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Littlepage's Complaint: The Realist Regionalism of Sarah Orne Jewett

MASON WALKER

"In that handful of houses they fancy they comprehend the universe."
Captain Littlepage, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*

In his manifesto "Criticism and Fiction," William Dean Howells called for American writers to stop penning their stories in perfect English. In order to portray a diversified nation with accuracy, Howells proposed rejecting the "priggish and artificial" speech of British literature in favor of styles that better reflected localized American dialects. "I should like to hear [characters] speak true American," he proclaimed, "with all the varying Tennessean, Philadelphian, Bostonian, and New York accents" (Howells 303). Suggestions like these were part of Howells's larger project, and of Realism's larger project as well; with national idealism crushed by the emotional weight of the Civil War, many Realists aimed to initiate a new literary tradition that emphasized accurate portraits of specific regions.

These Realists were particularly interested in capturing the color and content of small, self-contained communities. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Oldtown Fireside Stories*, Alice Dunbar Nelson's Creole romances, Mark Twain's Calaveras County tall tales—all of these are attempts to capture the routines and eccentricities of tiny, more or less isolated localities. However, it could be argued that these stories, with their unimpeachably humorous tone and uniformly happy endings, are not realistic enough to succeed

completely as Realist fictions. They have the sort of detailed local color called for by Howells, but their simple, optimistic portraits of those localities lack the sort of complex accuracy that was also an essential facet of Howells's Realist project. It is exactly that sort of complexity that Sarah Orne Jewett, a prolific nineteenth-century Realist and regionalist writer, provides in her fiction. As careful study of her work reveals, Jewett frequently and thoroughly examines both the advantages and disadvantages of small-town life. Like Stowe, Dunbar Nelson, and Twain, Jewett does express the eccentric joys of these towns, with their close-knit elders and quaint rituals, but she also conveys the personal sorrow and communal damage that may occur when one lives the rural life incorrectly. In her novel *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, as well as in short stories like "A White Heron" and "By The Morning Boat," Jewett imprints a complex and truly *realistic* impression of nineteenth-century rural regionalism, examining how benefits of community, privacy, and simplicity may, in some cases, come at the cost of individual knowledge and societal health.

One of Jewett's most extensive examinations of rural realism appears in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, an interconnected series of vignettes chronicling a writer's visit to the secluded community of Dunnet Landing. In an early chapter, the writer converses with an old sailor, Captain Littlepage, who provides one of the book's earliest ruminations on rural regionalist existence. Recounting his past days at sea, Littlepage tells the writer about the struggles of being a sailor; according to him, the occupation provides a "dog's life," full of "hard driving" and "old and leaky" ships (Jewett 1996, 20). He also recounts a specific voyage where the sailors, all sick, tired, and threatening mutiny, came upon a

frightening place with “fog-shaped men” that “wa’n’t a right feeling part of the world” (26-27). This story, with its combination of physical affliction and psychological torment, appears to discourage a life of travel, and by painting the outside world as garish and bewildering, Littlepage would seem implicitly to embrace the calmness and safety of Dunnet Landing.

But for all the struggles of his sailor’s life, the captain does ultimately value the time he spent at sea. Indeed, he bemoans the fact that *more* people are not spending time on such adventures. According to Littlepage, sailing, for all the trouble it caused, allowed the men of his generation to see “the world for themselves, and like ’s not their wives and children saw it When folks left home in the old days, they left it to some purpose, and when they got home they stayed there and had some pride in it” (Jewett 1996, 21). In these lines, Littlepage argues that journeying provides not only a general sense of worldliness, but also specific worldview-shifting experiences, which can lead to the development of an individual conscience. In addition to arguing in favor of ocean travel, Littlepage effectively rebuts a major objection to his argument: the idea that those who frequently leave their hometowns do so because they do not love them enough to stay. For Littlepage, on the contrary, those who occasionally journey away from their towns care about them and provide for them even *more*, and when they return from their various voyages, they will bring back new and useful knowledge. Furthermore, their time away from the town will have renewed their appreciation for it (“when they got home... they had some pride in it”). As Susan Gillman notes, Littlepage’s assessment of the benefits of travel is a “vision which encompasses the domestic and the heroic” (Gillman

106). In other words, a sailor's odyssey helps him develop his technical knowledge and survival skills (things he needs at sea), but what he acquires on that odyssey will also prove useful in his home life, consequently improving the well-being of his native town.

