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Local Color and a Mythologized Past: 
The Rituals of Memory 
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by PHILIP G. TERRIE

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, regional or local-color writing achieved a remarkable popularity. Jay Martin has described how this popularity depended on the need of each of the nation's regions to insist on the uniqueness of its culture; more important, it also reflected a fear that modern industry and politics, the direction of American life itself, were going all wrong. Disillusionment with the present produced a mythologization of the past: "Americans longed for simpler conditions, and made a mythical past embody their collective fantasies." Americans imaginatively reconstructed their history and traditions, idealizing an exaggerated vision of a faultless and irretrievably lost past.

Literature supplied one of the most effective vehicles for this process of idealization, and popular magazines purveyed innumerable accounts of an innocent past that never was. But in the hands of the writers sensitive to the unpleasant facets of modern life as well as to the falsely idyllic nature of idealizing the past, literature dealing with the past created a myth and destroyed it at the same time. The regional writers we read today, including Sarah Orne Jewett, displayed a "need to reconstruct a glorious past, along with a simultaneous recognition that such a paradise never existed." When Martin discusses Jewett's own contribution to this paradoxical combination, he shows that Jewett's Dunnet Landing, the Maine village of The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896), represents, in part, a "coherent world of the past." But he also notes Jewett's expert ability simultaneously to affirm and deny the reality of that past. As the narrator becomes more and more an accepted participant in the events and rituals of Dunnet Landing, she learns that this town, like any human habitation, has its frustrations, anxieties, and all the other features of modern life, including its joys. Thus, according to Martin, the doubleness of this piece of regional writing involves its warm affection for the people of Dunnet Landing combined with its revelation that their lives are no more peaceful or contented than those of the residents of any modern metropolis.

While Martin and others have been correct in asserting the two-sided nature of Jewett's narrative of Dunnet Landing, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is far more than an intelligent account of a rural village with some unhappy inhabitants. Besides being a town where we encounter a mythologized and then debunked past, Dunnet Landing is a place where memories of the past often define present reality, where the translation of memory into myth is the predominant social activity. In this way it refers to regional writing itself, especially that which obsessively idealizes or relives the past to the point of distorting the realities of the present. Jewett does not imply that there is anything inherently wrong with revising and reinterpreting the past. For both individuals and nations memories of the past provide important psychological sustenance. She does suggest, however, that there are different ways to use the past. Just as some people's ability to understand and use their past experiences in dealing with present problems helps them maintain psychological equilibrium, so a nation needs to be always aware of its past. On the other hand, both people and nations can lose themselves in nostalgia or regret over an invented past. In showing a variety of ways people relate to their past, Jewett's book comments on the function of memory in human experience. If Martin is correct in asserting that the primary subject of regional writing was a mythologized past, then *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is an example of the genre whose implicit subject is the genre.3

In Dunnet Landing returning to the past, through memory and its analogues—visits to places associated with the past and conversations in which well-known past events are rehearsed—is a part of life invested with profound, ritualistic implications. It allows the returning person to revive moments of human warmth and to share these moments with others, but at the same time it has its risks. While some people in this Maine village derive sustenance and vitality from participation in a variety of communal activities, others are isolated and withdrawn. Mrs. Blackett, though elderly and physically fragile, continually revivifies her moral and bodily strength through shared experiences, affection for others, and a refusal to dwell in the past; Joanna and Captain Littlepage, on the other hand, are isolated, the former by her self-exile to a seldom-visited island, the latter by his obsession with a fantasy. Memory and its uses help to explain why some characters live in isolation while others are community oriented; the themes of community and isolation have struck many readers as Jewett's main focus in this work.4 All the denizens of Dunnet


Landing are intensely involved with their respective pasts; this seems only natural in a society made up almost exclusively of the aged. But those who mythologize the past to the point of losing their ability to function in the present isolate themselves from the community; they also represent that tendency of some regional fiction to idealize the past and thus retreat from the realities of the present.

The narrator acknowledges the power exercised by memory over one’s perception of and relation to the present in the opening chapter, “The Return,” where she finds, to her delight, that the village appears in reality just as she recalls it. She rejoices in “the unchanged shores of the pointed firs, the same quaintness of the village with its elaborate conventions; all that mixture of remoteness, and childish certainty of being the centre of civilization of which her affectionate dreams had told.” There are few such places where dreams are not disappointed, where the remembered and the actual coincide. The fact that Dunnet Landing does not disappoint, that it is static, much like an event or character fixed in memory, suggests how this Maine village is both a place where memory determines reality and a metaphor for memory itself.

