

UNVEILING JEWETT'S HIDDEN VOICE: DISCOVERING THE  
ABORTED FUTURE OF DUNNET LANDING IN  
*THE COUNTRY OF THE POINTED FIRS*

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## ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship addresses a deeper significance to Jewett's female characters than was previously attributed in canonical history. Jewett imbues her women with complexity, but intentionally avoids portraying her females as disproportionately heroic. Indeed, a pervading recurrence of abortions and otherwise lost children among the predominately female community of Dunnet Landing creates a framework of death by which to interpret the actions and motivations of Jewett's characters.

My thesis explores the larger metaphor Jewett establishes by juxtaposing the literal abortions of her female characters and the figurative abortion of Dunnet Landing's future; moreover, the aborted futures of Jewett's female characters mirror the decay of the town itself which has not recovered from the loss of its once-vibrant shipping economy. Jewett's intermingling of these two themes unveils a sense of lost innocence which is cemented by the historical context of nostalgia for something lost that was setting in all over the country during Jewett's era.

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my husband, James McClelland, and my children, Brody and Kendall McClelland.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

If I were asked to name three American books which have the possibility of a long, long life, I would say at once: *The Scarlett Letter*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. I can think of no others that confront time and change so serenely. The last book seems to me fairly to shine with the reflection of its long, joyous future. It is so tightly yet so lightly built, so little encumbered with the heavy materialism that deteriorates and grows old-fashioned. I like to think with what pleasure, with what a sense of rich discovery, the young student of American literature in far distant years to come will take up this book and say: ‘A masterpiece!’ as proudly as if he himself had made it.

—Willa Cather, *On Writing*

The critical tendency to relegate the works of Sarah Orne Jewett into that dismissive and neglected subcategory of realism known as “local color” is one that is no longer based in sound scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Jewett did often write of her home state of Maine, which she knew and loved intimately, and it would appear that her incredibly subtle style is often mistaken for simplicity. Her stories, however, and particularly her finest work, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), are anything but simple as the term “local color” might suggest, and, when read carefully, shrug off any shallow impressions of being merely quaint portraits of New England life. Jewett was a realist author at the height of the realist movement during the late-nineteenth century. As a

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the best evidence of Jewett’s relegation to the local color category is the persistence with which scholars have attempted to refute that categorization in the last few decades. More direct evidence, however, is seen in the many literature anthologies of the twentieth century which firmly locate Jewett in that camp; for instance, Judith Fetterly and Marjorie Pryse, while certainly not criticizing Jewett’s work, still include her in their Norton anthology, *American Women Regionalists 1850-1910* (1992). For this study, I referenced June Howard’s review of the various defenses and refutations of Sarah Orne Jewett as local color author in “Unraveling Regions, Unsettling Periods: Sarah Orne Jewett and American Literary History” (1996).

contemporary of influential authors and critics, such as William Dean Howells, Jewett agreed that the only way to portray beauty and truth was to reflect life accurately and honestly, but as the letter cited in the epigraph indicates, she and her contemporaries understood that honest realism, and even subtlety, did not exclude complexity.<sup>2</sup>

The world of Sarah Orne Jewett was one in which industrialization and urbanization had disrupted and transformed many of the communities which she knew and loved, thereby creating a confused atmosphere of the excitement of progress and nostalgia for something lost at the same time.<sup>3</sup> Her world was one in which the social role of women was transitioning from a Victorian ideal of domestic subservience and tranquility to the advent of the twentieth-century New Woman, replete with an ambition for more than motherhood and motivated by liberation from mere domesticity. Her world was not only directly impacted by various movements that sought to evolve with the times, but also by legislative action that wanted to suppress the perceived threats that accompanied such evolutions. Jewett's world was inevitably influenced by the issues of her time, and as a realist author, she reflected that complex world in her writing.

Efforts over the last few decades to resurrect Jewett from the canonical subcategory of local color acknowledge her insightful portrayal of women and related social issues during the nineteenth century. Scholars now recognize sophistication in her work that previously had been

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<sup>2</sup> In a study of Howells, Jewett, Chesnut, and Cather, Paul R. Petrie argues that realist authors of the late nineteenth century were unavoidably shaped by their reaction either for or against Howellsian literary theory, which believed that literature "could accommodate [Howells's] increasing unease with the ever more divisive effects of emergent American capitalism, industrialization, urbanization, and immigration" (1). He depicts Jewett as being a close acquaintance of and adherent to Howells's theories. Petrie's study argues that realist authors believed "the use-value of the literary work for real readers in the world outside the boundaries of the text must be considered as a wholly integral part of that work's aesthetic worth" (14).

<sup>3</sup> My assumptions on the existence of post-industrial nineteenth-century nostalgia ride the coattails of other historians and scholars who have documented that phenomenon. The source I rely upon most heavily for this context is T.J. Jackson Lears's *No Place of Grace*, which will be discussed in greater detail in a later chapter.

recognized only by a select group of peers, including Willa Cather and William Dean Howells.<sup>4</sup> In spite of an enriched understanding of Jewett's work as a result of these recent efforts, the problem of how to account for *The Country of the Pointed Firs* persists. In their attempt to locate a unifying theme between Jewett's character sketches throughout the work, most critics tend to assign the primary intent of the text to one of several categorical absolutes: is it Christian or pagan? Feminist or anti-feminist? Lesbian? Racist? Classist? Imperialist?<sup>5</sup> The debate seems endless, but the majority of modern scholars rely upon the existence of a veiled but aggressive feminist interpretation. Margaret Roman, for instance, depicts Jewett's female characters as heroines who have surmounted the Victorian ideal of an "angel in the house." They have essentially made a jail break: "They have gotten through the windows, out of the houses, and hopped over the fences" (Roman 11). Sarah Sherman also argues for mostly triumphant feminist heroines asserting that Jewett's women experience a "transcendence paradoxically achieved through immanence" (25).<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Ammons and Barbara Johns offer

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, Willa Cather thought so highly of Jewett's work, which she deemed to be "so tightly yet so lightly built" (58), that she dedicated her novel *O Pioneers!* (1913) "To the memory of Sarah Orne Jewett in whose beautiful and delicate work there is the perfection that endures."

<sup>5</sup> For further scholarship on these positions, see the works discussed subsequently as well as the following authors whose work was reviewed briefly for this study. Marjorie Pryse offers an evaluation of the difficulty in categorizing Jewett's gender and class issues in her chapter "Sex, Class, and 'Category Crisis': Reading Jewett's Transitivity." Clare Colquitt's "Motherlove in Two Narratives of Community" and Diane D'Amico's "The Significance of The Dunnet Shepherdess to Jewett's Matriarchal Christianity" both offer a depiction of Jewett as an author seeking to establish a peacefully moderate and even Christian foundation for her work, while Francesca Sawaya argues for an opposite view of Jewett as politically "progressive" (509) in "Domesticity, Cultivation, and Vocation in Jane Addams and Sarah Orne Jewett." Melissa Solomon sees strains of lesbianism in her article "'The Queen's Twin': Sarah Orne Jewett and Lesbian Symmetry," while Hyatt Waggoner sees her as simply humanistic. In a more polarized criticism, Elizabeth Ammons sees Jewett as a classist and a racist (indeed almost fascist) in her "Material Culture, Empire, and Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs*" while Josephine Donovan refutes this theory outright in "Jewett on Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Imperialism: A Reply to Her Critics."

