

# GENDER, HISTORY, AND NATURE IN SARAH ORNE JEWETT'S *COUNTRY OF THE POINTED FIRS*

BY SARAH HAMELIN

*Sarah Orne Jewett's beautifully crafted stories of life on the Maine coast helped make this section of our state a nationally recognized landscape icon. Her characters, however, are not what we would expect to find in a state renowned for male-dominated pursuits like deep-sea fishing, logging, and river-driving. Jewett's people—the inhabitants of Dunnet Landing—are generally old and female. In describing them, she presents us with a picture of coastal life as a gentlewoman's world. Jewett accents gender and age by setting her characters against a backdrop of nature and history. Sarah Hamelin is a student at the University of Maine majoring in education.*

**T**RADITIONAL ideas of masculinity and femininity permeate Maine history. The state's Victorian gender stereotypes portray the male as head of the family—the protector, the provider, the authority figure who governed the politics of his land and his home. The archetypical male “Downeast Yankee” was engaged in fishing, sailing, hunting, or lumbering, all of them masculine tasks that provided the key icons for Maine regional identity. Women, on the other hand, are portrayed as raising the children and keeping the house in order by cooking and cleaning.

In her remarkable work, *Country of the Pointed Firs*, Sarah Orne Jewett challenged this traditional view of Maine women and men. Jewett's Dunnet Landing was a fictional town on the Maine coast where the elderly women were strong and independent and the men, for the most part, feeble and meek. Young people, presumably, were off seeking opportunities elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> In Jewett's eyes, these characters represented the lives of late-nineteenth-century Maine and its people, particularly its older inhabitants.

Jewett was born into a family with a seafaring tradition, and she grew up in South Berwick, Maine.<sup>2</sup> Her stories, most of them situated on the coast of Maine, reflect an acute sensitivity to Maine life, language, and traditions. This social realism captures in rich and faithful detail a bygone world not easily reproduced through standard historical endeavor. In *Country of the Pointed Firs* she used her knowledge of Maine

Sarah Orne Jewett, Maine's most notable regionalist author, composed a world that defied Victorian-age stereotypes of strong men and demure women. *Annie Fields, ed., LETTERS OF SARAH ORNE JEWETT (1911).*



and its natural surroundings to portray an intriguing alternative to the male-dominated paradigm of Maine culture and history. While her intimate descriptions of nature and the past give color and texture to life at Dunnet Landing, they also create gender roles and distinctions that illustrate a decidedly un-Victorian Maine.

### Nature and Community

Jewett's natural and historical imagery enlivens and enriches her descriptions of the small seaport town, providing a foundation for further character development. The narrator, as she arrives at the Landing for the first time, describes it as a "maritime village of eastern Maine [that had a] rocky shore and dark woods, and the few houses which seemed to be securely wedged and tree-nailed in among the ledges by the Landing...made the most of their seaward view. . . . The small-paned high windows in the peaks of their steep gables were like knowing eyes that watched the harbor and the far sea-line beyond."<sup>3</sup>

This description lays open the heart and soul of a deeply rooted village and its natural setting. Jewett suggests a humble atmosphere and emphasizes the intimacy of community life: "When one really knows a village like this and its surrounding, it is like becoming acquainted with a single person" (p. 2). The physical surroundings in this tight-knit community produce feelings of familiarity and comfort. Jewett's descriptions of the harbor and the neighboring islands inspire a sentimental reaction in the reader, but they also emphasize the pervasive influence of nature

in the community: "We were standing where there was a fine view of the harbor and its long stretches of shore all covered by the great army of the pointed firs, darkly cloaked and standing as if they waited to embark. As we looked far seaward among the outer islands, the trees seemed to march seaward still, going steadily over the heights and down to the water's edge" (pp. 44-45). Jewett links the trees, the inhabitants, and the Landing's history; the mental picture she creates harmonizes village and nature. The "pointed firs" appear as soldiers guarding the shores of the Landing and preserving its heritage. Moreover, these ancient soldiers know the stories of the Landing and the community's other ancient inhabitants, the elderly people who have lived on the coast for generations.

In a sweeping presentation of nature, community, and history, Jewett universalizes her understanding of Dunnet Landing: "There was a world, and here was she with eternity well begun. In the life of each of us, I said to myself, there is a place remote and islanded, and given to endless regret or secret happiness; we are each the unaccompanied hermit and recluse of an hour or a day; we understand our fellows of the cell to whatever age of history they may belong" (p. 132). Jewett twines her characters into the coast's history and its natural setting, personalizing this relationship for her reader. The world Jewett's narrator encounters is sedentary, yet active in proclaiming its history. The people of Dunnet Landing are elderly players recounting—and thereby preserving—the Landing's past. They are the keepers of community history.

