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The Genteel Picara: The Ethical Imperative in Sarah Orne Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs

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"In the light of Sarah Orne Jewett’s expressed affection for the rural villagers of Maine, it might seem inconsistent that she so often uses flight imagery" (36), observes Marilyn E. Mobley. But The Country of the Pointed Firs, while celebrating the intensely local, is dominated by the formal and thematic trope of travel which foregrounds movement as a means of constructing a dynamic female ethic that bridges domestic and public experience. What is remarkable about all the “dear old women” in all the “dear old houses”1 of The Country of the Pointed Firs is their refusal to relinquish the larger community beyond the home. While honoring the codes and arrangements of domesticity, each is also significantly defined by travel.2 Jewett’s “Angels in the House” simply do not stay put!

In the 1896 version, the “old women” associated with the occupation of a domestic setting include Mrs. Todd, Mrs. Blackett, and Joanna Todd. The later stories which make use of the same characters and locale add Mrs. Martin and Mrs. Tolland, and Mrs. Hight.3 Of these, only Mrs. Hight, because of a crippling stroke, is immobile. Yet, significantly, Mrs. Hight’s inspiring conversation with the narrator is described in a vocabulary of travel: “between us we had pretty nearly circumnavigated the globe and reached Dunnet Landing from an opposite direction to that in which we had started” (168).

Mrs. Todd is associated with the snug cottage that serves as a kind of hermitage to the narrator, but, in addition to her own frequent marches about the garden and into the countryside for herbs, she also serves as a “captain” of the narrator’s excursions to Green Island and the Bowden family reunion. Further, as a young woman on the trip with the minister to Joanna’s “Shellheap Island,” it was Mrs. Todd who took over the tiller and managed the sail.

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1. In her Preface to the 1925 Houghton Mifflin reissued volume of Jewett’s 1896 novel, Willa Cather recollects that “Jewett had once laughingly told me that her head was full of dear old houses and dear old women, and when an old house and an old woman came together in her brain with a click, then a story was underway” (n. pag.).
2. See also “Art and Archetype: Jewett’s Pointed Firs and the Dunnet Landing Stories,” in which Michael E. Holstein designates the voyage as one of three central topoi in Jewett’s work.
3. I make use of Barbara Solomon’s arrangement which presents Jewett’s original version and adds the “Four Related Stories”—“A Dunnet Shepherdess,” “The Foreigner,” “The Queen’s Twin,” and “William’s Wedding.”
Mrs. Blackett, Mrs. Todd’s mother, who occupies the central domestic shrine of the work, makes the ceremonial “expedition” over land and sea to the reunion. And even “poor Joanna,” who retreated from the disappointments of the community to the isolation of her island, “took a poor old boat that had been her father’s, and lo’d in a few things, and off she put all alone, with a good land breeze right out to sea” (98). Mrs. Tolland is a “foreigner” brought back by a local sailor, and Mrs. Abby Martin, poor, isolated, even deranged, managed in her youth an extraordinary journey of self-fulfillment. Convinced that the great gift of her life was a spiritual bond with Queen Victoria, who was born on her birthday and also had a husband named Albert, the “Queen’s Twin” voyaged to England on her brother-in-law’s vessel as a cook for the crew and managed to see her heroine review her troops in London.

Travel is the central defining quality of Jewett’s characters, and it is travel which promotes an ethical perspective of involvement with the larger community. As the narrator observes,

The coast of Maine was in former years brought so near to foreign shores by its busy fleet of ships that among the older men and women one still finds a surprising proportion of travelers. Each seaward-stretching headland with its high-set houses, each island of a single farm, has sent its spies to view many a land of Eschol; one may see plain, contented old faces at the window, whose eyes have looked at far-away ports and known the splendors of the Eastern world. They shame the easy voyager of the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean; they have rounded the Cape of Good Hope and braved the angry seas of Cape Horn in small wooden ships; they have brought up their hardy boys and girls on narrow decks; they were among the last of the Northmen’s children to go adventuring to unknown shores. More than this one cannot give to a young State for its enlightenment; the sea captains and the captains’ wives of Maine knew something of the wide world, and never mistook their native parishes for the whole. . . . (“The Queen’s Twin” 201)