<sup>6</sup> Sherman explores in great detail the history of feminine iconography and mythology as it relates to the complex and rich allusions within Jewett's work. She links the idea of the matriarchal goddess

a less progressive feminist analysis in suggesting that Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* appropriates and redefines formerly pejorative terms such as "witch" and "spinster."<sup>7</sup>

My contribution to Jewett scholarship will also address a deeper significance to Jewett's female characters, but will employ a more balanced approach. Jewett does imbue her women with complexity and sophistication, but, as Heather Love suggests in her review of Jewett's spinsters, she intentionally avoids portraying her females as overtly heroic.<sup>8</sup> In fact, it is the darker strains of loss, melancholy, and regret permeating Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs* that provide cohesion between what can otherwise be misinterpreted as disparate chapters and tales of women in rural New England.

Most significantly for the purposes of this study, a pervading recurrence of abortions and a distinct nostalgia for something lost among the predominantly female community of Dunnet Landing creates a framework of death and sorrow by which to interpret the actions and motivations of its characters. Surprisingly, the existence of allusions to abortion within the text has not been given much significant attention by scholars. Because scholars often become mired in their attempts to superficially categorize Jewett's within a binary of absolutes, they often miss

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figure to being one with nature in much the same way Mrs. Todd appears to the reader in *Country of the Pointed Firs*. In this way, Mrs. Todd becomes a triumphant figure for the narrator. The goddess figure achieves victory, or transcendence, through "immanence," or "by returning to nature with conscience awareness" (Sherman 25). Sherman's analysis provides a wealth of useful interpretations regarding the mythological elements of Jewett's text, but it seems that she has missed a crucial opportunity to enrich that discussion in failing to address the potential abortion implications.

<sup>7</sup> See Elizabeth Ammons's essay "Jewett's Witches" and Barbara Johns's "'Mateless and Appealing': Growing into Spinsterhood in Sarah Orne Jewett."

<sup>8</sup> Heather Love offers a more balanced review of Jewett's spinsters by insisting that Jewett intentionally avoids portraying her females as disproportionately heroic. Her nuanced analysis allows for the darker strains of melancholy that permeate Jewett's work: "Although the larger framework may be one of consolation, Jewett authors some truly devastating accounts of isolation, abandonment, and regret. She chronicles experiences that feminist, lesbian, and queer critical frameworks have not allowed us to see: the feelings of loss, disappointment, and longing that are *internal* to female worlds of love and ritual" (Love 313).

Jewett's carefully placed clues regarding abortion altogether. The most obvious explanation for this oversight resides in Jewett's necessarily subtle style, given the controversial nature of her subject. Existing federal legislation at the time, informally known as "Comstock's Law" (1873), did not allow Jewett to distribute or publish overt references to abortion or related matters; therefore, she encodes the text with clues meant to suggest abortions rather than stating the matter explicitly. Of those scholars who have discovered the same evidence within *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, many still apply that knowledge in no truly meaningful way.<sup>9</sup> In fact, Ron Welburn's examination of the significance of the pennyroyal herb as "an old remedy learned from Native Americans" for aborting a fetus is one of the only other arguments that gives the matter much forthright and plausible attention (75).<sup>10</sup> Welburn's examination, however, focuses more on the importance and location of pennyroyal and other symbols in the overall form of Jewett's text rather than on hypothesizing a meaningful purpose for their inclusion. Not only is the dismissal of Jewett's work as mere "local color" a gross misjudgment, but the misapplication of important content, even when correctly identified, is widespread.

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<sup>9</sup> A small handful of literary scholars have given attention to this issue, particularly regarding Jewett's references to the pennyroyal herb which will be discussed in more detail later in this essay, but very few, if any, have interpreted and applied that knowledge in a specific way as my argument does. George Smith asserts straightforwardly that abortions must have taken place among these women, but he then, in my own analysis, applies that knowledge a bit haphazardly in assuming that Sarah Tilley's broken china cup is a symbol of abortion and that Mrs. Todd seeks to include the narrator in the intimate details of her life because she harbors a lesbian desire for the narrator. Other scholars do not apply their knowledge widely enough. Elizabeth Ammons, for example, directly states that pennyroyal is an abortifacient, but only states as much to solidify her redefinition of Mrs. Todd as a cultish midwife figure rather than a "witch." The vast majority of literary critics, however, miss the reference entirely in spite of its central location in the text.

<sup>10</sup> In "The Braided Rug, Pennyroyal, and the Pathos of Almira Todd: A Cultural Reading of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*," Ron Welburn examines Jewett's work as a sort of collection of "the cultural and folk histories of northern New England" that exposes "the book's deepest secret" (73). He explicitly interprets the function of the pennyroyal herb as an abortifacient for Almira Todd, and sees great significance in its link to early Native American cultures.

My thesis will explore the larger metaphor Jewett establishes by forging an intersection between the literal abortions of her female characters and the figurative abortion of Dunnet Landing's future; indeed, the aborted futures of Jewett's female characters mirror the decay of the town itself, which has never quite recovered from the loss of its economic vibrancy via the once-burgeoning shipping industry. Jewett's subtle intermingling of these two themes unveils an immense sense of lost innocence, suggested in this novel by Captain Littlepage's fleeting allusion to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and is cemented by the historical context of nostalgia for something a lost way of life that was setting in all over the country during Jewett's era; the innocence lost when these women ventured into a world of experience and knowledge via the once-burgeoning shipping industry of their small coastal port results in a vulnerability that leads them to seek shelter from the world behind their pointed firs. The literal gardens they forge in the hillsides of Dunnet Landing do not offer a restoration of innocence or transcendence, but appear to have rooted them in death and decay.

Jewett's literal and metaphorical deployment of the abortion issue takes on further significance when considered in context of the legislative atmosphere and national temperament of her time. By subverting the dictates of the nineteenth-century Comstock Law, Jewett positions herself rebelliously as one more voice among many seeking to participate in what Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* describes as a frenzied "incitement to discourse" regarding female sexuality and its various implications (17). Exploring these layers of complexity in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* exposes the work as a valuable historical artifact depicting the nineteenth century experience by women of aborted futures and aborted voices; moreover, an examination of Jewett's text exposes her contribution to the discourse of the time

and provides insight into women's potential ability through recovering their voices also to recover their aborted futures.

*A Subtle Voice amid a "Discursive Explosion"*

The transitional environment of industrialization and feminist mobilization necessarily infiltrated Jewett's work as a realist author, even if only indirectly. As an author of any type, however, Jewett's prose would have been directly impacted by the reign of Comstock's Law. Perhaps this is why so many critics and scholars have trouble grasping the deeper complexity of Jewett's text: any references to issues that Jewett felt obligated to address in the name of realism had to be veiled to avoid risk of prosecution. Without realizing it themselves and based on an entirely different rationale, this is where recent scholars who view Jewett as a feminist get it right. Publishing stories that hinted at acts and methods of abortion was subversive in and of itself. While the overall thrust of her material does not exactly advocate subversive female behavior, her insistence that her female characters' stories be told is certainly rebellious. Sherman comments on the relevance of historical female suppression in the abstract: "Emerson once wrote that the seer is always a sayer; but women have not always had a name for their vision, and sometimes the ability to say shapes the ability to see" (x). Sherman's statement holds a more literal and significant relevance than she perhaps intends. Jewett's substantive material would have perhaps been controversial because of societal taboo, but it was actually impossible due to the legal environment. Her inability to actually say what she means has kept many readers from seeing and appreciating her subtext.