Nature, history, and the people of Dunnet Landing are interrelated,



The "pointed firs" in Jewett's famous short story appeared as sentinels guarding the shores of the Landing. Jewett, *THE COUNTRY OF THE POINTED FIRS* (1896).

and together they magnify the character of the place and the place of the characters. In one instance, Mrs. Todd and the narrator venture up a country road: "We had just passed a piece of wood land that shaded the road, and come out to some open fields beyond, when Mrs. Todd suddenly reined in the horse. . . 'I thought't was goin' to do well,' she said complacently as we went on again. 'Last time I was up this way that tree was kind of drooping and discouraged. Grown trees act that way sometimes, same's folks; then they'll put right to it and strike their roots off into new ground and start all over again with real courage'" (p. 150).

Mrs. Todd's observations on the resiliency of nature characterize the people in her small community. According to Elizabeth Silverthorne, Dunnet Landing "is filled with eccentrics who have found various ways to survive."<sup>4</sup> The courageousness of these characters, including Mrs. Todd, reveals a hidden strength and a sense of dedication to the Landing. Despite hard times, the people are adamant about "striking their roots off into new ground" or "starting all over again." Mrs. Todd suggests that "there's sometimes a good hearty tree groin' right out of the bare rock, out o' some crack that just holds the roots . . . that tree'll keep a green top in the driest summer. You lay your ear down to the ground an' you'll hear a little stream runnin'. Every such tree has got its own livin' spring; there's folks made to match 'em" (p. 151).

This piece of wisdom can be interpreted on two levels. First, the reader is drawn to Mrs. Todd's sage-like qualities. Her words indicate her historical understanding of the Landing and its people. By making a connection between the steadfast, deeply rooted trees and the people, she gives the reader insight into the rootedness of those living in Dunnet Landing. "The people of Dunnet Landing," according to one critic, "are easily identified as a folk group by their shared customs, language, and beliefs. Their traditions reinforce their own group solidarity."<sup>5</sup> These veterans, despite hard times, reconcile their troubles and maintain their homes and their values, beliefs, morals, and religion. Mrs. Todd explains that this takes extraordinary courage; surviving the hardships they endure makes the people stronger. Maine is their home, and they have cultivated a passion for their land. By enduring the hardships of place, the people of Dunnet Landing have crafted a history.

Second, in conjunction with steadfast roots and a commitment to the land, this statement conveys a great deal of insight about the elderly. In describing the tree, and trees in general, Mrs. Todd uses words like "grown" and "hearty." Like these enduring trees, the people of Dunnet Landing are mature; they have endured lifetimes of blessings and hard-



Mrs. Todd, the sage of Dunnet Landing, likened an old tree along the road to the wizened townswomen she knew so well, able to “strike their roots off into new ground and start all over again with real courage.” Jewett, *DEEPHAVEN*, illustrated by Charles and Marcia Woodbury (1877).

ships. Yet they, like the trees, are still dynamic, nurtured by “living springs.” And like tree branches, each person, although rooted in place, has taken many avenues over the years; each experience branches out as a new segment of their life. These interlocking pathways—branches in a forest, lives in a community—add new experiences and create uniquely diverse forms. Like the tree and its diverging branches, the people of Dunnet Landing create their own diverse history.

### History, Nature and Matriarchy

Mrs. Todd’s conversation with the narrator about the tree suggests the idea of women sharing their wisdom. Jewett uses the scene to reinforce the connection between women and the Landing’s natural setting. Like the tree, Mrs. Todd branches out and shares her knowledge of long ago. The ancient tree connects Jewett’s women with nature and with each other.

Just as Jewett uses nature to give subtle meaning to the residents of Dunnet Landing, she uses history to validate her female roles. In order to create a world in which “women’s concerns, family ties, a sense of community, are the serious subjects of literature,” Jewett creates strong, independent women. She surrounds her female characters with an aura of respect and wisdom and gives them prominent positions in society. She also relates their personalities to the past. Mrs. Todd and her mother, Mrs. Blackett, two of Jewett’s most memorable women, respect the past and have hopes and expectations for the future; they “accept chronolog-



Jewett's impression of coastal women is best exemplified in the dynamic and robust Almira Todd, Dunnet's busy herb-gatherer and gardener. *Jewett, DEEP-HAVEN.*

ical time but are not ruled by it." Jewett carefully constructs their personalities to "express the wisdom of age and the openness and spirituality of youth."<sup>6</sup>

