June 1994

"Characters...Worth Listening To": Dialogized Voices in Sarah Orne Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs

Margaret M. Strain

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

Recommended Citation
Colby Quarterly, Volume 30, no.2, June 1994, p.131-145

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.
“Characters . . . Worth Listening To”: Dialogized Voices in Sarah Orne Jewett’s
The Country of the Pointed Firs*

by MARGARET M. STRAIN

Since its publication in 1896, critics of Sarah Orne Jewett’s The Country of the Pointed Firs have disputed the work’s claim to be a novel. Feminist critics in particular have defended the fiction’s nonlinear structure, some claiming that its circularity and nondramatic development characterize a novelistic mode that is distinctively female. Yet even such defenses of Pointed Firs are limited. Resting as they do on binary polarities (male/female; linearity/non-linearity), such oppositions reduce discussion of Pointed Firs’s genre to issues of engenderment and plot variation. I believe that the work of Mikhail Bakhtin offers another way to address the question of whether Pointed Firs is a novel, a way that avoids the dichotomized nature of previous criticisms. Bakhtin’s

I would like to thank Susan M. Griffin, Thomas Byers, and Debra Journet for their encouragement, useful recommendations, and thoughtful readings of this text.

1. In the past, critics of Pointed Firs who address the question of its genre have fallen into two groups: those who argue that it is not a novel because of plot deficiencies and insufficient dramatic action and those who concede it is a novel, redeemed by some type of thematic unity. Defenders of the former position include Richard Cary who reduces Pointed Firs to a “paranovel” because it “lack[s] important elements customarily expected in a novel” (131); Hyatt F. Waggoner who refers to the work as a “group of semi-autobiographical sketches” (67); and F. O. Matthiessen who reveals the strongest criticism, calling the book a series of “loosely connected sketches” held together by “the unity of her [Jewett’s] vision” (101). One who accepts the book as a novel is John C. Hirsh; he suggests that the work operates according to a “double movement,” alternating between incidents which occur between the narrator and the Todd Family and those which include the narrator and “outsiders” (286). Paul John Eakin posits that friendship functions as “a kind of recurring musical theme” (526) that orders the text.

2. Feminist readers sensitive to the novel’s nonlinear structure include Cynthia J. Goheen who calls attention to “the novel’s overall cyclical progression” (156); Elizabeth Ammons calls the organization of Pointed Firs “nuclear”: “the narrative moves out from one base to a given point and back again . . . like arteries on a spider’s web” (85). Marcia McClintock Folsom also cites the novel’s networked structure, noting that the “isolated people seem to be connected . . . not only because of the web of visits and messages sent and delivered, but because of the tremendous power of empathy which binds distant people” (68). Along a similar vein is Richard G. Carson who believes that “five circles provide . . . a subtle organization as they show the reader the progress of Jewett’s pilgrim into the sacred sanctuaries of Dunnet Landing” (154).

3. Two other issues contributing to the controversy over the novel’s structure are the inclusion of the “Dunnet Landing Sketches” in later editions of the text and the related question of whether one recognizes these additions as integral components of the original work. Outlining Pointed Firs’s publication history, Sivagami Subbaraman observes that the novel was first serialized by Atlantic Monthly in the January, March, July, and September numbers of 1896 and did not include the sketches; it was also published by Houghton Mifflin in the same year. Willa Cather’s 1925 edition, however, incorporates “A Dunnet Shepherdess,” “The Queen’s Twin,” and “William’s Wedding” as part of the novel. Subbaraman speculates that Cather may not have known of the existence of a fourth sketch, “The Foreigner,” which is found in David Bonnell Green’s 1962 text (73). While one might argue that the inclusion of these sketches only adds to the rich complexity of the novel’s heteroglossic and multivocal form, I believe these later additions reveal more about Cather’s and Green’s notions of what constitutes the work than they do about Jewett’s intentions for the novel. Bakhtin is particularly sensitive to this latter point as well, given the privilege and emphasis he places upon authorial control over a text (“Discourse” 313–15). This paper recognizes the 1896 edition as the standard text.

4. Two scholars in particular have explored the potential Bakhtin’s theories have for redefining our understanding of novelistic form. Joanne S. Frye, investigating a feminist poetics of the novel, relies upon Bakhtin’s belief that novelistic language is dialogized with “an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openness”
theory of the novel rejects traditional definitions of the genre as a homogeneous form and of language as a unitary, centripetalizing system. Unlike his structuralist and linguistic contemporaries, Bakhtin recognizes that stratifications within language extend to include not only a variety of dialects but socio-ideological languages as well. In redirecting our attention to the realm of language, Bakhtin situates interanimated discourses and contesting voices at the heart of all novelistic fiction.

Bakhtin contends that a novel is any text which displays “a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” (“Discourse in the Novel” 262). This definition frees us to consider Pointed Firs in a manner that does not privilege dramatic action or plot as a text’s driving force. For Bakhtin both action and plot assume subordinate roles in the novel: their chief purpose is to expose the ideologically charged discourses of the characters. I would argue that Bakhtin’s notions of dialogism and heteroglossia suggest methods which not only establish Pointed Firs as a novel but also move us to a closer examination of the ways in which the dialogic confrontation located in competing characters’ voices and within the language of a single character bring the psychical and physical realities constitutive of the Dunnet Landing community into sharp relief.5 I would like to pursue this latter point in more detail, investigating first the narrator’s initial resistance to and gradual assimilation of the languages of the rural New England community. I will then show how Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia operating within the languages of Captain Littlepage and Elijah Tilley reflects the refracted speech of absent characters. And finally, by suggesting that heteroglossia operates along with an encoded text, I would like to read examples of heteroglossia alongside a semiotic notion of text to expand the possibilities for refracted speech as they are realized by the narrator in the personas of Sarah Tilley and Joanna Todd.

