

ANALYSIS

The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896)



Sarah Orne Jewett

(1849-1909)

“A woman who spends her summers in the isolated seaport town of Dunnet, Maine, describes the region in these portraits and anecdotes. She lives as a boarder with kindly Mrs. Almira Todd, through whose gossip she comes to know the lives and idiosyncrasies of the people. On a visit to Green Island, she meets Mrs. Todd’s charming old mother, Mrs. Blackett, and her shy brother William.

Other acquaintances are aged Captain Littlepage, who tells a fantastic story of discovering Purgatory in the Arctic; Abby Martin, the ‘Queen’s Twin,’ born in the same hour as Victoria; old Mrs. Fosdick, ‘the best hand in the world to make a visit,’ who tells of her childhood on her father’s ship; and the gentle shepherdess Esther Hight, who, though courted by Williams Blackett for 40 years, continues to live with her invalid mother. A visit from Mrs. Fosdick leads Mrs. Todd to tell of her cousin, ‘Poor Joanna,’ who became a hermit on Shell-heap Island when ‘crossed in love.’ Later events are the death of old Mrs. Hight and the happy marriage of William and Esther.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 169

“Her masterpiece, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), is the best piece of regional fiction to have come out of nineteenth century America. Yet this great book is not her only claim to admiration. Nearly all the stories she wrote after 1880 show the distinctive quality of her work: that particular combination of deep and tender insight with technical resilience and toughness which none of her contemporaries in the field learned to match, chiefly because they were unwilling to work as hard as she....

The growth between *Deephaven* [1877] and *The Country of the Pointed Firs* can be measured by seeing how observation has matured to insight, and how her attitude toward both her people and her art subtly deepened. In the early book the narrator seems (though she was not) a summer resident in search of the quaint and unique; without looking down on the people she is never quite at one with them, and her experiments with scenes are sometimes tentative and unsure. By the time of the *Pointed Firs* and its epilogue-story *The Dunnet Shepherdess*, she knows how to understand and therefore how to present her people; she has learned the great trick of true realism: to combine depth of sympathetic involvement with artistic detachment, reaching unity through the establishment of a point of view.

Deeply responsive to a look or a word from people like Almira Todd the gatherer of pennyroyal, or William Blackett the taciturn islander, she can still see that look or word as only one thread in the fabric of her total impression. An emotional experience is thus never felt to be the end in view, but only an indispensable contribution to that end. One could cite among dozens of examples the farewell to Mrs. Todd, soon followed by the distant prospect of the same Antigone-like figure descending the profile of a hill as party to a walking funeral. One hears that Miss Jewett's was a limited and muted art. But the significant point—in an age of realism for social history's sake, or regionalism strongly dependent for its force on mere local color, where characters were sometimes embarrassed and stereotyped by being saddled with the responsibility of representing a particular region—is that her stories were works of art, and of a high order....

On one occasion the narrator in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* notices how 'a narrow set of circumstances had caged a fine able character and held it captive.' But Miss Jewett rarely stresses, as Miss Wilkins frequently does, the caging environment, the captivity of circumstance, and there seems, accordingly, a larger measure of modern realism in the work of the younger writer."

Carlos Baker
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 845-46, 848

"The real Sarah Orne Jewett, even as a novelist, is in the two books that are not 'regular' novels at all: *Deephaven* (1877) and *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. Though these books include more varied material than they are sometimes given credit for having embraced, neither has a plot, and each comprises a series of sketches of Maine life. Yet each makes a unified impression upon the mind. And both, unfortunately, are indescribable, just as the *Cranford* of which the narrator of *Deephaven* is 'often reminded' is indescribable. In their unspectacular and perfect symmetry, they simply refuse to stick out any handles for the historian to grab hold of.

Yet their value for the historian is nearly as great as for the litterateur. Here—in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* especially—are Miss Jewett's 'actors' at their very best: Almira Todd, her mother, William, and the rest. For Miss Jewett knew the men and women—especially the women—of old Maine as no other writer of comparable talent has ever known them or ever can know them again.... Lowell compared Miss Jewett herself to Theocritus, and that was appropriate also. Kipling praised her for her grasp and vigor, and she was greatly admired by Henry James."

