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DURSO: Jewett's "Pointed Firs": An "Index Finger" to Character Development and Unity of Vision in The Country of the Pointed Firs

by PATRICIA KEEFE DURSO

I N A N 1897 review of The Country of the Pointed Firs, Alice Brown wrote: "...the title is exacting, prophetic... For it takes hold of the very centre of things. The pointed firs have their roots in the ground of national being; they are index fingers to the stars." This reviewer points to one very important aspect of Sarah Orne Jewett's book—its title and the pointed firs in it. For the firs are not just "index fingers to the stars," they are also index fingers which point to the growth and development of the narrator in The Country of the Pointed Firs. Following these "index fingers," one may also observe that the passages which bring the firs directly into the narrator's sight contain language which imposes a certain unity of vision on the narrator, the characters, and the reader. This vision, when guided by the image of the firs, attains an interpretive distance—endowing the narrator, her companions, and the reader with the ability to see, as it were, from the very tops of the tall, pointed firs themselves.

"The unchanged shores of the pointed firs" (47) welcome the narrator as she arrives in Dunnet Landing in the first chapter, and these same shores bid farewell to the narrator as she departs (238). The narrator, a character who grows, changes, and matures throughout the book, emerges with a strong integrity of her own (146). Paul D. Voelker, in 1970, took this idea further as he argued that The Country of the Pointed Firs should be seen as a novel (as opposed to a series of sketches, stories, etc.). He points out that previous critics have established that the book has unity, structure, and thematic content, and that the only things holding the book back from being called a novel are its "plotlessness" (which he dismisses by saying that the book's plot is "related to the picaresque novel form") and its alleged lack of character development. He thus argues that the narrator "is not the static nonparticipant as she has previously been represented" (239), and he proceeds to point out quite convincingly the various stages of the narrator's character development. Voelker's study follows the narrator chapter by chapter in order to show her growth and development as part of a "progressive chain" (241). He focuses, in his words, "on the progress of her visits and the sequence of her mythic similes and metaphors with regard to Mrs. Todd" (247). Many other critics have since discussed the narrator as a character in her own right. David Stouck, writing on Jewett's book as "A Pastoral of Innocence," states that "It is true that the narrator changes as the book proceeds; she loses her shyness and self-consciousness and becomes an accepted member of the Dunnet Landing community" (251). Rebecca Wall Nail notes that the narrator has formed many human attachments and has gotten to know the place very well by the time she leaves (193), and Cynthia J. Goheen discusses the growth and increasing maturity of the narrator as a "resurrection" of the "wisdom of the seafarer" (155).


2. Although early critics of Jewett's work saw the narrator simply as a vehicle through which Jewett related her story, as an interpreter, and as a figure simply there to describe what she saw and relate what she heard, later critics have argued that the narrator is a character who grows, changes, and matures throughout the book. In 1904, for instance, Charles Miner Thompson described the narrator (or "Miss Jewett," as he refers to her) as a "Lady Bountiful" who is "always in front" of her characters, "describing, explaining, most visibly acting as their interpreter" (43); and in 1959 Warner Berhoff wrote that "the narrator's part is simply to describe the seller and the situation, to provide occasion, to give notice of the passing of time ..." (148).

to her as she departs in the last chapter. After the initial welcome to the “unchanged shores,” the firs seem to fade into the background, only to reappear after the narrator’s session with Captain Littlepage in Chapters V and VI (“Captain Littlepage” and “The Waiting Place”). I would suggest that the reason for this is that in the intermediary chapters (II through IV) the narrator is very much in a learning stage. Her mind is preoccupied with the “long piece of writing” she has planned to do (50); and, symbolically, she rents the schoolhouse—an obvious place of learning—in order to have a quiet retreat in which to work undisturbed. Although she sits in that “great seat of authority” at the teacher’s desk, she also hangs up her hat and puts down her “luncheon-basket” as if she were a “small scholar” (53). The narrator is, in these chapters, characterized by ambiguity and mixed feelings—torn between the life of Dunnet Landing and Mrs. Todd’s house and the feeling that she should be concentrating on her “literary employment” (50). She sits in the schoolhouse with an “idle pen” and even, like a small child, once or twice “feigns excuses” to stay home from school (53). She is, in other words, still learning, still in school, and unable to see the firs from this elementary first-person point of view: as she walks up a hill by the schoolhouse and stops to look back, her gaze finds only the harbor and vague “dark woods” (52).