The dual manner in which language expresses both internal and external consciousness, what V. N. Volosinov calls the “living dialectical synthesis . . . constantly taking place again and again between the psyche and ideology, (“Epic and Novel” 7). She offers a way to question received notions of selfhood, particularly female selfhood, in a way that “frees the idea of an individual woman from established sociohistorical categories of femininity” (Frye 27). My case differs from hers by exploring the ways in which the narrator is freed from received notions of monolithic individualism by being immersed in a sociohistory not her own. Dale M. Bauer employs Bakhtin’s notion of the carnival, demonstrating the ways in which the ideologic discourse of a female protagonist, situated as “other” in a patriarchal community, points up the conflicting hierarchical norms which oppress her. Bauer’s examination shares with my own an interest in the female as other or outsider. My claim, however, regards the newly dialogized language of the narrator as the site for expanding the boundaries of ideologic meaning within discursive communities, offering a way to recognize the other/outsider as author of her own voice—a voice which is neither co-opted by a monologic patriarchal language nor reduced to silence or death.

5. Subbaraman also has investigated the function of the novel’s multivocality. The writer acknowledges the insufficiency of previous readings of Pointed Firs according to linear, thematic, or developmental guidelines, but regards the various tales recalled by the Dunnet Landing figures as mere “splitting[s] of the main narratorial voice” (62) and suggests we view the inclusion of the other narrators (e.g., Captain Littlepage, Elijah Tilley and Mrs. Fosdick) as shifts in the narratorial burden. As an alternative, Subbaraman offers a helical model for the text (64). I would argue that these characters’ voices are more than mere extensions of a primary narratorial voice, “refract[ing] the narrator’s intentions . . . as a kind of second language” (69). Rather, these figures should be regarded as distinct characters whose languages and voices interact dialogically with the language and voice of the narrator, pointing up not only her position as urban writer, but the ideologically and politicized status of their positions as rural, coastal maritimers.
between the inner and the outer” (40), is replicated in a similar relationship between reader and text. In Bakhtinian terms,

What is realized in the novel is the process of coming to know one’s own language as it is perceived in someone else’s language, coming to know one’s own belief system in someone else’s system ... an ideological translation of another’s language, and an overcoming of its otherness—an otherness that is only contingent, external, illusory. (365)

This awareness of otherness situates the novel’s significance, then, neither in its narrative form nor in the consciousness of any one authorial speaker. Rather, as one early critic of Pointed Firs observes, readers become active participants in a dialog with “characters . . . worth listening to” (“The New England Spirit” 602).

I

THE STORY OF DUNNET Landing and its inhabitants is chronicled through the consciousness of a summer visitor to the small coastal town. In the novel’s opening paragraphs, the authorial voice of a middle-aged narrator immediately conveys through her language the detachment and objectivity of an outside observer. She returns to the village she discovered a few years before only to reaffirm her initial impressions: Dunnet Landing is quaint, evincing an eclectic mixture of “elaborate conventionalities,” “remoteness,” and “childish certainty” (2). At the same time, the narrator signs herself as a writer by her studied prose style and personified description of the Maine houses: “there was a gayety and determined floweriness in their bits of garden ground; the small-paned high windows in the peaks of their steep gables were like knowing eyes that watched the harbor . . . or looked northward all along the shore” (1-2).7 The speech of the narrator as writer demonstrates what Bakhtin calls a “professional stratification,” classifying a dimension of a language peculiar to a particular vocation: “the language of the lawyer, the doctor, the businessman” (“Discourse” 289). He elaborates:

It goes without saying that these languages differ from each other not only in their vocabularies; they involve specific forms for manifesting intentions, forms for making conceptualization and evaluation concrete. And even the very language of the writer . . . can be taken as a professional jargon. (289)

The language of the professional writer is confirmed by her reliance on identifiable rhetorical forms to conceptualize her perceptions of the town. Her

6. Recent scholarship has debated whether the authorship of texts once attributed to Volosinov is not actually the work of Bakhtin himself. (See Dialogic Imagination xxvi.)

7. Michael Holstein also addresses the unique stance of the narrator as writer who struggles, at the novel’s outset, to balance herself between “competing claims of artistic and social responsibility,” questioning “whether she should stand in her material or outside of it” (39). His position takes a decidedly different tack than my own, however, when he asserts that the resolution of the writer’s struggle is due, in large part, to her summer apprenticeship with the town herbalist, Mrs. Todd. According to Holstein, the writer comes to recognize her craft as a similar “healing art” through the ministrations of Mrs. Todd and two other “positive models” of the Dunnet Landing community, the spiritualist and the solitary. As a result, the narrator comes to identify herself as one “who also would heal the spirit” (42). My claim is that the narrator’s interest is in attending to the dialogic tension between her authorial voice and the heteroglot languages of the Dunnet Landing community. For the writer, resolution is reached not in the similarity of one art to others but through an assimilation of Dunnet Landing’s languages within her own and a recognition of language’s inherent heteroglossic nature.
authorial voice, though encoded by numerous languages (e.g., the language of writer, of urbanite, of educated woman), is relatively monologic; her many languages have harmonized with one another to the degree that they identify her as a speaker socially and culturally distinct from the rural maritime community she enters. Bakhtin calls this phenomenon “a unitary language,” discourse conditioned by “specific sociohistorical destinies” and by “specific verbal-ideological movements” (269–70).