Michel Foucault's discussion regarding the development of the discourse of sexuality, as outlined in *The History of Sexuality: Volume I, An Introduction*, provides a useful theoretical framework for examining the niche that Jewett carves for herself amid the changing discourse of

the late nineteenth century. Foucault suggests that, despite a prevailing legal environment of censorship during the nineteenth century, Victorians actually wanted to talk about sexuality rather than suppress it; moreover, he refers to these transformations over time as “discursive explosions” (17). Their desire was not entirely to repress the discourse of sexuality and related matters, but to manipulate the output of the conversation. Foucault suggests that machinations designed to control, such as the Comstock Law, created an environment in which definitions and terminologies were appropriated by patriarchal institutions; in turn, society was forced to navigate within those boundaries, and hence, “a whole rhetoric of allusion and metaphor was codified” (18). As Foucault puts it, “new rules of propriety screened out some words: there was a policing of statements” (18). Foucault argues that, in spite of these efforts, each additional measure of control enacted upon the public discourse surrounding sexuality and topics such as abortion, birth control, homosexuality, masturbation, hermaphroditism among others only further incited both those who supported and those who opposed such control to join the discussion.

Jewett’s ability to circumvent this authority and insert herself into the conversation makes her a voice of opposition to such edicts, and Foucault insists that these oppositional voices are just as important in the evolution of the dialogue, or lack thereof. He posits that it is not as important *what* was said about sex, “but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak...the way in which sex is ‘put into discourse’” (11). Foucault accounts for the psychology of the oppositional viewpoints of the time by imagining the thrill of rebellion which people such as Jewett stood to gain by engaging in counterargument:

If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a

certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom. (6)

If this was Jewett's motivation, then critics have understated the real audacity of her work.

According to Foucault, the ability of a nineteenth-century author to become a part of the larger discourse of sexuality in the wake of new and stiflingly unprecedented regulation upon the written word provides valuable insight into the historical culture. It should hold perhaps even more value because of its nature as a direct artifact actually produced during that time. Beth Capo, in her study of birth control and modern American fiction, argues as much:

Too often historians ignore fiction, assuming that its created reality is far removed from that 'factual' history they are attempting to ascertain. Yet literature provides a rich social artifact that can track cultural change on multiple levels, most obviously in the events selected to move the plot along and the character types as reflections of social norms. Written as well as oral methods have been important to the retention and circulation of contraceptive knowledge among women even up to the present, and women were as likely to find accurate information in fiction as in nonfiction, from a friend as from their doctors. (9-10)

By finding a way to get a novel that focuses on abortion to the public for consumption, Jewett played a more important role in shaping the discourse of woman's sexuality than previously thought, particularly in linking the impact of nineteenth-century women's reproductive choices to the larger national environment. She became a subtle, but important voice amid the "discursive explosion" of her era for later students like myself to discover, as Cather foresaw, "a masterpiece" (58).

Indeed, the subtlety of the invocation of abortion in Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs* lends the allusion its metaphorical power within the text. Had Jewett's references to abortion been explicit, if such writing had been legally publishable at that time, the overall meaning of such inclusions might have been skewed into a singularly political context. Jewett's methods instead remind the reader not only of the literal consequences of aborting one's child, but of the

contextual ramifications of censoring women's voices in America. This invitation to extrapolate a broader meaning allows the reader to allocate meaning on a wider, more national scope rather than as an isolated issue of local concern; in other words, the village of Dunnet Landing is deteriorating for reasons larger than the sum of the actions of its residents. The loss of industry in this village mirrors the loss of its literal future generation, weaving a sophisticated metaphor of aborted children, aborted voices, and the aborted future of a history and a lifestyle that the new American society appeared to be leaving behind. Mrs. Todd's burden of regret and the regret of Captain Littlepage regarding the loss of the shipping industry become inextricably linked in the "tightly yet so lightly built" structure of Jewett's text. While the stories themselves leave the future of Dunnet Landing in a rather ambiguous state, Jewett's ability to get this piece published at all is perhaps the best answer for hope to the metaphorical question of the nation's future at the turn of the century.

To most fully explore the meaning behind Jewett's hidden voice amid the discursive explosion of the late nineteenth century, this study will interpret each layer of meaning in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* individually and end by questioning how Jewett connects those layers and whether or not a resolution is offered at the story's end. The first chapter outlines evidence within the text in support of the existence of literal abortions among the women of Dunnet Landing. This discussion includes an analysis of the women of Dunnet Landing and their relationship to each other along that vast spectrum of Victorian womanhood in the nineteenth century. The second chapter then moves from the literal meaning into the larger metaphors of loss and the implications of Captain Littlepage's reference to Milton's *Paradise Lost*. A third chapter analyzes two stories that Jewett wrote after the original publication of *Country of the Pointed Firs*, "A Dunnet Shepherdess" and "William's Wedding." While many

scholars debate the inclusion of these two stories with those of the original 1896 publication, this study will address how they are linked thematically and how Jewett uses them to further develop questions posed in the original text. Finally, an epilogue discusses Jewett's proposed resolution for moving forward, if indeed she advocates a resolution at all; namely, does Jewett offer reason to hope for the future of women and, by extension, our nation, or is there no true recovery from an impending death already set in motion?

## CHAPTER II

You bring something to the reading of a story that the story would go very lame without; but it is those unwritable things that the story holds in its heart, if it has any, that makes the true soul of it, and these must be understood, and yet how many a story goes lame for the lack of such understanding. In France, there is such a code, such recognitions, such richness of allusions; but here we confuse our scaffoldings with our buildings, and—and so!

—Sarah Orne Jewett in a letter to  
Sarah Whitman circa 1894 or 1895

Critical appreciation of Sarah Orne Jewett's body of work over the past century has followed a tumultuous pattern of peaks and valleys. Her first publications appeared to cause confusion among literary traditionalists who were baffled by their inability to adequately label the genre in which Jewett operated.<sup>11</sup> With each successive publication, and with ample time for critics to become accustomed to Jewett's style, her reputation increased in stature until she reached the peak of acclaim with *The Country of the Pointed Firs* in 1896. Upon this artistic achievement, many of the most prominent realist authors and literary scholars of the time proclaimed Jewett's brilliance and allotted a permanent space for her in the annals of American literary history. Her ensuing decline into the recesses of a subcategory of the allegedly more major and meaningful works of fiction, "local color" or "regional fiction," as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, is all the more confusing in light of the ultimate praise of her contemporaries. Only since approximately the mid-1960s to the present day has acclaim for her achievements seen resurgence.

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<sup>11</sup> An overview of the history of critical reception of Jewett's work can be found in Richard Cary's "The Rise, Decline, and Rise of Sarah Orne Jewett" (1972).

How can we account for the puzzling turbulence in the merit attributed to Jewett's body of work? I believe the answer to this question lies in the subtly encoded nature of Jewett's text. Regarding *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, understanding the clues and references to various social issues embedded within is crucial to a deeper appreciation of its literary complexities. In following this hypothesis, it makes sense that as Jewett's contemporaries became less concerned with categories, genre, and labels and became more invested in the aesthetic value and content of her prose, they inevitably came to an appreciation for Jewett's seemingly effortless and honest portrayal of a reality which had, up to that point, remained widely unexamined. Realist authors, such as Howells and Cather, were among her most ardent admirers, presumably because they saw in her work the same unpretentious courage to depict the complexities of the world around her that critics today are rediscovering.

