September 1990

The Rhetoric of Communion in Jewett's "A White Heron"

Terry Heller

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

Recommended Citation
Colby Quarterly, Volume 26, no.3, September 1990, p.182-194
Readers have observed duplicity in the rhetoric of Sarah Orne Jewett’s “A White Heron” (1886). On the one hand the story realizes a number of the conventions of realistic narrative, yet on the other hand there are several violations of these conventions, especially at the level of narrative voice. The violations consist of odd shifts between past and present tense, apostrophes to objects in the story, and direct addresses by the narrator to the reader and to Sylvia, the main character. Narrative activities such as these tend to be seen as violations of the rhetoric of realistic fiction for at least two interesting reasons. First, they are most commonly found during the nineteenth century in the sentimental fiction of “women’s” magazines. For example, they occur frequently in Jewett’s early magazine fiction that appears in The Uncollected Short Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett. In such locations these rhetorical devices nearly always contribute to a moralizing tone, when “good” values or sentiments are enjoined upon the reader or a character. Second, as Wayne Booth illustrates in Part 1 of The Rhetoric of Fiction, such techniques were increasingly suspect among Jewett’s realist contemporaries because they seemed to subvert what was becoming the central “rule” of realistic narrative, that the narrator who is not a character should seem invisible: “The novelist must not, by taking sides, exhibit his preferences... . He has... to render and not to tell....” (Ford Madox Ford in Booth 25).

It is worth observing that Jewett gradually abandoned using tense shifts, direct addresses, and apostrophes, so that they appear rarely in the fiction she collected into books. “A White Heron” is virtually the lone exception among her better-known works, and it remains her single best-known and most popular piece of fiction. These two observations would tend to suggest that her choice to use techniques here that she had generally abandoned by the time she wrote this story was in some way a right choice. This story has held its own in a literary climate that has not, on the whole, been favorable to Jewett’s works.

The apparent duplicity of Jewett’s rhetoric in “A White Heron” has contributed to critical ambivalence about the story. We can see such a response in Jewett’s difficulties finding a magazine publisher for what is now her most famous story. William Dean Howells, who published a number of Jewett’s stories, rejected this one because it was too romantic (Griffith 22). In response to this rejection, Jewett wrote to her friend Annie Fields: “Mr. Howells thinks...
that this age frowns upon the romantic, that it is no use to write romance any more; but dear me, how much of it there is left in every-day life after all. It must be the fault of the writers that such writing is dull, but what shall I do with my ‘White Heron’ now she is written? She isn’t a very good magazine story, but I love her, and I mean to keep her for the beginning of my next book . . .” (Held in Nagel 58).

The early reviewers responded at least indirectly to this duplicity. They tended, even in praising the story, to belittle it with qualifications. For example, the reviewer for *Overland Monthly* said the story “is perfect in its way—a tiny classic. One little episode of a child life, among birds and woods, makes it up: and the secret soul of a child, the appeal of the bird to its instinctive honor and tenderness, never were interpreted with more beauty and insight” (in Nagel 34). While this is high praise, the author cannot resist using qualifiers—“in its way, tiny classic, little episode”—and referring to Sylvia as an “it.” This language, especially neutering Sylvia, contrasts starkly with Jewett’s personifying the story itself as female in her letter.

The doubleness of Jewett’s rhetoric has earned negative criticism from recent critics, such as Richard Cary (101–02) and Josephine Donovan (70–71), and excuses about Jewett’s lack of control from readers such as George Held (in Nagel 58–60). Even the most interesting among the defenders of Jewett’s rhetoric, Elizabeth Ammons, finds herself caught in its doubleness. However, turning to Ammons’ reading of the story opens a rich perspective from which to consider what Jewett may have accomplished with her double rhetoric.