Jewett focuses primarily on the dynamic Almira Todd. When describing Mrs. Todd's house, she employs a color scheme symbolizing the elderly woman's character: "At first, the tiny house of Mrs. Almira Todd, which stood with its end to the street, appeared to be retired and sheltered enough from the busy world, behind its bushy bit of green garden in which all the blooming things...were pushed back against the gray-shingled wall" (p. 3). This description suggests seclusion, but the image is quickly set aside. The windows and doors are open to the community, and the house is far from sequestered.<sup>7</sup> "To arrive at this quietest of sea-side villages late in June, when the busy herb-gathering season was just beginning, was also to arrive in the early prime of Mrs. Todd's activity" (p. 6). Gabrielle Azzaro points out that like her garden, Mrs. Todd's "delicate, tender side is well-guarded behind her knowledge and usefulness."<sup>8</sup> The small home, pushed back into a shadowed nook, proves to be the seat of Mrs. Todd's herbalist occupation. Nature, transformed under Mrs. Todd's tender care, provides life for the ailing and aging folk of Dunnet Landing. Her remedies are "dispersed to suffering neighbors, who usually come at night as if by stealth, bringing their own ancient-looking vials to be filled" (pp.4-5). Mrs. Todd's spruce-beer cus-

tomers are “pretty steady in hot weather, and there were many demands for different soothing syrups and elixirs” (p. 7). Catering to the medicinal needs of this tight-knit Maine community allows Mrs. Todd to preserve her own vitality. But more than this, Mrs. Todd dispenses life for the narrator, opening her eyes to the history of the Landing. Mrs. Todd’s role as pharmacist and doctor gives her standing as social arbiter for the village as well.<sup>9</sup>

Jewett uses colors to integrate images of nature, home, and personality. She describes the bushy and blooming green garden, indicating that Mrs. Todd sustains the life of the community through her herbal production. By contrast, Jewett uses the color gray to describe Mrs. Todd’s house as well, and within it a woman whose life is symbolized by a braided rug. The rug’s “rings of black and gray seemed to circle about her feet in the dim light” (p. 10), perhaps representing the years of her life. Although her herbal business keeps her young, active, and whole, her green garden cannot hide the fact that she is old and gray. But the rings in Mrs. Todd’s domestic setting intimate that her world is also self-contained: “The radiating rings of the rug suggest an island, but Mrs. Todd’s domestic world is far from isolated.” The home is in fact a “central gathering place for villagers who come to her for herbal (and other) remedies.”<sup>10</sup>

Mrs. Todd is a well-rounded woman. Her fascination with herbs and her forays into the woods and fields to collect them support her role in vitalizing the quiet, aging town. As a collector of stories as well as herbs, Mrs. Todd is also a historian of sorts. This role, too, is vital to the community. Literary critic Ruth Nagel points out that Mrs. Todd “preserves the past through the human resource of memory and . . . verbal reminiscence. . . [She] . . . is able to balance her allegiance to the past with an active and full participation in daily life.”<sup>11</sup>

Because of her intimate knowledge of Dunnet Landing and the surrounding islands, Mrs. Todd has a deep appreciation for other people’s stories. As Jewett points out, Mrs. Todd “occupied the time and told all the news there was to tell of Dunnet Landing and its coasts” (p. 72). Her vast knowledge comes from the fact that she is a great adventurer—traditionally a male characteristic. And she is forthcoming. Mrs. Todd is an “almost unconscious transmitter,” according to Nagel, “and hence [a] preserver of information and wisdom from the past when she practices her vocation.”<sup>12</sup> This herbalist, who knows every fruitful spot on and off the mainland, travels alone to various locations in order to gather her precious commodities. Evidence of Mrs. Todd’s intimacy with the land

appears throughout the text: "Once or twice I feigned excuses for staying at home, while Mrs. Todd made distant excursions, and came home late, with both hands full and a heavily laden apron. This was pennyroyal time, and when the rare lobelia was in its prime and the elecampane was coming on" (p. 14). Mrs. Todd goes about her business, exuding confidence, independence, and a keen perception of the land and its treasures.

Mrs. Todd's conversation with Mrs. Fosdick, another elderly woman of the Landing, supports the notion that the former is a repository of the past. The narrator recalls "that very first evening my friends plunged into a boarderless sea of reminiscences and personal news" (p. 93). Mrs. Todd emerges as something of an authority: "Anyway, there was Indians—you can see their shell-heap that named the island; and I've heard myself that 't was one o' their cannibal places, but I never could believe it. There was no cannibals on the coast o' Maine. All the Indians o' these regions are tame-looking folks" (pp. 100-01).

Ironically, Mrs. Todd's historical sensitivity is tinged with melancholy, a point Jewett raises in several instances: "It is not often in a noisy world to come to the places of great grief and silence. An absolute, archaic grief possesses this country-woman; she seemed like a renewal of some historic soul, with her sorrows and the remoteness of a daily life busied with rustic simplicities and the scents of primeval herbs" (p. 78). Juxtaposing Mrs. Todd's "busy world" with Dunnet Landing's tranquility suggests her intense desire to keep the people of the Landing healthy with her herbal remedies. But this statement also explores the connection between grief and historical sensitivity. Despite her deeply rooted involvement in the community and her immortal spirit, Mrs. Todd grieves about past incidents. Because of her understanding of the past, she appears to be more susceptible to personal hardships, such as her age and the death of a lover.