In the ensuing collection of vignettes, Jewett describes the different ways in which people relate the past to their present lives. A declining community with no real future, Dunnet Landing thrives only in its memories, looking backward to a time of commercial, social, and physical vigor. Here old people whose lives lie behind them have established a reality defined by memory: whatever exists in memory is real. Thus Captain Littlepage’s arctic village, never actually seen by him but nonetheless a living entity in his memory, is no less real to him than are Mrs. Todd’s memories of Shell Heap Island, an actual place, to her. The potential of memory to provide an alternative reality for a people whose future is grim and unpromising illustrates its importance for the old folks of Dunnet Landing.

But memories can also distract people from present concerns. The narrator’s first encounter with story-telling, one of the chief vehicles for excursions to the past through memory, illustrates this liability well. Captain Littlepage’s story of a mysterious arctic village suggests that memory has a darkly seductive potential, that it can be raised to the level of legend (even when it has no basis in reality), and that it can turn around and possess its bearer. As soon as Captain Littlepage enters the schoolhouse where the narrator is working, she recalls Mrs. Todd’s warning about his
“'spells' of some unexplainable nature” (17). Despite his dapper charm, Littlepage, even among the eccentrics of Dunnet Landing, is an outcast. Convinced that he is privy to a truth ignored by the rest of the world, that he has “suffer[ed] at the hands of the ignorant” (18), he measures out a lonely, isolated existence. He laments bitterly the passage of time, hiding his dismay at his own aging in superficial complaints about progress and the present. Young people today, he insists, are “loafers”; the community has become “dreadful ignorant” (20); and a general loss of dignity defines the modern world. His complaint that “These bicycles offend me dreadfully” (21) suggests the pettiness of his regret. Like many Americans of the day, uncertain about the future and reassured only by nostalgic images from the past, Littlepage rejects progress, change, and modern life.

Most important, Littlepage has become obsessed with a memory that both reflects and partially causes his alienation from the contemporary Dunnet Landing community. Shipwrecked on the coast of Hudson’s Bay, Littlepage became the confidant of one Gaffett, an erratic Scot with a bizarre tale of an uncharted village somewhere in the Arctic. This village, Gaffett and subsequently Littlepage believe, is some sort of purgatory or stopping place for human souls passing from this world to the next. Littlepage describes this village with such detail and conviction of its reality that it seems as if he had seen it himself. And in his tortured imagination, he has seen it. Telling the narrator about this village, he reveals his obsession with its reality in a nearly hysterical delivery: “leaning forward with a strange look in his eyes, and whispering quickly,” he leaps “to his feet in his excitement and makes excited gestures” (26). His nervousness slightly upsets the narrator, who admonishes him to sit down and calm himself. The fact that he never saw this village but was told about it by Gaffett demonstrates how memories often do not reflect the reality of past experience but rather reflect the process of mythologization. In Littlepage’s case this leads to isolation.

The story told by Captain Littlepage serves as a paradigm for those that follow; despite its impossibility it emphasizes the mythic quality of subsequent stories and establishes the formula of question and response. The similarity between Littlepage’s story and the others that the narrator hears suggests both the importance of story-telling and the possibly perverting nature of any memory. Story-telling and reminiscing are important to any society, but this episode warns us that insisting on the reality of a mythologized past is a perilous occupation. One sign of this danger is the relationship between Captain Littlepage’s story-telling and thoughts of death. As Mrs. Todd says of his “'great narratives, . . . [f]unerals always sets him goin’” (29).  

6. This seems especially significant when we note that Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Fosdick elaborate a detailed necrology before commencing the by-now legendary tale of Joanna. It suggests, as seems only natural, that thoughts of death are on nearly everyone’s mind in this town of the aged. But while Littlepage’s sense of his mortality promotes his egocentrism, it leads Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Fosdick to look for opportunities to share a tale with someone else and feel a part of the community.
While Littlepage's story shows his obsession with an invented past, the way in which other characters pursue this ritual can reveal vital aspects of the teller's grasp of reality and acceptance of the present. For example, as we listen to Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Fosdick rehearsing the details of the life of Joanna, we realize that orally recounting past experience can play a central role in the mechanics whereby memory connects past to present in Dunnet Landing. As the primary vehicle of social intercourse, storytelling, when properly appreciated by teller and listener, encourages the bonds between people. Those people who fail to appreciate this function are the outcasts. The chief complaint which Mrs. Todd levels against the much disdained Mari' Harris, Captain Littlepage's housekeeper, is that, unlike the narrator, she refuses to listen to his stories (103).