Ammons does not set out to defend Jewett’s narrative technique, but she finds herself doing so when she explains the strange last paragraph in which the narrator says a number of puzzling things that seem not to connect very well with the rest of the story. Nine-year-old Sylvia has found and communed with the white heron that her visiting ornithologist so desires to add to his collection of stuffed specimens, but she has refused, despite strong temptation, to tell him where he can find the bird. Jewett’s narrator ends the story with exclamations and apostrophes:

> Dear Loyalty, that suffered a sharp pang as the guest went away disappointed later in the day, that could have served and followed him and loved him as a dog loves! Many a night Sylvia heard the echo of his whistle haunting the pasture path as she came home with the loitering cow. She forgot even her sorrow at the sharp report of his gun and the piteous sight of thrushes and sparrows dropping silent to the ground, their songs hushed and their pretty feathers stained and wet with blood. Were the birds better friends than their hunter might have been,—who can tell? Whatever treasures were lost to her, woodlands and summertime. remember! Bring your gifts and graces and tell your secrets to this lonely country child! (239)

The narrator pities Sylvia’s sharp pang when the disappointed hunter leaves never to return. She explains that after this day Sylvia forgot his killing birds and, instead, missed him and dreamed of his return. The narrator asks a startling question when she wonders which is the better friend, after reminding the reader of Sylvia’s now forgotten horror at the dead birds, for the story seems to have been saying all along, “Of course the birds were better friends!” But the narrator
Ammons' position is that this paragraph illustrates Jewett's resistance to
typical masculine impositions: "Having perfectly reproduced traditional male-defined
narrative structure she writes against it in her ultrafeminine last paragraph, full
of flowery, personal invocations and hovering apostrophes. This flossy feminine
paragraph rips the fiction formally very much as Sylvia's contrasting rhetoric—
her complete silence—has already torn up the hunter's plot" (Ammons, “White
Heron” 16). Ammons' language seems curiously violent and ambivalent, and
also rather exaggerated here. It does not appear that she really approves of this
"flossy feminine" paragraph that rips and tears. Furthermore, this paragraph
"sticks out" in the story much less prominently than Ammons seems to imply,
for Jewett has introduced unrealistic rhetoric earlier in the story. When Sylvia
climbs the pine tree and communes with the heron, the narrative rhetoric
completely does away with several major conventions of realistic narration.
Before examining Jewett's narrative rhetoric in more detail, it will be helpful to
place the story as a whole within the rich and enlightening context that Ammons
provides.

Ammons characterizes a masculine plot as the traditional linear form includ­
ing in this order: exposition, conflict, complication, crisis, climax, resolution.
What does Ammons mean when she labels such a plot as masculine? This is the
most common plot form in fiction because writing, publishing, and reviewing
fiction have been dominated by a patriarchal ideology which favors plots that
reflect conventional masculine gender roles. Traditionally, industrial man's
function in life has been to go outside the family into another world and to
struggle there until he succeeds or fails at some enterprise. Novel plots tend to
imitate this significant masculine motion. In another essay Ammons contrasts
this sort of plot with what she sees as the feminine plot of The Country of the
Pointed Firs. That novel she sees as structured outward from a central location
in space, time, and meaning, so that it forms a web of circular movements and
social ties (Ammons, “Pointed Firs” 84–86).

