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A Woman's World: Sarah Orne Jewett's Regionalist Alternative

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“And you could almost have done it as yourself—a woman could love her in that same protecting way—a woman could even care enough to wish to take her away from such a life, by some means or other...”

—Sarah Orne Jewett, 1908 (qtd. in Pryse 526)

This advice, found in a letter Sarah Orne Jewett wrote to Willa Cather in 1908, defines Jewett's purpose as an author. The quotation followed Jewett's suggestion that Cather change the sex of a dying woman's lover from male to female, but the piece of advice designed for Cather's story also applies to Jewett's own fiction. The phrase “done it as yourself” suggests self-sufficiency and capability, both in the general sense and on the specific part of women in love. Jewett's reference to a woman's capability to love in a “protecting way,” a way most often assigned to men, illuminates her belief that women could love in a traditionally masculine manner. However, the implication of a woman that both protects and nurtures (“[cares] enough”) implies that a woman may not only love as a man loves but can love simultaneously as both genders. Jewett's resulting work shows women performing both gender roles not in a muddled androgynous manner, but as stronger, more well-rounded women. In her short story “A White Heron,” Jewett uses her young heroine Sylvia to reject the traditional choices open to women at the time of publication in 1886 and choose instead a self-made alternative. In the story, Sylvia meets a young hunter who offers to pay her for the location of a heron he hunts. After a nighttime trip into the forest, where she climbs a tree and sees the heron, Sylvia decides to protect the heron at her own expense, thereby severing her relationship with the hunter (symbolic of industrialization) and solidifying her connection to nature. By representing the conceptual relationship between femininity and society in the metaphorical relationship between Sylvia, Nature, and the young sportsman, Jewett establishes a new dynamic for women. In doing so, the author proposes what Marjorie Pryse, in her essay “Reading Jewett's Transitivity,” calls an “alternative cultural vision” (Pryse 518).

Jewett's cultural vision is imperative to the scope of Regionalist American writing, work characterized by excessive concern to representing the region from which the author comes. This school of writing emphasizes accuracy in setting and devotion to the lifestyle found in its place. Sometimes called “Local Color” writing, Regionalism featured women writing for and about women, and this is also true of “A White Heron.” “Typically,” says Babette May Levy in her essay “Mutations in New England Local Color,” in *Regionalism*, “the wife and mother wins...or after some years of consideration, decides she does not want [her man]” (Levy 340). Many of these stories seem at first to empower women, because they feature heroines living without men. Some critics, though, such as Donald A. Dike, argue that this narrow focus on the local feminine experience limits the effectiveness of the Regionalist genre. In his essay “Notes on Local Color and Its

Relation to Realism,” Dike argues that Local Color “insists upon the special context of the events and character with which it deals...insists upon the primary importance of that special context to [convey] its meaning” (Dike 82). Even Levy, who supports Local Color much more optimistically, asks, “how much of the resulting pictures is pure recording, how much the artist’s individual interpretation...?” (Levy 338). In some ways, Local Color demands that the reader identify with the subjects. However, as Levy later explains, it is through these isolated interpretations that Regionalist writers accomplish their purpose; Sarah Orne Jewett “saw isolation as intensifying” (Levy 357). This critical debate reveals Jewett’s unique position. By isolating her work from the Realist canon, she fosters its growth as an alternative genre of literature, and promotes an alternative option for women’s lives, free from pressures to marry, raise children, and ultimately to rely on men.