The idyllic isle of Dunnet Landing is indeed beautiful, but Littlepage provides a potent warning about the dangers of idolizing this one place at the expense of travel to other places. An exchange of knowledge between and among different regions is necessary for the maintenance and growth of all involved—and, as Littlepage (and Jewett) reminds us, one of the dangers of rural regionalism is an excessively comfortable provincialism that disregards the larger perspective offered by such things as inter-regional traveling and learning.

If Littlepage's lament presents a traveler's sadness at the lack of adventurous men, it also expresses an old man's dissatisfaction with the state of Dunnet Landing's youth. The dearth of young sailors in Dunnet Landing is quite clearly related to a general dearth of young people: in *Pointed Firs*, Jewett's community consists almost entirely of widows, spinsters, and the otherwise unmarried. In both the text and the town it chronicles, the appearance of children is far from the norm. This lack of newborns, as Sarah Ensor notes, is due in no small part to the fact that many of the women on the island do not *want* to have children. Many single adults in Jewett's community ascribe to a world-view that Ensor calls "non-reproductive futurity"; that is, they "exemplify ... an alternative mode of inhabitation" by contributing to the town's figurative growth instead of its literal population expansion" (Ensor 422). By doing so, these people transform their lack of reproductive activity from "a chastening limitation to a

quietly affirmative state” (Ensor 422). Despite renouncing child-rearing, these individuals know their closely joined community well enough to contribute to it in other ways—by selling herbs, by catching fish, by hosting gatherings, and so on. Because their small town allows them easily to find their niches and to discover alternative ways to benefit their community, these people are able to transform childlessness, potentially a tragic state, into something positive and productive.

At least in some ways, then, it is clearly beneficial that Dunnet Landing makes room for the spinsters, widows, and single people of the world, and that the unique position of the town allows these people to thrive without being tied down by the confines of gender stereotypes and normative domesticity. However, these benefits come at a cost. While figurative growth is necessary, a community must also grow in a more literal way, through the creation of new citizens. Ultimately, it is the young who perpetuate a town and its traditions—and, as Littlepage’s lament about the lack of new sailors reveals, it is often the young who venture *beyond* that town in order to bring back fresh knowledge and a renewed sense of local pride. When the kind of “non-reproductive futurity” enabled by a small region like Dunnet Landing becomes excessive, childbirth becomes a rarity, and this venturing-out, this necessary exchange, simply stops.

There is also another, more metaphysical difficulty brought about by a lack of new life. Amidst all the kindness and charm, a sense of mournfulness pervades the inhabitants of Dunnet Landing. This becomes especially clear, for example, in the Bowden reunion scene, where various members of the town meet for a large celebratory gathering. At the end of that gathering, the writer,

observing the Dunnet Landing citizens taking their leave, notes that such a joyous occasion is very rare for these people, since they often have little cause to see one another. More depressingly, the writer goes on to that, in this community, a majority of large gatherings usually take place for decidedly less joyous reasons: "Funerals in this country of the pointed firs were not without their social advantages and satisfactions" (Jewett 1996, 101). Observing this town of spinsters, unmarried people, and elders, the writer tells us that the chief occasion of social gathering is not the celebration of a birth or a wedding, but, significantly, the mourning of a death. In a community with little new life, loss provides the dominant ritual. Dunnet Landing's "non-reproductive futurity" may offer important protections against hegemony, and it may make necessary room for those who are often unfairly treated as outcasts. But as a true Realist, Jewett knows that such a lifestyle has its darker side as well.