In “A White Heron,” says Ammons, Jewett did a perfect imitation of a
masculine plot in representing Sylvia's quest for the heron. Furthermore, this
plot appears in the context of a fairy tale of feminine coming of age, but with a
difference, in most such tales the young woman is rescued from the clutches of
an evil older woman by a handsome young man. Ammons says the meaning of
this plot is that when a girl reaches puberty, she is supposed to give up her
attachments to her mother and girl-friends for heterosexual love (Ammons,
“White Heron” 10–14). In Jewett's version the rescue fails because the young
woman can have a better life by staying longer with older women, both her
grandmother and Mother Nature. So, while following a traditional, masculine
plot line, Jewett subverts the traditional events of one version of that plot. The
final paragraph of the story is part of Jewett’s subversion—with a feminine flourish—of the male plot. That plot should end when Sylvia rejects the hunter in favor of the heron, but Jewett extends it with her “flossy feminine” intrusions. I think that Ammons is probably right to argue that in this story Jewett works against some patriarchal plots and ideas. We see a resistance of this kind in Jewett’s comments on Howells’ rejection of the story for his magazine. What he thinks is “real” in everyday life is not “really” all there is to see there. Jewett insists that “romance” is also “real.” A detailed examination of Jewett’s style would show that her rhetoric in this story works continuously against the masculine structure with which she organizes the events. Several critical essays that examine language and style in the story vividly demonstrate how much “fantasy” the story contains: rational cows, thinking pine trees, and a child who reads animals’ minds (see especially Smith in Nagel). Furthermore, the quest plot is elaborately framed with a long introduction that sets up multileveled oppositions between the two paths open for Sylvia’s immediate future. The strange final paragraph extends and closes the frame. About half the story’s length is given to narrating Sylvia’s quest, though rhetorical heightening may make this proportion seem greater.

Ammons, then, finds doubleness in “A White Heron.” Jewett subverts a masculine plot by changing the way it ends and, also, with feminine rhetoric. I could not agree more except that I believe Ammons misunderstands or underestimates the extent and force of that rhetoric. Let us then turn to a close examination of the development of Jewett’s unrealistic rhetoric in “A White Heron.”

From the very beginning of the story, as Jewett’s readers have pointed out, there are elements of the fanciful and of fantasy that form an undercurrent counter to realistic narrative. In the opening, for example, the narrator takes a childlike view of the milk cow’s motives and behavior. This move unobtrusively but decisively identifies the reader with Sylvia’s point of view, showing why she values the cow’s companionship and what she gains from it. The narrative rhetoric gradually becomes more obtrusive, however, beginning with an arbitrary tense shift, proceeding through a direct address to the reader, and climaxing when Sylvia meets the heron in a complex set of tense shifts and direct addresses. The first arbitrary tense shift breaks the narrative flow on several levels, including the grammatical level where it catches the reader’s attention. It occurs as Sylvia drives the cow homeward. She thinks about her old life in town and remembers something unpleasant:

[T]he thought of the great red-faced boy who used to chase and frighten her made her hurry along the path to escape from the shadow of the trees.

Suddenly this little woods-girl is horror stricken to hear a clear whistle not very far away. Not a bird’s whistle, but a boy’s whistle, determined, and somewhat aggressive. Sylvia left the cow to whatever sad fate might await her, and stepped discreetly aside into the bushes, but she was just too late. The enemy had discovered her. . . . (229)

An unpleasant memory disturbs Sylvia’s quiet and benign relations with the cow.
The shift to present tense coincides with the reappearance of that threat in the present, forcing her actually to abandon her friend. This move to present tense signals disruptions in the narrative: in time, mood, and plot development. Except for time, these disruptions belong to a traditional plot in that they introduce conflict. If we assume that the shift is a deliberate rhetorical choice rather than a lapse revealing Jewett’s lack of expertise or control, how can we explain it? What positive effects may be gained from this shift?

Clearly the tense shift is not necessary to introduce conflict. And as a device for heightening tension at the moment of introducing conflict, it seems “cheap” and clumsy. Surely Jewett was well aware of this. The risk seems unnecessary, unless there is something really important to be gained. Were this the only such anomaly in the story, we could not make much of an argument in its defense. But since more such anomalies will follow this one, we can begin here to think about how they work on readers.

If we take the tense shift as thoughtfully chosen by the narrator, then we are forced to see the narrator as potentially a force in the story. Wayne Booth, for one, has pointed out that overt attempts to control a reader’s reactions tend to expose a narration as an artificial construct (The Rhetoric of Fiction 205). By arbitrarily shifting tense, Jewett’s narrator becomes visible, or comes into existence as an artificer. The narrator reveals to the reader one of her powers, to change the tense relations between reader and story. Were we readers inclined simply to surrender to the rhetorical force of using the present tense, we would find ourselves more consciously participating in the enactment of narration.

