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Time, Masculinity, and Isolation in *The Country of the Pointed
Firs*

Olivia Bernard

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No community can exist in stasis. Time moves forward, and with it, societies must change. However, it's all too easy to become obsessed with or victim to times long gone and events long past, and in doing so, lose sight of the current day. What causes this disconnect? In her collection of short sketches, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Sarah Orne Jewett examines how the inability to balance the past and present is linked to isolation from society and reliance on patriarchal institutions. This observation holds true whether the social detachment involves the male characters, who are oblivious to their predicament, or the single female character for whom it is self-imposed. By contrasting balanced, feminine, interdependent characters like Mrs. Todd with their unbalanced, masculine, solitary counterparts, Jewett underscores the importance of respecting the past while not becoming consumed by it. Only by doing this, she argues, can one lead a fulfilling life and build a functioning community.

The Country of the Pointed Firs begins and ends with the bond forged between the visiting, unnamed female narrator and her host, Dunnet Landing native Almira Todd, whose balance represents a strong alternative to the masculine characters who will be discussed later. Mrs. Todd's centrality in the community is deeply tied to her practice as a healer and herbalist. Other residents of Dunnet Landing seek her remedies and medical authority. The narrator describes her "standing in the doorway ... while she muttered long chapters of directions, and kept up an air secrecy and importance to the last" (Jewett 43). When the narrator explains to Mrs. Todd that she will be unable to continue acting as a business partner to give Mrs. Todd time to collect wild herbs, the narrator "felt that I was cruel to a whole neighborhood in curtailing [Mrs. Todd's] liberty in this most important season for harvesting the different wild herbs that were so much counted upon to ease

their winter ails” (Jewett 45). Clearly, Almira Todd is a pillar of this community, central to its function and running a social network on her step. Many of Mrs. Todd’s herbal remedies, too, come from both a long history of use and are used to treat specifically female infirmities. Black and blue cohosh, which are members of her garden, tick both boxes; these plants were used by Native Americans to treat gynecological complaints such as alleviating period cramps, easing childbirth, and treating menopausal symptoms (Jewett 43n1). By distributing these treatments among her community of female patients, Mrs. Todd carries the traditions of the past into the present. She is, in effect, a stand-in for the greater community of Dunnet Landing, and her relationships with and contrasts to various characters similarly represent that greater whole.

Mrs. Todd’s balancing of the past and present is further linked to both herbs and femininity with her favorite herb, pennyroyal, which is commonly used to stimulate abortion (Jewett 47n1). However, pennyroyal’s importance to Mrs. Todd is much more personal. When she travels to a special location on Green Island to pick pennyroyal, she explains to the narrator that “Nathan, my husband, an’ I used to love this place when we was courtin’ ... when he was lost, ‘t was just off shore tryin’ to get in by the channel out there between Squaw Islands, right in sight o’ this headland where we’d set an’ made our plans all summer long” (Jewett 77). The pennyroyal is a means of remembrance to Mrs. Todd, both of her late husband Nathan and to the other man she would’ve married had his parents not considered her to be beneath him. As she says, “this pennyr’yal always reminded me, as I’d sit and gather it and hear [Nathan] talkin’—it always would remind me of—the other one” (Jewett 77). Even Mrs. Todd’s sorrow is then linked to a long history and tradition; the narrator compares her to “Antigone alone on the Theban plain” (Jewett 78), and soon after, describes her as “a renewal of some historic soul” (Jewett 78). Her loss is linked to a lineage of grief, tying her to a much greater past that she embodies and carries on, much as she carries on the memories of her two past loves through the pennyroyal.

Readers also meet Mrs. Todd’s male counterpart, the village doctor, early in the book, and are presented at once with

two sets of contrasts: masculinity versus femininity and solitary versus communal. Institutional medicine, especially in the late 1800s, was a solely male practice, and hence the doctor is figured as a kind of masculine version of Mrs. Todd, presumably offering remedies for ailments she also treats. It's worthy of note, too, that the doctor's form of medicine is a much newer institution than the centuries of "Indian remedy" (Jewett 43) Mrs. Todd's practice follows. However, calling the doctor marginal to the story is almost an overstatement; he briefly appears twice in the entire book and is never named. Where Mrs. Todd's status as a healer centralizes her in the community, the doctor seems to exist only at the sidelines, largely irrelevant. Healing alone is not what centralizes Mrs. Todd; rather, her place is cemented by servicing the feminine in the community and balancing the past with the future.

