

ANALYSIS

“A White Heron” (1886)



Sarah Orne Jewett

(1849-1909)

“A White Heron” is a rare achievement: both popular and high art, both expressing Victorianism and transcending it. The story is a blend of both Realism and iconic allegory, and appealing to everyone regardless of age or education. It is popular because the basic story is simple, it is uplifting in tone, it is composed of archetypal elements that elicit universal emotions, and its ending is gratifying to the reader. This also describes many popular stories of less quality during the 19th century. “A White Heron” is exceptional above all in dramatizing the individuation process in the transcendental mode of Hawthorne, *Walden*, *Moby-Dick*, and the poems of Dickinson.

Jewett’s style is plain, natural and subtle. She seems to be telling a simple story with the modesty of a lady in the Victorian age, while her narrative configures images as precisely as those in an allegory by Hawthorne, including in her first paragraph his recurrent images of shadows, light, woods, path and home--all both archetypal and iconic. Victorian popular culture--magazines, newspapers, books--had invested images that idealized the home, women and children with so much collective moral value they acquired the power of religious icons. The most powerful image in the first paragraph is “A little girl was driving home her cow...” Victorians valued children above all. A little girl, especially alone in the woods, elicits a stock response as an icon of innocence and purity. Sylvia incarnates the highest ideals of Victorian culture.

At that time, also, a high majority of the population lived on farms themselves and many tended cows. Milk maids were sentimental heroines, poor and virtuous farmers’ daughters, as in Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891). The name Sylvia identifies this little girl with the sylvan, with pastoral Nature, and her cow gives her responsibilities and the puritan virtues required on a farm. Versions of her could be seen inside and on the covers of almost every issue of popular women’s magazines during the 19th century, surrounded by a border of flowers with lambs and little birds and related pastoral imagery expressing the values of the heart. The challenge to a reader is to understand the meaning of Sylvy, her vision of the white heron and her choice at the end.

The simplest images to understand are the archetypal spaces: Sylvy comes from a “houseful of children” in the City, to the Garden--much like Priscilla in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) by Hawthorne: “Everybody said that it was a good change for a little maid who had tried to grow for eight years in a crowded manufacturing town, but as for Sylvia herself, it seemed as if she never had been alive at all before

she came to live at the farm.” She makes a pastoral retreat to “the old place” in Nature, where she has independence, space and the opportunity to grow and individuate. The farm is in the “wilderness” and evokes the history of settlers moving ever westward, clearing spaces in forests and woodlands for their farms. Sylvia lives with her grandmother in Maine, where the wild has been tamed: “The woodchoppers who had felled [the forest here] were dead and gone long ago, and a whole forest of sturdy trees, pines and oaks and maples, had grown again.” Hear ye, environmentalists. Sylvia’s mother and an uncle have gone west to California. Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman and the other New England local colorists of the late 19th century wrote about a culture in decline.

Sylvy is called a little “woods-girl,” her heart gives “a wild beat” and “the wild creatures counts her one o’ themselves,” but there are no wild bears or cougars or wolves here that pose a threat to her or her cow. The closest space to a true Wilderness is the swamp, but she does not go there: “Her grandmother had warned her that she might sink in the soft black mud underneath and never be heard of more.” Sylvy is like Thoreau at Walden Pond, able to idealize Nature because the woodchoppers and hunters before them have made it safe. Nature even actively helps Sylvy when she climbs the tall pine: “Who knows how steadily the least twigs held themselves to advantage this light, weak creature on her way! The old pine must have loved his new dependent... And the tree stood still and frowned away the winds.” Sylvia personifies the sentimental view of Nature-lovers that inspired the environmental movement of the late 20th century, which only became possible because of the axe and the gun.