The disruption of arbitrarily shifting the verb tense is likely to be felt as both right and wrong simultaneously. Past tense narration is, after all, only a convention of telling. It is exceedingly difficult to read any narration while maintaining a sense of its pastness, for the story is realized in the “present tense” of our acts of reading. Jewett’s shift calls attention to the “real” condition of our reading. Insofar as we have allowed ourselves as readers to become intimately involved with Sylvia’s contentment in her country refuge, we and she have entered the same experienced time. Insofar as the shift to present tense is felt as right, it draws us into deeper identification with Sylvia and, perhaps, with the narrator. We experience the violation of the dominant grammatical tense at the same instant that we share Sylvia’s shock at the violation of her rural peace. Our sharing with the character is deepened and is pointedly placed in the same time as her shock, the present of our act of reading.

There is, of course, little reason to grant so much rhetorical power to the placement of the word “is” in a position where we expected “was” unless other more weighty parts of the story support these ways of handling this anomaly. While the major justification for this reading comes in the climactic scene with the heron, I must delay our discussion of the key scene a little longer in order to examine Jewett’s second major disruption of the narrative flow. Doing so will show how she sets up the climactic scene and will allow an exploration of another kind of disruption, the address to the reader.

Jewett’s narrator addresses the reader directly early in Part II of the story. The
address occupies the position of a transition between Sylvia’s going to the tree and beginning her climb:

[S]he stole out of the house ... listening with a sense of comfort and companionship to the drowsy twitter of a half-awakened bird, whose perch she had jarred in passing. Alas, if the great wave of human interest which flooded for the first time this dull little life should sweep away the satisfaction of an existence heart to heart with nature and the dumb life of the forest! (235)

Like the tense shift, this exclamation seems out of place and unnecessary. The previous sentence, in which Sylvia jars and disturbs the bird, effectively conveys the danger into which she is entering. She has found the young bird collector very attractive, and she is tempted to turn away from the comparatively isolated rural life in which she has blossomed for a year, back toward the more masculine, urban life that threatened to prevent her becoming a complete self. Though this turn would be a mistake, the story also conveys in several ways that such a turn is inevitable. Eventually, Sylvia must rejoin the larger human community, but only after she has successfully grown into a self in the way that seems best to suit her—on the quiet, slow farm with her grandmother. Because the story fairly obviously conveys these attitudes, it is superfluous for the narrator to make such a statement. Yet the narrator makes the statement and underlines its oddness by addressing it directly to the reader.

Surely Jewett was well aware of how this statement would jar the tone of the narrative, calling attention to itself and to a growing relationship between narrator and reader as observers in an eternal present of the narrated events. One further sign of Jewett's self-consciousness is that this second major departure from narrative distance echoes the first one. It disturbs the narrative as Sylvia disturbs the bird. It comes at a moment when Sylvia is in danger, though this time she is less aware of her danger. Indeed her lack of awareness seems to generate the address. We readers and the narrator think the same thought. This seems to me the main rhetorical effect of the address. It is as if the narrator and the reader looked each other in the eye and understood our agreement as we watch Sylvia ignorantly moving toward an undesirable fate. The address produces and explicitly acknowledges a moment of sympathy between two consciousnesses who are concerned for Sylvia. The narrative voice, then, claims to speak for the reader, voicing what should be the reader's thought. This amounts to an assertion of communion between narrator and reader as we contemplate Sylvia.

I have been describing how the two most disturbing, early diversions from a third-person, past-tense narration might work in “A White Heron.” The shift to present tense and the direct address could be moves toward establishing the narrator and reader as self-conscious co-creators of the narration. Both intrusions could reduce the distance in time and mental location between narrator and reader; they could tend to move us into the same imaginative space and time. If we are willing to trust the author's skill, if we give in to these odd elements rather than resist them as signs of narrative weakness, we may at least find ourselves more disposed to let go of the conventional boundaries that tend to divide narrator, character, and reader from each other in realistic narrative. A close
reading of Sylvia’s adventure on the pine tree will show what we readers have to gain if we follow through with the disposition Jewett may have created.