The New Criticism in the mid twentieth century divorced historical context and authorial intent from the merits of a text. The advent of such literary valuations would have been a blow to an author like Jewett, whose subject matter was constrained by the legislative environment of her time and whose subtle prose relies on the context a historically informed reader can bring to it for complete understanding. Jewett's world was a complex one consisting of the convergence of multiple societal transformations, particularly the rapid expansion of industrialization, the evolution of gender roles, and the legislative control of the discourse of sexuality and related matters such as abortion and contraception. If a reader disregards the implications of that context, the most essential references within *Country of the Pointed Firs*, for instance, would be completely ignored. It is easy to see how, without the complexity those allusions lend to the text, the overall work can be dismissed as merely a collection of pleasant sketches.

Conversely then, the subsequent rise of new historicism would have been a boon for all of Jewett's work, but especially for *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. As critics and scholars began to reconnect Jewett's novel with the reality it was grounded in, their appreciation for its masterful achievement was also revitalized. The problem is not that Jewett's prose is not sophisticated enough to withstand the rigorous textual analysis of New Criticism, but that without a contextual knowledge with which to decipher literal allusions in the text, the reader is unable to see the large metaphor of innocence lost that makes this work so important. The aesthetic sophistication goes lame for want of grounding in reality.

And so, before any intelligent analysis of Jewett's metaphorical achievement can occur, the analysis must first resurrect and prove those literal references of historical concern which enhance the richness of the text. Contrary to the dictates of the nineteenth-century Comstock Law, this chapter will show Jewett published a work that deals with such controversial topics as female sexual autonomy and abortion. Central to the story is a midwife, Almira Todd, through whom Jewett depicts a community of women procuring the means to maintain control over their reproductive bodies. This topic is not necessarily the final aim of Jewett's novel, but it ultimately serves as a lens through which Jewett examines some of the most pressing national issues of the time. Because this information is so consistently overlooked, however, we must first establish the framework of its existence before moving on to the larger implications that give the text its enduring quality.

### *The World of Sarah Orne Jewett*

The majority of the nineteenth century up to the turn of the century was shaped by Victorian ideals, named for Queen Victoria who assumed the English throne in 1837. Publications of the time outlined detailed expectations for not only a woman's outward behavior,

but for the inner-workings of her heart and mind. Barbara Welter's classic study of "The Cult of True Womanhood" provides a succinct description of these expectations:

The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman. (152)

This shift in social expectations of feminine morality was augmented by the rapid spread of industrialization and urbanization. As the focus of labor moved away from an agrarian lifestyle in which every member of the family contributed, and into the cities, the husband was expected to work outside the home while the woman's primary concern became child-rearing and housekeeping. The iconic figure of the "angel in the house" was born.<sup>12</sup>

Many historians have drawn this connection between the rise of Victorian ideology and industrialized urban cities. In their previous agrarian settings, women had enjoyed a more equal share in the division of labor with men. Parenting was not something that was considered the sole burden of mothers; fathers were a role model for sons to the same extent that mothers were for daughters.<sup>13</sup> Victorian ideology provided a moral justification for what was becoming a practical reality in most families of the nineteenth century; indeed, a mother's place in the home and her natural love for her children became such an accepted norm that "to suggest otherwise was monstrous" (Welter 171). The large majority of nineteenth-century women internalized

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<sup>12</sup> The term "angel in the house" apparently originates from a poem by Coventry Patmore in 1854 titled "The Angel in the House." This model for women was passive, powerless, and meek, while still managing to exude charm, grace, piety, and purity. Much historical scholarship has been devoted to an exploration of this societal phenomenon, but a concise study of its influence on literature of the nineteenth century can be found in Elizabeth Langland's "Nobody's Angels: Domestic Ideology and Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Novel" (1992). While Langland's work deals primarily with British literature, the historical framework she explores also bears relevance to the bourgeois gender trends in American society.

<sup>13</sup> See Barbara Easton's "Industrialization and Femininity: A Case Study of Nineteenth-Century New England," p. 391.

these ideological and societal evolutions and relied upon maternity as a solid foundation for their identities: “Victorian women found their maternal role one of their few routes to self-esteem and power. However, even that power was subject to severe restrictions” (Sherman 6).

The disruption to communities wrought by industrialization as families relocated to find work often removed women from their extended kin who might have helped in what had become their sole duties of home management and parenting. Barbara Easton locates some changes at their earliest in port towns where the shipping industry was developed and thriving:

Puritan women were told to obey their husbands, but the social graces, childlike innocence and role of moral authority that later came to be associated with womanhood had little place on the New England farm. In Boston, however, and the other port towns, life was different... Their homes were becoming centers of social life and their wives were expected to develop those social graces which would allow them to be good hostesses. (392)

Details such as these are present in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, layering the text with thematic connections and implications of characterization which have been discussed already. Mrs. Todd’s mother, Mrs. Blackett, for instance, would have married and raised children under precisely these social circumstances. The great care she takes in maintaining a formal sitting room in which to receive guests is intentionally detailed: “It was indeed a tribute to Society to find a room set apart for her behests out there on so apparently neighborless and remote an island” (Jewett 89). When the reader is told later that Mrs. Todd was “restless” (97) in that home, knowledge of historical context lends that statement the entire weight of those restrictive Victorian ideals.

A Victorian ideology for the middle-class cemented in the practicality of working conditions in an industrialized nation had soon become the standard for women everywhere. As it turns out, however, not every woman appreciated the type of bliss bestowed upon them by unending domesticity and some historians have endeavored to record a countertrend among

Victorian women which rejected what they deemed to be a skewed and stifling expectation. While men were able to explore the opportunities of progress in the wide world, women sometimes felt imprisoned in their own homes: “As the split between men’s and women’s work deepened, the distribution of child rearing became even more lopsided and gender codes even more rigid” (Sherman 5). Many women were enticed by what they perceived to be the unlimited freedom enjoyed by their working husbands, and they wanted to taste it for themselves. In *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life*, G.J. Barker-Benfield discusses the impact that urbanization in particular had upon the psyche of women who had been relegated to the kitchen and the parlor: “woman’s attitude toward her role changed in the light of the freedom which could be grasped in the cities. But the urban, trend-setting women, the ‘women of the future,’ were placed in a difficult position, caught between new possibilities and the need for a response to the special demands that men made of them” (20). The number of “restless” women moving out of the confines of their homes and into the workforce, therefore, gradually increased during the second half of the nineteenth century and became common enough by the turn of the century to merit their own terminology—the New Woman.<sup>14</sup>

Jewett, however, was writing during that crucial transitional period when repression met burgeoning liberation. It was this generation which, like Mrs. Todd, had grown up with a mother securely embedded in a Victorian tradition but was also witness to the exciting changes occurring in the world outside their homes. Industrialization and urbanization were threatening the social fabric of American and forming major ruptures with the past as it destroyed the communities of this generation’s childhood. While many of these women knew they wanted

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<sup>14</sup> The term “New Woman” originated in 1895 in a published debate between two British authors: Sarah Grand and Ouida. For additional context of this terminology, see Aaron Shaheen’s *Androgynous Democracy*, p. 21.

more, Jewett depicts a world in which that desire was also tinged with the conflicted emotion of sentimental regret. Nonetheless, history shows that the women of this period moved outward and onward in larger numbers than ever before. It was only after these women made the initial break that the next generation of women would embrace the lifestyle of the New Woman.