It is in this primarily female social network that the narrator will spend the rest of the book. As Elizabeth Ammons argues in her article "Going in Circles: The Female Geography of Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs*," Mrs. Todd's house is a symbol of the bond between the narrator and her host, which "deepens and broadens but does not undergo fundamental or unexpected change—it is steady, solid, unshakeable" (85). The narrator's relationship to the community is founded upon her relationship to Mrs. Todd, putting it in contrast to the traditional hero's journey plot structure. The hero's journey is generally centered around a protagonist overcoming a hierarchy of increasingly difficult challenges. If interpersonal relationships are involved, they compete with or replace one another. However, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is a network of non-hierarchical encounters and accumulative relationships. As Ammons summarizes, "relationships do not vie with but complement each other. The narrator does not go through a series of people; she adds new friendships onto her life multidirectionally" (85). This expanding circle of structure, as Ammons argues, is fundamentally feminine, as it both breaks away from the traditional masculine plot structures and decentralizes lone wolf male heroes as the focal point of the story. In the common literature of the day, the male doctor would have been the story's main character, with Almira

Todd as, at best, an endearing quack of a minor character; his story would've followed a hero's journey brand of plot structure, using and discarding relationships. Instead, by centralizing and radiating out from the narrator and Mrs. Todd's friendship, Jewett pushes back against male centrality and focuses instead on female love throughout the Dunnet Landing community.

This story's structure of a relationship web is also linked to time in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. As in her essay "Visions of Time in 'The Country of the Pointed Firs,'" Margaret Baker Graham describes linear time as a fundamentally masculine effort to find relationships between events where none exist, strongarming them into a tidy cause and effect much like a traditional plot structure would. One event or person generally dominates the story. Feminine time, by contrast, is cyclical, with time and events "recurring without cessation and without agency" (Graham 30), much like the seasonal cycle to which Mrs. Todd and her plants are so wedded, and to which the female bodily functions—menstruation, gestation—that these plants treat are commonly linked. In fact, Mrs. Todd even directly links both her heartache and her femininity to the rotation of seasons: "a woman's heart is different; them feelin's comes back when you think you've done with 'em, as sure as spring comes with the year" (Jewett 45). In addition, the most socially significant events in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* are cyclical—that is, feminine—as well as notably all community- or relationship-oriented, from the annual Bowden reunion near the end of the book to the funeral (death being part of the cycle of life) the narrator sees in the fourth chapter.

Both Ammons and Graham note that the novel follows an alternating pattern of juxtaposing joyous feminine community with dejected masculine solitude. As Ammons writes, "we first meet robust Mrs. Todd, then sad Captain Littlepage, then lively Mrs. Blackett, then tragic Joanna, then delighted Bowden reunioners, then tearful Elijah Tilley" (87). After all, "If relationships are the focus rather than the background of one's world, as has traditionally been the situation of women, one inevitable rhythm ... is constant oscillation between vitality and morbidity, happiness and sadness, life and death, addition and loss" (Ammons 88).

Similarly, this emotional narrative push-pull is also alteration between characters occupying masculine, linear time and those occupying feminine, cyclical time, as Graham observes (30). This structure further serves to contrast balance with imbalance and highlight the factors that contribute to each character's respective connectedness with the community or detachment from it. The alternation makes it all the clearer who's leading a fulfilling life and who's not, emphasizing the ability of balance to bring about happiness. The disconnected, imbalanced characters share masculine traits which isolate and sadden them, starkly contrasted against the cheerful, feminine social network that surrounds them.