Still, her intimate knowledge of the past and its burdens and joys binds Mrs. Todd to her neighbors. Nagel explores this connection between grief and history: "When Mrs. Todd reveals the story of her lost love and her dead husband to the narrator, shared history serves as a binding function among women in the *Pointed Firs*."<sup>13</sup> This tale draws the narrator closer to Mrs. Todd, creating an intimacy that spawns a deep relationship.

Past hardships aside, Mrs. Todd's independence, a function of her relation to nature and to the past, liberates her. Her venture to Green Island is an example of this independence. "I supposed," the narrator re-

lates, "that she was tempted by the fine weather to take one of her favorite expeditions along the shore pastures to gather herbs and supplies, and would like to have me keep the house" (p. 48). This passage indicates how frequently Mrs. Todd disappears into nature to gather herbs. The narrator continues: "I had become well acquainted with Mrs. Todd as landlady, herb-gatherer, and historic philosopher . . . but I was yet to become acquainted with her as a mariner" (p. 50). Her talents are indeed diverse.

She is not only independent, but adventurous as well. Her wanderlust is surprising in a town like Dunnet Landing. Rather than give warning of her adventures on land or sea, Mrs. Todd relies on her primal understanding of the forces of nature; she "never trusted to any preliminary promise of good weather, but examined the day for herself in its infancy. . . . She went and came as if she had already started on her expedition with utmost haste and kept returning for something that was forgotten" (p. 135). With a sense of confidence and an eagerness to begin her journey, she announces: "I'm goin' up country" (p. 136). Travel is another means of sharing knowledge and history. Jewett's successful travelers, characters who have "resisted rural stagnation," share wisdom gained from their journeys with their own community, thus enriching and extending the flow of knowledge and understanding.<sup>14</sup>

A second elderly character who demonstrates strength and independence is Mrs. Todd's mother, Mrs. Blackett. This character, "a delightful little person . . . with bright eyes and an affectionate air of expectation like a child on a holiday," appears youthful and optimistic, despite her eighty-six years (p. 56). Jewett biographer Elizabeth Silverthorne describes Mrs. Blackett's vigor: she "lives her simple life with a zest that refreshes and inspires all who meet her."<sup>15</sup> While the narrator holds Mrs. Blackett in high regard, there are instances where she acknowledges the elder woman's age: "Mrs. Blackett's old face, for the first time, wore a look of trouble" (p. 67). In another reference to her age, Mrs. Blackett herself explains why she and her daughter don't live together on the island: "'She'd been very restless if she'd had to continue here on Green Island. You wanted more scope, didn't you, Almiry, an' to live in a large place where more things grew? Sometimes folks wonders that we don't live together; perhaps we shall some time,' and a shadow of sadness and apprehension flitted across her face. 'The time o' sickness an' failin' has got to come to all. But Almiry's got an herb that's good for everything.' She smiled as she spoke, and looked bright again" (p. 82). Jewett reveals Mrs. Blackett's innermost thoughts about her age. Mrs. Blackett expects



Mrs. Todd's herb-gathering ventures took her to the far corners of the town; her intimacy with the land and its verdure is evident throughout the story. To the herbalist, nature is a source of life, health, and vibrancy. *Jewett, DEEPHAVEN.*

that she will eventually live with her daughter, although Mrs. Todd's remedies will help postpone the inevitable.

These references to age are overshadowed by more youthful descriptions: "Mrs. Blackett's eyes were bright with excitement" (p. 154); and "I wondered why she had been set to shine on this lonely island of the northern coast. It must have been to keep the balance true, and make up to all her scattered and depending neighbors for other things which they may have lacked" (p. 73). These statements not only mark Mrs. Blackett's energy, but also her importance to Green Island. She is a radiant example that unifies and balances life on the island. Indeed, it was Mrs. Blackett who passed down her wisdom, warm heart, and historical sensibilities to her daughter. Like Mrs. Todd, Mrs. Blackett survives on her own as a widow. She provides for herself, as did many Maine women in an era when husbands were likely to be off fishing, sea-faring, or working in the woods.