A change begins to occur in the fourth chapter as the narrator watches a funeral procession from the schoolhouse window and wonders if she should have “walked with the rest, instead of hurrying away.” By “hurrying away” she realizes that she made herself and her friends remember that she “did not really belong to Dunnet Landing” (55–56). As Josephine Donovan and others have pointed out, this chapter may be seen, for various reasons, as a “counterpoint” to Chapter XVIII, “The Bowden Reunion.”4 But one interesting thing which does not seem to have been observed about these chapters is the connection between the landscape at the funeral and that at the reunion. In Chapter IV the narrator watches the funeral procession disappear from “the great landscape as if it had gone into a cave” (55); this can be directly compared to the procession at the reunion which marches into the “thick shaded grove” with the “great roof” of “dark pines and firs” (126). In other words, the narrator, with the Bowdens, disappears into the landscape at the reunion—into the “cave” which she could not enter in Chapter IV.

Captain Littlepage’s visit to the narrator in the schoolhouse is referred to above as a “session,” and for good reason. The narrator’s experience with Captain Littlepage may be seen as an important first “lesson” in her growth, for it is directly after she speaks with him that she walks down from the schoolhouse on the same hill that she stood on earlier and sees a sharper, much more engaging

4. Josephine Donovan, Sarah Orne Jewett (New York: F. Ungar Publishing Co., 1980). In Donovan’s study the narrator’s attitude toward the funeral in Chapter IV is contrasted with her frame of mind at the reunion; Donovan writes that the narrator feels herself to be a part of the community for the first time at that festive gathering (109). Cyury makes a point of noting the narrator’s statement that she “comes near to feeling like a true Bowden” at the reunion (SOJ, 146–47), and Robin Magowan, in an essay on “Pastoral and the Art of Landscape” in Jewett’s book, writes that the pastoral movement is completed when the “narrator’s self-progress achieves its final self-identification during the climactic moment of the Bowden reunion” (191). And last, in Voelker’s study of the narrator’s growth, he singles out the reunion as the “climax” of her development (245).
view than she had before. In place of an unadorned “wide harbor” surrounded by vague “dark woods,” there is now “a fine view of the harbor” with “its long stretches of shore all covered by the great army of the pointed firs, darkly cloaked and standing as if they waited to embark” (68).

This imaginative and descriptive language which the narrator employs in her second view from the hill is largely due to the influence of Captain Littlepage’s tale of an arctic “waiting-place between this world an’ the next” (65). When the old gentleman comes into the schoolhouse and bows to her so courteously, the narrator does not seem to be entirely happy about the intrusion. She calls him “sir,” which may be respectful, but it just increases the distance between them (she does not, for instance, address Elijah Tilley, whom she encounters at the end of the book, in this way). The narrator is also inattentive and somewhat condescending. As Captain Littlepage talks about “poor Mrs. Begg” who died, she is wondering about his looks and if he had “sprung from a line of ministers” (58). Later, he notices that her thoughts are “unkindly wandering” (60), and she quietly tells him at one point to “sit down” as if he were a child (65). Part of the narrator’s attitude toward Captain Littlepage seems to have to do with the fact that Mrs. Todd has “made some dark reference to his having ‘spells’ of some unexplainable nature” (58), and the narrator is simply uneasy about this. It is also right before Captain Littlepage’s entrance into the schoolhouse that the narrator is seen not with an “idle pen” and “half-written page” (56) but lost completely in her work (57), and she might thus resent the intrusion.