The celebratory rhetoric of the voyage of exploration is modified here by constant contradiction. The islanded farms contrast the unbounded ocean, the old are set against the young, and the working sailors of former times oppose the modern tourist. The primary juxtaposition is that of female domesticity and male adventure. Such terms as “spies,” “shame,” “angry” may betray the unacknowledged anomaly of mothers and children on board for the heroic male journey. But, in fact, Jewett’s contradictory passage serves to redefine the purpose of such adventuring. Instead of the fruits of the male voyage of discovery—wealth, freedom, excitement—Jewett endorses contentment and “enlightenment,” a term that for Jewett invokes the perspective gained through the active practice of inclusivity. The vocabulary of a male topos has been modified by Jewett’s insistent female ethic. At the heart of this remarkable passage is the insistence on the value of a world view through which both men and women can locate themselves and come to terms with that location. The object of that view is what I am defining as the ethical imperative of Jewett’s mature fiction.

The trope of the journey as Jewett constructs it combines inner requirements with outer possibilities. It provides a bridge between the house and the
world, which all her women traverse. That traversal fashions an ethic combining empowerment with care in the communal vision that is the theme of Jewett’s text. A semiotics of travel, with its rudimentary requirement of a traveler, a journey, and a territory, insists on the active engagement of the needs of the self with the exigencies of the world. A traveling woman, then, must inevitably encounter along the way the social facts of her subjective reality, and the adventure and moral benefit of such an encounter is addressed by the travel structure of The Country of the Pointed Firs.

The Genteel Picara

JEWETT’S EARLIEST EDUCATION in literature reflects the tastes of both her parents. Her mother introduced her to Jane Austen, and throughout her life Jewett was happy to note the parallels between Austen’s fiction and certain interludes in the social life of South Berwick. Her mother also shared with her daughter her interest in American female writers of the period, and Jewett’s encounter with Harriet Beecher Stowe’s The Pearl of Orr’s Island (1862) in early adolescence was a watershed moment that allowed her “to follow eagerly the old shore paths from one gray, weather-beaten house to another” (quoted by Cary, Deephaven, Introduction, 11). Although commentators generally assume that the series of sketches which comprise The Country of the Pointed Firs imitates the local color writing she grew up on, there may be another source for its peripatetic structure. As Josephine Donovan observes, “One cannot overestimate the influence of her father in the formulation of Sarah Orne Jewett’s literary standards” (Sarah Orne Jewett 4), and his endorsement of tempered realism was based on the travel texts of Cervantes’ Don Quixote and Sterne’s A Sentimental Journey. While Jewett indicates that she was in her youth unable to appreciate these narratives of episodic wanderings, there is no reason to assume that Dr. Jewett’s recommended reading, like his literary advice, did not influence her maturity.

In his comments on the generic status of The Country of the Pointed Firs, Paul D. Voelker observes that it “could always be related to the picaresque form” (238), and, about the time she was writing it, William Dean Howells, whose opinions she respected, was suggesting that the picaresque was a fitting structure for the depiction of American experience (Wicks 14). Although Jewett was no student of the classic genre, her adaptation of the picaresque mode in The Country of the Pointed Firs allows her to foreground the dynamic process of moral construction evolving from her chain of visits. In formal terms, Jewett may be understood to be writing what Claudio Guillen defines as a picaresque myth: “an essential situation or significant structure” derived from the historical genre (qtd. by Wicks 38).

The picaresque structure minimally includes (1) a first-person narrator,

5. See Donovan, Sarah Orne Jewett, chapter 1.
6. “My dear father used to say to me very often, ‘Tell things just as they are!’ and used to show me what he meant in A Sentimental Journey (qtd. by Donovan, Sarah Orne Jewett 5).
the picaro, who is an outsider in the society he traverses, (2) an episodic plot based on the journey of the picaro through a social world, (3) a realistic vocabulary and setting, and (4) a satiric perspective. Jewett’s work may be seen to adapt these key features.