As she did with Mrs. Todd, Jewett describes Mrs. Blackett's house in ways that accent nature, age, and the past: "The house was just before us now, on a green level that looked as if a huge hand had scooped it out of the long green field we had been ascending. . . . The house was broad and clean, with a roof that looked heavy on its low walls. It was one of the houses that seem firm-rooted in the ground" (pp. 58-59). The connection between a house "firm-rooted in the ground" and Mrs. Todd's description of the "good hearty tree groin' right out of the bare rock," which immediately follows, implies that Mrs. Blackett grew up and

raised her own family in the house, and now she grows old there. She is, in other words, a relic of island history.

Mrs. Blackett's material possessions further reveal her character: "There was a worn red Bible on the nightstand, and Mrs. Blackett's heavy, silver-bored glasses; her thimble was on the narrow windowledge, and folded carefully on the table was a thick striped-cotton shirt that she was making for her son. Those dear old fingers and their loving stitches, that heart which had made the most of everything that needed love! Here was the real home, the heart of the old house on Green Island!" (p. 84). Like Mrs. Blackett, these items are relics, but they reflect love and caring. And like Mrs. Todd, who is connected to her community by her historical wisdom, Mrs. Blackett is connected to others by her warm and loving manner. The narrator uses phrases like "dear old fingers" and "loving stitches" to symbolize Mrs. Blackett's personality.

Despite the references to Mrs. Blackett's age, terms like "delightful person" and "bright eyes" suggest vitality (p. 56). But here again, Mrs. Blackett's vitality is best revealed in images of verdant nature; she lives on Green Island, the color reflecting both nature and suppleness. Moreover, "the house was . . . on a green level . . . [and] a little way above, the dark spruce woods began to climb the top of the hill and cover the seaward slopes of the island. . . . The front door stood hospitably open in expectation of company, and an orderly vine grew at each side . . . and there grew a mass of gay flowers and greenery" (pp. 59-60). According to Sr. Mary Conrad Kraus, the trees encircling the house and the sea encircling the trees represent "a traditional image of infinity and perfection, having no beginning or end."<sup>16</sup> A scene described by the narrator reflects this unity: "At the end, near the woods, we [the narrator and Mrs. Todd's brother William] could climb up on [the hill] and walk along to the highest point; there above the circle of pointed firs we could look down over all the island, and could see the ocean that circled this and [a] hundred other bits of green ground" (p. 70). Establishing this connection with nature gives the reader a sense of the shared sensibilities among the people of Dunnet Landing.

### **History, Nature, and Masculinity**

The men in Jewett's story also challenge Victorian stereotypes. Jewett's men are weaker than her women, and unlike the women, they clearly reflect their age. The author rarely emphasizes vitality in her male characters, physically or symbolically. Like the women, they are revealed in images of nature, but their character development suggests a different

perspective. Clearly, Jewett saw women as the more important figures in the Maine landscape.

Captain Littlepage, a prominent male character, sits “pale and old behind a closed window; never out of doors.” In Jewett’s mind he “looked like an aged grasshopper of some strange human variety” (p. 17). As with Jewett’s two central female characters, Captain Littlepage first appears in conjunction with a domicile: a “little white schoolhouse much wind-blown and weather-beaten, which was a landmark to seagoing folk” (p. 12). Here the narrator recognizes the “one strange and unrelated person in all the company, an old man who had always been mysterious to me. I could see his thin, bending figure. He wore a narrow, long-tailed coat and walked with a stick, and had the same ‘cant to leeward’ as the wind-bent trees on the height above” (p. 16).

While Jewett’s women are liberated by nature, the men are eroded by it. Captain Littlepage is the product of erosive natural forces, as is the old schoolhouse where he first talks with the narrator. Like the schoolhouse, Captain Littlepage is pale, lonely, abandoned, and worn, and like the trees bent by the steady wind, Captain Littlepage has been bent and shaped into an old man; he easily succumbs to the forces around him.

Similarly, while Jewett’s women are enlivened by history, Captain Littlepage is burdened by it. He is an almost forgotten figure in the town because his adventure days on the high seas are over. But those days live on in his memory, dominating and restricting his life and isolating him from the community.<sup>17</sup> The narrator’s account of Captain Littlepage in the schoolhouse is revealing: “I saw . . . Captain Littlepage . . . sitting behind his closed window . . . watching for someone who never came. . . . 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 or find companionship” (p. 143). Without anyone who can relate to his sea-faring glory days, he is alone, living only in the past. Captain Littlepage’s stories give the narrator some insight into his youth, but this youthfulness disappears when the stories end. “The old, pathetic, scholarly look returned” (p. 41). History sustains Jewett’s women; history erodes her male characters.