Jewett accomplishes this intensifying isolation by rebelling against the traditions of industrialism, but literally and ideologically. According to Bill Brown, in “Regional Artifacts: The Life of Things in the Work of Sarah Orne Jewett,” Regionalism “was perceived in the 1890s as providing relief from the cosmopolitan scene, as the antidote” (Brown 196). This “relief” from the worldview of Realism creates an “alternative narrative space” in which Jewett and other Regionalists focused on women’s social progress (Pryse 517). By removing the traditions of contemporary writing, they made room for their own ideas, and the creation of an alternative narrative space forms a canon of what Pryse calls “resistant literature” (Pryse 519). Just as Sylvia, the protagonist of “A White Heron,” resists the financial temptation to betray Nature, Jewett “[resists] rigid sexual categories” (Pryse 519). In this way, her literature ignores the bonds of traditional culture. Jewett uses her innate “[mildness] in spirit” to create a mild character, Sylvia, that overthrows gender norms and chooses an alternative lifestyle for women (Levy 350). She does this by setting up Sylvia as an innocent faced with a choice, manipulating that choice into female dominance, and ultimately championing a relationship between feminine entities as a stronger alternative for nineteenth century women than the predetermined fate of dependence in matrimony.

“A White Heron” reflects these literary moves perfectly by offering the protagonist the bones of an industrial lifestyle but instead fostering the simplicity of the natural world. Sylvia begins the story as an innocent—a young girl that exemplifies vulnerability. The author establishes this not only through Sylvia’s youth and fear, but also through the inclusion of frail imagery and references to the girl in transition. Jewett describes Sylvia as “little,” “childish,” “bare,” and “trembling” (Jewett 415-7). These words lend vulnerability to Sylvia’s characterization so that the audience immediately reads her as innocent and untried. These qualities, in combination with her age—Jewett specifies that she is

nine years old—place her as the ideal of young femininity (416). Throughout the story, the author includes references to Sylvia's transition. The opening paragraph refers both to shadow and to the sunset. By referencing not only images of light and dark but also of the movement of the sun, which marks the transition from day to night, Jewett sets the reader up for a story of transition from masculinity to femininity. As the child walks with her cow, they “[go] away from whatever light there was...while the moon [comes] up”(418). By including these two references to the changing of daylight, the author illustrates the significance of Sylvia's innocence and her upcoming change.

In comparison to Sylvia, the young sportsman exemplifies masculine virility. The girl thinks of him as an “enemy,” and hides from him in the bushes (Jewett 417). The young man “[carries] a gun over his shoulder,” which makes Sylvia feel threatened (417). This may be because of the unmistakably phallic implications of this image, or because the gun represents the development of technology. Since technology threatens Nature, to which Sylvia is bonded, the boy carrying technology threatens her. As Sylvia spends time with the boy, she grows used to him; however, he remains a sexual predator to her, “determined and somewhat aggressive” (417). In their first conversation, he asks her to tell him “what [her] name is, and whether [she thinks he] can spend the night at [her] house, and go out gunning early in the morning” (417). By combining her identity with his spending the night and “gunning,” he groups her into his agenda, which of course includes conquest. This is consistent with male treatment of women during the nineteenth century. In characterizing the young man as an aggressor and Sylvia as a frightened target, Jewett sets up the circumstances for her later status shift in genders, a shift away from technology and toward nature, that awards power to the female and relegates relationship with males to a single option rather than an assumption.

Part of this status shift is initiated by the young sportsman. As he reaches Sylvia's home and greets Mrs. Tilley, he “[stands] his gun beside the door” (Jewett 417). By setting aside his weapon at the entrance to their domain, he surrenders his virility to the women. Without the gun, which represents his phallic authority as man, the young man is powerless. In saying things like, “Put me anywhere you like,” the young man hands control over to the women and establishes a new order in which the feminine lead (417).

In order to establish and maintain that alternative hierarchy, the women in “A White Heron” care for themselves. When discussing Mistress Moolly, the cow, the narrator says, “if the creature had not given good milk and plenty of it, the case would have seemed very different to her owners” (Jewett 416). From this, the reader can infer that Mrs. Tilley and Sylvia depend on the cow not only for milk, but also for their welfare. That Mrs. Tilley does not depend on a husband or son for financial independence establishes her as an individual capable of self-

sufficiency. In addition, the statement implies that Mrs. Tilley operates her homestead judiciously and with skill.