It is the necessity for the division of subject and object, the separation of the picaro and the world he experiences, which accounts for what might otherwise appear to be the condescension of the narrator in the first short chapter which describes her return to Dunnet Landing, a place, as she describes it, of “elaborate conventionalities” and “childish certainty of being the centre of the universe” (47). The unnamed narrator, having first glimpsed the locale from the deck of a yacht, is an outsider, but, unlike the picaro, she is not a social inferior. The issue raised by her difference is the question of the genuine source of worth. From the perspective of wealth and social position, a writer from the wider world has a distinct advantage, but from the point of view of moral education, the narrator’s status is fluid. In the rented schoolhouse where she goes to write, her actions mimic those of “the great authority” of the teacher even as she shares the expectant humility of the “small scholar” (53). Further, the initial outside status of the narrator introduces the central theme of the book: the necessity of establishing social contact.

In an important article which explores Jewett’s novel as the geographical expression of Carol Gilligan’s care ethic, Elizabeth Ammons describes the moral imperative of the text as a home-seeking journey. But the 1896 text ends with the departure of the narrator at the end of her vacation, and, although she sets off from Mrs. Todd’s house and apparently returns to it after each excursion into the wider community, the emphasis in the text is on the expedition rather than the return. The home-seeking journey results in the establishment of a static safe-haven, while the episodic plot of the picaresque journey as Jewett constructs it emphasizes the experiential encounter as ethics in action.

In “The Origin of Morality in Early Childhood Relationships,” Carol Gilligan and Grant Wiggins emphasize ethical development as a constructive and cumulative practice. They explain that the adolescent girl, whose maturation makes it apparent that she is no longer a dependent child, must fashion a synthesis between issues of self-empowerment and attachment. Wishing “to be able to disagree, to be different without losing contact with others, leads outward in girls’ experience from family relationships to relationships with the world.” The girl, according to Gilligan, is seeking “to affirm truths about herself by joining those truths to her mother’s experience” in order to validate her own perceptions through connection (“Exit-Voice” 155). Gilligan’s postoedipal girl, in both method and motive, is very much like Jewett’s narrator, who is also attempting an integration of self and world

7. Love, they explain, “is tied to the activities of relationship and premised, like attachment, on the responsiveness of human connection, the ability of people to engage with one another in such a way that the feelings of the other come to be experienced and taken on as part of the self” (120).
through mature maternal relations. Gilligan emphasizes ethics as an integrative process, an emphasis captured in Jewett’s metaphor of a chain that links the people and nature along the route to the Bowden family reunion.

As she travels with Mrs. Blackett, the narrator observes in the older woman’s responsive welcome at various houses along the way evidence of “the constant interest and intercourse that had linked the far island and these scattered farms into a golden chain of love and dependence” (118). One stop implies the moral operation of all the others the three travelers make at various homesteads on their route. Observing that one of the old farms is occupied by a new family, Mrs. Todd pauses to water the horse and readjust the checkrein. The “thin, anxious mistress of the farmhouse” emerges to greet her visitors “with wistful sympathy to hear what news” they “might have to give.” When Mrs. Blackett gently suggests that they may be intruding, their hostess brings out a plate of freshly baked doughnuts as a gesture of hospitality. “Why, we’ve perceived there was new doughnuts all along the road, but you’re the first that has treated us,” Mrs. Todd remarks in appreciation, while the farmer’s wife “flushes with pleasure.” Before their departure, the visitors, upon learning that the woman will also be attending the reunion, have invited her to sit with them at the gathering. On their way they deliberate her kinship and consider the possibilities of her incorporation into their own complex network (119). Soon afterward Mrs. Todd extends similar solicitude during a visit to an ash tree: “Last time I was up this way that tree was kind of drooping and discouraged,” she remarks. “Grown trees act that way sometimes, same’s folks; then they’ll put right to it and strike their roots into new ground and start all over again with real good courage. . .” (120).