With its comprehensive treatment of the delights and dangers of rural regionalism, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* provides an appreciably realistic account of Dunnet Landing. *Firs*, however, is not Jewett's final word on the complexities of local life, and several of her short stories engage with these questions as well. In the most famous of these, "A White Heron," Jewett uses an encounter between a country girl and a city man to dramatize the unique strengths and weaknesses of the rural and the urban. Admittedly, the story, with its fanciful plot about a nature-loving girl who saves a heron from the hands of an ornithologist, initially seems simplistic in comparison to *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. Indeed, in its early pages, the narrative is somewhat conventional: Sylvia, the "little-woods girl," meets a city man with a "determined,

aggressive whistle” and decides to protect a rare bird instead of giving it to him to “stuff and preserve” as a trophy (Jewett 1997, 73 and 75). This opening presents the reader with a highly romanticized view of nature, and thus of rural regionalist life as well. Because Sylvia lives in a small locality near a forest, she has developed a closeness to and empathy with nature—an empathy which the ornithologist, who grew up in the busy amorality of the Great Wide World, ultimately lacks. At this point in “A White Heron,” it appears as though the struggle in the story will be between the good of the rural and the evil of the urban.

However, Jewett, a constant complicator of easy binaries, has something more nuanced in mind. When Sylvia finally decides not to tell the ornithologist where the heron lives, one might expect a triumphalist finale: nature has beaten human cruelty. But at exactly the moment we might expect the writer to laud Sylvia’s decision, she begins to question it: “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?” (Jewett 1997, 79). Suddenly, Sylvia has had a Realist thought in the midst of what was previously an almost Romantic narrative. Could it be that her rural regionalist worldview has some negative consequences? In this moment, Sylvia’s closeness with the animal world has cost her a rare chance to become connected to the *human* world by securing the ornithologist’s money, knowledge, and friendship. Her choice to save the bird’s life comes at the expense of the sort of travel and inter-regional understanding that Captain Littlepage defends so passionately in *Pointed Firs*.

By its final lines, this story's once-simplistic narrative has become confused and ambiguous. As the story draws to a close, Jewett (as narrator) asks the question taking shape in Sylvia's head: "Were the birds better friends than their hunter might have been? Who can tell?" (Jewett 1997, 80). As Josephine Donovan argues, part of the story's strength lies in the fact that Jewett makes it difficult to answer these questions. While the story does indeed "reject ... the evils of the industrial city (symbolized in the man's gun)," it also "acknowledges the limitations of the country world ... and [the] opportunity for ... growth [that] the city represents" (Donovan 72). The sort of isolated regionalist environment in which Sylvia was raised has left her with a deep, practical understanding of nature, and, as such, has inculcated an empathy with the natural world that a "city person" would likely lack. However, this attachment to the natural world leaves Sylvia unsure of how to interact with other humans—and, for better or worse, it renders her incapable of seizing a significant opportunity for growth. In the world of "Heron," as in the world of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, rural regionalism's beauties and burdens are connected and, quite often, inextricable.

The Country of the Pointed Firs and "A White Heron" thus examine issues of rural regionalism with the sort of Realism that William Dean Howells held in high esteem. But of all her published work, it is in "By the Morning Boat" that Jewett deals with these issues most explicitly. This story, which chronicles the final hours before a young man departs from coastal Maine for a temporary job in Boston, is centered almost exclusively on questions of place. As young Elisha prepares to leave from the tiny, enclosed community in which he was raised, various characters ponder the benefits and

drawbacks of that departure. One of his family's main concerns is that the virtuous child they raised will be negatively influenced by the cruelty of the city. As Jewett describes them, Elisha's family are "speechless with grief: they could not bear to part with [his] pride and hope and boyish strength" (Jewett n.d.). His young sister is particularly distressed, fearing that her brother will lose all of the qualities instilled by his rural upbringing: "It was a world of favor to which little Lydia's brother had gone, ... but who would know ... [of his] country boy's bashfulness and humble raiment from the cheap counter of a country store?"