In the fifth chapter, the narrator has her first personal encounter with a male character on the fringes of society, much like the doctor was. This theme will remain consistent with virtually all of the male characters in the book. Captain Littlepage is a reclusive former sailor for the shipping industry, a predominantly male profession for the time period. He spends most of his time cut off from the world, watching the greater society of Dunnet Landing from behind closed windows. He wanders alone into the narrator's presence while she's trying to write and tells her about his past travels on the ocean, in particular his encounter with "a kind of waiting-place between this world an' the next" (Jewett 59) in the far north, populated by elusive, shadowy "fog people." Captain Littlepage is an example of a character occupying masculine, linear time—and his timeline has frozen in the past with the death of the shipping industry. As Graham observes, he is "unable to recognize the recurring processes of life that remain" (31), and therefore Littlepage "becomes the story he cannot forget" (31). He cannot find balance, and as such, he cannot participate in the community surrounding him. Instead, he's an outsider in his own hometown, a relic of days long gone and rather ghostly himself. So isolated is the captain that later, the narrator describes "Captain Littlepage ... sitting behind his closed window ... there was a patient look on the old man's face, as if the world were a great mistake and he had nobody with whom to speak his own language" (Jewett 108). Littlepage is an object of sad confusion and pity to Mrs. Todd, who speaks for the community when she says ruefully, "Oh, he used to be a beautiful man!" (Jewett 62). His

hero's journey has ended, and because he cannot move beyond that kind of solitary, masculine, linear time to balance his past and present, now he is only a sorry relic on the fringes of society.

Later in the narrative, after a joyous reunion with Mrs. Todd's mother, Mrs. Blackett, on Green Island, the narrator encounters the tale of the second character to live outside of the community: Joanna Todd. This character, being female, is the exception to the rule of male solitude in the novel; however, she follows a similar pattern of isolation and detachment, showing that this theme is not essentialist. Joanna has been dead for twenty-two years before the narrator's arrival at the Landing, but her story lives on through Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett, who explain how heartbreak led Joanna to turn the sparse and tiny Shell-Heap Island into a hermitage where she lived until death. Unlike the male characters, who seem oblivious in their isolation, Joanna makes a conscious choice to detach herself as punishment, believing that "I haven't got no right to live with folks no more" because her thoughts were "so wicked towards God that I can't expect ever to be forgiven" (Jewett 98). Joanna's self-seclusion began with her inability to move past the end of the linear timeline of her failed love life and rejection of the church. Like Littlepage's obsession with the dead shipping industry, Joanna's faith in another patriarchal institution ultimately led her to solitude and detachment. She believes that she will forever be defined by these events, and as such, forces that belief to be true. Joanna also rejects the community's attempts to bring her back into the fold, which are once again symbolized by Mrs. Todd and her visit to Shell-Heap Island. The conscious attempts of the rest of Dunnet Landing to free Joanna from her solitude are something else that sets her apart from the male characters, whose isolation the rest of society seems to have accepted. However, because she continues to refuse this outreach, Joanna still cannot balance the past and present.

The second-to-last chapter of the book consists of the narrator's final major meeting with a relic of the past: Elijah Tilley, a widower who cannot move forward from the death of his wife eight years earlier. His entire house is a shrine to her; everything is just as she left it, a fact made all the more significant by the narrator's observation that "a man's house is really but his larger

body, and expresses in a way his nature and character” (Jewett 131). His character cannot extend past his grief for his wife and the life they led, and the unchanged interior of the house reflects that; as Elijah explains, “I try to keep things looking right, same’s poor dear left ‘em” (Jewett 132). Like Littlepage, Elijah cannot move on from the past, and he says as much multiple times, first when he remarks to the narrator that “Folks all kep’ repeatin’ that time would ease me, but I can’t find it does” (Jewett 132) and soon after, when he says, “I can’t git over losin’ her no way nor no how” (Jewett 133). Like Littlepage and Joanna before him, Elijah’s despair once again stems from a patriarchal institution, marriage. His timeline, like theirs, is linear and masculine, and it ended with his wife. His wife is, as Graham puts it, “a symbol of the past wherein he traps himself” (32).