Regardless of her slight impatience and resentment, Captain Littlepage’s “moving tale” with its “air of truth” (67) manages to have a great effect on the narrator—an effect produced not just by the tale but by the look and demeanor of the teller. The narrator may not, at times, listen very intently to what Captain Littlepage is saying, but throughout his tale she observes his face and eyes, and, as he finishes his story, she is thinking about the “alert, determined look and the seafaring, ready aspect that had come into his face” (66). It is after this meeting that Captain Littlepage and the narrator part, “the best of friends” (67), and she meets Mrs. Todd on the same hill she had stood on earlier.

It is with this strong and sibyl-like figure of Mrs. Todd that the narrator stands and observes the view of the harbor and the “great army of the pointed firs.” Both the suggestive presence of Mrs. Todd, then, and the narrator’s recent experience with Captain Littlepage combine to propel the narrator’s thoughts to a level of imagery and awareness that she had not been capable of earlier. The narrator’s attentiveness to the Captain’s look and demeanor and her sensitivity to the determination in his eyes all indicate a growing recognition on her part of the essence of Dunnet Landing—of its old seafaring men as well as its sturdy old women. Her ability to perceive imaginatively then is not all that has developed here. Her experience with Captain Littlepage seems to give her a stronger feeling for the “country” she is in and for the hearts and hopes of the people who inhabit it. She is thus able to see “great armies” of trees marching seaward where she once only saw “dark woods” passively surrounding a wide harbor.

Captain Littlepage’s visit also serves to heighten the narrator’s ability to listen
with a discerning ear to how something is being said, as opposed to merely hearing the words that are being uttered. Earlier in the book the narrator displays other acute sensory perceptions: in the second chapter she is able to locate Mrs. Todd in a particular part of her herb garden by the scent that her “great presence” sends into the air (48); and in the third chapter the narrator seems truly to feel the contentment and happiness in the “loud cheerful” voices of Mrs. Todd and her “customers” (although she “resolutely” flees “further temptation” and leaves to find a quiet place in which to write) (52). After her encounter with Captain Littlepage and with the “army of the pointed firs,” the narrator is found listening once again to Mrs. Todd speaking with friends. This time, however, the sound of their speech affects her in quite a different way. She notes the “unsual loudness” of Mrs. Todd’s “remarks,” and she hears her singing the “notes of a familiar hymn” which she imagines are “directed purposely” to her “sleepy ears” (70). Marcia McClintock Folsom would call this scene an example of Jewett’s “empathic style,” or a kind of “mind-reading.”5 I would also add that the narrator was incapable of this kind of “mind-reading” earlier; only now can she listen to Mrs. Todd and interpret the volume of her voice as a signal that she “wished” she “would wake up and come and speak to her” (70).

It is also interesting that the narrator at this point briefly enters into the third person, referring to herself as “a morning voice” (70). This serves to remind the reader that the narrator is still in a sleepy, somewhat distant state, both literally and in regard to her growth. The narrator must be drawn into the activity of the day by Mrs. Todd; as soon as this lady answers the “morning voice,” the narrator quickly returns to the first person, and they are soon on their way to visit Mrs. Todd’s mother on Green Island. As the encounter with Captain Littlepage serves as the narrator’s first “lesson,” the trip to Green Island and the narrator’s introduction to both Mrs. Blackett and William Blackett may be seen as her second “lesson.”

Again on a hill, but this time on Green Island, the narrator stops with Mrs. Todd and her mother, Mrs. Blackett, and looks upward at “the tops of the firs” which “came sharp against the blue sky” (75). And later, with William, the narrator stands on the “great ledge,” where, as she tells it:

At the end, near the woods, we could climb up on it [the ledge] and walk along to the highest point; there above the circle of the pointed firs we could look down over all the island, and could see the ocean that circled this and a hundred other bits of island-ground, the mainland shore and all the far horizons. It gave a sudden sense of space, for nothing stopped the eye or hedged one in—that sense of liberty and space and time which great prospects always give. (81)6

The firs here are not “cloaked” in the language of imagery and a fanciful, marching imagination. Neither are they seen laterally from a distance as the “unchanged shores of the pointed firs” (47) nor as “long stretches of shore” (68).