The grandmother says that Sylvy takes after her son Dan who “was a great hand to go gunning” and shot partridges and squirrels to help feed the family in earlier times. Thanks to Dan and those like him, the family no longer needs to shoot game. Had she lived out west at the time, in order to survive Sylvy would have needed to know how to kill with a gun. In the matriarchal culture of old Maine, however, the gun is a threat--an icon of male dominance in the larger world encroaching on the natural environment and the pastoral values of the heart. Melville likewise defined rural culture as matriarchal and urban culture as patriarchal in *Pierre* (1852). Jewett’s emphasis on how difficult life was in earlier times—“she had buried four children”—makes her vision complex pastoralism as distinct from the sentimental pastoralism embodied in the child--who is our lost innocence. In Jewett’s realistic pastoral vision, from a woman’s perspective the pasture is “half a swamp.” The danger to a woman living an independent life is that she will get stuck in the mud.

Victorianism is expressed in the polarization of the genders: the male is all head, Sylvia all heart and soul. The grandmother is a balance. The young hunter embodies the male priorities of western civilization identified with the City, in particular science and money. “We murder to dissect” is the famous line by Wordsworth expressing the traditional Romantic critique of the scientific attitude. The peaceful feminine atmosphere is obliterated by a male whistle: “Suddenly this little woods-girl is horror-stricken to hear a clear whistle not very far away...somewhat aggressive... The enemy had discovered her.”

Sylvy learned to fear male aggression in the City, where “the great red-faced boy...used to chase and frighten her.” To the Victorian feminist the male is an outsider, as in *Little Women* (1868,69) by Alcott. He is even “the enemy.” In contrast her grandmother transcends gender, as she “don’t blame” her son Dan for leaving home to see the world, since she would have done the same if she could and is too well-adapted to complain. Victorian gender stereotypes are reinforced, however, when she invites the scientist into her home. The man is insensitive to “family sorrows in his eager interest in something else.” This self-absorbed failure to be sensitive was the trait most commonly criticized in men by 19th-century American women novelists, and by men such as Henry James.

Jewett transcends Feminist polarization of the genders in the grandmother and in Sylvy’s attraction to the hunter, a “friendly lad, who proved to be most kind and sympathetic.” His capacity to be sympathetic is evidence that he transcends the stereotype of the insensitive male and is worthy of Sylvy’s admiration. She overcomes her prejudice and “watched the young man with loving admiration. She had never seen anybody so charming and delightful; the woman’s heart, asleep in the child, was vaguely thrilled by a dream of love.” And though she decides to decline his proposal, “He is so well worth making happy” that she “could have served and followed him and loved him as a dog loves.” Her decision expresses the stronger desire to preserve (1) the natural environment and wildlife; (2) “the satisfactions of an existence heart to heart with

nature and the dumb life of the forest"; (3) the spiritual values symbolized by the white heron; (4) memories of transcendent experiences in childhood.

Sylvy climbs an oak to get into the tall pine, which would not have any low branches. The pine is compared to a ladder, a metaphor that would bring to the mind of most readers the biblical image of Jacob climbing a ladder to Heaven, making her climb a spiritual ascent--in a spiral "round and round the tree's great stem, higher and higher upward." Her fingers are "like bird's claws" and she "felt as if she too could go flying away among the clouds." The tree "was like a great main-mast to the voyaging earth," an expansive metaphor also in *Moby-Dick* (1851), which invites a comparison of the white heron with the white whale, especially in this passage, striking in its resemblance to "a white living spot...with wonderful celerity uprising, and magnifying as it rose" (*MD*, CXXXIII):

...look, look! a white spot of him like a single floating feather comes up
from the dead hemlock and grows larger, and rises, and comes close at
last, and goes by the landmark pine with steady sweep of wing and
outstretched slender neck and crested head.