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century
(Holt 1952) 172-73

"Standard opinion has not done justice to Miss Jewett—not since James Russell Lowell wrote that she had composed 'idylls in prose, and the life they commemorate is as simple as its main elements, if not so picturesque in its setting, as that which has survived for us in Theocritus.' Parrington called her Brahmin, which is surely an absurd tag for the daughter of a Maine country doctor; he probably meant to say that her work didn't satisfy his appetite for social realism. Van Wyck Brooks, while purring over forgotten ladies who dabbled in polite literature, and almost nothing about Miss Jewett, though she wrote, as it happens, one of the few first-rate works of prose we can claim for nineteenth-century America. F. O. Matthiessen, in his little book on Miss Jewett, drew a warm and charming vignette, but barely touched on criticism. By contrast, Carlos Baker in the more recent *Literary History of the United States* has the good sense to praise her as an artist—but then proceeds to cancel out his praise by exiling her to that literary wilderness known as 'regional fiction.'

Sarah Orne Jewett was a writer of deep pure feeling and a limited capacity for emotional expression: there is always, one senses, more behind the language than actually comes through it. In her best work she employed—it was an instinctive and inevitable choice—a tone of muted nostalgia. She knew that the Maine country she loved so well was slowly being pushed into a social impasse: it could not compete in the jungle warfare that was American life in the late nineteenth century. But even as this knowledge formed

and limited her vision of things, she did not let it become the dominant content of her work, for she understood, or felt, that the obsolete also has its claim upon us.

She was honest and tactful enough not to inflate her sense of passing and nostalgia with the urgencies of a heroism that could only have been willed; in her bare, linear stories about country people struggling to keep their farms alive, she made no false claims, for she saw that even when one or another figure in her Maine country might be heroic there was nothing distinctively heroic in the spectacle of a community in decline, a way of life gradually dying. But she knew—it was an enviable knowledge—that admiration and love can be extended to those who have neither the vocation nor the possibility for heroism. She paid a price, of course. In a country where literature has so often been given over to roaring and proclaiming and ‘promulgating’ it was nearly impossible for so exquisite an artist—exquisite precisely because she was, and knew she was, a minor figure—to be properly valued.

At first glance *The Country of the Pointed Firs* bears a certain resemblance to Mrs. Gaskell’s *Cranford*. In both books a young woman who has tasted urban knowledge returns to a quaint, outmoded village which represents pre-industrial society, and there observes the manners of its inhabitants with a mixture of fondness and amusement. But charming as *Cranford* obviously is, it does not seem to me nearly so good as Miss Jewett’s book. Too often Mrs. Gaskell is content to bask in the soft glow of eccentricity and oddity, so that her narrator leaves *Cranford* pretty much the person she was. But Miss Jewett’s ‘I’ registers the meaning of Deephaven with an increase of force and insight that is beautifully arranged: for her the experience of arriving and leaving becomes an education in mortality.

The people in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* are eccentrics, a little gnarled by the American weather and twisted by American loneliness; but it is not for a display of these deformities that Miss Jewett presents them. She is interested in reaching some core beneath the crusted surface and like so many other American writers, like Anderson and Frost and Robinson, she knows the value and pathos of the buried life. That is why it is harmful, despite the fact that her stories are set in the same locale, to speak of her as a regional writer; for regional literature, by its very premise, implies a certain slackening of the human measure, a complacent readiness to accept the merely accidental and unusual.

With infinite delicacy Miss Jewett moves her light from one figure to another: the shy fisherman William who late in life returns to the interior country to claim his love; the jilted Miss Joanna Todd who in the immensity of her grief cuts herself off from humanity and lives alone on a coastal island; the touched sea captain who remembers journeys to places that never were; and most of all, Mrs. Almiry Todd, the central figure of the book, sharp-tongued, wise, witty, a somewhat greyed version of George Eliot’s Mrs. Poyser. (As Mrs. Todd recalls her dead husband, ‘She might have been Antigone alone on the Theban plain.... An absolute, archaic grief possessed this countrywoman; 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.’) The book is set in a dramatic present that is necessarily somewhat fragile, but it resounds with full echoes of the past: tradition lives as an element of experience, not a proposition of ideology. (‘Conversation’s got to have some root in the past,’ says an old lady, ‘or else you’ve got to explain every remark you make, and it wears a person out.’)