All the visits in the book operate on the several key principles observable in these two examples: that life is hard and imposes painful isolation, that growth and courage are required, and that these qualities can be supported through the conscious and tactful establishment of mutual bonds of human appreciation and empathy. The reiteration of visits and the important arrangements for travel that make them possible underscore the significance of the moral principles they demonstrate and the narrator’s requirement of a process for assimilating them. Each visit seeks to perceive the individual needs of the host—as Mrs. Blackett understands the farm woman’s need to establish some claim of intimacy by sharing her doughnuts—and to respond supportively. Thus, independence and connection are both honored. The narrator learns again and again what the girls in Gilligan’s study sought to internalize: that individuality does not preclude sympathy, and that mothers and daughters can cooperate to construct a social ethic that works in the world as well as in the home.

A second metaphorical device of the episodic travel narrative employed by Jewett is the use of the promontory description. In Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation, Mary Louise Pratt exposes this common Romantic and Victorian device as a vicious form of co-option. In her analy-
sis, a European explorer looking down from a great height describes a panoramic native landscape in a rhetorical strategy she labels “the-monarch-of-all-I-survey genre” (202); his object is to incorporate the local into the European by recasting the landscape in terms of his own discourse. Specifically, the view is “estheticized” to appeal in terms of landscape painting to European sensibilities; his semantic descriptions reconstitute the unknown in terms of the “explorer’s home culture”; and his painterly depiction is meant to establish a relation of mastery of the scene: if he does not have the “power to possess” the new world he encounters, he does claim the prerogative of its evaluation (204-05). An excerpt from Richard Burton’s rendition of his first sight of Lake Tanganyika in *The Lake Regions of Central Africa: A Picture of Exploration* (1860) provides an example:

... as the eye dilates, it falls upon a cluster of outlying islets, speckling a sea horizon. Villages, cultivated lands, the frequent canoes of the fishermen on the waters, and on nearer approach the murmurs of the waves breaking upon the shore, give a something of variety, of movement, of life to the landscape, which like the fairest prospects in these regions, wants but a little of the neatness and finish of art—mosques and kiosks, palaces and villas, gardens and orchards—contrasting with the profuse lavishness and magnificence of nature. . . . (qtd. by Pratt 203)

Moving from the world to the self, Burton dominates the landscape, judges it inferior to his own ideal view of what it should be, and proposes its corrective modification by adding a few graceful touches from his own culture—“palaces and villas, gardens and orchards”—to improve it.

Jewett’s travel narrative makes frequent use of the promontory perspective. For example, the narrator looks at the funeral from the elevated perspective of the schoolhouse at the beginning of the novel and ends with a view from the same site; there are two vista views in the Green Island sequence, and the Bowden family reunion is introduced through a panoramic view, but her rhetorical strategy provides a marked contrast to that which Pratt describes. The description of the scene that unfolds on the way to the reunion, like Burton’s a water view, is typical:

When I thought we were in the heart of the inland country, we reached the top of a hill, and suddenly there lay spread before us a wonderful great view of well-cleared fields that swept down to the wide water of a bay. Beyond this were distant shores like another country in the midday haze which half hid the hills beyond, and the far-away blue mountains on the northern horizon. There was a schooner with all sails set coming down the shore from a white village that was sprinkled on the shore, and there were many sailboats flitting about. It was a noble landscape, and my eyes, which had grown used to the narrow inspection of a shaded roadside, could hardly take it in.

"Why it's the upper bay," said Mrs. Todd. "You can see 'way over into the town of Fessenden. Those farms 'way over there are all in Fessenden. Mother used to have a sister that lived up that shore. If we started as early's we could on a summer mornin' we couldn't get to her place from Green Island till late afternoon, even with a fair, steady breeze, and you had to strike the time just right so as to fetch up 'long o' the tide and land near the flood. 'T was a ticklish business, an' we didn't visit back and forth as much as mother desired...."