The character who cuts herself off from this important social activity, as Joanna does also, indicates her disinclination to participate in a life-renewing process. The difference between Joanna and Mrs. Todd, who has suffered a disappointing romance similar to Joanna's, and the reason why Joanna dies a relatively young woman while Mrs. Todd advances vigorously into old age, is that Joanna isolates herself from social intercourse, which in Dunnet Landing is primarily the retelling and thereby reliving of past events. Joanna lives in her memories and finds them insufficient nourishment; for the most part, Mrs. Todd lives with hers, and by constantly sharing (and perhaps revising) them and thus engaging in as dynamic an activity as the conventions of her society permit, she experiences a continual revivification. Of course, as Captain Littlepage's case demonstrates, storytelling does not itself guarantee a hearty view of life like Mrs. Todd's. What distinguishes Mrs. Todd from Littlepage in the use of storytelling is that she recognizes the importance of the listener and the present-time union between teller and hearer, while Littlepage's story and the way he tells it reflect his egocentrism.

The catechism through which Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Fosdick proceed in the elaboration of the tale of the recluse Joanna best illustrates how storytelling in Dunnet Landing, when properly employed, can make positive use of community memories. It is a social ritual wherein the participants experience both the relived feelings of a recreated past as well as the present pleasure of telling and listening to the story itself, and we note that storytelling has its established forms from which the teller and listener do not deviate. As Mrs. Todd explains the details of her visit to Shell Heap Island with Dr. Bennet, we realize that Mrs. Fosdick has heard this story many times before and knows what happened that day nearly as well as Mrs. Todd does. Yet she and Mrs. Todd proceed through a refined and formulaic litany of question and response, a litany that reminds us of the exchange, similar in pattern, between the narrator and Captain Littlepage.

The important experience, for these women, is not so much remembering the story of Joanna, though both Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Fosdick gen-
uinely sympathize with Joanna and enjoy reminiscing about her, as it is
the pleasure of the present give and take between them, of engaging in a
tacitly recognized communion. As Mrs. Fosdick observes earlier,
“‘There, it does seem so pleasant to talk with an old acquaintance that
knows what you know. . . . Conversation’s got to have some root in the
past, or else you’ve got to explain every remark you make, an’ it wears a
person out’” (61). The tale of Joanna provides Mrs. Fosdick with neither
new information about nor new insights into a local tragedy, but it does
serve as a vehicle for a deeply felt union between her and Mrs. Todd, both
because they knew the subject of the story and because they enjoy the
present experience of telling and hearing it once again.

Besides activities like story-telling or less structured reminiscing, the
major avenue into the past in the world of Dunnet Landing is the actual
visit. And, as is the case with story-telling, such visits can be either
revitalizing or merely self-indulgent. The narrator’s first experience with
the ritual of physical return as tribute to the past (outside of her own
return in the opening chapter) occurs when she visits Green Island with
Mrs. Todd. To Mrs. Todd, Green Island, where she grew up, represents
the past, and her visit there is like slipping into a retrospective reverie. On
the mainland Mrs. Todd uses her memories as part of her daily, forward­
looking life. But on Green Island even those memories which are sad,
those of her unfortunate first love and of her dead husband, must be ac­
tively sought as part of the visit. She takes the narrator to the pennyroyal
field despite (indeed, because of) the certainty that the field will evoke sad
memories.

Mrs. Todd’s retreat to her past begins to seem monomaniacal when we
realize that her visit to the pennyroyal field is undertaken not simply to
remember the past but to remember the act of remembering. When she is
there with the narrator, Mrs. Todd declares that at the same place with her
husband Nathan she would sadly but silently recall the lover who had
preceded him but whom she had been unable to marry. This field is a
shrine to memory, where the initiate comes to evoke memories of that
most sacred act—the act of remembering itself. The “absolute, archaic
grief” (49) which possesses Mrs. Todd derives from a love affair that
failed at least forty years earlier. The similarity between the view of Green
Island from the mainland and Captain Littlepage's description of his arctic
village suggests how Mrs. Todd's trip to her mother's is at least partly
a descent into self-pity. Of the fabulous arctic village Littlepage says,
“Gaffett believed it was the next world to this” (24). And only a few pages
later the narrator says of Green Island, “The sunburst upon that outer­
most island made it seem like a sudden revelation of the world beyond this
which some people believe to be so near” (30).7 Underneath the filial and
sisterly affection that ostensibly moves Mrs. Todd to sail out to Green

7. Donovan, Sarah Orne Jewett, p. 105, notes this similarity.
Island lies a strangely masochistic compulsion to relive what she considers the tragedy of her life.

With Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett the narrator participates in another journey undertaken as a tribute to the importance of the past, this one to the Bowden family reunion. As she does with so much of the activity of the people of Dunnet Landing, Jewett shows that this pilgrimage transcends a simple family gathering. The Bowdens and their kin (of whom, significantly, the narrator by now counts herself as one) proceed through a formulaic and ritualistic consecration of the past, stirred not just by personal and familial memories but also by racial memory.

We carried the tokens and inheritance of all such households from which this had descended, and were only the latest of our line. We possessed the instincts of a far, forgotten childhood; I found myself thinking that we ought to be carrying green branches and singing as we went. (100)

For these old people, particularly Mrs. Blackett, we see how the return to a place associated with distant youth produces a feeling of the closeness of the past. Taking the narrator to the old Bowden house, Mrs. Blackett imagines “that the house looked almost exactly the same” and speaks of the days of her childhood “as if they had but recently passed” (110). In this central episode, the Bowden reunion, we see better than anywhere else how the people of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* have developed certain rituals, which either, like the reunion, revive the past or, like a familiar story, recreate it; the ceremonial connections between past and present are latent in nearly every Dunnet Landing activity.

The narrator does not fail to observe these connections; as she participates in the world of Dunnet Landing, she learns to view present experience in terms of its usefulness as memory. When she and Mrs. Todd are gathering herbs on Green Island, she connects the pleasure of the moment to her own past, “reading a page of remembrance with new pleasure” (49). Later, she recognizes that the joy of the present is itself the substance of future memories; she has learned to look on the present in the same way that Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett do. Daily life in Dunnet Landing is the conscious process of gathering memories. When these three women are returning from the Bowden reunion, they “are rich with the treasure of new remembrance” (110). Likewise, Mrs. Blackett says that the visit paid to her and William by the narrator and Mrs. Todd will be a source of pleasure during the long, cold nights of the coming winter.

The narrator also must observe that like story-telling the actual visit can function in different ways. If the underlying rationale for the visit takes into consideration the present and is not self-centered, then the trip is positive—as Mrs. Blackett’s reunion journey is. But if the visit is strictly past-oriented, calculated to stir up feelings of regret, like Mrs. Todd’s pilgrimage to the pennyroyal field, then it is negative. Thus with this pair of trips and with the stories told by Captain Littlepage and Mrs. Todd we have two examples of each of the two basic avenues to the past. Viewing
them schematically, we can say that Mrs. Todd's visit to the pennyroyal field is to Littlepage's story as Mrs. Blackett's reunion journey is to Mrs. Todd's tale about Joanna. Each paired set provides the narrator with a clear-cut distinction between two possible uses of the past. And as the narrator responds to the conflict between her affection for Dunnet Landing and the demands of her own life beyond that isolated Maine village, we see how the village represents the past and that the narrator's visit there is a metaphor for memory.

The narrator's gradual entrance into and acceptance by the community of Dunnet Landing are significant. On her arrival, she exhibits a slightly patronizing attitude to Mrs. Todd and her eccentricities, and she resents the need to be sociable. Although her condescension quickly vanishes, she remains, for a while at least, uneasy about immersing herself completely in the rituals of story-telling and memory which occupy Mrs. Todd and the other inhabitants of the town. After the funeral in chapter 4, she regrets the absence of "news from the outer world, which had been, half unconsciously, forgotten," but at the same time she wishes that she were more a member of the community (15). Throughout her stay, she sees the rituals of sociability, as they operate in Dunnet Landing, as a seduction, something drawing her away from other concerns. Because Mrs. Todd's "friendly gossip" is a "temptation," the narrator is not applying herself to her writing (8-9), but by the time of the reunion the writing seems to have been forgotten altogether. During her visit to Green Island, the narrator wishes she could stay there forever.

Perhaps the most telling example of the narrator's becoming a citizen of Dunnet Landing, with all the psychological perils attached, is her afternoon with Elijah Tilley. This occurs right after her return from the Bowden reunion, on the way home from which she becomes acutely aware of her own advancing age. The usually taciturn Tilley identifies the narrator as a receptive listener, and she in turn immediately remembers that Tilley has been grief stricken over the death eight years earlier of a beloved wife. Throughout the encounter with Tilley, the narrator seems more and more to be taking the wife's place. Tilley welcomes the narrator to his house and offers her a chair by the window; later we learn that this was the wife's chair and that it is part of the shrine Tilley has established to her memory. As Tilley describes the departed wife, the narrator, like Tilley, begins to see her. At the same time, Tilley begins to read the narrator's unspoken thoughts—so attuned are they to one another. And, what is more important, she briefly imagines herself as the absent wife. The meeting with Tilley is thus a climactic event for the narrator. It reminds her of the morbid possibilities in dwelling on the past, and it especially shows how she herself is susceptible to the seductions of memory. In time,

she could become just as obsessed as Tilley or Littlepage. Mrs. Todd's awareness of precisely this inclination in the narrator leads to the gift of Joanna's coral pin just before the narrator's departure.