Like other books dealing with a relatively simple society, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* gains organic structure from its relaxed loyalty to the rhythms of natural life. The world it memorializes is small and shrinking, and the dominant images of the book serve only to bound this world more stringently: images of the ranked firs and the water, which together suggest the enclosing force of everything beyond the social perimeter. But meanwhile a community survives, endowed with rare powers of implicit communication: to say in this world that someone has ‘real feelins’ is to say everything.

Finally the book is a triumph of style, a precise and delicate style such as we seldom find in nineteenth century American prose.... There is much to be gained from a study of her finely modulated prose, which never strains for effects beyond its reach and always achieves a secure pattern of rhythm. Listen to this sentence with its sly abrupt climax: ‘There was something quite charming in his appearance: it was a face thin and delicate with refinement, but worn into appealing lines, as if he had suffered from loneliness and misapprehension.’ Or to the lucid gravity of this sentence: ‘There was in the eyes a look of anticipation

and joy, a far-off look that sought the horizon; one often sees it in seafaring families, inherited by girls and boys alike from men who spend their lives at sea, and are always watching for distant sails or the firs loom of the land.' Or to the wit of Mrs. Todd as she places her minister: 'He seemed to know no remedies, but he had a great use of words.'

The Country of the Pointed Firs is not a 'great' book; it isn't *Moby-Dick* or *Sister Carrie* or even *The Great Gatsby*. It cannot sustain profound exegesis or symbol hunting. In fact, all it needs is appreciation. But living as we do in a country where the grand too easily becomes synonymous with virtue...it is good to remember that we have writers like Miss Jewett, calmly waiting for us to remember them."

Irving Howe

"*The Country of the Pointed Firs*" (1954)
The Critic as Artist: Essays on Books 1920-1970
ed. Gilbert A. Harrison
(Liveright 1972) 162-66

"*Deephaven* (1877) established her reputation and defined a literary style made independent and original by the author's determined probing for the truth of a character or situation, without a trace of the moralizing sentiment then popular. Its independence appeared in the writer's command of a unity of atmosphere or mood as the structural element, which gave to the consecutive sketches something like the impact of a novel. This technique was often exemplified in her later stories, but not again in an entire volume until the appearance of her masterpiece, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, in 1896. Howells had praised her style, but she had earlier identified it for herself in declining to write for Scudder a long narrative, conventionally plotted. Not plot, she said, controlled her writing, but what she called 'character and meditations,' words showing prescience in a young writer of twenty'."

Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long, eds.
The American Tradition in Literature, 3rd edition, Vol. 2
(Norton 1956-67) 541

"Thinly bound together by a faint thread of plot, these sketches describe a Maine community, an isolated seaport town. Local color is deftly applied, and humor mingles with sentiment in descriptions of characters who are resolutely themselves. Willa Cather thought so well of the book that she placed it alongside *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Scarlet Letter*."

Max J. Herzberg & staff

The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 214

"The slow, steady advance of the art of Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1909) from the miniature competence of her *Atlantic* sketches of the '70s, collected in *Deephaven* (1877), to the formal perfection of her masterpiece *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), indicates a writer of a different, and superior, order. As much as Mark Twain's breakthrough in *Huckleberry Finn* or the towering example of Henry James—for all obvious differences in scale—it marks the crystallization of the broad undifferentiated impulse toward Realism in American fiction...

So in the beautiful book that all her development as a writer seems now to have pointed toward, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, it is interesting to see that she abandons the conventions of dramatic fiction and improvises something else. In this novel-length chronicle of remembered episodes, two dominant features bring the whole loose sequence into an exceptional unity, and both involve an imaginative submission to her materials. One is the firm, unforced evocation in chapter after chapter of the setting named in the book's title—the rocky shoreline and green forest; the shrunken village (always disappearing from sight, as in the book's closing sentence); the restless, untamable ocean. The other is her allowing her chief characters to tell their own stories, in their own voices and at their own pace of disclosure. It is this last device that is at the heart of the illusion the book gives us of circumscribing a complete actual 'world,' though a small one. We hear of these episodes in the very accents of those who have themselves been party to them and for whom they have already taken on the absoluteness of legend; and that is the practical

source of the book's quiet power, the formal means through which we discover the residual fullness of feeling beneath the pathetic deprivations of social circumstance.

