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Geography as Gendered Space: An Analysis of Female Perspectives in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*

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Abstract— *Sarah Orne Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs redefines literary realism through a distinctly female perspective, transforming the geographical space of Dunnet Landing into a vessel for women's experiences and memories. Through the lens of an unnamed female narrator, Jewett challenges the male-dominated realist tradition by intertwining landscape with female consciousness, intimacy, and community. The novel emphasizes women's resilience and wisdom, particularly through characters like Almira Todd, who embody a deep connection to nature and serve as emotional and cultural pillars of their rural society. Male characters are marginalized, further highlighting women's central roles in sustaining community life. Jewett blends detailed realism with poetic romanticism, exploring themes of memory, solitude, and human connection. Her narrative strategy expands the boundaries of realism by prioritizing inner emotional landscapes and the symbiotic relationship between people and place, offering a profound critique of gender and narrative authority while affirming the enduring power of female-centered storytelling.*

Keywords— ***Sarah Orne Jewett; The Country of the Pointed Firs; geography; gender***

Sarah Orne Jewett was a significant writer in late 19th-century American literature, renowned for her detailed observations of rural New England life, particularly through the lens of women's perspectives. Her works often explore themes of identity, place, and community, with *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories* being one of her most representative works.

One of the central themes of this novel is the transformation of Dunnet Landing's geographical space into a vessel for female experience and memory through the use of a female first-person narrative. Through the perspective of the female narrator, Jewett imbues the town's landscape with a unique sense of intimacy and belonging. This is not only a profound expression of female experience but also a challenge to the male-dominated literary realism tradition of the late 19th century. Through this narrative strategy, Jewett tightly links the geographical landscape of Dunnet Landing with the emotional and cultural experiences of women, providing a powerful critique of gender and narrative authority, and breaking away from the male-dominated literary tradition.

The narrator's dual identity as both an outsider and a

temporary member of the community reflects Jewett's own dual life as a Boston intellectual and a carrier of Maine nostalgia. The narrator's integration into Dunnet Landing is always mediated through the women of the community. "Later, there was only one fault to find with this choice of a summer lodging-place, and that was its complete lack of seclusion" (Jewett 5). Among them, Mrs. Todd's wisdom and narrative become the key for the narrator to understand the land. The series of interpersonal relationships the narrator develops within the community revolves around Mrs. Todd. Through Mrs. Todd, the narrator becomes integrated into the community, but she is also in search of her own space (the schoolhouse) of solitude. In this way, she exists both outside and within the community, gaining a perspective that is at once distanced yet intimate.

As the narrative progresses, the descriptions of the landscape gradually merge with the female characters, creating a seamless connection between environment and identity (Folsom 70). Initially, the geographical descriptions are restrained, but they gradually take on the narrative rhythm of the female characters. This shift in style reinforces Jewett's central argument: geographical descriptions are never neutral; they are always shaped by the narrator's gender perspective. In the novel, the depiction of the landscape is intricately connected to gendered perspectives (Hild 117). For instance, when the narrator describes the coastal town of Dunnet Landing, the rocky shore, dark forests, and houses nestled against the cliffs are anthropomorphized as "securely wedged and tree-nailed," while the high windows are likened to "knowing eyes that watched the harbor." This personification not only gives the environment a female-like gaze and sense of guardianship but also suggests the intimate connection between female characters, like Mrs. Todd, and nature---her herb garden is described as "the scent of sweetbriar, lemon balm, mint, and wormwood came in with the sea breeze," as if nature itself were expressing its healing power through her hands.

Furthermore, the depiction of Green Island through the eyes of Mrs. Todd's mother, an elderly yet resilient woman, also ties the female experience to the natural world. "A long time before we landed at Green Island we could see the small white house, standing high like a beacon, where Mrs. Todd was born and where her mother lived, on a green slope above the water, with dark spruce woods still higher" (Jewett 30). This portrayal of women intertwined with home and nature highlights the central role of women as a bridge between nature and culture.

On Joanna's secluded Shell-heap Island, the desolate rocks, sparse vegetation, and solitary waves mirror her inner world, evoking a deep resonance with the narrator. "There was the 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 uncompanioned hermit and recluse of an hour or a day; we understand our fellows of the cell to whatever age of history they may belong" (Jewett 71). Joanna's choice---to live away from society and alone with nature---is imbued with a tragic sense of the sublime, "There was something medieval in the behavior of poor Joanna Todd under a disappointment of the heart. (Jewett 60)" Other female characters, like Mrs. Todd, further emphasize their understanding and sympathy for Joanna, strengthening the unique female recognition of nature and solitude.