Sylvia’s climb, as we have seen, takes place in the context of a specific danger to her well-being. She goes to the pine to locate the heron: “[I]f one climbed it at break of day, could not one see all the world, and easily discover whence the white heron flew, and mark the place, and find the hidden nest” (234)? Sylvia has conceived the notion of taking all the world at once into her consciousness. If she succeeds, then she will be able to give a piece of that world to the attractive young hunter who wandered to her home two nights before. But, as the first address to the reader shows, the story has so controlled our reactions to the hunter and to Sylvia that we readers and the narrator want Sylvia to resist his desire to find the white heron. To give the heron away has become tantamount to sweeping away the progress she has made in discovering herself; it will amount to giving herself away, a great error, since she is as vast a world as the one she will see from atop the tree, and neither world really can be known in an instant. Her problem, as she climbs the tree, is that she has not yet discovered that she will lose herself if she flows now with the great wave of human interest that is flooding her little life for the first time. Jewett emphasizes this danger during the climb by repeatedly describing Sylvia as birdlike: her hands and feet like claws, her climbing upward as in first flight, her being at home in the trees, her desire to fly. And images emphasizing her paleness connect her specifically to the heron, as do images that connect both her and the heron with the rising sun.

Jewett prepares the reader for the strangeness of Sylvia’s meeting the heron with more fantasy like that which opens the story. However, we do not see the tree from Sylvia’s point of view as we did the cow. Here the narrator pointedly asks us readers to share with her imagining of the possible thoughts and actions of the pine:

The tree... must truly have been amazed that morning through all its ponderous frame as it felt this determined spark of human spirit creeping and climbing from higher branch to branch. Who knows how steadily the least twigs held themselves to advantage this light, weak creature on her way! The old pine must have loved his new dependent. More than all the hawks, and bats, and moths, and even the sweet-voiced thrushes, was the brave, beating heart of the solitary grey-eyed child. And the tree stood still and held away the winds that June morning while the dawn grew bright in the east. (236)

Sylvia is to the tree as her blood is to her, “coursing the channels of her whole frame” (235). Sylvia and the tree seem one in consciousness and desire, though she may not herself be aware of this oneness. Contributing freely to her vitality, unconscious of danger, all living things abet Sylvia in what could turn out to be her greatest error. Implicit in such gifts from nature is an assurance that unity of spirit, the “existence heart to heart with nature,” is the more powerful force in Sylvia’s life and that it is even now asserting itself.

The reader is more directly exposed to that power after Sylvia attains her pinnacle and finally sees the “vast and awesome world” from the endless-seeming eastern sea to the also endless, settled westward land (238). The two
paragraphs describing Sylvia’s encounter with the heron subvert any pretense to a realistic rhetoric.

In the first paragraph, she sees the heron:

At last the sun came up bewilderingly bright. Sylvia could see the white sails of ships out at sea, and the clouds that were purple and rose-colored and yellow at first began to fade away. Where was the white heron’s nest in the sea of green branches, and was this wonderful sight and pageant of the world the only reward for having climbed to such a giddy height? Now look down again, Sylvia, where the green marsh is set among the shining birches and dark hemlocks; there where you saw the white heron once before you will see him again; look! look! a white spot of him like a single floating feather comes up from the dead hemlock and grows larger, and rises, and comes close at last, and goes by the landmark pine with steady sweep of wing and outstretched slender neck and crested head. And wait! wait! do not move a foot or a finger, little girl, do not send an arrow of light and consciousness from your two eager eyes, for the heron has perched on a pine bough not far beyond yours, and cries back to his mate on the nest, and plumes his feathers for the day! (238)