6. It might also be pointed out here that the “circle of pointed firs”—with the firs that surround the Bowdens and the narrator at the reunion, and the firs that are “unchanging” and seemingly ever present and ever green—reinforce the circular and cyclical nature of life in Jewett’s book which many critics have pointed out.
Instead, the narrator and William stand above the firs and achieve a much larger perspective of their own little “country,” as well as the world which surrounds it.

This scene with William and the narrator recalls the advice which Jewett offered to Willa Cather in a letter:

... be surer of your backgrounds. ... you don’t see them yet quite enough from the outside. — you stand right in the middle of each of them when you write, without having the standpoint of the looker-on who takes them each in their relations to letters, to the world.7

Jewett’s various references to the pointed firs are generally from a distant perspective, as has been noted. It is during the narrator’s visit to Green Island, however, that she climbs above the firs and sees them from an even greater distance—in “their relations ... to the world.” And it is only after reaching this height that the narrator can indeed disobey Jewett’s advice and “stand right in the middle” of the firs during “The Bowden Reunion,” while still retaining the ability to see the larger picture, to place the day and the people in a wide, interpretive framework. The narrator, however, still has some distance to travel before reaching the reunion, the climax of her development.

The narrator’s experience with the reticent and quiet William—his offer to walk her to the ledge above the firs and his statement, so simple ... honest, and appreciative, that “there ain’t no such view in the world” (81)—is indeed one of the learning experiences in this second “lesson” on Green Island. William’s old mother, the strong, clear-eyed, and clear-headed Mrs. Blackett, is also a great influence on the narrator. The narrator sees in this old woman’s eyes “a look of anticipation and joy, a far-off look that sought the horizon ...” (83). Nothing, as the narrator says of the view from above the firs, “stops” Mrs. Blackett’s eye or “hedges” her in. Some of this magic of Mrs. Blackett’s seems to be imparted to the narrator as she sits down in the “old quilted rockin’-chair” by the window. It is while reposing in this rocking chair, the “heart of the old house,” that the narrator observes the “worn red Bible on the nightstand” and the “loving stitches” in a shirt for William. It is here where the narrator sees and feels the interconnection between the heart and the sky, between the house and the background, between the peace and contentment of Mrs. Blackett and her “far-off look that sought the horizon” (88). Richard Cary quotes a statement Jewett made about her “mission” in writing in which she says that she wanted “the world to know” the “grand, simple” lives of “country people.”8 In the world of the pointed firs Jewett’s narrator, above all, had to come “to know” these “grand, simple” lives, and indeed it is here on Green Island that this knowledge is, to a large extent, found, recorded, and captured in her heart.

There are many other signs of the narrator’s growth on Green Island: the move with Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett toward the kitchen “as if by common instinct” (76–77); and the capability the narrator demonstrates in hoeing the potatoes (79) and in gathering herbs for Mrs. Todd (85). The scene on the hill “where

pennyroyal grew” is also significant because Mrs. Todd’s revelation to the narrator of that place’s strong hold on her heart and memories makes the narrator feel more strongly that they are “friends now” (84). The narrator undergoes so many changes on Green Island that when they return to Dunnet Landing it is no longer a “white-clapboarded little town” (47) but “large and noisy and oppressive” (88). On Green Island the narrator finally finds an inner peace which has eluded her, a peace which takes her out of the schoolhouse (although she is still “vacation-tenant” of it [89], she never enters it again) and immerses her into the world of Dunnet Landing.

We thus find the narrator back in Dunnet Landing living in Mrs. Todd’s “quaint little house with as much comfort and unconsciousness as if it were a larger body, or a double shell, in whose simple convolutions” Mrs. Todd and herself had “secreted” themselves (89). This is obviously a changed narrator from the one in Chapter II who found the same house merely “a summer lodging-place” which lacked seclusion (48). Although the narrator has “secreted” herself in this “double shell,” it still proves immune to total seclusion, for, as she humorously puts it, “some wandering hermit crab of a visitor marked the little spare room for her own” (89). The visit of Mrs. Fosdick, this “wandering hermit crab,” marks an interlude in the imagery of the pointed firs, for they do not appear again until she leaves and Mrs. Todd and the narrator return to their “former quietness” (109).