"No, we were 'most separated, my dear sister and me, after the first year she was married," said Mrs. Blackett. "We had our little families and plenty o' cares. We were always lookin' forward to the time we could see each other more. Now and then she'd get out to the island for a
few days while her husband was fishin’; and once she stopped with her two children, and made him some flakes right there and cured all his fish for winter. We did have a beautiful time together, sister an’ me; she used to look back to it long’s she lived. (120-21)

The contrast to Burton is remarkable. First, although Jewett is evidently aware of her participation in a shared tradition—indeed, her diction acknowledges depiction of a “noble landscape”—she deliberately abdicates the powerful control Burton insists upon. At the end of the first paragraph, despite her authorship of the visual description, the narrator insists that she can hardly “take it in,” a rhetorical gesture meant to situate the locus of authority in the scene itself. The narrator in fact resists incorporation of the view by insisting that it is “another country.”

Further, the response to the landscape is not rendered as the exclusive property of the narrator, but serves as the basis of a shared view developed out of three differing perspectives. Mrs. Todd assigns a personal meaning to the scene based on her geographical and nautical experience and her participation in family life. Mrs. Blackett responds to the scene as an emotional symbol. Although both Jewett and Burton make use of the landscape painter’s device of miniaturization to signal the observer’s controlling point of view, it is significant that the narrator’s esthetic perspective, unlike Burton’s, does not dominate, but instead opens the scene to alternative readings. The tripartite scene moves, as does Burton’s description, from the foreign to the domestic, but Jewett’s multivalent presentation does not insist on the superiority of this favored position. The depiction of panoramic landscape, a staple of Jewett’s travel structure, as this example demonstrates, reinforces the necessary interplay between the world and the self as a means of establishing an ethic of cooperation.

The Picaresque Alternative

The main task of the picaresque narrative, according to Barbara A. Babcock, is to speak the truth about society from an “inverse perspective” (95). For Josephine Donovan the parodic function of the picaresque form is an important influence in local color writing, which she understands as a realistic alternative to women’s sentimental writing. She points specifically to “the satire of the ‘female-quixote’ figure in the women’s tradition” (Local Color 11) as a critique of the romance plot of the sentimental bourgeois novel whose heroine is an economically and socially powerless woman. Tabitha Tenney, whose Female Quixotism appeared in 1801, was a relative of Sarah Orne Jewett, and Donovan implies her direct influence in Jewett’s short story “The Dulham Ladies” (Local Color 27). For Donovan the antirealism of Jewett’s local color literature contrasts an “alienated world of real experience” to the “transcending vision of a supportive, fulfilling communi-

8. Essentially, this female counterpart of the unrealistic Don Quixote is an exaggeration of the book-befuddled, impractical, hence powerless, heroine of the sentimental novel. Donovan traces her development in the works of Maria Edgeworth, Jane Austen, Charlotte Lennox, whose The Female Quixote was published in 1752, and many others. See Chapters 1 and 2, New England Local Color Literature.
ty" (Local Color 99). The positive community of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is, however, in Donovan’s view, an elegiac recreation of a lost “matriarchal world” of the “foremothers” of Jewett’s generation “and their longing to reconnect with it” (Local Color 113). It is this kind of preoedipal fascination that has intrigued feminist scholars and influenced studies of Jewett’s fiction. Nancy Chodorow propounds a lifelong bond between mothers and daughters that retains important features of their earliest attachment, a thesis Sarah Way Sherman makes use of in her 1989 *Sarah Orne Jewett: An American Persephone*, which holds that the principal concern of Jewett’s fiction is the reestablishment of the bond with a lost and idealized mother.

Basing her findings on the theories of object-relations psychologists who also influence Chodorow’s later argument, Sally McNall discovers in the painful persistence of the preoedipal relationship the basis of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction:

Unable to accept the loss of the “good” mother, [the girl child] searches endlessly to project the image onto another, and to recreate it in herself. Unable to believe that she can separate from the “bad” mother, she tries endlessly to propitiate or make reparations to projections of this image. (120-21)

But while mother figures and daughter figures are central to *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, their relation is that of engagement with individuals rather than imaginary replication of lost projections. Instead of replicating the uncomfortable cycle described by McNall, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is a corrective to earlier women’s genres. In Jewett’s work the narrator and Mrs. Todd do not take on the qualities of the distant figures of childhood obsession. Adult women, they are engaged in a cooperative enterprise to construct the ethical arrangements of social experience.