The unrest and mobilization of women during this transitional time evoked fear among its predominantly male legislative bodies. A tendency to question the role proscribed for them made these women a potential threat to the tradition of existing ideals which was maintaining the status quo. Of particular concern was the threat that many women were becomingly increasingly determined to take control of their reproductive capabilities. Rather than viewing motherhood as the ultimate venue for moral authority, as the Victorian ideology would have it, women with many children to care for and many mouths to feed were beginning to believe that it was merely another link in the chain of servitude binding them to their homes. Victorian morality suggested that birth control of any sort was unnatural; even before legal measures had been taken to outlaw a woman's access to contraceptives, publicly seeking a means of limiting pregnancy was so taboo that most sought help strictly within the community of women around them. Midwives were an essential and important resource for women who had become tired of the prospect of annual pregnancies for the rest of their lives.<sup>15</sup> With the force of public opinion against them, women were finding a variety of ways to take control of their bodies. Birth rates in America had been steadily declining throughout the nineteenth century and this fact had not escaped the notice of men in power: census results showed that the average "family size declined so dramatically in the nineteenth century—from an average number of births in 1800 of 7.04 [per family] to 3.56 by

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<sup>15</sup> Many critics have suggested that the character of Mrs. Todd serves the needs of her community in a midwife capacity; moreover, it is relevant that the herbalist in Dunnet Landing is a woman while the doctor of modern medicine is a male. This would have been another subtle detail provided by Jewett which carries weight when unpacked.

1900” (Marsh xix). Not only did men find it alarming that they were losing control of the women in their homes, but a very practical problem had emerged that they deemed to be an affront against woman’s fundamental biological and spiritual duty—the problem of populating the nation.

Further inquiries into this problem led to a discovery which legislators found to be even more disturbing: because birth control measures were rudimentary and not always entirely effective, a marked rise in abortion as a means of limiting childbirth had occurred. Esther Katz’s history of birth control comes to the explicit conclusion that the decline in birth rates during this time “was the result not of natural physiological changes, but of deliberate efforts to limit the number of children born” (82). More than one scholar has linked the decline in birth rates of the nineteenth century with the rise in the rate of abortions: “It is highly likely that periodic abstinence and abortion accounted for at least part of the decline in the birth rate during the nineteenth century” (Marsh xix). Women who had been relocated to urban centers, and who had therefore severed access to an intimate community of women within which to seek help, were in a more desperate situation. Facing fewer female resources for understanding how to regulate and control their reproductive options, women increasingly resorted to the care of often antagonistic male medical assistance as doctors sought to eliminate the legitimacy of midwives in the gynecological profession. Midwives became “one of the casualties of the male drive to take control of women” (Barker-Benfield 61). In her wonderfully thorough query into these issues of the nineteenth century and beyond, Helen Horowitz cites this dilemma as the impetus for the success of the professional abortionist:

It was the disruption of community knowledge that created the grounds for the dissemination of printed information on abortion and for the rise of female abortionists in cities such as New York... As many young people came to the city hoping for work and a better life, they separated from their kin. For women, this

meant leaving the community of women of their mothers and aunts. Just as mental hospitals took the place of homes in the care of the mentally ill, so abortionists may have emerged to provide commercial services that the women's community had once offered its members. (197-98)

The outrage this development caused resulted in legislative action being taken against a woman's right to access information regarding abortion as well as birth control. Just as Victorian ideology had quickly become a tacit standard among all families, so the reaction against these perceived threats took on the form of a universal solution. And this time the restrictions had become law.

The 1860s had seen efforts to regulate the type of material that could be sent through the federal post office. The aim of this effort was to use what power the government had to inhibit morally offensive material from a means of distribution. While it succeeded in driving some industries underground, these early attempts at regulation were ineffectual, restricted in breadth, and nearly impossible to enforce. In 1873, Congress passed an act entitled "Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use," also known as "Comstock's Law" after Anthony Comstock, who had championed its cause. Horowitz explains, "It made it illegal and punishable to send through the mail six kinds of material: erotica; contraceptive medications or devices; abortifacients; sexual implements, such as those used in masturbation; contraceptive information; and advertisements for contraception, abortion, or sexual implements" (382). Unlike its earlier counterpart, this law had teeth. It essentially "declared war upon 'obscenity'" (Marsh xxi) and enabled judges to issue warrants for search and seizure of any written and photographic materials, as well as many other media, that fit the description outlined in the law.

Over the next several years, Anthony Comstock led a crusade to expand the scope of this law. The literary world was not exempt from regulation as certain authors and works were deemed to be purveyors of the obscene. Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* was included among

this number; Comstock even attempted to censor such classic works as Homer and Ovid. A number of repeal efforts were attempted without success for several decades. This resulted in an ongoing battle between opposing forces which Horowitz calls “one of our first national culture wars, a battle between those committed to sexual knowledge and those determined to suppress it” (15). The first amendment to this law, removing restrictions against contraceptives, did not actually occur until 1971, but the opinions of the courts shifted during the 1920s when Margaret Sanger was allowed to open the first actual birth control clinic for women. Though several others had been prosecuted under this law before her, Sanger’s 1914 indictment was arguably the most famous.<sup>16</sup> She fled to Europe upon release to avoid going to trial and all charges were dropped upon her return. The courts remained resistant to striking down the law in full, however, and an unenforced version of the law remains on the books even today.

### *The Female Community of Dunnet Landing*

In *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, these historical realities are reflected in Jewett’s portrayal of a disintegrating port village, Dunnet Landing, particularly among the female community. Jewett carefully avoids portraying the women of Dunnet Landing as feminist heroines as many modern critics would like to conclude, but endows them, nonetheless, with reasonable and varying degrees of likeable traits. Fortunately, dismissing a more radical feminist interpretation does not diminish the complexity of Jewett’s characterizations. This community of women is both nurturing and depressing, simultaneously triumphant and deteriorating.

Heather Love summarizes the balancing effect that Jewett depicts in the novel:

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<sup>16</sup> For more detailed information regarding the chronology and dates of these events see Margaret Marsh’s “Foreword” to Margaret Sanger’s *Motherhood in Bondage*, pg. xv. Further historical research on Sanger’s life and history can be found in Helen Horowitz’s *Rereading Sex: Battle over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* (2002).

While Jewett's solitary women are often independent, self-reliant, idiosyncratic, and admirable, they can also be abject, bereft, isolated, and self-deluded. Some critics have attempted to sort out the happy and sad stories in Jewett's fiction with recourse to a moralizing framework about her characters' choices and their relationship to gender norms. (312)

Love is correct in claiming that a "moralizing framework" is non-existent in Jewett's text.

Jewett does not need to outline clear demarcations between "good" and "bad" to elicit understanding from the reader regarding the plight of these women.