The interlude in the imagery of the firs could be attributed quite easily to Mrs. Fosdick’s affinity for gossip and talk—there is simply no room for anything else. It may be more seriously attributed, however, to the fact that the narrator spends the whole time listening to the stories of her friends—listening so singularly and to such intimate conversation that she compares herself to a shell upon the mantelpiece (92) and states that her friends are often “quite unconscious of a listener” (100). The story they tell of the voluntary hermitage of “poor Joanna” takes up the majority of the narrative, and, after Mrs. Fosdick departs, it is this story which may be seen as yet another “lesson” for the narrator.

The firs, then, have been absent because the narrator has been busy listening and learning, absorbing the information she hears about Joanna Todd and the life she led. It is when the narrator takes a trip to Shell-heap Island, Joanna’s former home, that the firs again emerge from the background and make their way into the narrator’s thoughts:

I had seen the color of the islands change from the fresh green of June to a sunburnt brown that made them look like stone, except where the dark green of the spruces and fir balsam kept the tint that even winter storms might deepen, but not fade. (110)

Like the tale which Captain Littlepage told her, the narrator’s mind is affected by the saga of Joanna Todd. Joanna’s story, however, leads the narrator’s thoughts not to action-packed armies of pointed firs but to a serene, reflective recognition of the eternal constancy of the firs, of the land, of life’s sorrows and disappointments, and of intertwined hearts such as Mrs. Todd’s and Mrs. Blackett’s. Her experience on Shell-heap Island leads her to realize that:
In the life of each of us . . . there is a place remote and islanded, and given to endless regret or secret happiness; we are each the unaccompanied hermit and recluse of an hour or a day; we understand our fellows of the cell to whatever age of history they may belong. (111)

Thus the narrator “understands” Joanna, who died years before. She puts herself in Joanna’s place and feels her life of disappointment, penance, and loneliness as she stands at her grave. And, as the narrator hears the gaiety of “distant voices,” she imagines that Joanna must have heard similar sounds “on many and many a summer afternoon . . .” (111). She also recognizes her current “fellows of the cell” as real “fellows”—as friends, as companions, and even as family, for it is after this pilgrimage to Shell-heap Island that the narrator sets off with Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett on “The Great Expedition” to the Bowden reunion.

On the morning of the reunion the narrator tells us that “the world was filled with the fragrance of fir balsam” (116). Appropriately accompanying this pervasive scent of firs is a number of images reminiscent of the narrator’s various “lessons.” There is, first of all, a “sunshiny air . . . of some ethereal northern sort, with a cool freshness as if it came over new-fallen snow” (116)—as if it came, indeed, out of Captain Littlepage’s arctic world (the narrator also passes by the Captain sitting at his window). There is “William Blackett’s escaping sail” (116)—escaping, perhaps, to the place above the “circle of the pointed firs.” And last there is the voice of “the constant song sparrows” (116)—sparrows like those which Joanna Todd tamed and which “lit on” her coffin and sparrows which sang, not just at Joanna’s funeral (107) but also at the funeral the narrator watched from the schoolhouse window (55).

The scent of the firs, then, brings to the narrator’s mind this short reprise of past images connected with her various “lessons,” and when she finds herself actually in the middle of a “thick growth of dark pines and firs,” she is “possessed” with “the instincts of a far, forgotten childhood” (126). This “possession” is very different from her reaction, for example, to the scent of Mrs. Todd’s herbs in Chapter II, where she was “roused” to only a “dim sense and remembrance of something in the forgotten past” (48). Here at the reunion the narrator’s senses are fully developed, and that which she remembers is no longer “dim” but strong, powerful, and instinctive.

The reunion chapter is obviously a significant one for the narrator, and, indeed, many critical advocates of the narrator’s status as a growing, maturing character see this chapter as the climax of her development—the point at which she feels most at one with the other characters and with her surroundings. The narrator’s “surroundings” are extremely important here, for it is during the reunion that the narrator, as mentioned earlier, enters the “cave” of the “pointed firs” (comparable to the “cave” which she could not enter in Chapter IV). The “pointed firs,” throughout most of the book, have remained in the distance—seen only from hilltops and ships and outer islands. But in this chapter the narrator is “upcountry,” and the firs are not distant or far away; they envelop the celebrating clan and form a protective “great roof” over everyone.