The form and value of these new arrangements are represented by contradictory travel narratives of the male and female journey. The masculine or normative social version is portrayed satirically in Captain Littlepage’s sea story, “The Waiting Place.” Although the narrator is compassionate, the old captain’s name, which hints at the depreciation of his literary product, and his apparent senility frame his narrative for a satiric reading. The gender role reversal at work in the depictions of all the men in the novel further erodes the authority of his tale. Captain Littlepage is, indeed, cast as a male version of the female anti-quixote figure who, like her, has “overset his mind with too much reading” (22).

The captain’s story, like Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, tells of a fantastic journey beyond charted regions. After his
own ship was wrecked, Captain Littlepage spent a dreary winter with a Scotchman, old Gafflett, who had “shipped on a voyage of discovery” (63-64) only to wind up in “the next world to this,” a spectral region “neither living nor dead” (64) inhabited by “fog-shaped men” who finally attack Gafflett’s fellow seamen like “incessant armies.” Littlepage, at Gafflett’s behest, and to the detriment of his own career, has sought to convince the scientific community of the actual existence of this “waiting-place between this world and the next” (65).

Littlepage serves as an emblem for traditional critics of the decay of the shipping industry, the devastation of the male population in New England as a result of the Civil War, and the development of the factory system which robbed the region of its youthful population. Warner Berthoff, for instance, in 1959 termed the description of the waiting place as “in some ways the boldest and most decisive passage in the book, for it secures that reference to the life of male action and encounter without which the narrator’s sympathy for backwater Dunnet would seem myopic, sentimental” (153). For Berthoff, the male journey, even in its decline, supplies the standard. In his reading, the vitality of the women of the novel is a “sacrifice required for survival... to give up a woman’s proper life and cover the default of the men” (149-50). Francis Fike, on the other hand, countering Berthoff’s emphasis on dissolution with a celebration of the universal and “natural resources of human character” he discovered in the novel, at the same time resuscitates the spent Captain as the misunderstood prophet of “a myth of immortality” (175).

But it is the response of the narrator to Littlepage that supplies the best index to a genuinely critical reception of his tale. The narrator resents his interruption and responds with tact rather than interest during most of his recitation. She appears to disapprove of his litany of complaints about his crew and the conditions of the voyage, and she is actually engaged only during Gafflett’s mysterious tale within the tale. Littlepage is depicted as unaware of the narrator’s needs and generally oblivious to the world around him. He is, for example, totally unconscious of a swallow that enters the schoolroom and beats its wings against the walls before escaping while he is talking.11 Littlepage is presented as a product of the mercantile world of shipping, a world that generates metaphoric encounters of militancy and death. He is described as characteristically “pathetic, scholarly” rather than “alert” and engaged (66), and Gafflett, whose cause he identifies with, is “crippled,” “brooding,” and distrustful (63). Littlepage appears palpably isolated, even among the group of mourners in which the narrator first observes him, and he accounts for his habit of reading as a result of the customary nautical requirement keeping the ship’s captain from the fellowship of the crew. In the absence of human connection, he has turned to books for company. Yet

11. This metaphor, with some wit, suggests the narrator’s own situation in the encounter, but it also invokes the predicament of women suggested by bird imagery in nineteenth-century writing. See the extended discussion in Cheryl Walker’s *The Nightingale’s Burden*.
despite his profession he strikes the narrator as a particularly inept traveler, as if “he was meant to hop along the road of life rather than to walk” (58). It is significant that the antisocial journey described by Littlepage leads to the stasis of the “waiting-place” in contrast to the movement of the narrator’s serial excursions into social engagement.