The writer comes to Dunnet Landing because she considers the pastoral location an ideal refuge from which to pursue her “literary employments” (8). She discovers, however, that the anonymity and isolation she seeks are far more possible in the urban world she left than the rural one she enters. Although the house itself (along with its elderly occupant) appears “to be retired and sheltered enough from the busy world” (3), Mrs. Todd’s actually offers a “complete lack of seclusion” (3). The daily bustlings of Mrs. Todd in her garden, the constant stream of ailing neighbors seeking the herbalist’s prescriptions, and the landlady’s own loquaciousness cause the narrator to lay her pen aside, for “it was impossible not to listen” (12). Her primary concern as a writer is to preserve the artistic purity (and dominance) of her own voice, yet she finds herself initially silenced—hearing only the heteroglot languages of Dunnet Landing’s inhabitants. The conflict in the novel and, more particularly, in the mind of the central speaker resides at the site of dialogic contact between her language and the heteroglot languages of the community. In Bakhtin’s view, a common unitary language generally struggles to defend itself as “an already formed language from the pressure of growing heteroglossia” (271). Thus in the early pages of Pointed Firs, we witness the writer’s efforts to resist the inclusion of others’ refracted speech within her own language, motivating her decision to “fle[e] further temptation” (12) and retreat to the village schoolhouse—a refuge symbolic of her urban academic origins and protective bastion for her monologic language. The novel’s development traces the manner in which the narrator resolves this conflict. She chooses to accept the presence of other languages, resulting in what Bakhtin terms double-voiced discourse (“Discourse” 324), the presence of “two speakers at the same time . . . express[ing] simultaneously two different intentions” (324). Her response, ultimately, is a movement toward and mingling with otherness. In this way, the narrator reestablishes a state of equilibrium within her own discourse by redialogizing it to acknowledge and include the other. Indeed, for Bakhtin, the novel’s distinctive quality as a genre is its very ability to engage the internal dialog hidden in all languages:

A language is revealed in all its distinctiveness only when it is brought into relationship with other languages, entering with them into one single heteroglot unity of societal becoming. (411)

Upon meeting Mrs. Todd, the narrator matter-of-factly records her descriptions of the herbalist, her home, and garden. She classifies the animated Mrs. Todd as a “very large person” who lives in a “tiny” house; her landlady’s greatest pride is a “queer little garden” whose few flowers are dwarfed “by so much greenery” (3, 4). But as the writer comes to know Mrs. Todd and is drawn into
the circle of her friendship, the narrator finds it increasingly difficult to express herself with the same degree of detachment:

To have been patted kindly on the shoulder and called “darlin’,” to have been offered a surprise of early mushrooms for supper, to have had all the glory of making two dollars and twenty-seven cents in a single day, and then to renounce it all and withdraw from these pleasant successes, needed much resolution. . . . I frankly told her I could no longer enjoy the pleasure of what we called “seein’ folks.” (8) (emphases mine)

The stratified language of the writer shows through clearly in the calculated repetition of infinitive phrases rhetorically constructed to contrast the narrator’s increasing involvement with Mrs. Todd’s herb business with her decreasing interest in her own untouched paperwork. The authorial intrusion of the narrator’s final dictum, “I frankly told her” effectively disrupts the fluid, seductive rhythms of the opening lines. In addition, the writer’s apologetic withdrawal from their daily excursions of “seein’ folks” suggests both her impatience to return to her own work and her wish to avoid further assimilation of the community’s “folksy” colloquialisms. Accordingly, the writer begins to mark off Mrs. Todd’s Maine dialect from that of her own professional language by the use of quotation marks. Nonetheless, this self-conscious construction of dialogic speech belies two significant breaks in the writer’s unified language: her inclusion of colloquial speech in this passage indicates a deference to the appropriateness of Mrs. Todd’s language in expressing the writer’s thoughts; in addition, the narrator’s use of we betrays a growing intimacy with the people of the community as she begins to assimilate their voices.

