September 1987

Rebirth of the Seafarer: Sarah Orne Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs

Cynthia J. Goheen

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 23, no.3, September 1987, p.154-164

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
Rebirth of the Seafarer:  
Sarah Orne Jewett's  
The Country of the Pointed Firs  
by CYNTHIA J. GOHEEN

Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs* begins with a chapter entitled “The Return.”¹ For the unnamed young woman who becomes the narrator in chapter two, it is a return to Dunnet Landing, a coastal Maine village and its environs. Of her return we are told:

When one really knows a village like this and its surroundings, it is like becoming acquainted with a single person. The process of falling in love at first sight is as final as it is swift in such a case, but the growth of true friendship may be a lifelong affair. (pp. 1-2)

Thus we are given a hint that the narrative to follow is in some way about a process of growth which the narrator undergoes. In the course of this process, what was perceived “at first sight” changes.

Indeed, the growth of true friendship between the narrator and various inhabitants of the Dunnet region provides the storyline. And yet the novel is more than a story of friendship. “When one really knows a village like this and its surroundings, it is like becoming acquainted with a single person” (p. 1). Not only is there a similarity between the way one knows a place “like this” and the way one knows a person, there is also a vital connection between person and place. Somehow region and inhabitants embody one another.

The narrator’s process of growth provides a clue to what it is that people and place embody. As her time in Dunnet Landing passes, the narrator learns both what makes possible and what hinders the deepening of intimacy among friends. More than this, she learns an approach or orientation toward life which can sustain one through pain and also enable pleasure, even passion. She learns wisdom, and wisdom in the sense that it is understood as an orientation toward life rather than maxims by which to live.

There are twenty-one chapters in the novel as it was first published in book form.² In the first chapter the narrator is introduced. She comes by

---


². Although the publication history of this novel is largely beyond the scope of my essay, a brief review should serve to clarify my reasons for focusing on the text of twenty-one chapters. *The Country of the Pointed Firs* appeared first in the *Atlantic Monthly* in four installments between January and September of 1896. Before Houghton, Mifflin and Company published the novel at the year’s end, Jewett revised the manuscript. Among other changes she added two final chapters, “Along Shore” and “The Backward View,” bringing the total to twenty-one chapters. When the novel was republished a year after Jewett’s
CYNTHIA J. GOHEEN

way of the sea, returning to a place that has been the object of her dreams. By chapter twenty-one, Dunnet and its inhabitants are much more than objects. They have their own being and so does she. The voice which introduced her does not return. She completes the narrative herself. Thus she has moved from voicelessness to voice, and from passivity to self-conscious agency. She is self-conscious in the positive sense that she knows herself.

At first sight Dunnet Landing seems an unlikely place for such growth to occur. Progress seems to have left the village behind. Dunnet, with its old wharves and "disabled schooners" in the harbor, is symbolic of the region which actually did experience a radical change of fortune when it lost its seafaring industry (p. 132). In this sense Dunnet symbolizes a kind of death and decay. Numerous writers and social commentators of Jewett’s time focused on its death, perceiving an irreversible and comprehensive decline in the vitality and interest of the region. On her return to Dunnet the narrator finds the mark of this death. The seafaring industry is dead. And yet the seafarer’s orientation toward life, the seafarer’s wisdom, is resurrected in two of the characters whom the narrator befriends. Thus rebirth is present with death in the people and place of Dunnet Landing. By the novel’s end, the wisdom of the seafarer is resurrected in the narrator.

The qualities of this peculiar wisdom of the seafarer are two: hope and union. These two qualities are illustrated in the substance of the narrator’s relationships, and they take their shape in the very structure of the novel. The first structural or formal element to note is a three-part movement which underlies the narrator’s development. Each part of this movement transpires in roughly seven chapters; each transition corresponds to a significant change in the narrator’s understanding and embodiment of wisdom. Thus in chapters one through seven the narrator is withdrawn and somewhat alienated. She feels like a “miser of time” for whom the presence of another only can be a hindrance to her work, which is writing (p. 16). During chapters eight through fourteen she comes out of her withdrawal and moves into the heart of social relations. This movement is passive, however, in that she does not initiate these relationships. She merely assents, though with pleasure, to their happening. Finally, in the last seven chapters, she actively initiates actions and relationships and enjoys participating in the society of others.