The masculine journey of life, as represented by Littlepage, suggests constriction and isolation even to the point of death. Unlike the feminine journeys of “enlightenment,” which include the wives of sea captains and lead to enlarged perspective and contentment, the male journey of Gafflett’s tale leads to a dark place. Unlike the evolving community of feminine sympathy the narrator discovers in her travels, Littlepage experiences Gafflett’s paranoid suspicion and the hostile rejection of the learned societies with whom he shares Gafflett’s account, and his own general attitude of narcissistic self-absorption is directly opposed to the striking inclusivity of the feminine journeys.

The narrator, working alone on her own writing in the schoolhouse at the beginning of the novel, must recognize an uncomfortable similarity to her scholar-like and lonely guest. She experiences in Littlepage’s narrative a parodic version of attitudes she herself has absorbed from the world outside of Dunnet Landing and to which her travels in the text are meant as corrective alternatives. Captain Littlepage’s journey, which is introduced within the context of a funeral, condemns a conventional ethics of success without community, knowledge without human use, and power as personal entitlement rather than mutual benefit.

Unlike the male picaro the narrator does not signal a constant counterpoint to the community through which she travels. Instead, she learns to substitute for the myth of male journey, which is her initial orientation, a new paradigm of female travel, indigenous to the maternal teachers whom she encounters on her way. That journey is neither the universal entitlement Fike suggested nor a simple stopgap in the face of the failure of male heroic enterprise as Berthoff defined it. It is an incremental structure for the development of a moral system of mutual support and connection which contradicts dominant practice. As feminist historians have pointed out, the periods of confusion in male history—such as the decline of New England in Sarah Orne Jewett’s lifetime—have frequently opened the way for the participation of women in the construction of civilization. The ethical imperative of the genteel picara of The Country of the Pointed Firs is an example of such a project.

**Mature Dependence**

Just as unwitting masculinist bias may read the decrepitude of setting as the sign of irredeemable loss rather than radical opportunity, feminist incli-
nation has led to a view of the aging mothers of Jewett’s work as preoedipal projections rather than postoedipal partners. But Nancy Chodorow’s influential work may also support the latter view. In her 1974 essay on “Family Structure and Feminine Personality,” she contrasts the exclusive mother-daughter relation of Western middle classes to the communal bond of matri-focal societies defined as “mature dependence.”13 Whereas the offspring of contemporary families vacillate between the unacceptable polarities of “infantile dependence” and “forced independence,” daughters in matri-focal societies develop identities separate from those of their mothers but none the less embedded in an ongoing connection with mothers and other adult women, their societal functions, kinship relationships, and social status (62).

The necessary shift from the exclusive mother-daughter relation to that of the daughter within a maternal community is outlined in Jewett’s text by the visit of Mrs. Fosdick to the narrator and Mrs. Todd. The imagery of the account designates Mrs. Fosdick metonymically as “a strange sail on the far horizon” who enters the snug harbor of the intimate relation of the narrator and her hostess, an intimacy presented in imagery suggestive of the child in the womb: “I had been living in the 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 I had secreted ourselves...” (89). Mrs. Todd uses the presence of Mrs. Fosdick to foster tactfully a “sincere” friendship that includes both her new friend and her old in an enlarged community of sympathetic and active visitors (56) that defines the postoedipal maternal relations of Jewett’s text. The diction of the account casts the narrator as the girl child awaiting with some anxiety the acknowledgment and approval of the guest. Mrs. Fosdick functions as a postoedipal mother14 who, significantly, has outlived “a large family of sons and daughters” to become a “woman of the world” and an “entertaining pilgrim” who welcomes the narrator as a fellow traveler, an equal participant in the triadic community forged by the three women for the interval of the visit. The postoedipal mother is defined by her facilitation of communal cooperation instead of preoedipal dependence. Combining the virtues of home and voyage, she is Jewett’s most emblematic genteel picara, a syncretic figure whose serial embarkations and arrivals serve to fashion an inclusive ethic in which domestic fidelity is enriched by the “enlightenment” (92) of the engaged journey.

13. Chodorow adapts the term and the concept from Harry Guntrip.
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