What begins as a deliberate dialogic construction—the inclusion of a New England dialect within the literary prose of the narrator—gradually develops into heteroglossia, the unmarked incorporation of “another’s speech in another’s language” (“Discourse” 324). And though the speaker flees to the local schoolhouse, her language here and elsewhere exhibits unmarked, fully dialogized discourse:

One day she [Mrs. Todd] appeared at the schoolhouse itself, partly out of amused curiosity about my industries; but she explained that there was no tansy in the neighborhood with such snap to it as some that grew about the schoolhouse lot. Being scuffed down all the spring made it grow so much the better, like some folks that had it hard in their youth, and were bound to make the most of themselves before they died. (14) (emphasis mine)

The selection begins in the language of the professional writer recording an unexpected visit from her landlady, but the passage which begins “there was no tansy in the neighborhood” and extends to the end of the paragraph bears the unmistakable language of Mrs. Todd herself. We might read such phrases as “snap to it,” “grew about” and “scuffed down all the spring” as the folksy speech indigenous to the coastal community. However, the analogy made between the weather-worn tansy plant and the hardy townspeople is a metaphor one would only expect from the village herbalist. Within the narrator’s speech, one detects the refracted voice of Mrs. Todd, creating an embedded dialogue, “one as yet unfolded, a concentrated dialogue of two voices, two world views, two lan-
More than a few critics have noted the unique position of the narrator who records, from a not disinterested point of view, the disintegrative effects of historical and economic change on the Maine village. But none have observed how it is the flexibility of the novelistic form itself that allows the writer to present the ebbing life of the Dunnet Landing community even as she paradoxically gives it life through her literary expression. *Pointed Firs* as novel becomes, then, a vehicle that at once describes the changing history of the Maine town and *enacts* the nature of historical change itself. Bakhtin comments upon the open-ended nature of the novelistic form, characterized by the continual dialogic confrontations among its social, historical and ideological contingencies:

A dialogue of languages is a dialogue of social forces perceived not only in their static co-existence, but also as a dialogue of different times, epochs and days, a dialogue that is forever dying, living, being born: co-existence and becoming are here fused into an indissoluble concrete unity that is contradictory, multi-speeched and heterogeneous. (365) (emphasis mine)

Bakhtin’s remarks concerning language’s dialogic nature are not unlike the observations of the narrator herself, reflected at the close of her visit: “So we die before our own eyes; so we see some chapters of our lives come to their natural end” (210).

II

ANOTHER VOICE

The narrator listens to is that of Captain Littlepage who disrupts the solitude of the schoolhouse hermitage one afternoon with a surprise visit. A respected shipmaster for over forty years, the captain has sentenced himself to a life of forced retirement and seclusion following the disastrous wreck of his ship. Seldom seen outside his home, the recluse now seeks out the narrator, detecting in her self-imposed alienation a kindred spirit. At the outset of their dialogue, the captain’s language exhibits the same poise and formal sophistication as that of the worldly narrator as he argues for the monologic refinement of Milton’s language:

“There’s nothing that ranks, to my mind, with Paradise Lost; it’s all lofty, all lofty,” he continued. “Shakespeare was a great poet; he copied life, but you have to put up with a great deal of low talk.” (21)

The conversation between these two outsiders begins “all lofty” as they exchange views about the merits of literature and Mrs. Begg’s passing. But as their conversation evolves into a discussion of Littlepage’s shipwreck, the captain’s

8. Hyatt Waggoner comments that “The world it [*Pointed Firs*] depicts” is a world which “‘progress’ has not yet touched” (68); Jay Martin notes that the novel’s progress traces the narrator’s “entry into that root in the past” (146). For Martin, one of the ultimate strengths of Jewett’s work is “[t]he portrayal of common life as history or history-becoming-dream—” (148). Philip Terrie builds on this notion, adding “Dunnet Landing is a place where memories of the past often define present reality, where the translation of memory into myth is the predominant social activity” (17). Warner Bertoff is one of several critics who identify the economic decline of Dunnet Landing as a significant undercurrent in the novel, fostering “an indelible impression of a community that is inexorably, however luminously, dying” (33). Finally, Michael W. Vella contends that “the narrator learns to perceive within the flux of nature and history something transcendental and permanent . . . something which serves for her as an intimation of immortality” (276).

https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq/vol30/iss2/7
language ironically invokes the “low talk” of a seasoned mariner: “when we were well out o’ sight o’ land, headin’ for Hudson’s Straits, I had a bad turn o’ some sort o’ fever, and had to stay below. . . . and the crew done their work by dint of hard driving” (26). Littlepage distinguishes between the high and low talk, initially implying that he prefers the poetic language, which aestheticizes life, to colloquial speech, which recounts lived experience. But as the captain delves into his past, we see that this distinction dissolves.

He tells the narrator, “Certainty, not conjecture, is what we all desire” (23). In the course of their interview, Littlepage reveals that the certainty he subscribes to lies not in the external society of Dunnet Landing but in the supernatural community of the “Waiting Place”—a phantasmic village of the nether world. Though Littlepage has not seen the place himself, he nevertheless believes in the hallucinatory island with the same resolution as the fellow sailor who claims to have visited there. Via his “low” language, Littlepage escorts the narrator first to the scene of the ill-fated voyage and then across the boundaries of his consciousness to the site of a psychic reality more authentic to him than his existence in Dunnet Landing.