This kind of independent operation, characteristic of the head of the household, makes the feminine home run properly without the aid of men. In fact, Sylvia's grandmother does head her household. As Sylvia brings the young man home, she wonders, "would not her grandmother consider her much to blame?" and the cow "[gives] a loud moo by way of explanation" (Jewett 417). That both Sylvia and the cow feel the need to give account for their actions reflects the authority of Mrs. Tilley. Sylvia's anxiety and the cow's offering both indicate a social order within the homestead, with Mrs. Tilley at the head. Sylvia's grandmother stands in the doorway, guarding her home as a man might traditionally guard his.

In comparison to her power, the force of the boy's intimidation fails. Jewett illustrates the boy's inferior status through his youth, his willingness to submit to the feminine world, and, ultimately, through Sylvia's choice to deny him. At the beginning of the story, when Sylvia hears him in the woods, she hears "a boy's whistle," not a man's whistle (Jewett 417). By casting him into immaturity, Jewett elevates the status of the much older Mrs. Tilley. When asked if his birds are caged, the boy replies, "Oh no, they're stuffed and preserved, dozens and dozens of them...and I have shot or snared every one myself" (418). The phrase "dozens and dozens" is grammatically unnecessary, yet consistent with a child's speech, while his pride in his skill ("I have shot or snared every one myself") reveals a childlike need for approval (418). Mrs. Tilley's reaction, too, shows this age gap. During the sportsman's talk, the narrator intrudes. The sportsman says, "...ever since I was a boy," and the narrator interjects "(Mrs. Tilley smiled)" (418). The narrator's use of parentheses here draws attention to Mrs. Tilley's reaction. Her amusement illustrates a woman as more knowledgeable, more worldly, and more practical than a man, and this upsets the normative order of gender. Mrs. Tilley, like the audience, recognizes the man as a boy, and his masculinity as an outdated dominator next to the growing agency of femininity. Dike argues that Local Color writing "does not grapple seriously with the moral problem of social groups or of individuals in groups. Instead, it sermonizes and supplies innumerable demonstrations of unambiguous virtue" (Dike 87). The scale of values at work in "A White Heron" may not be ambiguous, but the characters do quite a bit of grappling for status. Sylvia sits between this struggle. Her choice to protect the heron, a part of the feminine Nature, rather than helping the young, passive-aggressive male, causes the ultimate shift in the status of the genders.

Before Sylvia makes this choice, however, she examines her suitors. The young man puts forth his best effort to woo her. In order to convince her to tell him where the heron is, the young man "[tells] her many things" (Jewett 419).

The offering of knowledge correlates with his profession as an ornithologist and expands on the conflict between nature and industrialization, a theme underscored by a corresponding conflict between femininity and masculinity (418). As a man who makes his living on science, the father of technology, the young man encourages an enemy of Nature. While Sylvia seems to enjoy learning new things from the young man, she cannot quite give up her close relationship with Nature in order to keep him.

In considering Sylvia's relationship with Nature, one must consider Nature holistically, as a sum of parts grouped together in one entity that relates to Sylvia. This entity is female. In demonstration of the above quote from Jewett to Cather promoting a femininity that both protects and nurtures, Nature becomes a female lover to Sylvia. Jewett defines this by drawing attention to Sylvia's relationship with Nature. At the beginning of the story, the woods "[make Sylvia] feel as if she were a part of the gray shadows and the moving leaves" (Jewett 417). The inclusion of Sylvia's feelings with the phrase "part of" connects her with the shadows and leaves, giving her an exclusive communion with Nature, similar to that of lovers. Later on, Mrs. Tilley brags to the sportsman, "There ain't a foot o' ground she don't know her way over, and the wild creatures counts her one o'themselves" (Jewett 418). This reveals Sylvia's close relationship to the outdoors and to the collection of its inhabitants. The familiarity implied by Mrs. Tilley's statement reflects Sylvia's level of comfort and mutuality with Nature. The phrase "one of themselves" indicates union. As Sylvia communes with Nature, she depends on it. As Dike says, "Local Color fiction...tends to be deterministic. Its characters are deeply rooted in their environment, and their behavior depends on what it has made of them" (Dike 83). Considering this, one concludes that Sylvia's actions require the impetus of Nature. The phrase "rooted in" illustrates how closely Sylvia and Nature are tied, even in criticism. Naturally, then, Sylvia's actions toward men are based on her existing relationship with Nature.