The first four sentences of this passage reenact the general pattern we observed in the first two disruptions of realistic narrative. We move from identifying with Sylvia’s consciousness in the past tense, through a pair of questions that are at least ambiguous in their source, to a present tense address from the narrator to Sylvia. If Jewett’s rhetoric has worked as a rhetoric of communion, then at this point in the story, we are well prepared to accept that the voice of our readerly sympathy coincides with the narrative voice. When that voice asks where the nest is, we see Sylvia’s head scanning the marsh, but because the words are not Sylvia’s spoken thoughts, we also feel the question as the narrator’s and as our own. The second question moves us further in this direction, for how could Sylvia—overwhelmed as she is by the vision of all the world before her, exhilarated as she is by the sensation that she is flying out into that world—how could she feel or express disappointment? How could she ask whether this vision is her only reward? The reader and the narrator are the ones who want more for her, though we join the pine tree as well in that what we want is to complete her communion with the world, for her to experience as fully as possible “the satisfaction of an existence heart to heart with nature and the dumb life of the forest.” The second question belongs to us, a composite voice of narrator, reader, and nature. And it is this composite, communing voice that next speaks to Sylvia. We speak in the present tense, acknowledging that the moment of Sylvia’s vision is eternally present and that we are in it together. In this moment we take over her body, directing her movements, our thoughts becoming her thoughts. We tell her where to look, and she looks there. We tell her not to move and to withhold her consciousness; she remains still and lets the impression of the moment flow in.

Only as the heron withdraws do we withdraw our restraining presence from her consciousness:

The child gives a long sigh a minute later when a company of shouting cat-birds comes also to the tree, and vexed by their fluttering and lawlessness the solemn heron goes away. She knows his secret now, the wild, light, slender bird that floats and wavers and goes back like an arrow presently to his home in the green world beneath. Then Sylvia, well satisfied, makes her perilous way down again. . . . (238)
We leave her well satisfied, knowing fully the satisfaction of communion with nature, which has also been communion with us. Having helped her restrain the arrow of her consciousness, we have also helped the heron to become the arrow of her consciousness as it returns to its home in the green world, which is, on a metaphorical level, the current best home for her growing spirit. We have completed the identification that images and comparisons have been asserting between the brave, pale, light, slender girl and the wild, white, light, arrow-like bird.

Jewett then uses a fragmentary sentence to introduce a threat to Sylvia’s achieved unity: “Wondering over and over again what the stranger would say to her, and what he would think when she told him how to find his way straight to the heron’s nest” (238). This slight grammatical jar returns us to the past tense. We see the worried grandmother and the hunter who is anxious to compel Sylvia to tell the secret he believes she has discovered. However, as soon as we turn to Sylvia’s consciousness, we return to the present tense:

Here she comes now, paler than ever... The grandmother and the sportsman stand in the door together and question her... But Sylvia does not speak after all, ...

No, she must keep silence! What is it that suddenly forbids her and makes her dumb? Has she been nine years growing, and now, when the great world for the first time puts out a hand to her, must she thrust it aside for a bird’s sake? The murmur of the pine’s green branches is in her ears, she remembers how the white heron came flying through the golden air and how they watched the sea and the morning together, and Sylvia cannot speak; she cannot tell the heron’s secret and give its life away. (239)

As the heron’s cry back to its mate might suggest, there are, in fact, two great worlds. When Sylvia stands atop the pine, she can see them both: the world of settled humanity and the world of the dumb creatures of forest and sea. Given her tendency to quiet introspection, the latter world is the right one for her to grow up in, though she cannot avoid the former if she is finally to be happy. Most of Jewett’s other works of fiction repeatedly emphasize the importance of human communion to human happiness. Sylvia needs first to discover herself apart from the kind of society represented by whistling boys, collecting hunters, and noisy catbirds. This is not the right time to take the proffered hand of the great world that is imaged as a “great wave of human interest.”