Unlike Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett, Captain Littlepage is dependent. He relies on his stories to give him youth. By retelling his glory days, he recaptures the vibrant imagery of his past; he briefly appears multidimensional. Laura Buseman says that Littlepage “loses his grasp on reality when he relates his extraordinary tale[s],” making him “an unsuccessful traveler because he can’t return and share his experience for the good of



Mrs. Todd's mother, Mrs. Blackett, appeared youthful and optimistic despite her eighty-six years. But occasionally a shadow passed across her face as she contemplated the "time o' sickness an' failin'" ahead. Mrs. Todd's remedies would help postpone the inevitable. *Jewett, DEEPHAVEN.*

the community. . . . He tells his tale, yet it remains an abstraction, which instead of integrating him into the community, as other story tellers are integrated, reinforces his isolation."<sup>18</sup> Unlike Mrs. Todd and her bustling home, Captain Littlepage and his abandoned schoolhouse are passive and solemn, giving substance to the idea that men are less important than women in this Maine community.

Even more intriguing is William Blackett, the son of Mrs. Blackett and the brother of Mrs. Todd. The narrator's first encounter with William takes place when Mrs. Todd and the narrator reach Green Island. "I think William might have just stopped an' said a word," remarked Mrs. Todd . . . "He's friendly enough when he comes ashore . . . He ain't disposed to be very social with the ladies" (p. 64). Jewett again draws upon natural images to develop William's character as shy, quiet, and unsociable:

I turned, startled in the silence of the wide field, and saw an elderly man, bent in the shoulders as fishermen often are, gray-haired and clean-shaven, and with a timid air. It was William. He looked just like his mother, and I had been imagining that he was large and stout like his sister, Almira Todd; and, strange to say, my fancy had led me to picture him not far from thirty and a little latish. It was necessary instead to pay William the respect due to age . . . He was about sixty and not

young-looking for his years, yet so undying in the spirit of youth, and bashfulness has such a power of survival (p. 68).

Shocked by his appearance, the narrator describes William as “bent in the shoulders,” echoing Jewett’s description of Captain Littlepage, whose figure resembles “wind-bent trees.” The image arises again when William and the narrator are walking through the forest. “Often, we had to push aside heavy drooping branches which barred the way” (p. 221). The bending tree reinforces the idea that William is sensitive and easily swayed or manipulated. Like Captain Littlepage, he is fragile and malleable.

Although William embodies Jewett’s typical male characteristics, he is developed in a different manner. Though reticent, he possesses a recognizable spirit, withering with age but still visible to the narrator and the reader. Elizabeth Silverthorne describes William’s character: “There is gentle irony and great sympathy in the portraits of William, the ancient yet boyishly innocent beau.”<sup>19</sup> Here, too, William resembles Captain Littlepage. The spirit and youth in both men, however subtle, kindles a tiny flame. But Captain Littlepage is talkative, while William “did not talk much” (p. 72). His silence produces a glimmer of mystery, confusing the narrator at times. He seems happy one moment and despondent the next. Unlike his sister, Mrs. Todd, who is outspoken, William is quiet: “there was enough excitement for most occasions in hearing William speak three sentences at once” (p. 214). William is easily overwhelmed, “meekly submitting” to his sister (p. 209). Laura Buseman compares William and Mrs. Todd: William has “large and brave and patient traits which enable him to let events unfold as they must, while Mrs. Todd herself occasionally demonstrates a lack of such patience.”<sup>20</sup> William concedes to Mrs. Todd’s variously condoning, protective, and critical comments, often made in reference to William’s sheltered, humble life. Mrs. Todd assumes the traditional fatherly role, and William plays the role traditionally assigned to the daughter.<sup>21</sup> He is quite domestic—a homebody. Instead of venturing out to other islands, or even exploring his own, he confines his business and his entertainment—fishing in both cases—to one location. This sedentary life contributes to William’s meekness; he is a shy, humble man who is “firmly rooted” in his ways, a hermit and a permanent fixture on the island.

Yet, as the narrator comes to know William better, her descriptions become richer and more intriguing. She is drawn to William’s domestic, retiring nature, and discovers in him a deep sense of happiness waiting to be shared. William glows when he sings for the narrator. “His voice

was a little faint and frail, like the family daguerreotypes, but it was a tenor voice, and perfectly true and sweet. I have never heard Home Sweet Home sung as touchingly and seriously as he sang it; he seemed to make it quite new; and when he paused for a moment at the end of the first line and began the next, the old mother joined him and they sang together" (p. 82). Absorbed in song, William almost breaks out of his shell, a mixture of the ancient and the childlike.<sup>22</sup> Jewett again employs natural images:

His own complexion was still strangely impaired by its defenses, but I kept forgetting it. . . . The moment that I began to fish the brook, I had a sense of its emptiness. . . . But it was a lovely brook, and I went a long way through woods and breezy open pastures, and found a forsaken house and overgrown farm, and laid up many pleasures for future joy and remembrance . . . As for William, he looked more boyish than ever, and kept a more remote and juvenile sort of silence. Once I wondered how he had come to be so curiously wrinkled, forgetting, absent-mindedly, to recognize the effects of time (pp. 218-19).