Once imaginatively secured, this legendary world became, for Sarah Jewett, more actual than that of her own time. It thus renewed the risks of sentimentality. She wrote more Dunnet Landing stories, three of which came to be included, but only after her death, in new printings of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*: a publisher's mistake, it may be said, for in their renewed concessions to quaintness and charm these additional stories jeopardize the delicate yet strict unity of the original book. But a fourth, and much the longest, is quite another matter. Entitled, 'The Foreigner,' this extraordinary story may truly be called one of the mislaid treasures of American writing; until its recovery by Sarah Jewett's most recent editor, it had been buried in the files of the *Atlantic* since its publication in August, 1900. Not least because it briefly moves us back into the vanished world of masculine enterprise which Dunnet Landing has bleakly come down from and yet is still haunted by—and shows Sarah Jewett in easy control of that world, too—'The Foreigner' confirms one's sense of the authority of *Pointed Firs*.

It is, for one thing, a masterly instance of narrative framing. The storm perils and ambiguous reassurances of safety with which it opens introduce the bold combination of tones through which it goes forward: on the one hand there is the broad masculine humor of the four Yankee shipmasters, out on the town in the West Indies and 'three sheets in the wind,' gravely interposing their persons between a mysterious guitar-playing lady and some unmannerly mistreatment of her; on the other, the shadowy pathos building up around the lady herself, French-born and French-mannered, after she had been taken as a bride into the austerities of seafaring, Calvinist New England. These tones, moreover, are perfectly fused in the rising and falling rhythms of Mrs. Todd's patient, precisely detailed narration.

It is all lively, charming dialect comedy—and it is also a ghost story summoned up out of a strangely heroic past, legendary, elegiac, and only reluctantly recalled and renewed. Its resonances are, one may say, peculiarly 'American.' In the figure of the gay, sensual foreign lady widowed (inevitably) and wasting, her exotic tastes and ways isolating her in Dunnet and becoming fixed into a permanent warp of queerness; in the half-grotesque episode of the lost treasure supposedly hidden away in her house; and finally in the faultlessly rendered climax, when her mother's ghost comes to take her home and, as Mrs. Todd has seen plainly, the doors suddenly open wide, out of the losses and deprivations of the world of time into a redeeming outer world of timeless spirits—in all this Sarah Jewett found the right occasion for setting out once more her deepest knowledge of her fictional world and its fundamental human history, in a story no part of which (to use Mrs. Todd's words) seems in any way 'beyond reason'."

Warner Berthoff

The Ferment of Realism: American Literature 1884-1919
(The Free Press/Macmillan 1965) 96, 98-100

"The triumph of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) is that it simultaneously affirms and denies the world of Dunnet Landing. The life there is to be seen not from the outside—as Kate and Helen, two Boston girls, saw it in *Deephaven*. Instead, the narrator of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* begins where they remained. At first, she slightly condescends to the antique-village quaintness of Dunnet Landing; but she is progressively initiated into its manners and morals.

In the best sense the stories are tentative sketches—never completed stories—in which the narrator becomes increasingly aware that the world of Dunnet Landing is neither idyllic nor antique, and certainly not quaint, but vibrantly alive to hope, frustration, contentment, and suffering. In 'Amandar,' Rose Terry Cooke had written of 'the dreadful reticence that underlies all New England character, and forbids it to blossom in expression, though like some abnormal plant, it may bear fruit abundantly in deeds.' Similarly, as the narrator of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* penetrates the convention of reticence, she understands the signs, smiles, tones, and gestures of the Dunnet people, who never say the important things they manage in other ways to communicate. 'There, it does seem so pleasant to talk with an old acquaintance that knows what you know....' Susan Fosdick, a visitor much sought after by the Dunnet townspeople, says: 'Conversation's got to have some root in the past, or else you've got to explain every remark you make an' it wears a person out.'