Under this “roof,” in this protective and mystical grove of trees, the narrator
enters into the celebration fully in spirit, in mind, and in narrative discourse—for the majority of the reunion is not related by a singular first-person “I” but by a plural first-person “we”:

... we were no more a New England family celebrating its own existence and simple progress; we carried the tokens and inheritance of all such households from which this had descended, and were only the latest of our line. ... (126)

The narrative voice alternates between “I” and “we” throughout most of the book, but it is here, at the reunion, that the “we” emerges dominant. This is very different from the first chapter, for instance, where the narrator, as many critics have noted, operates from a distant third-person point of view.

In the first chapter and, indeed, into the second, the narrator is not an “I” or part of a “we” but “a lover,” “a single passenger,” “a stranger,” and a “lodger” (47–49). The firs are forever distant, blending in with the spruces to form a background to the houses and standing silently before the visitor, as a faithful lover with “unchanged shores.” This summer visitor, a “lodger” who makes a “shrewd business arrangement” with her “hosiness” Mrs. Todd (49), is a long way from this woman in Chapter XVIII who feels as if she is part of a New England family, of a line of descent, and of a ritual, as Mrs. Todd symbolically (almost as a priestess offering her communion) feeds her the word “Bowden” from the cake at the reunion (132). The narrator has changed a good deal from the first chapter to the eighteenth, and it is the imagery of the firs throughout these chapters and beyond that guides the growing interpretive vision of the narrator and corresponds to the different stages of her growth. It is, as mentioned earlier, during “The Bowden Reunion” that the narrator more or less “disobeys” Jewett’s advice and “stands right in the middle” of the “background” (i.e., the firs) and yet still retains the ability to see a larger picture. As many have noted, it is also at the reunion that the narrator “feels like an adopted Bowden” (123). Most significantly, it is while thriving in the comradery of the Bowden clan that the narrator makes many acute observations about New Englanders in general, about family, and about old age. At the beginning of the reunion, for example, the narrator introduces the Bowden family with a spirited contemplation on the “hidden fire of enthusiasm in the New England nature”:

In quiet neighborhoods such inward force does not waste itself upon those petty excitements of every day that belong to cities, but when, at long intervals, the altars to patriotism, to friendship, to the ties of kindred, are reared in our familiar fields, then the fires glow, the flames come up as if from the inexhaustible burning heart of the earth: the primal fires break through the granite dust in which our souls are set. ... (123)

The narrator also reflects on age, noting the joy in the faces of the “elder kinsfolk” and recognizing the “isolation in which it was possible to live in that . . . thinly settled region” (133). One of the results of this isolation, she notices, is that “even funerals in the country of the pointed firs” are “not without their social advantages and satisfactions” (133). And, as the narrator makes her way home with Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett, she silently hopes that she “might be like them” as she lives “on into age” (135). The narrator has learned, as she puts it,
that "we always keep the same hearts, though our outer framework fails and shows the touch of time" (135).

The narrator's use of "we" in this last observation is, as has been noted, characteristic of many of her thoughts at the reunion and throughout much of the book. The use of this plural, collective pronoun is particularly evident in those passages in which the firs appear. The narrator, for example, presents the "great army of pointed firs" not as "I" but as "we": "We were standing where there was a fine view... As we looked seaward... the trees seemed to march seaward still" (68). And when the narrator stands on the great ledge with William it is again "we" who "look down over the island" and "we" who "see the ocean that circled this and a hundred other bits of island-ground..." (81). And at the reunion, in the thick of the chapter and in the thick of the grove of firs, the narrator, with the rest of her "New England family," is actively embracing her companions and the reader in her narrative: "...we could see the water, shining behind the tree-trunks, and feel the cool salt breeze... We could see the green sunlit field we had just crossed as if we looked out at it from a dark room..." (127).