After the wreck, Littlepage is rescued by Eskimo villagers; during his stay with them, he makes the acquaintance of a similarly displaced sailor called “old Gaffett.” The two pass their time together exchanging stories and secrets. As Littlepage reminisces, we are able to detect within his authorial voice the character zone of “old Gaffett.” Bakhtin calls character zones the “scattered words and sayings belonging to someone else’s speech . . . the field of action for a character’s voice, encroaching in one way or another upon the author’s voice” (“Discourse” 316). The old Scot’s voice is represented in Littlepage’s description of the ghosts inhabiting the “Waiting Place”:

Gaffett said that he and another man came near one o’ the fog-shaped men . . . . They [the spirits] would make as if they talked together, but there was no sound of voices, and “they acted as if they didn’t see us, but only felt us coming towards them,” says Gaffett one day, trying to tell the particulars. (37–38)

As he recalls for the narrator the strange happenings on the island, Littlepage’s voice interacts dialogically with Gaffett’s voice as though the captain himself has experienced the events. Indeed, it becomes his experience in his retelling of the tale:

“Then there came a day,” said Captain Littlepage, leaning toward me with a strange look in his eyes, and whispering quickly. “The men all swore they would n’t stay any longer; the man on watch early in the morning gave the alarm, and they all put off in the boat. . . . Those folks, or whatever they were, come about ’em like bats . . . . as if to drive ’em back to sea.” (38)

At this point, both the narrator and Jewett’s readers cross the boundary of external reality; physical surroundings dissolve. As we enter the internal life of the captain’s psyche, we note that the seaman’s usual taciturn demeanor is replaced by an otherworldly animation: “the dulled look in his eyes had gone, and there was instead a clear intentness that made them seem dark and piercing” (32). The refracted language of Gaffett dialogized within the speech of Littlepage adds
another dimension to our understanding of the captain. We are able to recognize the similarity between the actions of Gaffett’s frightened sailors and those of the imperiled men aboard Littlepage’s storm-tossed Minerva. As Bakhtin notes, “The distinctive qualities of a character’s discourse always strive for a certain social significance, a social breadth” (333). In the case of Littlepage, social significance would come in the form of the townspeople’s acceptance of his narrative, but his language, constituted as it is by surrealistic detail, does not meld with the pragmatic sensibilities of the scientists, the folkloric traditions of Dunnet Landing, nor the literary imagination of the writer. The narrator laments, “he [Littlepage] had nobody with whom to speak his own language” (143). No community hears him, and so his world is circumscribed in silence. Thus he chooses to live in his psychical world with the certainty of the “Waiting Place,” confident that he sits in complete possession of a truth denied the rest of the community: “I know what I speak of; those who laughed at me little know how much reason my ideas are based upon” (23–24). For a brief moment, even the narrator shares his belief in the “Waiting Place”: “all this moving tale had such an air of truth that I could not argue with Captain Littlepage” (42).

As the narrator’s authorial voice once again takes over, we are reminded of the irony in Captain Littlepage’s statement “a community narrows down and grows dreadful ignorant when it is shut up to its own affairs, and gets no knowledge of the outside world” (27). Littlepage’s definition of community entails an acknowledgment of a world literally outside the physical. He believes that Gaffett’s story not only provides its audience with a glimpse of another world beyond the perimeters of Dunnet Landing but also knowledge of an afterlife while yet living. We are reminded of the way in which Littlepage prefaces his story to the narrator:

“It may be found out some o’ these days,” he said earnestly. “We may know it all, the next step; where Mrs. Begg is now, for instance. . . . We shall know it while yet below,” insisted the captain . . . . “We have not looked for truth in the right direction.” (23)

In Bakhtinian terms, the word community serves as an ideologeme representing the ideological and sociohistorical stance of its user. And in examining the heteroglot languages of Gaffett, Littlepage, and the narrator, we see that Captain Littlepage and the Dunnet Landing community privilege different standards. Representative of what Captain Littlepage sees as Dunnet Landing’s narrowed stance is Mrs. Todd who reduces the authenticity of the “Waiting Place” to a mere tale that “hangs together toler’ble well” (44). To Captain Littlepage, the sense of community extended by Dunnet Landing is no more substantive than the gossipy speculations of a “cheap, unprincipled newspaper” (27)—composed in a language he refuses to read.

III

The appeal of Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia is its power to disclose at the site of utterance the presence of both ideological influences and individualized voices. Having examined the way in which double-voicedness and heteroglossia work within the speech of a single character, I would like to demonstrate how
both notions operate among the combined speeches of several characters at once to create the voice of Joanna Todd—an individual we come to know only through the commingled recollections of Mrs. Fosdick, Mrs. Todd and, finally, the narrator.

The narrator’s introduction to Joanna Todd is occasioned by the arrival of a new guest in Almira Todd’s household. Susan Fosdick shares with the narrator a love of travel and familiarity with the outside world. Unlike the writer, she strikes up an immediate rapport with the countrywoman—a mixture of frankness and tenderness made possible by years of friendship. The narrator is initially anxious about this visitor who disrupts her peaceful routine: the writer is relegated to the role of housekeeper as she scurries to prepare oolong tea and a hasty dinner for the latecomer. Despite Mrs. Todd’s early praises of the woman, Susan Fosdick does “not look, at first sight, like a person of great social gifts” (90). In deferring to Mrs. Fosdick’s needs, however, the narrator realizes the special vantage she has been accorded: “I soon grew more or less acquainted with the histories of all their fortunes and misfortunes, and subjects of an intimate nature were no more withheld from my ears than if I had been a shell on the mantelpiece” (93). It is her very role as a listener which allows the ensuing discussion of Joanna.