As the book progresses the narrator gradually gains entry into that root in the past. Leaving a local funeral after the services but before the burial, she is reminded early in the book 'that I did not really belong to Dunnet Landing.' Yet, already undergoing initiation, she does her work in the empty schoolhouse and begins to feel 'as if I were a small scholar.' Captain Littlepage, who comes to the schoolhouse, becomes her first master, Mrs. Todd having already told her something of town history. He enters quoting *Paradise Lost*, and moves from a dissertation on the intellectual and psychological effects of the loss of shipping to his own mad proof of the truth of his criticisms. Later, on Green Island, where Mrs. Todd's mother lives, the narrator expresses the desire to be initiated into the world of Dunnet Landing—'to be a citizen of such a complete and tiny continent and home of fisherfolk.' The mother, Mrs. Blackett, in turn, tells her, "I shan't make any stranger of you."

Mrs. Todd shows her secret places where she had never taken anyone before. Mother and daughter take her to their family-reunion festival where, at last, she 'felt like an adopted Bowden.' But the summertime within the great time of past and future has been moving resolutely through the book, and as fall approaches—the Fall is suggested—the summer visitor must return to the outer world. Now initiated, she suddenly begins to feel 'to find herself a foreigner' away from Dunnet. As her parting gift, Mrs. Todd gives her a coral pin, long before bought for Joanna, the recluse of Shell-Heap Island, implying that in some sense the narrator will now likewise be a hermit in the world to which she is returning, cut off from the relevant community of Dunnet Landing. 'So we die before our own eyes,' the narrator concludes. From the schoolhouse scholar, the innocent, to experience and her symbolic death back in the world she has come full circle.

From spectator she has become participant, thus understanding the double impulses of the New England world, which contains both an Edenic Green Island and a desolate Shell-Heap Island; both the sociable Mrs. Blackett—though even she, on her island, is isolated socially—and shy recluses like William Blackett, Joanna, and the two farming families who, though sharing a small island, have not spoken to each other for three generations, 'even in times of sickness or death or birth.' Joanna, whose total isolation counterbalances Mrs. Blackett's social instincts, illustrates the 'singular turn' to harshness that emotional energy had taken in the decline of New England. She confides to Mrs. Todd, 'I have committed the unpardonable sin' (never revealed) and so withdraws from society 'like one of the saints in the desert'—but without their social justification and without Ethan Brand's tragic suffering. Understanding her tale, the narrator is brought to the abrupt recognition that 'in the life of each of us...there is a place remote and islanded,' while she is yet able to accept the joy in the 'gay voices and laughter from a pleasure-boat that was going seaward full of boys and girls' past Shell-Heap Island at that moment.

Sant Bowden is another whose talent has been buried by circumstance. His heritage is from the militant Norman spirit that Miss Jewett depicted in her history book, *The Normans* (1898). But he has had no chance to be a military hero. Rejected for service in the Civil War, he is now a frustrated old man who incessantly plans military strategies and maneuvers that can never be carried out.

The very title of the book conveys its essential ambivalence: for the *Pointed Firs* are, on the one hand, an obvious analogue to Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and like grass suggest endurance, continuing fertility, and masculine strength. At the same time, the forests of pointed firs visually suggest the fleets of ships whose endless masts once forested the harbors of Berwick: the last sight the narrator has of Dunnet is of 'the tall masts of its disabled schooners in the inner bay,' rotting at the wharves. The image of pointed firs referred to, at the very beginning, in the title of the book, and suggesting the dual possibilities of fertility or decadence, is thus seized upon at the very end by the narrator as the essential symbol for her experience of New England doubleness. The islands she has found represent both prison and paradise; and she is committed to accepting and rejecting them both. Held by the hopes and promises of the New England Mission, she had yet to reject it and face sternly the crumbled relics of its ruin."

Jay Martin

Harvests of Change: American Literature 1865-1914
(Prentice-Hall 1967) 145-47

"Cather gratefully dedicated her first novel about a heroine, *O Pioneers!* (1913) to Jewett and said in 1925 that the older woman's masterpiece, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, ranked with *The Scarlet Letter*

and *Huckleberry Finn* as an American classic. Perhaps because *The Country of the Pointed Firs* came toward the end of her career, Jewett was able to fuse brilliantly in a long work her interests in rural community, female friendship, the making of art, and the structure of narrative. These concerns also shape 'A White Heron,' written in 1881 and probably Jewett's best-known individual story, and 'The Foreigner,' whose main character, Almira Todd, is central in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* as well."

Elizabeth Ammons
The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2
(D.C. Heath 1990) 111

Michael Hollister (2015)