Critics have pointed out the influences upon Jewett of women writers, but not the apparent influences upon her of Bryant, Hawthorne and Melville. The white whale is unkillable, whereas the white heron is vulnerable. The whiteness of the whale is so complex in significance it takes a chapter to explain, whereas the whiteness of the heron, in the context of Sylvy's story, is so specific and cultural in significance it becomes iconic, with the Victorian connotation of purity. The white whale is male, whereas the white heron, though male, is feminine in form and grace--like the spirit of a pure-minded Victorian Gentleman. The heron inhabits both land and water and flies in the Sky, transcending the Wilderness of the sea. The whale from the depths manifests divinity in brute Nature, whereas the heron represents the ideal feminine aspects of Nature refined into the heavenly--that is the vision of Sylvy from the treetop.

Sylvy's vision is not that of an experienced mature adult like the grandmother, it does not manifest the psychological wholeness of Ishmael or Thoreau, it is the uniquely pure first impression of a child, comparable again to Wordsworth in "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (1807). The hunter of the heron is pursuing truth in the contrasting spirit of science, which seeks to control Nature by killing a lot of it. He is a normal icon of civilization in contrast to mad Ahab. Even more than the white whale, the white heron resembles the "Waterfowl" (1818) of William Cullen Bryant. Whereas Bryant implies a Creator, Jewett renders a girl's first impression of the awesomely beautiful Creation. Hemingway's posthumous novel *The Garden of Eden* (1986) contains "African Betrayal," about a boy who witnesses the killing of a magnificent elephant in the jungle, which is comparable in plot and meaning to "A White Heron," though the opposite in outcome.

Jewett concludes her story in the voice of the omniscient narrator traditional in Victorian fiction, weighing the choice made by Sylvy not to reveal the nest of the white heron to the hunter. "Were the birds better friends than their hunter might have been,--who can tell?" With this choice made at 9 years of age, Sylvy defines herself for life, "as if she were a desert-islander." For "the child had no playmates." She has been moved to her choice by her vision at the top of the tall pine, focused on the white heron. Her dangerous climb is an individuating experience that leads to transcendental consciousness, the kind unique to a child. Black Elk was the same age when he had a more extreme and complex visionary experience. Sylvy's vision is comparable to a conversion that leads some religious people to renounce society. She is like a younger Thoreau who never wants to leave Walden Pond and like Emily Dickinson who renounces marriage for her poems and the world of her Garden.

"Whatever treasures were lost to her, woodlands and summer-time, remember!" The appeal is to nostalgia: Remember how it felt to be young and part of Nature like Sylvy. In the last sentence Sylvy is defined forever as a "lonely country child." Loneliness is the price one pays for independence. Sylvy will never make another choice, she will never marry because she will never grow up. She is fixed in time as an icon evoking values and memories from childhood most worth preserving: seeing the sea for the first time--at dawn from the top of a tall pine on the highest land around--and gliding with a white heron through the

sky. As Dickinson wrote, "Exultation is the going / Of an inland soul to sea, / Past the houses -- past the headlands -- Into deep Eternity --"

Sylvy's rejection of the young hunter cannot be taken as a rejection by Jewett of marriage in general. Though she never married herself, Jewett affirms the young man by placing him side-by-side with the grandmother, standing for the continuity of generations, and by describing him as "so well worth making happy." She affirms marriage when the white heron "cries back to his mate on the nest." The family is a Victorian icon based upon Nature. Also Victorian is the implicit parallel between preserving chastity and Sylvy refusing to allow the male to penetrate to her secret nesting place--especially not for money.

Environmentalists should note that Jewett does not complain about the woodchoppers who cut down the Maine forest, because it grew back. Many in the late 20th century turned forest into an icon, which led to a false conception of Nature as static and to policies such as those enforced under the Endangered Species Act. The government stopped the woodchoppers, which has led to overcrowded forests, infestation and more intense wildfires that are destroying them, killing and depriving endangered species of habitat. To protect the endangered northern spotted owl the government uses guns to slaughter thousands of their rivals, barred owls. Contrary to the spirit of "A White Heron," the government is now trying to conquer Nature by blocking natural selection, the evolution of species. Trying to manage all of the natural order has become more complicated than saving one heron.