As a newcomer, the narrator becomes a disruptive element in the intimate friendship of Mrs. Fosdick and Mrs. Todd. Though accepted into the group, she is nonetheless an outsider to Dunnet Landing—a person whose presence requires special explanations. Once again, the “professional stratification” of the narrator’s voice comes into dialogic conflict with another member of the Dunnet Landing community. And again, the writer’s voice is temporarily silenced as details and connections long established between the two old friends are clarified and reconnected for the narrator. The voices of all three women represent the heteroglot languages of old friends and new, of countryfolk and urbanite, of time-honored wisdom and new knowledge. In Bakhtin’s view, the juxtaposition of these dialogized voices reflects “specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings, and values” (291–92). Though the two old friends have undoubtedly discussed Joanna many times in the past, it is through the redialogized voices of the narrator and Joanna that we come to recognize the illumined consciousness of a woman who died over twenty years before.

One particular evening the women’s conversation turns from topic to topic until Mrs. Todd casually mentions Shell-heap Island. Stirred by the narrator’s curiosity, Mrs. Fosdick picks up the conversation and explains the island’s odd appellation and history, tracing its colorful heritage as home to both Indians and wandering spirits. Susan Fosdick’s observations about the island’s past inhabitants and the unusual people she has met on her own travels lead her to comment rather disappointedly about the current lack of variety among people. She laments the absence of “queer folks,” people who “used to rove the country” or “the ones that used to hive away in their own houses with some strange notion or other” (101, 102). It is in this vein that Mrs. Fosdick remembers Joanna.
Mrs. Fosdick interprets Joanna’s retreat to Shell-heap Island as a hasty reaction to being jilted by a suitor. For her, Joanna’s is a response which answers a rejection with a rejection: “She retired from the world for good an’ all . . . . All she wanted was . . . to be free” (103). Mrs. Fosdick’s voice is at once a part of and separate from the censorial voice of the Dunnet Landing community. Although she distinguishes herself from those who “could laugh at Joanna” (104), the visitor nevertheless indicates that she considers Joanna’s decision a poor one. Mrs. Fosdick sees in Joanna’s chosen solitude a life she never could have stood; to her, the consummate visitor, an isolated existence on Shell-heap Island still seems as desolate and moribund now as in the days of the Indians and spirits. When Mrs. Fosdick implicates Joanna as one of the “queer folks” no longer plentiful in the region, Almira Todd quickly jumps to her relative’s defense: “I never want to hear Joanna laughed about” (103). She replaces Mrs. Fosdick’s misjudgments about the recluse with a narrative, a miniature which echoes the writer’s storytelling ability and reflects the herbalist’s own experience with the solitary woman.

Mrs. Todd’s tale contradicts Mrs. Fosdick’s opinion that Shell-heap Island barely sustains life. Joanna greets her visitor looking “the same as ever” (116). The young woman maintains herself and her home in felicitous fashion: she dresses in gingham and furnishes her cottage with handmade rush mats. Joanna’s admission that she has committed “an unpardonable sin” and her resolution to carry out her self-imposed penance in exile reveal to Mrs. Todd and the reader a noble strength of character not realized in Mrs. Fosdick’s superficial observations. Indeed, the story of Joanna’s life on Shell-heap Island corrects the voices of Mrs. Fosdick and Dunnet Landing society, demonstrating instead Joanna’s acceptance of a life filled with gentle industry and domestic tranquillity.

Both Mrs. Fosdick’s and Mrs. Todd’s observations are marked by deep sighs and the recurring comment “poor Joanna.” Mrs. Fosdick reassures herself that such a case as Joanna’s is a thing of the past. Indeed, time and wisdom have softened Mrs. Fosdick’s opinion of Joanna as a “great fool”; she empathetically admits, “I see it all now as I could n’t when I was young” (111), her final remark bringing Joanna’s case to a resolution and healing a wound of misunderstanding between Mrs. Todd and herself. Mrs. Todd’s sentimental reminiscences, however, seem rooted in a much more fatalistic view. She concludes, “Some is meant to be the Joannas in this world, an’ ‘twas her poor lot” (126), suggesting that there always remains within each human being an untouchable part of the self that others are forced to accept even if they do not understand.

It is in the narrator’s private pilgrimage to the island that we finally glimpse the mystery that sustained Joanna’s inner life. Up to this point, the narrator has maintained a notable silence as the dialogic voices of the Dunnet Landing community, Mrs. Todd, and Mrs. Fosdick have created an enigmatic picture of the recluse. But the minute the writer steps foot on the island, the conflicting voices are supplanted. The narrator’s own voice merges with that of the island’s previous inhabitant so that Joanna’s voice is recollected in the linguistic consciousness of the narrator. Bakhtin points out that in the novel, an author
may even choose not to give his [her] character a direct discourse of his [her] own, he [she] may confine himself [herself] to the representation of the character’s actions alone; in such an authorial representation, however . . . the alien discourse (i.e., the discourse of the character himself [herself]) always sounds together with authorial speech. (335)