As the ornithologist in "A White Heron" reminds us, contact with the wider world can certainly have its unsavory side, and it is therefore sensible that his relatives worry about the effect such unsavoriness will have on Elisha. Far from optimistically hoping that the city will bring blessings to the boy, they fear that it will cause him to give in to faddishness, trading the "humble raiment" of his country upbringing for the more vapid and less kindly fashions of modernity. Moreover, Elisha's mother worries that her son's departure will hurt the family dynamic. Discussing the matter with her own father, Elisha's mother confesses that she had long ago "settled on [Elisha] as the one to keep," and states that "p'raps folks was right about our needing of him" (Jewett n.d.). In a rural family as close and interdependent as this one, the departure of a single individual can cause significant emotional damage—and, since the departing person is in this case a strong, capable male, that departure may damage them economically and domestically as well. But Elisha's mother's uncertainty about Elisha's journey goes beyond a practical "needing of him." Long ago, Elisha's own father was killed in a boat accident while on a

shipping job very similar to the one Elisha is about to take. The possibility of Elijah's departure therefore brings back traumatic memories; the mother says that she "couldn't git much sleep" because of "things I don't relish the feelin' of, all over again." If Elijah chose to stay on the coast of Maine, it would quell his sister's worries about his morality, stop the family from fraying, and ensure that he does not meet the same sad fate as his father.

Overall, there are many reasons for Elisha to stay in his safe, rural home. But, as Jewett suggests towards the end of the story, the reasons for him to leave, though fewer, are greater. As the boy prepares to sail away, Jewett addresses the audience directly, lauding her character's decision. According to her, Elisha's journey is part of the "natural processes" of growth, the only thing that will give him "a joyful sense of manliness and responsibility" (Jewett n.d.). As Elisha sails off to Boston, Jewett proclaims that he is embarking upon "the great adventure of life's fortunes," at last ready to be ranked "by his own character and ability." Although Elisha's mother and siblings may think of his journey in negative terms, it is clear from phrases like these that the narrator conceives of it positively. Perhaps this is because the narrator knows what Captain Littlepage knows: regardless of the risks, such journeys are what invigorate individuals, and, by extension, their communities. It would seem that, for Jewett, the way to keep a rural town alive is not to over-Romanticize it and cling to it jealously, but to venture away from it and return a little wiser. To paraphrase Littlepage: the only way a little town will stay healthy is if some of its residents leave with a purpose and then return with pride. In an excessively Romantic world, people like Elisha could be seen as betraying their native regions by temporarily abandoning them for the city. In

Jewett's realistic world, people like Elijah are the ones keeping their native regions alive.

In his analysis of "A White Heron," Terry Heller refers to the story as "a drama of human incompleteness" and states that the fact "that Sylvia wants to belong to both great worlds (the country and the city) points to the incompleteness of each" (Heller 192). By way of conclusion, then, it will be helpful to envision *all* three of these Jewett texts as "dramas of human incompleteness," examinations of what the rural regionalist lifestyle can and cannot contribute to our struggle for human wholeness. In all of these works, the close-knit rural community can provide benefits that other kinds of community cannot: closeness with nature, communal acceptance of alternative lifestyles, and a general sense of safety, to name just a few. However, these communities also have their drawbacks. Closeness with nature may come at the expense of proper human interaction. Alternative lifestyles may have a negative impact on a community's future. And, as all three of these works reveal, an excessive regard for rootedness and safety may lead to a lack of new knowledge and understanding—and that will *definitely* have a negative impact on a community's future.

Ultimately, Jewett's small towns are, like any social arrangement, uniquely capable and uniquely incapable, singularly gifted but ultimately incomplete. They are, in other words, what Howells might call "life-like." Many other nineteenth-century American authors attempted to paint truthful portraits of rural regionalist life, but, as these pieces show, Jewett's eye for detail, disdain for inaccuracy, and openness to ambiguity allowed her to reach a level of realistic portrayal that few of her colleagues achieved. If readers feel as though they have inhabited Jewett's

locations, it is because her dispassionate eye and compassionate heart allowed her to inhabit them herself.

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