TRANSCENDENTAL CHARACTERISTICS

1. **QUEST INTO THE WILDERNESS:** The forest around the farm is called a "wilderness" and it is one to Sylvy. Her quest is her "perilous" excursion into the forest looking for the heron. Her climb up the pine in the dark is described as "dangerous," as beasts might be. The climb is a painful trial and she is "ready to cry sometimes because her fingers ache and her lamed feet slip."
2. **SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY TO SAVE ONE'S OWN SOUL OR SELF:** The heron she saves is a metaphor of her spiritual or best Self, her soul. If she had been an Indian girl on a vision quest her name would be White Heron.
3. **CHRIST-EVOKING FIGURE AS EXEMPLAR:** Sylvy has no exemplar and is herself Christ-evoking in her purity and sacrifice for the heron.
4. **SPIRITUAL GUIDES:** She herself is the spiritual guide, as to the hunter who appeals to her, "I have lost my way."
5. **SOLITUDE & SELF-RELIANCE:** She is a "lonely country child" and "had no playmates." She climbs by herself.
6. **SPIRITUAL DEATH & REBIRTH:** "She forgot even her sorrow at the sharp report of his gun and the sight of thrushes and sparrows dropping silent to the ground, their songs hushed and their pretty feathers stained and wet with blood." Sylvy's spiritual death is vicarious and her rebirth comes with her decision to "die" to the world beyond the farm, sending the hunter away.
7. **CONFRONTATION WITH ULTIMATE TRUTH, OFTEN IN THE FORM OF A WILD ANIMAL:** At the top of the tall pine she gazes upon the white heron as a form of the divine in Nature--an epitome of purity, beauty and grace--vulnerable to death.
8. **ATONEMENT WITH NATURE:** Sylvy is a "woods-girl" already at one with Nature as a child can be. To have betrayed the heron would have dissociated her from Nature and herself.
9. **RECONCILIATION OF OPPOSITES THAT INTEGRATES HEAD AND HEART, PURITAN & PASTORAL VALUES:** Her decision reconciles the conflict in herself caused by the hunter, who embodies the priorities of the head versus the heart, the City threatening the Garden.

10. CIRCULAR, CYCLICAL & SPIRAL IMAGERY: Her daily routine tending to and searching for the cow in the pasture is circuitous, through the cycle of the seasons on the farm. When she climbs the tall pine to look for the heron she “went round and round the tree’s great stem, higher and higher upward.”
11. INNER LIGHT: “Sylvia’s face was like a pale star” and the dawn light is the metaphor of an inner dawning.
12. NUMINOUS EVOCATION: The description of the heron in flight and on a high perch is objective evocation rather than Romantic, its numinosity generated by prose style, vivid realism, graceful movement and importance as a goal.
13. MYSTERY, INTENSITY, ECSTASY: The mystery is the location of the white heron--literal and psychological. Sylvy’s emotions are conveyed by the rendering of her perceptions when she observes the heron and by her silence when asked to locate it: “The murmur of the pine’s green branches is in her ears, she remembers how the white heron came flying through the golden air and how they watched the sea and the morning together...”
14. TRANSCENDENCE OF TIME & SPACE: “She stood trembling and tired but wholly triumphant, high in the treetop.... Sylvia felt as if she too could go flying away among the clouds.”
15. SENSE OF PARADOX: The heron first appears not overhead in the sky as expected, but rises up from the green world below, implying that what it represents is deep within her: “...comes up from the dead hemlock and grows larger, and rises, and comes close at last...”
16. INEFFABILITY: Her silence at the end, even after her grandmother “fretfully rebukes her”—“Sylvia cannot speak....”
17. HOLISTIC PERCEPTION: Her vision is intuitively holistic, but since she is a child it is not comprehensive.
18. HARMONIOUS VISION OF LIFE: “She forgot even her sorrow” and is implicitly content, in harmony with Nature.

See “Model of Metaphors”

Michael Hollister (2012)