The second formal element which clarifies the meaning of wisdom is the quality of time that enables the narrator to grow and also to experience a kind of death and rebirth. Her cycle of growth begins and ends on the...
sea. In this sense chapters one and twenty-one meet in the end, although not repetitiously because the narrator has changed. The meeting of chapters one and twenty-one create the circumstances which could give birth to yet another cycle. In the first chapter the narrator is symbolically born into Dunnet, and in the final chapter she speaks of her imminent departure as a kind of dying out of the place. Yet she is going somewhere. She can look ahead to being born into a new or at least a different context beyond the bounds of this narrative. Furthermore, the novel's overall cyclical progression is suggested in the title of the very first chapter: "The Return." Only within the context of a cycle can a beginning also be a return.

Chapter one's ambiguous narrative voice, which is neither quite omniscient nor third person, becomes indisputably first person in chapter two. Here the narrator introduces us to Mrs. Todd, her aging landlady who is also the local herbalist. At first the narrator describes her relationship with Mrs. Todd in terms that suggest a business partnership more than a friendship. While Mrs. Todd goes herb-gathering the narrator stays at home and sells remedies to customers. The narrator enjoys this until the voice of her conscience makes her uncomfortably aware that she is behind in her own work. She has come to Dunnet to write. As a professional writer she faces literary deadlines. Almost at once, then, she feels caught. Her new relationships are pleasurable, yet they require time. More accurately, they seem to take time away from her writing.

The authority of the deadline asserts itself and she ends her business relationship with Mrs. Todd. Instead of selling remedies she will write. She tells us that "Mrs. Todd and I were not separated or estranged by the change in our business relations; on the contrary, a deeper intimacy seemed to begin" (p. 7). That it only "seemed to begin" suggests that the narrator is neither quite certain nor comfortable about the change. Indeed, she feels enchanted by Mrs. Todd. Each time they come into each other's presence in more than a casual interaction, the narrator feels as if she is under the power of a spell.

What is the significance of a spell? A spell bypasses human agency. A spell eliminates even the possibility of choosing for oneself. A relationship which is compelled by a spell cannot be mutual because at least one of the participants is coerced by the other's powers of enchantment. In this context a spell is a kind of coercive power. It is coercive because it seems to compel an intimacy or simply time together which the narrator has not chosen to spend.

Yet there is a difference between the actual power to enchant and feeling as though under the power of a spell. Mrs. Todd does not really have this power. The narrator is not really without the ability to act in accordance with her own wishes. She simply does not perceive that she can act in this way. As she tells us, her conscience reminded her that she had "a long piece of writing, sadly belated now, which I was bound to do" (p. 6).
She feels bound by an obligation, and in particular by a deadline. Thus she cannot justify being present with anything or anyone other than her work.

Being present with someone occurs in time and takes time. At this point in the novel, the narrator perceives her relationship with Mrs. Todd as something which takes away from her writing by taking her time. To take can mean to possess. The narrator is thus doubly "bound." Not only does she feel enchanted into giving up some of her time to Mrs. Todd, but she is bound by the deadline implicit in her writing. Her time, and her self as the one who spends it, seems to be taken and indeed possessed by Mrs. Todd or the deadline.

In this sense the narrator is possessed by her sense of time as rigidly limited, which is to say linear. A deadline is a particular moment in time. Aware of that moment, the narrator believes that she should organize all other moments toward its end. The deadline thus becomes a miserly god which judges all moments as well spent according to how well they serve its will or effect its end. Throughout the first seven chapters the narrator is subject to this miserly god, but she is not at peace with it.

The narrator’s withdrawal from business relations does not help her writing. She is still distracted by the conversations she hears from her room in Mrs. Todd’s house. Thus she removes herself one step further from society by renting the town schoolhouse, closed during these summer months, where she goes each day to write. Although she finds that she can concentrate in this location, here she also feels the pain of her withdrawal. From the schoolhouse window she watches a neighbor’s funeral procession pass far below.

