, the great enterprise would really begin" (p. 16).

8. Campbell, pp. 40–41.

9. Campbell, p. 30.

10. Campbell, p. 193.

11. Campbell, p. 218.

12. *A White Heron and Other Stories* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1886), p. 5. All page references are to this edition and appear in parentheses in the text.

Once on the pine tree she experiences the most difficult trials of her journey. The way is "harder than she thought; she must reach far and hold fast, the sharp dry twigs caught and held her and scratched her like angry talons, the pitch made her thin little fingers clumsy and stiff" (pp. 16–17). But the tree itself now awakens to act as her supernatural guardian. It is "amazed" that "this determined spark of human spirit" is climbing it. It loves "the brave, beating heart of the solitary grey-eyed child," steadies its limbs for her, and frowns away the winds (p. 17).

The climax of Sylvia's climb is a mystical experience corresponding to that in Campbell's archetype. For her, the pine tree becomes a tree of knowledge; it is, after all, like a "great main-mast to the voyaging earth" (p. 17). At the top, "wholly triumphant," she sees the sea for the first time, "with the dawning sun making a golden dazzle over it." She looks westward at the woods and farms and sees that "truly it was a vast and awesome world" (p. 18). And at the same time, she also sees the "solemn" white heron perched on a lower branch of her tree, and she sees it fly to its nest in "the green world beneath" (p. 19).

Now she "knows his secret" and begins the third part of the hero's journey, the "Return." The way down is "perilous" and "her fingers ache and her lamed feet slip" (p. 20). But she reaches home finally, where the hunter and her grandmother await her expectantly. All she has to do now is bestow her "boon." But although the hunter "can make them rich with money" and "is so well worth making happy" (p. 21), Sylvia at the last minute holds back her secret. Why? asks the author. Why, when "the great world for the first time puts out a hand to her," does she "thrust it aside for a bird's sake"? The answer is that Sylvia "remembers how the white heron came flying through the golden air and how they watched the sea and the morning together"; she cannot "give its life away" (p. 21). As in Campbell's archetype, Sylvia exercises her option to withhold her boon. She chooses to remain in the world of nature, the place of her adventures and the subject of her revelation. She will not—or cannot—integrate it with the materialistic world beyond the forest that now beckons to her.

The resemblance of Sylvia's experience to the hero archetype described by Campbell is probably not coincidental. Jewett was fond of the same kind of fantasy literature on which Campbell bases his archetype. It would not have been out of the way for her to write an adult fantasy of her own.¹³ But if Sylvia is a traditional hero, what is she a hero of? That is, what does she fight for? What does she fight against? What does she renounce? Had Jewett simply ended the story with Sylvia's refusal, the answers to these questions would be quickly forthcoming. Sylvia would be a heroic defender of pristine nature against those who would reduce it to a commercial value—ten dollars for the

13. Information on Jewett's reading can be found in Cary, *Sarah Orne Jewett*; Sarah Orne Jewett, *Letters*, ed. Richard Cary (Waterville, Maine: Colby College Press, 1967); Fields, *Letters*; John Eldridge Frost, *Sarah Orne Jewett* (Kittery Point, Maine: The Bundalow Club, 1960); and Matthiessen. For a comparison of the story to the fairy tale pattern, which to an extent embodies Campbell's archetype, see Theodore Hovet's "Once Upon a Time": Sarah Orne Jewett's 'A White Heron' as a Fairy Tale," *Studies in Short Fiction*, XV (Winter 1978), 63–68.

life of one heron. Sylvia, of course, refuses to betray nature, and in this way "A White Heron" is a "conservation" story. Most of the commentators on this story interpret it in exactly this way.¹⁴

But Jewett does not end the story with Sylvia's refusal. She adds a paragraph that broadens the implication of the story and makes its meaning ambiguous. Here is the paragraph, the final one of the story:

Dear loyalty, that suffered a sharp pang as the guest went away disappointed later in the day, that would have served and followed him and loved him as a dog loves! Many a night Sylvia heard the echo of his whistle haunting the pasture path as she came home with the loitering cow. She forgot even her sorrow at the sharp report of his gun and the sight of thrushes and sparrows dropping silent to the ground, their songs hushed and their pretty feathers stained and wet with blood. Were the birds better friends than their hunter might have been, — who can tell? Whatever treasures were lost to her, woodlands and summer-time, remember! Bring your gifts and graces and tell your secrets to this lonely country girl! (pp. 21–22)

The story now no longer seems to be merely about a choice between nature and someone who would destroy it but between "love"—a woman's love for a man—and loyalty to something else, something that inevitably leads to loneliness and isolation. Sylvia's attachment to the hunter, we learn earlier, is not just friendship or affection but romantic love. Although she cannot "understand why he killed the very birds he seemed to like so much," she watches him "with loving admiration" (p. 12), "her grey eyes dark with excitement" (p. 13). Her "woman's heart," asleep until now, is "vaguely thrilled by a dream of love," and the "great power" of love stirs and sways them both as they traverse "the solemn woodlands with soft-footed silent care" (pp. 12–13). Because of this new love, she makes her quest: "What fancied triumph and delight and glory for the later morning," she thinks, "when she could make known the secret! It was almost too real and too great for the childish heart to bear" (p. 15).

Looked at realistically, this love motif makes little sense. Sylvia is only nine years old. Even if she told the hunter her secret, he would leave the area, probably never to return. Yet Jewett makes it seem as if Sylvia could have fulfilled a long-term commitment to the hunter, something akin to marriage. Jewett also indicates that the results of Sylvia's choice will be loneliness and lost "treasures," even though Sylvia returns to the same idyllic conditions that existed before the hunter emerged. Finally, Jewett casts doubt upon the rightness of Sylvia's choice.