Jewett follows this path in depicting Joanna: her actions are represented through the speeches of Mrs. Fosdick and Mrs. Todd, and later reproduced within the “alien” discourse of the narrator. During her pilgrimage, the writer physically touches those things which touched Joanna: the foundations of her home, the remnants of her flower garden, the fresh water spring. Finally standing “as Joanna must have watched it many a day” (132), the narrator gazes at the mainland in Joanna’s stead. As she does so, her voice enters the character zone of Joanna, and the writer reflects: “There was the world, and here was she with eternity well begun” (emphasis mine) (132). The conjunction and creates a grammatical symmetry between the words there and here, linguistically replicating the delicate balance Joanna maintained between her two coexisting worlds: Dunnet Landing and Shell-heap Island. World as ideologeme becomes ironic: the immensity of human existence called forth in the reference to the haze-covered mainland is strikingly undercut by the overwhelming vastness of Joanna’s otherworldly life on the tiny island. World also recalls the urban home of the writer and the misty-covered “Waiting Place” of Captain Littlepage’s nether world. But unlike the captain’s ghostly island, Joanna’s world never permits the recluse to slip into despairing isolation. As the narrator’s language attests, Joanna’s sorrow and disappointments are forever kept in balance by the attentions of a local fisherman, the overtures of Almira and the “sound of distant voices” (132) from the passing boats. 9

Finally, I would like to explore the possibilities that a combined examination of Bakhtin’s dialogism and a contemporary semiotic notion of text have for heteroglossia. Semioticians generally expand our traditional definition of text as inscribed object so that the term refers, in Robert Scholes’s words, to a set of signals transmitted through some medium from a sender to a receiver in a particular code or set of codes. The receiver of such a set of signals, perceiving them as a text, proceeds to interpret them according to the code or codes that are available and appropriate. (149)

The kitchen of Elijah Tilley’s home and its furnishings may be read as texts encoded by the norms of domesticity maintained by Elijah’s wife; as such, they serve as textual personifications of the late Sarah Tilley. The narrator’s description of the Tilley kitchen harmonizes with the language of Elijah about his wife to produce a voice for Sarah that lies in dialogic conflict with the narrator’s previously held notions about the couple. The narrator comes away from her visit with Elijah possessing an understanding of the fisherman and his wife quite distinct from that of Mrs. Todd, the representative voice of Dunnet Landing.

9. Bauer’s work also deals with the notion of female silence, seeing in women’s marginalized and silenced voices an opposition to dominant patriarchal discourses as they are presented in the modern American novel. My project recognizes silence not as a form of subversive resistance but as a legitimate form of expression whose intelligible forms have yet to be fully investigated.
During the final days of her stay, the narrator makes the acquaintance of an aging fisherman by the name of Elijah Tilley. Because she is intrigued by the “inner life and thought” (187) of such silent individuals, the narrator accepts an invitation to visit him one afternoon. To her surprise, the writer finds Elijah a quiet but hospitable companion who lives out his life in tender devotion to the wife he lost eight years before. Upon her arrival, Elijah Tilley escorts the narrator past the locked “best room” where one usually entertains visitors and into the family kitchen. The narrator wonders at the easy hospitality of the impeccably kept room:

The sunshine poured in at the two further windows, and a cat was curled up sound asleep on the table that stood between them. There was a new-looking light oilcloth of a tiled pattern on the floor, and a crockery teapot, large for a household of only one person, stood on the bright stove. (194)

Elijah Tilley’s contented silence is accompanied by an uncanny knack for mind reading as he answers the narrator’s unspoken questions: “There ain’t nobody here but me. I try to keep things looking right, same’s poor dear left ’em.... I was the only one knew just how she liked to have things set” (194). Elijah continues to explain the ways in which he has tried to “make shift” since her death, but his speech always returns to the kitchen locale: “I set here an’ think it all over.... I keep a watchin’ them doors as if she might step in to ary one” (195-96).

As Elijah lapses into thoughtful reverie, the narrator examines the room about her. She begins to see the objects in it—the bright stove, the rocker, the crockery teapot, the windows looking out to sea, the open doorway—as a “visible tribute.... enshrin[ing] her [Sarah Tilley’s] memory” (197). Sarah’s kitchen and its furnishings become a text in which the writer is able to read and interpret the couple’s long life together. And in the prevailing silence of the waning afternoon, the narrator’s voice creates an image of the woman herself:

I began to see her myself in her home,—a delicate-looking, faded little woman, who leaned upon his rough strength and affectionate heart, who was always watching for his boat out of this very window, and who always opened the door and welcomed him when he came home. (197)

The narrator sees, as we do, the way in which the textual significance of the kitchen harmonizes with Elijah’s references to Sarah to evoke a domestic language that encompasses both husband and wife. The narrator’s voice acknowledges this harmonization within her own parting thoughts:

“Poor dear.” I repeated to myself half aloud; “I wonder where she is and what she knows of the little world she left. I wonder what she has been doing these eight years!” (205) (emphases mine)

This passage illustrates what Bakhtin calls a hybridization, “the mixing, within a single concrete utterance, of two or more different linguistic consciousnesses, often widely separated in time and social space” (Dialogic Imagination 429). “Poor dear” invokes the colloquial speech of the fisherman as he questions his absent wife’s whereabouts; yet, dialogized within the authorial speech of the narrator, the utterance carries the possibility for new interpretations: one is left to question if the “poor dear” is, after all, Sarah Tilley or the spouse she has left

https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq/vol30/iss2/7
behind “these eight years!” (205). In addition, the passage above illustrates what Bakhtin means by the simultaneous reference to two distinct linguistic consciousnesses separated by temporal and social space. The prefatory “poor” calls to mind echoes of “poor Joanna”—another voice evoked but not present; in a similar way, the assumptions that Sarah’s absence is a temporary one and that she lives an “otherworldly” existence are not unlike Gaffett and Littlepage’s belief in the “Waiting Place.” Elijah Tilley shares with the sailors the surety that life continues in some form outside the “little world” of Dunnet Landing.