The bay-sheltered islands and the great sea beyond stretched away to the far horizon southward and eastward; the little procession in the foreground looked futile and helpless on the edge of the rocky shore. (p. 14)

The tone of the narrator’s reflections suggests that it is she who feels “futile and helpless.” From her withdrawn position it is not the funeral procession alone but human life, and in particular the narrator’s, which seems futile. Having left the funeral early she had, she says, “made myself and my friends remember that I did not really belong to Dunnet Landing” (p. 15). Her sense of futility is linked to her feeling that she does not belong. Both feelings are exacerbated by the actual alienation which her withdrawal to the schoolhouse has wrought.

It is after this scene, after she has “sighed, and turned to the half-written page again,” that Captain Littlepage makes his entrance (p. 15). The continuity between “half-written” and Littlepage suggests that the Captain’s orientation toward life will not be a satisfactory model for the narrator to emulate. Littlepage fancies himself better informed than his neighbors in Dunnet Landing. Since his shipwreck and subsequent retirement he has been obsessed with a phantasmic vision of the Waiting
Place, a mysterious land which he fervently believes is the world between this one and the next. Arising as it does within the context of reflection upon his neighbor's death and funeral, Littlepage clearly intends his narrative to be taken as the answer to speculation on the afterlife. "Certainty, not conjecture, is what we all desire," he declares (p. 18). He is certain that his vision of the Waiting Place is true.

Interestingly, the story of the Waiting Place had been told to the Captain by another shipwrecked sailor who claimed to have seen the strange land. Littlepage had not actually seen anything, yet he embraced the vision as though it were absolute truth. He had written to scientists, certain that they would want to document the veracity of the story. They had not responded, and his own townspeople had not believed. When he meets the narrator he has long been removed from social circulation. He senses in her a kindred spirit—one who is withdrawn in service of a higher value than social relations. The Captain is withdrawn in service of his vision, and the narrator of her deadline.

By chapter seven, at the close of Littlepage's narrative, the narrator remarks that "all this moving tale [of the Waiting Place] had such an air of truth that I could not argue with Captain Littlepage" (p. 28). Yet as an air of truth his knowledge and the orientation toward life which it informs are not quite true. She turns toward home, having seen the Captain safely in the direction of his own house, and meets Mrs. Todd. Standing together and looking out to sea they see sunlight strike an outer island. Mrs. Todd identifies it as Green Island, her mother's home, and promises to take the narrator out to meet her someday. They return home together and Mrs. Todd fixes a medicinal beverage for the narrator, who again images Mrs. Todd as "my enchantress" (p. 31).

The narrative proceeds to one morning when the narrator is awakened and greeted by Mrs. Todd, who says, "I expect you're goin' up to your schoolhouse to pass all this pleasant day; yes, I expect you're goin' to be dreadful busy" (p. 31). The narrator is delighted to learn that Mrs. Todd wishes to take her to Green Island. She chooses to voyage with Mrs. Todd, and after this there are no more scenes in which the narrator withdraws to the schoolhouse. She does continue to write, but the schoolhouse is no longer a place of withdrawal from society. The deadline implicit in her writing, and formerly the miserly god which compelled her withdrawal, has lost its power over her.

Equally important, the "spell" language does not recur. The narrator has moved from standing apart to participating. She no longer stands in relationship because she feels compelled, as if by the power of a spell. Rather, she wants to participate in society. And although she does not initiate the visit to Green Island, she expresses a desire to go along. She chooses to go out of her desire, and that is important. Far from being a

3. "The Waiting Place" is the title of chapter VI, pp. 22-27.
choice made on the principle that one must choose, hers is a choice that flows from her desire. A principle is grounded in authority external to the self, whereas desire or passion derives its authority from within a particular self. Desire moves from within the self to the outside—from self to other. For the first time in the novel the narrator feels that she desires friendship, or perhaps more accurately that she can honor her desire rather than subordinate it to the deadline's external authority.