Jewett attempts to portray a balanced and realistic panorama of the lives of women during the nineteenth century. In fact, Jewett's most crucial references rely on her readers' ability to recognize their own reality within her text. In a study of the social consciousness present in Jewett and other realist authors' works, Paul Petrie summarizes the aim of realism: "only by attempting an objective representation of the commonplace world comprised of the quotidian social experiences of its own audience could literature gain a solid basis for ethically purposeful communication between authors and readers" (6). The domestic and social experiences of Victorian women pervade nearly every page of *Country of the Pointed Firs*, but Jewett's perspective and tone regarding this reality is perhaps most succinctly captured in a scant observation late in the novel at the Bowden family graveyard: "there were plenty of scattered Bowdens who were not laid there,—some lost at sea, and some out West, and some who died in the war; most of the home graves were those of women" (132). The sociologically inescapable connection to bearing and raising children, in many cases, kept women confined to the domestic realm while their men travelled the world uninhibited.<sup>17</sup> The framing of this moment is also consistent with the ominous tone of death and loss throughout the entire novel. In this honest

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<sup>17</sup> This statement is supported by the many historical references already included in this thesis, as well as in the historical findings of Sarah Sherman's *Sarah Orne Jewett, An American Persephone*: "The biological tie to childbearing, then, keeps women in the domestic sphere and places them in social roles that are perceived as lower on the cultural hierarchy" (3).

and simple statement, Jewett reminds the reader that many of these women lived uneventful lives and died in the same manner, many of them without ever having had their stories told as did the male history-writers of the world. Jewett's novel provides a glimpse into those stories and a chance for these women's voices to be heard.

Along Jewett's panorama of Victorian reality, characters such as Mrs. Blackett and Sarah Tilley represent the more traditional end of the feminine spectrum. The narrator imagines that the "real home" and "heart" of Mrs. Blackett's Green Island is found in that woman's "dear old fingers and their loving stitches" (98). The narrator experiences this heartfelt appreciation after being seated in Mrs. Blackett's rocking chair by the window—a perfect image of the domestic woman in repose, resting peacefully after a full day of quiet devotion and service to her family and home. Sarah Tilley is described as "a delicate-looking, faded little woman, who leaned upon [the] rough strength and affectionate heart" of her husband and who was "always watching for his boat" from her rightful place at home (150). Like Mrs. Blackett, the late Sarah Tilley had executed her convergent duties as hostess and wife by maintaining a clean and meticulous sitting room, complete with the requisite cabinet of serving china. Upon his wife's death, Elijah Tilley is moved to discover a broken china cup tucked away in the back of the cabinet. Presumably ashamed of this faux pas, Sarah had sought to conceal the broken cup from her husband. Again, in a relatively understated and simple moment, and without exacting judgment, Jewett manages to hint at the faultline hidden beneath an ideological façade of domestic bliss and perfection.

Other characters portray a more ambiguous neutrality in Jewett's community. Mrs. Fosdick hints at the possibility of women wanting more when she fondly recalls the "spell o' freedom" she enjoyed via a temporary gender reversal when her mother dressed her in her brother's clothes (103). Jewett hardly describes Mrs. Fosdick as a radical, but she illustrates that

Mrs. Todd's desire for something more is not an isolated occurrence. Mrs. Fosdick admits to liking the experience of being in male trousers and laments the feeling of discouragement she had "feeling the hem at [her] heels every minute, and as if youth was past and gone" (103). This signifier of femininity was oppressive to Mrs. Fosdick because it represented a loss of freedom. The theme of loss is present in another aspect of Mrs. Fosdick's character when the reader learns that she "had been the mother of a large family of sons and daughters" but "most of them had died before her" (102). While there is no indication that these deaths were the result of anything more or less than accidental or natural, the absence of children is in keeping with the overall pattern among the women of Dunnet Landing. Mrs. Tilley left no children for her husband, Mrs. Fosdick's have mostly passed on, and the reader comes to find that something much more deliberate has occurred among other women in the community.

At the more progressive end of the spectrum are women like Joanna and Mrs. Todd. Both of these women defy tradition in some way by following their hearts and their instincts rather than the dictates of social expectation. Joanna lives the majority of her life in self-imposed exile on Shell Heap Island, almost completely independent of society. Mrs. Todd removes herself from her mother's home and moves to the main village of Dunnet Landing in search of "more scope" (97). Welter assures us that in the Cult of True Womanhood, scope was strongly discouraged: "If any woman asked for greater scope for her gifts the magazines were sharply critical. Such women were tampering with society, undermining civilization" (172-3). As the child of one of Dunnet Landing's "seafaring families," however, the "anticipation" and "far-off look" that motivated Mrs. Todd is described as rather inevitable (94). The formerly-thriving industry that inhabited Dunnet Landing's shores would have worked a seduction of promise and opportunity that was hard for a young woman to resist; the allure of a chance at

independence and a more vibrant life appears to have been overpowering for the younger Mrs. Todd. Careful not to glamorize the choices of these young women, however, Jewett subtly informs the reader that their relative autonomy and independence also came with dark consequences.

As with previous examples given, Jewett enriches the stories of Mrs. Todd and Joanna deftly without ever overtly stating her case. Because she was legally prohibited from talking about abortions in her text, Jewett weaves clues throughout which provide strong evidence of their existence when paired with historical evidence. That Mrs. Todd is an herbalist is known from the beginning of the story. Her role as such is consistent with historical knowledge of gender divisions in the medical field during the late nineteenth century. Midwives were always female, while licensed doctors were almost always male, as is the case in *Country of the Pointed Firs*. Particularly, as an herbalist, Mrs. Todd would have understood the implications and various uses of the many herbs mentioned in this novel. An ominous tone regarding these herbs is established from the beginning, such as when the doctor jokingly chides Mrs. Todd over her prescribing a “too persistent course of thoroughwort elixir” which sometimes “endanger[ed] the life and usefulness” of her neighbors (63). Mrs. Todd’s “occult” knowledge is imparted in a secretive manner through “whispered directions” to neighbors “who usually came at night as if by stealth” (62). Jewett never states explicitly what treatments Mrs. Todd is doling out, but insinuates that there are practices taking place which are sometimes of a dangerous nature and must be kept secret.

Besides being an herbalist, the reader also comes to understand that Mrs. Todd was involved in a love affair in her youth that did not work out: “I came to know that she had loved one who was far above her” (65). That the younger Mrs. Todd was seduced, not only by

industry, but also by a man whose “mother didn’t favor the match” is hinted at here and confirmed in a later confessional scene between herself and the narrator (65). In the tenth chapter, entitled “Where Pennyroyal Grew,” Mrs. Todd becomes reminiscent and tells the narrator of how her husband died. He had been “lost” in a shipwreck “right in sight o’ this headland where [they]’d set an’ made [their] plans all summer” (95). She then imparts a key piece of evidence to her rapt audience:

I knew it afore he started to go to sea. My heart was gone out o’ my keepin’ before I ever saw Nathan; but he loved me well, and he made me real happy, and he died before he ever knew what he’d had to know if we’d lived long together. ‘T is very strange about love. No, Nathan never found out, but my heart was troubled when I knew him first... But this pennyroyal always reminded me, as I’d sit and gather it and hear him talkin’—it always would remind me of—the other one. (95)

The clues are certainly subtle, but an unraveling of this paragraph reveals the likelihood that Mrs. Todd aborted a pregnancy that resulted from her love affair with “the other one,” the man who “was far above her.” This is why her “heart was troubled” when she met him and why she seems to feel a mild relief that “he died before he ever knew what he’d had to know if [they]’d lived long together.”