The narrator leaves Elijah Tilley’s home no longer regarding the aged fisherman as “evasive and uncomfortable,” but possessed of a new voice now opened and redialogized by her interview with him. This transformation is especially apparent in the writer’s discussion of the visit with Mrs. Todd, who can only staidly surmise: “I expect you had kind of a dull session; he ain’t the talkin’ kind . . . (205). The narrator’s acknowledgment and assimilation of new languages appears in stark relief against the monologic standards of the herbalist who refuses to engage her voice with that of the “ploddin’ man.”

As Pointed Firs draws to a close, the presence of silence which so powerfully informs the life and personality of Elijah Tilley functions as one of the novel’s most strongly articulated languages. It is characteristic of several Dunnet Landing figures, often operating alongside mental imagery and material signs. On her visit to Green Island, the narrator’s kinship with Mrs. Blackett is affirmed when the two women momentarily share the tranquillity of the older woman’s “little brown bedroom,” its “rocking-chair” and “quiet outlook upon field and sea and sky” (84). This “place of peace” is the source of the narrator’s observation that “we understood each other without speaking” (84). Certainly, part of the narrator’s apprehension of Joanna’s voice is facilitated by the silent placidity of Shell-heap Island. Prior to her visit with Tilley, the narrator is moved by the “apparently speechless” demeanor of the aged fishermen whose lives amidst the elements have created such a longstanding “alliance and understanding” amongst the friends that the writer wonders “that they should talk at all” (186, 187).

The most engaging example, however, is that of William Blackett, Mrs. Todd’s brother. A man of few words, William allows both his mother and sister to speak for him. During the narrator’s visit to Green Island, the writer recalls two significant exchanges with the gentleman: one distinguished by total silence (70–71) and the other a moment of pure expression (82–83). In the duet with his mother, William’s voice is mixed with the harmonizing notes of Mrs. Blackett, causing the narrator to comment that music provided “the silent man’s real and only means of expression” (83). Perhaps we may interpret William’s singing as the man’s only verbalized form of expression. Here and elsewhere in Pointed Firs, silence becomes a voice that exerts its own particular presence as it interacts dialogically with other heteroglott languages.
IV

The novel’s final pages provide fitting testament to the narrator’s fully dialogized voice, a heteroglossic mixture of urban writer and rural convert. Her literary acumen remains easily identifiable in her metaphoric, stylistically controlled descriptions: “I let each of them [the final days] slip away unwillingly as a miser spends his coins” (208). At the same time, her choice of a maritime metaphor in describing her relationship with Elijah Tilley displays the assimilation of the coastal community’s imagery into the narrator’s discourse: “I found that I had suddenly left the forbidding coast and come into a smooth little harbor of friendship” (189). The degree to which her appropriation of the Maine community’s languages has melded with her own is not lost upon the writer. She calls to mind the difficulty with which her own voice initially resisted the presence of foreign discourses and hesitates to upset this newly established equilibrium by “return[ing] to the world in which I feared to find myself a foreigner” (208). For Bakhtin, the process of continually redialogized discourse lies at the heart of the genre we call the novel:

The word, breaking through to its own meaning and its own expression across an environment full of alien words...harmonizing with some of the elements... and striking a dissonance with others, is able, in this dialogized process, to shape its own stylistic profile and tone. (“Discourse” 277)

At the conclusion of Pointed Firs, we are able to see in the writer’s departure a strengthened, redefined voice—one which both resounds together with and is interanimated by the various languages with which it comes into contact. She is able to interpret the effects of her own impending absence in Mrs. Todd’s gruff leave-taking and hastily retreating footsteps, standing in the silence of the empty house which “had suddenly grown lonely” (210), and to read Elijah Tilley’s “solemn nod” as a fitting response to her calls of farewell. Her dialogized words and the silences, like the islands and headland receding before her, have “run together,” their boundaries finally “lost to sight” (213).

Bakhtin’s significance to the fields of rhetoric and literature rests in his exploration of the novel as a genre. Jewett herself expressed concern over whether she would be able to move easily from the short story to the longer literary form:

I don’t believe I could write a long story as he [William Dean Howells] suggested.... In the first place, I have no dramatic talent. The story would have no plot. I should have to fill it out with descriptions of characters and meditations.... And what shall be done with such a girl? For I wish to keep on writing, and to do the very best I can. (Letters 29)

By subordinating the concerns of dramatic action and plot development to the overriding importance of discourse, Bakhtin opens the way for an illumined reading of nontraditional texts such as Jewett’s The Country of the Pointed Firs which have resisted examination under previous standards. His definitions of double-voiced discourse, heteroglossia and, most significantly, the novel itself redirect our attention to Jewett’s own focus: her characters and their voices. Thus, Bakhtin invites readers and writers of texts to engage in a dialogic exchange—an exchange in which the imaginations of both readers and writers become revitalized in a search for new meaning.
Works Cited