Mrs. Todd takes the narrator to meet her mother and her brother William on Green Island. The narrative progresses from Littlepage's intangible Waiting Place to this solid island, and from Littlepage himself, a shipmaster “wrecked on the lee shore of age,” to Mrs. Blackett, who is no younger than he yet youthful and life-filled (p. 29). There is also a transition from Littlepage’s orientation toward life as a doubtful model for the narrator to a new model embodied in Mrs. Blackett. The expression which the narrator sees in Mrs. Blackett’s daguerreotype suggests the character of this new model. Mrs. Blackett exhibits “the large and brave and patient traits” and “the hopeful pleasantness that one loves so in a seafarer” (p. 48). These traits are related to the balance which Mrs. Blackett has struck with the reality that is Society. She is under no illusions that she can live wholly apart from it, nor does she live wholly in its service as if under its spell. Rather, she takes “a valued share in whatever Society can give and take” (p. 41).

Mrs. Blackett is described as a seafarer. The traits of a seafarer are “hopeful pleasantness,” bravery, and patience which sustain one in the long present that exists on the sea when land is out of sight. It is an attitude of hopeful pleasantness that enables one to welcome the sight and experience of new land beyond one’s acquaintance. Recalling the connectedness that exists between people and place in this novel, this attitude extends beyond actual land to human beings and the often unexpected course of human life. Mrs. Blackett as seafarer knows how to take pleasure in society and in the giving of self and receiving of other which is its potential.

Speaking of Mrs. Blackett the narrator observes, “you felt as if she promised a great future, and was beginning, not ending, her summers and their happy toils” (p. 40). Mrs. Blackett’s old age is positive. Compare her example to Captain Littlepage, who is described as a shipmaster “wrecked on the lee shore of age” (p. 29). He is a seafarer no longer. In a very real sense he died with the shipping industry and its age, which is for him a golden era and, indeed, a paradise lost. To the narrator he had said, “There’s no large-minded way of thinking now: the worst have got to be best and rule everything; we’re all turned upside down and going back year by year” (p. 21). There is no hope for a “great future” nor is there hope at all in Littlepage’s assessment. He waits, living for a time in between life and death. He waits, alone, certain that his vision of the Waiting Place is true. He is alone in his certainty.
Certainty, an absolute end to knowledge, is a linear concept. A strictly linear sequence allows only beginnings, mid-points and ends. There is no room for rebirth in such a sequence. Death is an absolute end, and the Captain has only to wait for it. The seafaring industry and all that it meant are absolutely dead for him. Yet Mrs. Blackett is a seafarer. She is not certain about the future, but hopeful. The novel thus establishes a difference between certainty, or expectancy, and hope. Expectancy implies that one is certain and therefore anticipates a particular outcome. By contrast, hope is not based upon certain expectations. Hope opens to potential. Like desire, it is grounded within the self and opens outward. Expectancy is grounded outside the self and relies completely on external factors. Expectancy closes to all outcomes but one.

The novel does not make expectancy into an evil. Even Mrs. Blackett is described as expectant at least once, as she thinks about the family reunion. Expectancy becomes problematical when it defines one's orientation toward life, as it does for Captain Littlepage. When expectancy defines one's orientation toward one's life, other people, and even existence, it becomes a denial of the present. It requires that one live for something-which-is-not. In this sense expectancy is like a deadline, in that the expected outcome is granted absolute authority over one's will, and perhaps even over one's imagination. A sense of time as linear grounds expectancy as an orientation toward life. The kind of time which underlies the hope of the seafarer is cyclic. Cyclical time allows for birth, development and death, like linear time. Unlike linear time it allows rebirth to follow death. The seafaring industry and era are dead, but the wisdom of the seafarer lives on in Mrs. Blackett.

The narrator's visit with Mrs. Blackett is her first introduction to the meaning of hope, that essential ground of the seafarer's wisdom. After she and Mrs. Todd have returned to Dunnet, the narrator's understanding of hope is enriched through the story of “Poor Joanna.” The story is told during a visit by Mrs. Fosdick, an old friend of Mrs. Todd's who is thought to be quite well informed. Yet Mrs. Fosdick's worldly knowledge, gained in the course of her travels, is contrasted to Mrs. Todd's wisdom, which is “an intimation of truth itself. She might belong to any age, like an idyl of Theocritus; but while she always understood Mrs. Fosdick, that entertaining pilgrim could not always understand Mrs. Todd” (p. 59). Unlike Mrs. Fosdick's knowledge of facts, Mrs. Todd's words are not what they seem at first sight. Mrs. Todd, like her mother Mrs. Blackett, knows something about wisdom. It is Mrs. Todd who narrates most of Joanna's story.