What kind of relationship is this? From Pryse, the reader can infer that Jewett supported homosexual relationships that furthered the cause of literature. "Sexuality, for Jewett," she says, "was not a fixed category" (Pryse 526). Considering this and viewing Nature as a collective group of elements that makes up a feminine essence, the reader sees Sylvia's nighttime trip to see the heron in a lesbian psychosexual context.

To understand Sylvia's final choice, one must first understand Nature as a woman, and then as a female lover. The obvious metaphor for this, of course, is the proverbial "Mother Nature." By describing nature so that it relates to this title, Jewett capitalizes on the feminine "mother" to define her character. Other references throughout the work lend credibility to the view of Nature as woman. For example, in the opening paragraphs, the sun sets, giving way to the moon.

Viewing the moon as a traditional symbol of femininity, this image of the masculine sun setting and the feminine moon rising becomes a transition in authority from masculinity to femininity. Since Nature contains the sunset, it depends on this dominant femininity for its gender identity. Other elements, such as the sex of Mistress Moolly the cow and the frequent references to plant imagery, combine to solidify Nature as a female character.

This, then, pits Nature, as feminine, against technology, as masculine. Sylvia's appraisal of the young man with the gun as an "enemy" begins the conflict between the two. The young man hunts the heron, a part of Nature, as part of his technological aggression. His eagerness to stuff bits of Nature and put them on display reflects a need to conquer into submission, much as masculine culture of the nineteenth century dominated the feminine. This conflict creates a "gendered binary" set up as a foil between male and female (Pryse 525). Through the binary, Jewett makes the often-referenced dramatic conflict between Man and Nature much more literally between the young Man (male) and Nature (female).

Of course, the object of Jewett's structure is for Nature to triumph. The author forms the ideal conflict between gendered opposites so that the feminine may triumph through the embracing of an alternative. She does this through intercourse. It is impossible to overlook the sexual symbolism involved in Sylvia's nighttime trip; from the beginning, the story sets up what can only be described as Sylvia's sex scene with the pine tree. The narrator mentions "a heart that beat fast with pleasure" and that the woods "made her feel as if she were a part of the gray shadows and the moving leaves" (Jewett 417). Jewett's language mimics that most often used to describe sexual encounters. The sense of physical anticipation that Sylvia experiences when feeling like she is "part of" Nature echoes a lover's.

The tree, of course, is male, and is in fact the only male object in feminine Nature, the "last of its generation" (Jewett 419). Were there any reader doubt as to the sex of the tree, Jewett's possessive pronoun "his" in combination with her conspicuous phallic imagery as Sylvia climbs the tree clears up the debate (421). The tree "[lengthens] itself out as she [goes] up, and [reaches] farther and farther upward" (420). This metaphorical erection makes clear the event. By climbing the pine tree, Sylvia conquers that which is masculine in Nature, restoring it to a feminine relationship.

Brown calls this technique the "pairing of people and things" (Brown 197). By correlating the physical set of the story with the conceptual, the author illustrates her purpose. As Sylvia "mount[s] to the top" of the tree, she climbs a hierarchy "with tingling, eager blood coursing the channels of her whole frame" (Jewett 420). She, like the women in societies before her, climbs the tree with difficulty: "the way was harder than she thought" (420). At one point, it appears as though the tree has triumphed and "[loves] his new dependent" (421). By

referencing Sylvia as such, Jewett warns the reader that without the firm resolve to choose Sylvia's alternative lifestyle, the female remains dependent on the male. The alternative she presents takes effort, but it is possible. Sylvia returns from her nighttime escapade "trembling and tired but wholly triumphant" (421). The sexual experience with the pine tree has restored her relationship with woman Nature and the "sense of comfort and companionship" it offers (420). This correlates with Brown's assertion that "the effectiveness of the scene depends on material intimacy, on evoking the intimate relation between the human body and physical artifacts" (Brown 206). The intimacy referenced takes place between women—that is, between Sylvia, a new woman, and Nature, as female lovers.