The narrator's first impression of the brook is a sense of emptiness—a mirror of William's quiet, introverted nature. However, she quickly begins to appreciate the brook's hidden beauty, just as she gains a deeper appreciation of William by enjoying his company.

While Jewett uses green to illustrate Mrs. Blackett's vigorous soul, in constant renewal like springtime, she places her men in settings with gray images. William's surroundings reflect a "great stretch of rough pasture-land round the shoulder of the island to the eastward, and here were all the thick-scattered gray rocks that keep their places, and the gray backs of many sheep that forever wandered and fed on the thin sweet pasturage that fringed the ledges and made soft hollows and strips of green turf like growing velvet" (p. 59). This description sets William's domain apart from those of Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett. The latter's home is surrounded by green growth, blossoming flowers, and new life. William's domain, though still natural, is characterized as gray, rough, and thin, a reflection of his age and character.

In contrast to Captain Littlepage, William has a companion who brings out his dormant vitality. Toward the end of the novel, Jewett creates a romantic scene that rejuvenates William. Through his impending marriage to a local shepherdess, William's "patience and wisdom" are rewarded; he can become young again.<sup>23</sup> As the narrator becomes engrossed in this island romance, she discovers another side of William: I now discovered with a quick leap of amusement and delight in my heart

that I had fallen upon a serious chapter of romance" (pp. 233-34).

William looked almost bold, and oddly like a happy young man rather than an ancient boy. As for Esther [the shepherdess], she might have been Jeanne d'Arc returned to her sheep, touched with age and gray with the ashes of a great remembrance. She wore the simple look of sainthood and unfeigned devotion. My heart was moved by the sight of her plain sweet face, weather-worn and gentle in its looks, her thin figure in its close dress, and the strong hand that clasped a shepherd's staff, and I could only hold William in new reverence; this silent farmer-fisherman who knew, and he alone, the noble and patient heart that beat within her breast. I am not sure that they acknowledged even to themselves that they had always been lovers . . . but they were happy in being together in the world. (pp. 237-38).

The narrator's reflections are rich in detail. She approves of the union of these two similar individuals. It is clear that the power of Esther's love has erased the effects of time. William's courtship makes him less ingrown; his boyish nature takes on charm.<sup>24</sup> Here again, in contrast to the widows in Jewett's novel, males are dependent on other people to make them happy. As Captain Littlepage depends on his stories to keep him young, William depends on Esther. The narrator explains: "They were going to be young again now, she and William" (p. 288). As a sign of rejuvenation, Jewett includes a refreshing description of nature on the day of their wedding. "The warm air was full of birds, there was a glow of light on the sea instead of the cold shining of chilly weather which had lingered late" (pp. 288-89).

Through her use of natural images and landscape, Jewett characterizes both Captain Littlepage and William as meek and fragile shadows of their youth. Rather than assuming a masculine character, Captain Littlepage and William adopt a typically Victorian feminine aspect. Jewett's use of role reversal is essential to her portrait of Maine society.

### **Nature and Departure**

The story opens with the narrator refreshed by her arrival in Dunnet Landing. It ends with the narrator feeling empty. The warmth and life that she felt at her arrival changes as the seasons change.

At last it was the time of late summer, when the house was cool and damp in the morning, and all the light seemed to come through green leaves. . . . The sea, the sky, all the long shore line and the inland hills, with every bush of bay and every fir-top, gained a deeper color and a sharper clearness. There was something shining in the air, and a kind



Jewett's male characters, especially the elderly Captain Littlepage, were dependent, frail, and alienated from nature. Captain Littlepage recaptured his youth by relating tales of his life at sea, but living in the past only reinforced his isolation. Jewett, *DEEPHAVEN*.

of lustre on the water and the pasture grass, a northern look that, except at this moment of the year, one must go far to seek. The sunshine of a northern summer was coming to its lovely end. . . . At last I had to say good-bye to all my Dunnet Landing friends, and my homelike place in the little house, and return to the world in which I feared to find myself a foreigner" (p. 300).

As the narrator expresses her apprehension about returning to her chaotic urban world, she begins to describe the island in more melancholic terms. "When I went in again the little house had suddenly grown lonely, and my room looked empty as it had the day I came. I and all my belongings had died out of it, and I knew how it would seem when Mrs. Todd came back and found her lodger was gone. So we die before our own eyes; so we see some chapters of our lives come to their natural end" (p. 303).

The house, rather than fragrant and blossoming, becomes lonely and desolate, forecasting departure and "death"—implying that the narrator will abandon her rural summer idyll for a busy urban life. However, the narrator's experiences in Dunnet Landing are now embedded in the community's history. Her encounters add another chapter to the village's history.