Joanna is a counterpart to Captain Littlepage. Like the Captain, Joanna was a recluse from society. She, too, had placed her hope in one
outcome. "All her hopes were built on marryin', an' havin' a real home and somebody to look to," Mrs. Todd says (p. 65). When Joanna realized that her expectations could not possibly be fulfilled, her world turned upside-down. She cursed God, whom she had supposed to reign over the world of her expectations. Then, burdened by her sense that she had committed blasphemy, she left the shore to live on Shell-heap Island until her death. She believed that she did not deserve to enjoy the company of others. When Mrs. Todd had visited her on the island years ago Joanna had said, "I have come to know what it is to have patience, but I have lost my hope" (p. 76).

On that visit Mrs. Todd had brought Joanna a coral pin. The pin was a gift from Mrs. Todd's seafaring husband, who had purchased it in a foreign port. Symbolically speaking, the pin is the gift of one seafarer to another. It is a sign which identifies the wearer as a seafarer. Joanna, having lost her hope and withdrawn from society, was no longer a seafarer herself. She would not accept the pin. Instead, she asked Mrs. Todd to keep it. Mrs. Todd, like her mother Mrs. Blackett, is also a seafarer.

It is after hearing the story of Poor Joanna that the narrator makes the transition from passive participation in her relationships to actively initiating them. Chapter fifteen finds her on the sea in a sailing vessel that she has chartered and which eventually will take her to Joanna's island, at the narrator's request. Along the way she makes an observation which yields an insight into the significance of the pointed firs as an image of wisdom. Passing islands burnt brown by the summer sun, she notices the enduring green of the firs that keep "the tint that even winter storms might deepen, but not fade" (p. 80). The firs seem to have a resiliency and a remarkable ability to survive even the worst of storms. Not only do they survive, but they become more character-filled (as one who has seen such trees along the Maine coast knows). Remembering that people and place mutually embody each other in this novel, one can imagine that these trees are like the people in their resiliency. In particular, the trees are like the spirit of the seafarer which did not die even in the worst of adversity, but lived on in people like Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett.

Two chapters later the narrator's observation about firs is recalled in Mrs. Todd's lengthier exposition on trees in general:

"There's sometimes a good hearty tree growin' right out of the bare rock, out o' some crack that just holds the roots;" she went on to say, "right on the pitch o' one o' them bare stony hills where you can't seem to see a wheel-barrowful o' good earth in a place, but that tree'll keep a green top in the driest summer. You lay your ear down to the ground an' you'll hear a little stream runnin'. Every such tree has got its own livin' spring; there's folk made to match 'em." (p. 92)

Of this observation the narrator says, "it was this peculiar wisdom that made one value Mrs. Todd's pleasant company" (p. 92). Mrs. Todd, whose words have been called an "intimation of truth itself," is one who
not only can perceive wisdom, like her mother, but who can reveal it as well (p. 59). In this passage she has gone one step further than the narrator to make trees analogous to human beings.

The Country of the Pointed Firs is the spirit of its inhabitants, and vice versa. More accurately, the Country of the Pointed Firs is the spirit of those inhabitants who are like the resilient firs which the narrator observed on the sunburnt islands and also like the “hearty tree” of Mrs. Todd’s discourse. As I have suggested, these trees are an image of the seafarer’s wisdom. Mrs. Todd has enriched the meaning of the seafarer’s wisdom yet again. Since her observation occurs in the context of a drive to the Bowden family reunion, the “livin’ spring” which is the source of resiliency is most likely a human one.

Indeed, this proves to be true. The paragraph which follows Mrs. Todd’s observation begins as the narrator tells us, “I could not help turning to look at Mrs. Blackett, close beside me” (p. 92). The narrator thus acknowledges a connection between the trees and Mrs. Blackett. She is like such a tree, as is Mrs. Todd herself. Like the firs assailed by winter storms, they have seen trouble and have emerged from the experience wiser than before. As the tint of a fir can deepen from living through a storm, so can a human being grow wiser, if not always stronger, by living through her or his experience. A tree’s ability to survive drought is enabled by an underground spring; a human being’s ability to weather the dry seasons and the storms of life is enabled by hope and its embodiment through one’s cultivation of relationships.