As noted, it is impossible not to note the prominent phallic imagery. It is necessary, however, for the pine tree's phallic imagery to belong to the feminine. Brown establishes this as the "image of incorporating the particularity of place into the body itself" (Brown 212). He argues that the physical relationship between characters and their physical surroundings in literature creates the theme in the character. In this way, Nature, even as woman, *must* penetrate Sylvia in order to establish femininity within her. Jewett's mix of genital imagery may be more fully understood when considering her reference to Sylvia as a flower. When feeling guilty for bringing the young sportsman back to the house, the girl "[hangs] her head as if the stem of it were broken" (Jewett 417). This metaphor, comparing Sylvia to a flower, illuminates the gender work at play between feminine Nature and the phallic pine tree. As a flower includes both the stigma and the ovary, the male and female reproductive organs, it fosters an *intracourse* between itself and the workings of Nature. Flowers, like Sylvia, are unmistakably tied to the feminine. Therefore, by comparing the girl to the flower, Jewett completes the analogy. Just as flowers include both the masculine and feminine genitals, yet adhere to the feminine in symbolism, Nature, as Sylvia's lover, uses the phallus to solidify Sylvia's femininity and their relationship, opening a lifestyle for Sylvia independent of men.

After reconsidering the implications of Sylvia's relationships to both the young sportsman and Nature, the other implications of the story become clear. Sylvia's choice to protect the heron from the hunter and to live in communion with Nature echoes Jewett's advice to Cather that a woman might "care enough to wish to take her away from such a life" (Pryse 526). "Such a life" here might refer to a life among men as a traditional wife. The story "portrays the high cost of the social construction of woman-as-marriageable-heterosexual," but more importantly, it offers an alternative lifestyle (Pryse 540). This alternative "away from such a life" is in the country, or, metaphorically, among women. Sylvia "tried to grow for eight years in a crowded manufacturing town, but...it seemed as if she never had been alive at all before she came to live at the farm" (Jewett 416). That Sylvia suffers in industrialization dominated by men but prospers in

the feminine atmosphere of the farm indicates her innate sexual orientation. Comments like, "Sylvia would have liked him better without his gun" gain significance in the scope of the protagonist's inclination. By choosing to deny the hunter, Sylvia acknowledges the expectations placed upon women to marry and tend house, rejects them, and embraces a lifestyle dominated by women.

By metaphorically illustrating a young girl's rejection of traditional gender roles, the author uses a passive-aggressive strategy to endorse this alternative standard. The most important element at work in the story is, of course, Sylvia's freedom to choose her own role. Using the specificity of Regionalist literature, which, as Dike points out, "calls attention to the plight or special problem of people in local areas" Jewett expands the options available to women (Dike 84). The "local areas" in this case transcend the scope of geography and to include the limits placed upon the feminine role. Jewett's characters "live well outside the centers of power and urban social hierarchies common in fiction by her Realist contemporaries" (Pryse 517). In this way, the geographic remoteness of Regionalism removes the story from "social hierarchies" that may interfere with that choice. Because the author avoids traditional Realism and narrows the focus of her story "A White Heron" to center on the relationship between Sylvia, a fresh heroine, and Nature, her lesbian mate, the author expands the story beyond the boundaries of time.

The gender work taking place in "A White Heron" is relevant not only to changes in society's attitude towards alternative sexual orientations but also to the more general conceptual implications. Dike claims, "Local Color writing cannot easily make such a transformation and be true to its purpose, be itself. It remains engrossed in differences, ignoring the great continuity of human experience which more serious literature strives to illuminate" (Dike 88). In spite of this claim, however, Jewett champions a character that chooses not her orientation but her way of life, relating a local struggle to the universal. She takes an option available only to white males and gives that option to a young girl, and in doing so, defends a woman's right to choose her lifestyle. This not only proves Dike wrong, it more importantly expands the scope of Jewett's work, because the concept of choice is universal.

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