Without research and historical context, however, these textual hints might amount to nothing conclusive. As an experienced herbalist, Mrs. Todd would have been aware of pennyroyal’s use as a homemade abortifacient. Historians such as Horowitz and Marsh corroborate that women, especially in rural communities dependent on midwives, were aware of herbal remedies for all sorts of female health concerns, including abortions which were often simply induced miscarriages. Marsh suggests that women may have had this knowledge “handed down through generations” (xxx). Margaret Sanger at one point published an herbal abortifacient recipe in one of her publications in an attempt to keep women from fatally dosing

themselves. In *Contraception and Abortion in Nineteenth-Century America*, Janet Brodie singles out pennyroyal “of all the mints” as having “one of the longest associations with abortion” (44). Its usage for that and other gynecological matters was so widely known that Native Americans called it the “squaw mint” (Brodie 44). In appropriate dosages it can assist in regulating menstrual flow and in the expulsion of the placenta after childbirth, but when used in just the right (or wrong) way it is capable of inducing contractions and thereby causing miscarriages during the early term of a pregnancy.<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Ammons, in her explication of Mrs. Todd as a midwife figure, points out the darker tones inherent in the mention and usage of this “strong and even dangerous herb” because if “taken internally or just as an extracted oil, it can kill” (175). Jewett has developed Mrs. Todd’s character fully enough by now for a careful reader to realize that an abortion is the most likely reason that the scent of pennyroyal reminds Mrs. Todd not of her husband, but of “the other one.” This is the source of the “absolute, archaic grief” (95) that possesses Mrs. Todd and the reason that a “touch of regret would forever come with all her thoughts of happiness” (88).

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<sup>18</sup> A small handful of literary scholars have also made the connection between pennyroyal and its abortive qualities, but very few, if any, have interpreted and applied that knowledge to the actual histories of Mrs. Todd and Joanna. George Smith argues that abortions must have taken place among these women, but he then, in my own analysis, applies that knowledge a bit haphazardly in assuming that Sarah Tilley’s broken china cup is a symbol of abortion and that Mrs. Todd seeks to include the narrator in the intimate details of her life because she harbors a lesbian desire for the narrator. Other scholars do not apply their knowledge widely enough. Elizabeth Ammons, for example, directly states that pennyroyal is an abortifacient, but only states as much to solidify her redefinition of Mrs. Todd as a cultish midwife figure rather than a “witch.” George Welburn most accurately and thoroughly explores the Jewett’s selection of herbs and their direct historical connection to abortion, though he uses the information to develop his theory of Mrs. Todd’s connection to the Native American history of the New England region. Regarding pennyroyal he states, “Several herbological sources agree about this, and the knowledge of how to use pennyroyal (with brewer’s yeast according to one source) for aborting a fetus is an old remedy learned from Native Americans” (75). Astonishingly, this crucial bit of evidence has not been given widespread treatment within the field of Jewett criticism, even though historians and women’s health encyclopedias do so copiously. For more detailed information regarding the usage of the pennyroyal herb see the sources I have cited here.

In case these clues are not convincing enough, Jewett disperses further provocations throughout the novel. Not only does Mrs. Todd take great care in gathering up her pennyroyal during the proper season, but it is suggested that the pennyroyal that grows in Dunnet Landing is superior to all pennyroyal everywhere: “Among the grass grew such pennyroyal as the rest of the world could not provide” (94). Within the third chapter, well before the reader might have made any connections to the more tragic undertones of Mrs. Todd’s story, Jewett cements the nature of her herbal concoctions in just a few short sentences through the observations of the novel’s unnamed narrator:

This was in the pennyroyal time, and when the rare lobelia was in its prime and the elecampane was coming on. One day [Mrs. Todd] appeared at the schoolhouse itself, partly out of amused curiosity about my industries; but she explained that there was no tansy in the neighborhood with such snap to it as some that grew about the schoolhouse lot. (67)

Although the herbs employed here do have other known uses, it can be no small coincidence that both pennyroyal and oil of tansy are known abortifacients; lobelia is a useful anesthetic, but can also be used as an emetic; and elecampane is said to ease cramps and convulsions.<sup>19</sup> Until the connection to abortion has been made, this passage is easy to overlook; nevertheless, these are certainly the herbs of a midwife and all can conceivably function in the termination of pregnancies. Upon first arriving at Dunnet Landing, the narrator finds Mrs. Todd’s home “laden with not only sweet-brier and sweet-mary, but balm and sage and borage and mint, wormwood and southernwood” (62). Balm, sage, and almost the entire mint family of plants have been historically linked to abortion and similar female inducements such as speeding up labor and

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<sup>19</sup> Tansy is also mentioned by Brodie as an abortifacient (43). Horowitz specifically attributes the acquisition of these herbs as an early function of the midwife. She compellingly notes, “The line between clearing up an obstruction and inducing miscarriage was a blurred one, and it was important to keep it so” (196). Horowitz also discusses the use of emetics, which induce nausea and vomiting, as a method for producing a miscarriage.

encouraging menstruation.<sup>20</sup> Wormwood and southernwood have similar capabilities and it is significant to note that the farewell gift Mrs. Todd gives to the narrator at the novel's end includes "a neatly tied bunch of southernwood and a twig of bay," which can also be used as an emmenagogue in its essential oil form<sup>21</sup> (199). Other questionable herbs include Mrs. Todd's gathering of a mysterious bark for reasons which "she proved incommunicative,"<sup>22</sup> the "hy'sop" she prescribes to customers,<sup>23</sup> and the herbs "like the great fading bloodroot leaves" which she tends "by moonlight"<sup>24</sup> (142, 65, 68).

Once realized, the evidence of Mrs. Todd's abortion is overwhelming and makes the Joanna storyline much easier to comprehend when it is introduced barely ten pages later. Her story is related by a conversation between Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Fosdick to which the narrator is again audience. The reader comes to understand that Joanna was also seduced, but in this scenario by "shifty-eyed, coaxin' sort of man, that got what he wanted out o' folks," a man who eventually jilted her and ran away with another woman (117). Having just made a confession of her own, Mrs. Todd is understandably anxious and "reticent" to even talk about Joanna (116). The reader finds that Mrs. Todd and Joanna had a mysteriously intimate sort of relationship; Mrs. Todd attributes this to the fact that she is a cousin by marriage, but also admits that a mutual understanding was the central force of their friendship: "I'd had my own trials, young as I

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<sup>20</sup> See Brodie, pp. 42-3.

<sup>21</sup> See Nancy Arrowsmith's *Essential Herbal Wisdom: A Complete Exploration of 50 Remarkable Herbs*, p. 248.

<sup>22</sup> While we are not given the actual name of the bark, Brodie mentions a number of barks, such as cottonroot, that could be used to induce abortion (43).

<sup>23</sup> See Brodie, p. 43.

<sup>24</sup> See Brodie, p. 44.

was, an' she knew it" (115). So, at the very least, Joanna presumably had been aware of Mrs. Todd's terminated pregnancy and sympathized with her for it. As Mrs. Fosdick and Mrs. Todd attempt to parse out exactly why Joanna felt the need to exile herself from the community, Mrs. Todd takes the tone of the story one step further by conceding that "she done it for a penance" (108). A jilted heart alone would require no penance on behalf of the victim; Jewett begins to plant the idea that some sort of action had been taken on Joanna's part to make her culpable in her own tragic tale.