Leaving Dunnet Landing brought a sense of melancholy and desolation: “My room looked empty as it had the day I came,” the narrator recalled. “So we die before our own eyes; so we see some chapters of our lives come to their natural end.” *Jewett, DEEPHAVEN.*

While Jewett portrays Dunnet Landing as a kind of refuge from the busy urban world, she also develops her characters, both women and men, in connection with the imagery she gathers from nature. The women of her story, in particular Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett, are mobile, strong, independent, and sensitive to the past. They are the providers, offering physical and spiritual sustenance. In contrast, the male characters are frail, meek, dependent, and unproductive. *Country of the Pointed Firs* sheds light on a Maine quite different from the images so often conveyed in history books. Rather than patriarchal, Jewett’s Maine is matriarchal. By aligning her natural imagery with gender references, Jewett highlights the predominant role women played in nineteenth-century coastal Maine society. Her emphasis on the important roles played by women—a neglected feature in Maine history—is a valuable corrective. By downplaying the roles of Captain Littlepage and William in contrast to Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett, Jewett encourages a richer appreciation for Maine women, and opens the door to the recognition of their importance. Women became essential players in making—and preserving—Maine history. Without them, there would be no “history.”

November 11<sup>th</sup> 1901  
 South Berwick.  
 Maine.

Mr. F. H. Jordan Esq<sup>r</sup>  
 Dear Sir Please find  
 enclosed my cheque for \$50. for  
 the Longfellow Memorial Fund of  
 the Maine Historical Society, and  
 believe me Yours most truly  
 Sarah Orne Jewett

Miss Jewett supports the Maine Historical Society.  
*Collections of the Maine Historical Society.*

## NOTES

1. Jewett was once asked about the location of Dunnet Landing. She replied that she could not say for sure, "except that it must be somewhere 'along shore' between the region of Tenants Harbor and Boothbay. See *The World of Dunnet Landing: A Sarah Orne Jewett Collection* (David Bonnell Green ed. 1962), p. v.

2. See Mary Ellen Chase, "Sarah Orne Jewett as a Social Historian," in *The World of Dunnet Landing: A Sarah Orne Jewett Collection*, ed. by David Bonnell Green (Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1972).

3. Sarah Orne Jewett, *Country of the Pointed Firs* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1910), p. 1. Hereafter, references to Jewett will be listed in text by page number only.

4. Elizabeth Silverthorne, *Sarah Orne Jewett: A Writer's Life* (New York: Overlook Press, 1993), p. 165.

5. Susan Joan Martin Fagan, "Sarah Orne Jewett's Fiction: A Reevaluation from Three Perspectives," Ph.D dissertation, University of Oregon, 1982, p. 63.
6. Cynthia Keyworth, *Master Smart Woman: A Portrait of Sarah Orne Jewett* (Unity, Maine: North Country Press, 1988), pp. 134-36; Gwen Nagel, *Critical Essays on Sarah Orne Jewett* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Company, 1984), pp. 87, 293; Laura Jean Buseman, "The Realism of Sarah Orne Jewett's Characterization of Men," Ph.D dissertation, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, 1993, p. 179.
7. Nagel, *Critical Essays on Sarah Orne Jewett*, p. 265.
8. Gabrielle T. Azzaro, "Sarah Orne Jewett and the Country of the Pointed Firs," M.A. thesis, Southern Connecticut State University, 1985, pp. 20-23.
9. Fagan, "Sarah Orne Jewett's Fiction," p. 137.
10. Nagel, *Critical Essays on Sarah Orne Jewett*, p. 264.
11. Gwen L. Nagel, "Women and Preservation in the Works of Sarah Orne Jewett," Ph.D dissertation, Tufts University, 1979, p. 259.
12. Nagel, *Critical Essays on Sarah Orne Jewett*, p. 263.
13. Nagel, *Critical Essays on Sarah Orne Jewett*, p. 262.
14. Buseman, "Realism of Sarah Orne Jewett's Characterization of Men," p. 91.
15. Silverthorne, *Sarah Orne Jewett*, p. 166.
16. Sr. Mary Conrad Kraus, "The Unifying Vision of Sarah Orne Jewett," M.A thesis, University of Notre Dame, 1978, p. 114.
17. Nagel, *Critical Essays on Sarah Orne Jewett*, p. 239.
18. Buseman, "Realism of Sarah Orne Jewett's Characterization of Men," p. 130.
19. Silverthorne, *Sarah Orne Jewett*, p. 172.
20. Buseman, "Realism of Sarah Orne Jewett's Characterization of Men," p. 103.
21. Ibid., pp. 197-98.
22. Ibid., p. 182.
23. Ibid., p. 186.
24. Ibid., p. 185.