The great world that Sylvia chooses by identification with its silence is the world that makes her dumb. In images, it consists of all that she has seen on her trip to find the heron. But rhetorically it consists of the narrator and the reader in concert with a sort of consciousness in nature. We have become nature’s voice in the story. We have spoken inside Sylvia, controlling her body and her consciousness, and finally enforcing her silence. We have been the self that she is in the process of discovering and, in performing this function at the behest of Jewett’s unusual rhetoric, we have communed with Sylvia, with the natural scenes she experiences, and with all who have ever or will ever read this story.

“A White Heron” is a great story, in part because Jewett found a rhetoric that could overcome the pretenses of separation between narrator, reader, and
character that are characteristic of realistic fiction. Like the great American 
transcendentalists, Thoreau in *Walden* and Whitman in “Crossing Brooklyn 
Ferry,” she sought and found means of using language to stimulate something 
like visionary experience in the reader.

I think we can now see that the last paragraph is consistent with the rhetoric 
of the whole story. It is probably wrong to say that this paragraph rips and tears 
at the rest of the story, though it may indeed do to the masculine plot what 
Sylvia’s silence did to the hunter’s plans for the white heron. Sylvia’s silence, as 
we have seen, is not hers alone but is rather of a piece with the dumb life of the 
forest. That silence arises out of a communion we readers have experienced and 
is the means by which we acknowledge and treasure that communion. Our 
silence affirms the irreducible value and mystery of individual lives. Though one 
may try to take, possess, or collect such lives, one suffers under an illusion as long 
as one believes anything substantial is gained by the effort. This is the hunter’s 
illusion, and it is the major sign of his incompletion. This incompletion is 
signaled both times he seems most threatening to Sylvia’s growth, in the 
fragmentary sentence that announces his whistle (229) and in the second 
fragmentary sentence when Sylvia anticipates telling him the heron’s secret 
(238). When Sylvia gives him silence in response to his desire, she gives him the 
greatest gift she has for him, the same gift she has just received. This is the gift 
that can make him whole. The power of such a gift is hinted in Mrs. Tilley’s 
account of how her son changed her husband’s life by daring him and running 
away (232).

How is the ornithologist fragmented? Critics have tended to associate him 
with the greatest evils of Western civilization: Satan, sexism, commercial ex­ 
ploration, cultural tyranny, materialism, matricide, and mad scientists. Yet most 
of these critics are forced to recognize that Sylvia, Mrs. Tilley, and the narrator 
find the hunter a personable and attractive person. The only serious problem 
Sylvia has with him is that he kills the birds he knows and loves so well (233). 
Taken out of the traditional context that establishes some personal or sacramental 
relationship with the hunted animal, the bird collector’s actions do indeed seem 
reprehensible. Jewett reveals in him a dangerous aggressiveness by associating 
him with the pursuing red-faced boy, by making him an ornithologist who kills 
the birds he loves most for the purposes of knowing and possessing them, and by 
having him offer comfort and money in exchange for Sylvia’s loyalty to her 
animal friends. He clearly threatens Sylvia by tempting her to leave her 
hermitage before she achieves a self. Still, he does not lack grace: “he told her 
many things about the birds and what they knew and where they lived and what 
they did with themselves” (233). The problem with the hunter is not that he is 
inhomernently evil; rather he is incomplete. Were everyone always to behave as the 
hunter does and never as Sylvia learns to in her vision, we would all always kill 
the things we love, or at least frighten them away with the arrows of our 
consciousness. If he shared fully the sacramental view of the heron that Sylvia 
gains, he would give up the gun and simply walk the woods to see the birds, 
valuing imaginative over literal possession. What the hunter needs is to be
rescued from the excesses of his culture's ideology of masculinity, from the rigidity of his failed quest plot. He cannot complete that plot himself; therefore he sends Sylvia on his behalf after the bird. When she gives him silence instead of the bird, she still acts on his behalf though he does not yet understand this. For to be complete the hunter needs to learn another kind of possession, the kind of imaginative communion with a living spirit that Thoreau, in his chapter in *Walden* on "Higher Laws," says led him to give up his gun.