This blending of home and nature is especially evident in the scenes of female community gatherings. In the famous "Bowden Family Union" chapter, Jewett places the social activities of a group of women in the expansive natural environment of the island. "The sky, the sea, have watched poor humanity at its rites so long; we were no more a New England family celebrating its own existence and simple progress" (Jewett 87). This description not only naturalizes human social activities but also implies that the female community itself is an organic part of this landscape. Through careful spatial arrangement, Jewett allows the reader to see that these women's memories, wisdom, and emotions are deeply rooted in the land, like the wild grass growing on the island. These descriptions indicate that the

landscape in the novel is not merely a backdrop but an extension of women's lives, emotions, and power. Nature is imbued with feminine spirituality, and the female characters use nature to define and connect with themselves.

Jewett's exceptional character development is beyond dispute. In fact, the most remarkable aspect of her works lies in her emotionally rich and profound depictions of women living in poverty. She once told Willa Cather that her mind was filled with the image of those lovely old houses and elderly women (Cary 203), and whenever these two things crossed her mind, she knew another story would emerge. Many of the female characters she portrays are older women. This is not only because these older women inherit and maintain past values but also because, in regions like Maine, most young people, especially men, have left the countryside. It should be noted that when the rapid development of capitalist industrial economies caused young people, especially men, to leave their hometowns and flock to the cities, it was women who stayed behind to shoulder the burdens of life, facing poverty, decay, and hardship. As American feminist critic Jane Tompkins pointed out, escape is the one lifestyle that female literature does not recommend to its readers (175). In contrast to the classic works of 19th-century male writers, where protagonists often rebel by escaping from civilized society, Jewett's work focuses on a group of women who persist in living in rural towns that have already lost their economic vitality (Jin 87). Jewett portrays women as the pillars of life. The female characters she creates actually embody certain qualities typically associated with men. However, Jewett emphasizes the superiority of female qualities, highlighting women's irreplaceable role in both the family and society. The themes of Jewett's works are not marriage and childbirth, nor are they the struggles of young women fighting for personal liberation. What she strives to portray are women who survive with resilience in adversity, demonstrating endurance. At the same time, she excels at depicting women's delicate emotions and rich spiritual worlds, which gives her works immense artistic power.

In the portrayal of women in this novel, the characters who have passed their prime years radiate a vitality that rivals youth, and Almira Todd is a captivating example of this. A woman who embodies independence, sharp intelligence, and wisdom, she earns her living by collecting herbs, tending her garden, and renting out rooms. Not only is she an indispensable figure in the village, but her warm friendliness and witty remarks also win her the affection of everyone (Chen 95). She often collaborates with the village doctor to provide medical care for the locals. As the story unfolds, readers gradually realize that this seemingly ordinary widow is far from destitute. Her resilient will, profound intellect, and skillful hands have long held her destiny firmly in her grasp. What is especially noteworthy is that the admirable qualities she possesses resonate deeply with the laws of nature. Jewett cleverly portrays her as a personification of Mother Earth, perfectly embodying the expansive heart and all-encompassing wisdom of the earth's mother. It is this connection with nature that allows her to become the "wise woman" in the eyes of the villagers, holding a revered position within the community. However, this strong exterior conceals a delicate and profound emotional world. One evening, while gathering herbs, she opens up to the guest writer residing with her and shares the painful memory of her youth---having been forced to marry a man she respected but did not love. Though her husband treated her with great care, and they once sat side by side on the rocks gazing at the sea, a sudden storm took him away forever. Mrs. Todd buried this deep sorrow in her heart, only allowing herself to release the storm of emotions when she faces the raging sea alone. The narrator poetically describes the scene: in the twilight, her tall figure stands as though a solitary Antigone in a Greek tragedy, her unwavering vitality shining through, yet her posture also conveys timeless sorrow. This combination of strength and tenderness makes her one of the most moving female characters in Jewett's work.

In contrast to the brilliance and larger number of female characters, the male characters are largely

marginalized. Through this approach, Sarah Orne Jewett not only challenges traditional gender roles but also demonstrates how women in that era gained power and existence through self-awareness and solidarity (Goheen 155). In Dunnet Landing, men's lives are primarily focused on the outside world, whether it's going out to sea for fishing or heading to the city, while women delve into the core of the local society, assuming the responsibility of maintaining community life and emotional bonds. Although male characters are not entirely absent from the story, their roles and influence are often diminished, even excluded from the central plot.

There are three main male characters. The first is Captain Littlepage, who is deeply immersed in the past and unable to extricate himself from it. The old man has lost touch with the present world. What is past is gone, and the future exists only in imagination. He can only live through fantasies, relying on memories of past glory to pass the time. He may wish to replicate the male glory of his time at sea, but unfortunately, in Dunnet Landing, that male-dominated era has long passed.