Elijah Tilley, in many ways, serves as male foil for Almira Todd, further emphasizing the masculine and feminine differences that set them apart and allow the latter to thrive into the present while the former withers into the past. Both characters have lost spouses, and each is still dealing with their loss and reminiscing over their late partners. However, Mrs. Todd is not hindered by the death of her husband. Instead, she finds ways to commemorate him that don’t restrain her ability to live in the present, such as gathering the aforementioned pennyroyal to aid her position as a healer. She still tenderly recalls about the times they shared, but her reminiscence isn’t her entire existence.

Elijah, on the other hand, not only makes preservation of the past the entire point of his life, he smooths over and idealizes this past. As Graham observes, he does not really see his wife as an individual. The memories that Elijah recounts, too, paint a much less cheery picture than the one he imagines; Graham notes that from what we know, Sarah Tilley was “a timid woman afraid of bad weather, afraid to tell her husband she had broken a cup, afraid to sail to Green Island” (32). In addition, “Rather than understanding or helping his wife overcome her fears, Elijah Tilley worsened her fears by staying out late and laughing at her timidity” (Graham 32). He never calls her anything other than the patronizing “poor dear”; readers only learn her first name (Sarah) from Mrs. Todd, who values the dead woman’s individuality more

than her husband does. Mrs. Todd says that “there ain’t one o’ her old friends can ever make up her loss” (Jewett 137), commemorating Sarah Tilley’s place in the larger Dunnet Landing society. The differences between these two characters further underscore how the feminine approach to grief and healing—remembrance through a shared bond of community—is what enables Mrs. Todd to achieve balance where Elijah Tilley is left stranded and alone in the past.

Between these three clear examples of stagnant, solitary, masculine isolation are several more instances of male characters detached from society, and although they don’t get nearly as much depth or story focus, they still bear mentioning. William, Mrs. Todd’s brother, is eccentric and shy; at first, he even hides from the narrator and remains reclusive even when his female relatives wish he would participate in community events. The ineffectual Reverend Dimmick, a character in Joanna’s story, “seemed to know no remedies, but ... had a great use of words” (Jewett 99) and is figured as ignorant to Joanna’s needs and completely aloof. Santin Bowden, a washed-up drunkard and wannabe soldier, uses the members of the community around him as actors to live out his outdated military fantasies rather than connecting with them on a more meaningful level. All of these male characters are marginal and detached from the central web of female relationships. Without that community, they are either stuck at various points in the past, bound up in patriarchal institutions, or both, and as such, they are figured as sad objects of pity and unfulfillment.

By contrasting these antisocial, masculine loners with the warm community centered around and embodied by Mrs. Todd, Jewett highlights the importance of the cyclical, the communal, and the feminine. Only once the importance of these factors is realized can the delicate balance of the past and the present be achieved, leading to a gratifying life and a functional society. *The Country of the Pointed Firs* warns of the power of regret and hindsight to overwhelm and stifle a life. Instead, it presents an alternative where the past is honored but not obsessed over. The narrator takes this message with her as she leaves her elderly friends and the fading village of Dunnet Landing—representatives of the past—at the end of the book to return to her own “present”

in the city. She and the reader alike now bear both the cautionary tales of the male characters and the positive role model of Mrs. Todd as they depart Dunnet Landing.

The lesson of balance applies on a scale from the personal to the national to the global. History should be acknowledged and atoned for, but it must also be learned and moved on from. Society at large tends towards masculine thinking; single people or events are made to define eras which begin and then end with a clear cause and effect. Gandhi led India to independence. Napoleon caused the rise and fall of France. Less attention is paid to the greater situations and communities surrounding these people and events. Gandhi became the icon of an independence movement that had been growing in India long before he arrived. Napoleon came to power in a time of great upheaval following the French Revolution. These larger frameworks cannot be overlooked. By understanding the full picture, the state of societies around great events and the relationships of those events to one another, the lessons of the past become visible and applicable, and finally observers can reach an understanding about how that past can be appreciated and honored without it overpowering the current day. Only once the past and the present are balanced can one then look towards the future.

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