The story's final paragraph seems not to be about destruction but rather about redemption and healing. It completes an opposition that the story has sustained within its rhetoric and between its plot and rhetoric. Realistic rhetoric and plot have moved the story toward Sylvia's moment of decision when she may choose silence or speech. As Ammons shows, there are powerful traditional and conventional forces that would tend to affirm an ending in which Sylvia chooses human society over nature. One of these forces is the set of cultural values implicit in one kind of fairy tale of female coming of age in which the young woman leaves evil older women to place herself in the care of a questing man, e.g., "Snow White" and "Cinderella." However, we have seen that Jewett's rhetoric works consistently against such expectations and urgently engages us readers on the side of communion with nature. Of course there is another tradition, visible for example in Romantic transcendentalism, that would tend to make absolute the choice of communion with nature as preferable to communion with humanity. But Jewett's rhetoric also closes off any simplistic version of this response. Both conventional patriarchy and Romantic pantheism are incomplete. The former will prevent Sylvia from becoming a person capable of communion; the latter will cut her off from complex human relations so that she could eventually become like "poor" Joanna in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, incapable of human relations. The story has sought to heal this division by means of visionary experience in which various "characters" experience communion while contemplating nature together.

Among the effects upon a reader of entering into the kind of communion Jewett offers in "A White Heron" is the experience of that communion. Such an experience can be redemptive. Readers tend to come to the story saturated with the rhetoric of realistic fiction, where the characters, however much we may sympathize with them, remain outside of and separate from ourselves. Jewett's rhetoric undoes such separations; it "rescues" us from loneliness and takes us into the human communion that writing essentially is. Our communion continues into the final paragraph, where we participate in further acts of healing.

In the last paragraph Jewett dramatizes human incompletion and acknowledges the value of human communion. That Sylvia wants to belong to both great worlds points to the incompleteness of each. Sylvia's legitimate desire to belong to the great world of human interest leads her to purify the hunter in her memory. The narrator rhetorically underlines what Sylvia forgets by detailing the violence of the dead and bloodied birds the hunter produced, yet grants and even admires the desire in Sylvia that forgets and so forgives. It really is not certain whether the birds were better friends to Sylvia than their hunter might have been. She will
have lost treasures by rejecting the path he offered her. For one thing, she is a lonely country girl, and to love someone, even uncritically as a dog does, may be preferable to loneliness. Nevertheless, when the narrator prays to nature to bring gifts and graces to Sylvia, we readers are confident that nature will not cease to offer its gifts, just as we and Whitman are confident in the last movement of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” that the landscape of that poem will continue to give itself to the eye and to indicate what it “really” is to all who look with vision enhanced by Whitman’s incantations.

Sylvia, in imagination, heals and redeems the hunter. Her silence toward him reenacts nature’s silence toward her and so stands as an always-open offer to him of actual redemption if he will learn how to read her silence, how to look with her. Sylvia has become the focus of a visionary occasion of communion between narrator, reader, and nature; this occasion offers to heal the divisions valorized by the conventions of realistic narrative while offering redemption from the ideology of exploitation that corrupts the hunter. Jewett has created a moment of timeless unity between narrator, character, and reader by means of her rhetoric of communion. In doing so, she may reform and, thereby, alter the meaning of the masculine quest plot at the center of her story; she may create an imaginative space where masculine doing and feminine seeing may meet in temporary transcendence of their ancient opposition. That space is in the composite narrative voice of this story, where we readers may all be united for a moment—at least in our imaginations—with the wholeness of being that includes both nature and human will, both the feminine and the masculine, both seeing and doing.

Sources Cited and a Selection of Sources Consulted

Ammons, Elizabeth. “Going in Circles: The Female Geography of Jewett’s Country of the Pointed Firs.” Studies in Literary Imagination, 16(2) (Fall 1983), 83–92.
Anon. “Review of A White Heron and Other Stories.” Harper’s, 74 (February 1887), 483.
Once Upon a Time': Sarah Orne Jewett's 'A White Heron' as a Fairy Tale."