The narrator does not, at the reunion, talk of "they," as an observer would, but of "we," as a participant would. Likewise, in the passages with Mrs. Todd and William, she uses "we" not just to indicate a common action but to create a unity of vision between herself, her companion, and the reader. It is "we" who see the firs from different perspectives, and it is even "we" who "feel" the "cool salt breeze" at the reunion. By giving this language to the narrator, Jewett creates an increasing sense of oneness between the narrator and the people of Dunnet Landing. Because this usage becomes most prevalent after the narrator speaks with Captain Littlepage and culminates in the chapter at the reunion, it may be seen as coincident with the narrator's growth and development. In addition, the use of "we" draws the reader actively into the story—as Jewett herself has said, the reader's role should not be a passive one (Donovan, 135).

This "we" all but disappears as the summer draws to an end and the narrator prepares to leave Dunnet Landing. First, however, the narrator demonstrates to the reader the extent to which she has changed when she meets "Old Elijah Tilley" and is "delighted" to have "this opportunity to make acquaintance with an old fisherman" (137). Earlier, when Captain Littlepage sought the narrator out and talked to her, he had invited her not once but twice to come and visit him (67), yet she never found the time. In comparison, when Elijah Tilley shyly says "You ain't never been up to my place," she responds by saying "I should like very much to come," and she does indeed go alone to visit him later that day (139). From the moment the narrator enters Elijah's house (from the informal side door), she feels the presence of his late wife, "poor dear," much as she felt Joanna Todd's presence on Shell-heap Island. This is the last chapter in which the narrator interacts with the people of Dunnet Landing, and her initiative and perceptiveness in this episode clearly exhibit the extent of her growth and development.

With a new outlook, then, the narrator prepares to depart in the last chapter, where the "deeper color" and "sharper clearness" of the firs and the shore line...
correspond to her matured character and vision: "There was no autumnal mist on the coast, nor any August fog; instead of these, the sea, the sky, all the long shore line and the inland hills, with every bush of bay and every fir-top, gained a deeper color and sharper clearness" (148). With a "sharper clearness," then, the narrator feels the pain of leaving Dunnet Landing, of dying out of her room, out of the "double shell" in which she and Mrs. Todd had "secreted" themselves, and she perceives and understands the pain and deep affection in Mrs. Todd's brusque and businesslike manner and refusal to say good-bye.

Finding herself once again on the hill by the schoolhouse, the narrator reflects on her summer spent in Dunnet Landing, and, from this distance, she points her gaze toward the sea and Green Island, back on the houses below, on the gardens, on the pastures, and finally on the figure of Mrs. Todd walking alone on a footpath (150). As the narrator watches Mrs. Todd, the virtues bestowed on sight when one stands back at a distance are once more reinforced:

At such a distance one can feel the large, positive qualities that control a character. Close at hand, Mrs. Todd seemed able and warm-hearted and quite absorbed in her bustling industries, but her distant figure looked quite mateless and appealing, with something about it that was strangely self-possessed and mysterious. (150)

The last image of Mrs. Todd is of her disappearing "behind a dark clump of juniper and the pointed firs" (150). Thus, the firs that welcomed the narrator to Mrs. Todd's world in Chapter I enclose this "mysterious" figure in the last chapter. It is in these firs, then, that the reader may find the "consistency in design," the "unity in thought from beginning to end," which Jewett found necessary in a "great work" of literature.9

The narrator's ability to feel "at such a distance," to recognize positive qualities within both people and places, has been developed carefully throughout the book. And, throughout, the presence of the "pointed firs" and the narrator's perception of them has pointed to her growth as clearly, indeed, as "index fingers." At the end, as "the islands and the headland" "run together and Dunnet Landing and all its coasts" are "lost to sight," it is clear that the narrator will never lose sight of those lessons she has learned and holds within her heart and mind. The narrator, like the firs, has gained a "deeper color and sharper clearness"—she has developed an insight and wisdom equal in depth and clarity to those solid, constant figures on the shore line. It is with these "positive qualities" of her own, then, that this "summer visitor" sails away from The Country of the Pointed Firs.

Works Cited