The annual Bowden family reunion, to which the narrator, Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett go together, honors family ties. Yet the narrator is not a member of the family by blood. At the reunion she tells us that she feels almost like a true Bowden (pp. 99, 110). For her, reunion has a deeper meaning. Reunions celebrate union. In this novel the self is imagined as a gift. Giving of self and receiving of other is the potential inherent in Society, and its expression is considered to be a great pleasure. Recalling the model of the seafarer who both gives and receives, it is obvious that the novel does not uphold an ideal of one-sided self-sacrifice. Being with other persons as they are is imagined as the most enjoyable and important occupation possible.

The capacity to unite is imagined to be constitutive of who we are as human beings. The exercise of this capacity can enable pleasure or simply endurance. Union is a fundamental human need, as the novel imagines humanity. Mrs. Blackett and Mrs. Todd alike have seen hard times. Their innate ability to see “things just as they be” has enabled them to confront even the most painful realities of their lives without illusion (p. 47). Their capacity to draw strength from the “livin’ spring” that is family, friends, and a strong sense of personal identity has brought them through hardships. Union grounds hope, then, in its promise of support and solace as well as joy.
I have suggested that cyclical time grounds the hope of the seafarer. In this novel, relationships are chronological only in the most general sense that they take place within a certain amount of time: namely, a summer. The narrator's self-awareness grows gradually, through the course of her friendships. Near the very beginning when she sat alone in the schoolhouse, subjected to the authority of her deadlines, life itself seemed futile. But in the presence of another, of her own accord, her present is so full and interesting that clock time is not mentioned at all. Life transpires.

The narrator’s distance from who she was in the novel's beginning is further indicated in two encounters: one with Littlepage, and the second with an old fisherman named Elijah Tilley. On the morning of the Bowden family reunion she pauses before Captain Littlepage’s house and waves. He is there, “sitting behind his closed window . . . watching for some one who never came” (p. 88). The fact that he does not see the narrator testifies to her transformation. No longer is she a kindred spirit, a “fellow-shipmaster wrecked on the lee shore of age like himself” (p. 29).

After the Bowden family reunion has passed, the narrator meets and befriends Elijah Tilley. That very afternoon she goes to visit him in his home. It seems remarkable that Tilley has spoken; the narrator comments that his party of old fishermen hardly “waste[s] breath on any form of trivial gossip,” not to mention on words at all (p. 114). Yet he speaks and the narrator responds. “At first,” she says, “he had seemed to be one of those evasive and uncomfortable persons who are so suspicious of you that they make you almost suspicious of yourself” (p. 114). So he had seemed, but by the twentieth chapter the narrator sees beneath the seemingly simple surfaces of people and place. Perhaps more importantly, she also is no longer uncertain or “almost suspicious” of herself. She is aware of place and of self in a new way. No longer is Dunnet merely the object of her dreams. No longer is she merely the object of a world ruled by deadlines. Both narrator and place have become subjects, agents, and indeed self-conscious.

In the end hers is a bittersweet parting with the Country of the Pointed Firs and Mrs. Todd, who has been her guide and friend. As the narrator waits alone in the house for the steamer that will take her back to the city, she looks around her room. “I and all my belongings had died out of it, and I knew how it would seem when Mrs. Todd came back and found her lodger gone. So we die before our own eyes; so we see some chapters of our lives come to their natural end,” she says (pp. 130-31). This chapter of the narrator’s life must close before another can begin. She examines the things which Mrs. Todd has prepared for her voyage and discovers among them an old, leather box containing the coral pin. The gift which Poor Joanna could not accept the narrator can, for she has become a seafarer.

From the steamer deck she watches the shoreline recede. The last resident of Dunnet she sees is Elijah Tilley, whom she had befriended without
any assistance from Mrs. Todd. She waves to him in his small boat on the sea and turns back to watch the last of Dunnet, which seems to crumble into the shore. Soon there is nothing but ocean on the horizon. As the novel cycles to its natural end, the narrator stands in the interval between the familiar and the new, hopeful.