The second is Mrs. Todd's brother, William. Though he is one of the few men in the story, he exhibits distinctly "feminine" traits. At over 60, he is easily embarrassed and shy, with limited contact with the outside world, much like an unmarried woman from ancient times. From the narrator's description, we sense that, compared to his mother and sister, he does not have the traditional male privilege and masculinity that male characters typically possess in male-oriented novels; instead, he is gentler and calmer.

The third is an old fisherman named Elijah Tilley. In him, almost all male traits are abandoned. He watches over a wife who will never return, just as his wife once waited for him to return from sea in her youth. He seems to be living in place of his wife. He keeps his modest home as tidy as it was when his wife was alive, as a way to express his sorrow. He washes, mends, and does the things his wife once did, silently passing the time. For him, only the kind of home environment his wife would have wished for holds meaning, so he refuses help from others, fearing it would disrupt the order of the home his wife established (Jin 88).

The perspective of the female narrator, as an incarnation of the author, and her characterizations serve Jewett's thematic expression well, and through this perspective, Jewett expands the boundaries of realism traditionally dominated by male authors. This unique artistic practice by Jewett essentially constructs a more inclusive aesthetic of realism. While male writers were focused on depicting urban changes or commercial competition in the wake of industrialization, Jewett turned her gaze toward the rural female communities marginalized by mainstream narratives. When traditional realism was obsessed with representing the objective reality of the external world, she shifted her focus to explore the subtle resonance between inner emotions and the external environment. This creative direction is not a departure from realism but a deepening and expansion of its meaning---in Jewett's view, the life stories exchanged by elderly women as they sit mending, or the daily scenes of an elderly woman living by the sea conversing with the tides, are equally essential components of reality.

As seen in the seemingly casual but carefully arranged details in the novel: the shadow of the drying fishing nets cast in the sunlight, which intertwines with the wrinkles on the faces of the elderly women, creates a marvelous intertextuality; the cries of seagulls blend with the laughter of the women, blurring the boundary between natural sounds and human language. These descriptions transcend mere environmental depiction, creating an artistic realm where subject and object merge, where nature and humanity are in harmony.

Jewett's innovation lies further in her creative fusion of the realist tradition with the spiritual pursuit of romanticism. In this novel, reality is not only found in tangible, sensory objects but also flows in the fleeting moments of connection between the characters and nature, which are difficult to articulate. When the narrator describes

Mrs. Todd listening to the waves, the detailed realism and near-mystical experiential description merge seamlessly. This writing strategy breaks the boundary between realism and transcendentalism, suggesting that the deepest reality often resides in the intersection between rational cognition and intuitive understanding. Through the female perspective's acute sensitivity, Jewett captures those subtle tremors that traditional realist writers often overlook---memories embedded in objects, emotions reflected in landscapes, and the silent testimony of time etched on the human body. This expanded concept of realism has had a profound influence on the development of later literature. Jewett proved that realism need not be confined to a faithful recording of social appearances; it can delve into the complex interactions between human consciousness and the material world. In her writing, reality is no longer a passive object of observation but an active process of experience; it is not a static picture but a flowing perception. This understanding allows this novel---though it describes the seemingly simple lives of a remote fishing village and its humble characters---to touch upon universal human themes: memory and forgetting, loneliness and connection, passing time and eternity (Mehlman 400). When modern readers walk along the coast of Dunnet Landing with the narrator, they not only witness the real landscape of late 19th-century New England but also feel an emotional resonance that transcends time and space. This is Jewett's most valuable contribution to realist literature: she liberated the genre from a single, objective imitation of the world and imbued it with the depth and breadth of expressing the landscapes of the soul.

The Country of the Pointed Firs redefines the boundaries of realism with its unique female narrative perspective and delicate geographical descriptions. Through the observations and integration of the unnamed narrator, Jewett transforms the geographical space of Dunnet Landing into a vessel for female experience and memory, intertwining the natural landscape with the emotions of the characters. This breaks the traditional male-centered narrative model of realism. The female characters in the novel, particularly Almira Todd, not only exhibit resilience and wisdom but also, through their symbiotic relationship with nature, become the core of the community's spirit and knowledge. At the same time, the marginalization of male characters further highlights the dominant role women play in maintaining rural society. Finally, the narrator's departure from Dunnet Landing may be Jewett's hope for the transcendence of the limitations of female narrative. Jewett combines the realist tradition of detailed description with the poetic expression of romanticism, imbuing everyday life with transcendent meaning, thereby expanding the depth and breadth of realism. Her work not only records the true appearance of late 19th-century rural New England but also, through the sharp perception of the female perspective, reveals universal human themes---memory, loneliness, and connection. This innovative interpretation of realism provides important insights for later literary developments, proving that reality is not only found in the outward appearances of the objective world but also in the deep interactions between characters and their environment.

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