Why does she complicate the story in this way? The answer I find most plausible is that the story is not meant to be strictly logical or realistic, but rather that it had a special symbolic value for the author. Jewett's own life, in its outlines, is similar to Sylvia's. When she was a child growing up in South Berwick, Maine, she had her own glimpse of shimmering ideals. She learned of South Berwick's former glory and vigor from various members of her fami-

14. See Cary, *Sarah Orne Jewett*, pp. 55–56, 102; Jay Martin, *Harvests of Change: American Literature 1865–1914* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 144; Matthiessen, p. 83; and Margaret Farrand Thorpe, *Sarah Orne Jewett* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1966), p. 39.

ly. She came to love the New England world of nature. And she saw a seemingly perfect blend of strength, love, knowledge, and wisdom embodied in her father. Her father was the greatest influence on her life. From watching him at work, studying his medical books, and reading the literature he urged upon her, she early decided that only a professional life of some kind would satisfy her emotional and intellectual needs. When she graduated from Berwick Academy, she considered a medical career but rejected it because of poor health. Instead, she turned to writing. Her "triumph," like Sylvia's, came very early. By her nineteenth year she had published her first story, and by her twentieth she had published a story in the nation's most prestigious literary magazine, the *Atlantic Monthly*. She devoted the rest of her life to a very successful literary career. During all this time she never took a suitor or considered getting married.¹⁵

One critic has already suggested that Sylvia's rejection of the hunter represents Jewett's own decision not to get married. Eugene H. Pool argues that, because of Jewett's deep emotional attachment to her father, she could never give up her childhood and become a mature woman. Instead she chose to remain incomplete emotionally.¹⁶ Jewett clearly had a nostalgic longing for her childhood. She expresses it in many of her letters and stories.¹⁷ But it seems equally likely that the story represents a more conscious choice that Jewett began to make as a child, that between a life independent of men and a life dependent on men, between a career and marriage. Although Jewett seems never to have regretted her choice, she was obviously thinking about it around the time she wrote "A White Heron." And as she thought about herself she thought also of other women who faced similar choices.

Two works that illustrate this line of thought are "Farmer Finch," a story published in the same volume as "A White Heron," and *A Country Doctor*, a novel published two years before, in 1884. The world of all her fiction is one of weak men and strong women. With only a few exceptions, her men are deceptive, shiftless, cowardly, garrulous, cruel, thoughtless, vain, senile, drunken, and easily defeated. To fill the vacuum left by their abdication of responsibility, she created self-reliant and versatile women, a type that she clearly admired.¹⁸ "Farmer Finch," about a girl who takes over the family farm during a time of crisis, and *A Country Doctor*, about a girl who chooses to enter the medical profession, contain two such women, both of whom are similar to Sylvia. Like her they are young and tied to nature in a way that emphasizes their purity, strength, and potential. Like her, they conceive of ideals that are deeply personal, that provide a standard of evaluating all things, and that emanate from nature. Like her, they are confronted by young men who force them to choose between romantic love and their ideals. And like her, they reject these men in order to protect and follow the dictates of their ideals.

15. The preceding biographical details come from Cary, Frost, and Matthiessen.

16. See Eugene H. Pool, "The Child in Sarah Orne Jewett," *Appreciation of Sarah Orne Jewett: 29 Interpretive Essays*, ed. Richard Cary (Waterville, Maine: Colby College Press, 1973), pp. 223-28.

17. See, for example, Fields, *Letters*, pp. 124, 132.

18. Cary, *Sarah Orne Jewett*, p. 39.

What ties all three works to Jewett's own experience is that one, *A Country Doctor*, is unquestionably autobiographical. Nan Prince, the heroine of *A Country Doctor*, is strikingly like the young Sarah Jewett, and Dr. Leslie, Nan's guardian, is the author's portrait of her father. Through Nan, Jewett is clearly reliving her own experience, and though she did not herself have a suitor, she gives Nan one. She is also, by having Nan become a doctor, putting herself in the position of any woman who would choose a career instead of marriage, especially one as controversial for women to enter then as medicine. By dramatizing Nan's experience, she thinks through what a woman making such a choice would have to overcome.

Polly Finch and Nan Prince, then, are heroes who fight for a woman's right to seek a place in society commensurate with her talents and aspirations. They bravely fight against arbitrary oppositions to this right and reject suitors, even marriage itself, to win it. "A White Heron" is a reworking of this material, but because Jewett blurs its realism, she gives it a much wider appeal. Sylvia is a hero on several levels of meaning. On the literal level, she is a backwoods girl who quests for something that the man she "loves" wants, and at the climax of her quest she finds something much more valuable. She sees the sea, the morning sun, and the countryside—symbolically, the whole world—all at once. Unconsciously she realizes that the white heron represents the essence of this mysterious new world, and she cannot betray it for a mere ten dollars. On another level, she is Jewett herself and other women like her who heroically reject the too-confining impositions of society for an independent, self-fulfilling life lived on their own terms. Sylvia's age underscores the abstract nature of that choice. She is not just rejecting one man; she is Jewett's surrogate, rejecting all men. But unlike the more polemical "Farmer Finch" and *A Country Doctor*, "A White Heron" qualifies the triumph of that choice. The final paragraph seems to suggest that such a choice is fraught with risk—the risk of loneliness, isolation, disappointment, limited opportunity, and doubt. On a third level the story achieves its most universal appeal. Sylvia is anyone who unselfishly quests for knowledge, receives a stunning revelation, and resists any cheapening of it. The hero, someone has said, does what normal people are not brave enough or strong enough to do. Most of us would have taken the ten dollars, if only to retain the warm approval and appreciation of those we love. But Sylvia does not, and she pays the penalty. This is her heroism. We admire her for it and would strive to do likewise.

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