Thus the narrator comes to suspect that there can be something unsatisfactory about the way memory fixes the significance of every human action in Dunnet Landing. The affectionate, sympathetic tone with which she describes the various forms that memory takes should not obscure the point that, at least in the extreme cases of Captain Littlepage or Elijah Tilley, a fixation with the past is solipsistic. In the book's first paragraph the narrator implies that the past-oriented reveries of the old folks of Dunnet Landing are otherwise similar to the daydreams of children and that only the very old and the very young may indulge themselves with such self-centeredness. This is not to say that Jewett condemns out of hand either old people or their reminiscing. Certainly Mrs. Todd and her mother, Mrs. Blackett, evince strong, admirable qualities, facing old age and death with equanimity and courage, using their commonly shared memories as social bonds, as connections between individuals and between the past and present. Within the limited world of Dunnet Landing these two women, especially the elder, illustrate how memories promote personal warmth and community identity.

But because the way of life of Dunnet Landing, however attractive, is that of an earlier age, to the narrator it carries the threat of a nostalgic obsession with the past. Far from being a simple celebration of the rural past, this is one example of local color which points out the dangers of idealizing the past. The narrator's departure from the village coupled with her wish that every reader have a Dunnet Landing of his own reveals her ambivalence. She feels an urge to join a life that often exists wholly in a mellow haze of pleasant nostalgia, but she finally decides to leave. Aware of her own impending old age, she recognizes the seductiveness of a view of life that looks exclusively backward. When she is the most comfortably integrated into the Dunnet Landing community, when she has attended the Bowden family reunion as an insider and when she has been accepted by Elijah Tilley as a confidant, then she is the most keenly sensitive to a need to leave the village and return to the larger life of the outside world.

To the narrator Dunnet Landing is memory itself, that part of the human consciousness able either to pervert and isolate or to strengthen and sustain the individual facing the ineluctable processes of time. The narrator's visit to Dunnet Landing and her ultimate departure from it represent the journey of one consciousness into the recesses of memory and back to the present. Although the narrator certainly loves Mrs. Blackett and Mrs. Todd and accepts their view of life as functional for them in their world, she, an outsider, cannot remain there. A writer, presumably a story-teller, she recognizes the need to leave the land of memories and pursue her story-telling role. For the narrator to use her memories constructively requires that she rejoin the outside world and
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communicate the story of Dunnet Landing. Thus she asserts her role in a present-oriented society and takes the same pleasure from the union between reader and writer that Mrs. Fosdick and Mrs. Todd take from that between story-teller and listener.

The sad, nostalgic tone of "The Backward View," wherein the narrator leaves Dunnet Landing, can suggest that this chapter simply recounts a departure from a beloved place. The sadness—real enough—comes from the urge to give up the frenetic life of the modern world; or in a metaphorical sense it comes from the inclination on the part of the narrator's consciousness to withdraw to the relatively undemanding confines of memory instead of facing an unpredictable, perilous present reality. But when we consider the narrator's final glimpse of the village, "indistinguishable from the other towns that looked as if they were crumbled on the furry-green stoniness of the shore" (132–33), and note the faint mirror in this picture of Captain Littlepage's arctic village, we infer that this Maine town has a capacity to enthrall the narrator's consciousness just as powerfully as the captain's mythical village has possessed him. Only two villages in the book are approached from the sea, visited, and then left: the narrator's Dunnet Landing and Littlepage's town of ghosts. If Dunnet Landing stands for memory, and if memory, as this similarity suggests, sometimes perverts the consciousness away from a realistic grasp of the world to a solipsistic view of life that ignores everything outside itself, then leaving the town, like leaving our memories, is the only way to avoid morbid stagnation. Despite the sadness, the narrator's departure from Dunnet Landing represents a triumph of the will.9

9. Catherine Barnes Stevenson, "The Double Consciousness of the Narrator in Sarah Orne Jewett's Fiction," Colby Library Quarterly, 11 (March 1975), 1–12, notes that the narrator, in addition to seeing Dunnet Landing as a retreat from complex, modern society, also sees the need for growth and change.