Finally, the moment comes when Mrs. Todd reveals Joanna's true motivations and the guilty conscience at work within her. During one brief visit to Shell Heap Island, Joanna confesses to Mrs. Todd: "I have committed the unpardonable sin; you don't understand... I was in great wrath and trouble, and my thoughts was so wicked towards God that I can't expect ever to be forgiven" (115). Mrs. Fosdick then admits an understanding of this reference: "Yes, she was one o' them poor things that talked about the great sin; we don't seem to hear much about the unpardonable sin now, but you may say 't was not uncommon then" (116). Although many critics again misinterpret the impetus for Joanna's "penance," with the key evidence of Mrs. Todd's abortion fresh in a reader's mind, one does not have to read very closely to understand that the "trouble" Joanna found herself in was the same thing that "troubled" Mrs. Todd's heart before she married. For good measure, Jewett inserts again the presence of abortive herbs on Shell Heap Island: "Mullein in great quantities and a plant o' wormwood" (109).<sup>25</sup> Having internalized the ideology of True Womanhood, Joanna deems her abortion as a "monstrous" rejection of her maternal obligations. She believes she has committed an "unpardonable sin," one that makes her feel unfit to remain in the community of the village.

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<sup>25</sup> See Arrowsmith, pg. 529.

A meaningful understanding of this language can be easily lost when critics adhere to a strictly religious understanding of the term “unpardonable sin” (which is blasphemy toward God), but the rhetorical history of those words, especially when paired with the word “trouble,” provides evidence that women used them colloquially to reference abortion and pregnancy even if it was not religiously accurate. Mrs. Fosdick suggests that “nowadays, if such a thing happened, she’d have gone out West to her uncle’s folks or up to Massachusetts and had a change, an’ come home good as new” (Jewett 116). This was not an uncommon solution for a pregnant girl to avoid being shamed by her community—to disappear for a length of time and “[have] a change.” In the twentieth century, it became common slang to refer to an unmarried pregnant woman as being “in trouble.” The Oxford English Dictionary, however, proves that that particular usage appeared in literature as early as 1891, before the publication of Jewett’s novel, in Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. Just a few decades later, in *Motherhood in Bondage*, Margaret Sanger provides this commentary on the “unpardonable sin”:

This gesture, always taken at the risk of her own life and health, is a final protest against the overwhelming power of those blind, relentless forces of which she is a plaything. If she be the child of one of the great churches, she is made to believe that this act is the unpardonable sin. In committing abortion she is condemning her own soul to an eternity of torture. Yet in her desperation she challenges the edict. (395)

Sanger had just compiled a collection of personal letters written to her by actual women all over the country desperate for some guidance regarding birth control and family planning.

Historically speaking, this rhetoric was used to refer to abortions, and it is likely they “don’t seem to hear much about [it] now,” as Mrs. Fosdick suggests, because of the censorious environment enacted by the Comstock Laws.

It is perhaps necessary, having outlined the presence of such dark storylines in the novel, to clarify one position: while Mrs. Todd experiences an eternal agony and Joanna herself might

have dubbed her actions “unpardonable,” we are not to mistake this judgment for Jewett’s own opinion. As previously noted, the text does not offer such simplistic moralizing frameworks with which the reader can assign blame or judgment upon Jewett’s female characters; her characterizations are much more balanced and complex than that. Even after discovering the use for Mrs. Todd’s precious herbs, and realizing that more than one woman in this story had terminated an unwanted pregnancy (most likely with those very herbs), Mrs. Todd continues to be described as an admirable and likeable figure. In spite of her inconsolable internal grief, she is also depicted as being full of power and charm. One moment she is described as a “huge sybil,” or prophetess; another she has the timeless and universal wisdom of an “idyl of Theocritus” (65, 102). The narrator envisions her as a figure of great strength, a pillar-like “caryatide” or a “force of Nature” with “cousinship to the ancient deities” (81, 178). The narrator forms a close relationship with Mrs. Todd during the course of her visit and is immensely saddened to leave her by the novel’s end. If the fervor of her writing is any indication, Jewett seems to have been just as saddened to have finished writing the story of such a rich character.

The narrator also draws the reader into direct commiseration and understanding with Joanna: “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” (120). In this poignant moment, Jewett reminds the reader that, not only should we refrain from judging poor Joanna, but that her story could just as easily be that of any woman in history. Rather than being the monsters that society’s Cult of True Womanhood would make them out to be, these dark corners were a part of the universal human condition, regardless of age, gender, or

geography and are often formulated by the unique combination of social conditions in which we live. As Jewett so masterfully illustrates for us, they were certainly the dark corners of the domestic reality of many nineteenth century women.

### CHAPTER III

I suppose that elderly people have said, ever since the time of Shem, Ham, and Japhet's wives in the ark, that society is nothing to what it used to be, and we may expect to be always told what unworthy successors we are of our grandmothers. But the fact remains that a certain element of American society is fast dying out, giving place to the new; and with all our glory and pride in modern progress and success, we cling to the old associations regretfully. There is nothing to take the place of the pleasure we have in going to see our old friends in the parlors which have changed little since our childhood.

—Sarah Orne Jewett, "From a Mournful Villager"

Vocalizing the censored, dark corners of women's lives during the nineteenth century is not Jewett's sole aim in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. In doing so she, in some ways, positions herself as the antipatriarchal feminist heroine that many scholars would love her to be, but in reality her achievement is much more than that. The sophistication of her text on a literal level is important, but it is her ability to frame those elements within a metaphor of wider national relevance that gives the novel its lasting power. It can perhaps be easy to forget that it is not only the children of Dunnet Landing who have been aborted: the town itself has been aborted by history—its remaining residents, while vibrant in character, clinging to an existence that has already become history. Jewett's publication of the controversial material within *Country of the Pointed Firs* is not simply a rebellion against the male legislators who would silence the realities of a woman's life, but is an indictment of the culture of the modern industrial world around her that, for Jewett, has claimed as its victim not only the nation's many small villages like Dunnet Landing, but an entire way of life. The disturbing trend of aborted children among Jewett's female characters becomes emblematic not only of the aborted voices of women during the

nineteenth century, but also of the aborted future of a happier and simpler paradisiacal existence—in both instances, a tragic case of innocence lost.

As with many other aspects of her text, Jewett does not detail an explicit timeline of the history and demise of Dunnet Landing; nevertheless, the general picture she provides when considered within its historical context leads to the safe assumption that this village's devastation, in many ways, mirrors the national trend of its time. When modern scholars refer to the Industrial Revolution, they do not refer to a single event that wrought an immediate change upon the nation; the impact of industrial innovation was only realized after decades, perhaps even centuries, of the gradual compounding of technological innovations, ideologies, social movements, a capitalist market economy, and urbanization. Most historians view this historical development in terms of a first and second phase of industrial revolution.

Prior to the first phase of industrialization, populations were dispersed through the globe in mostly rural settings, grouping themselves in communities only to the extent that was necessary for their survival. Most cultures were primarily agrarian, but some areas with unique resources, such as Dunnet Landing, would have also identified themselves according to their natural capabilities—in this case, as a fishing village. This earlier structure of communal subsistence is evident in Jewett's cursory descriptions of Dunnet Landing and its adjacent areas. For instance, as Mrs. Todd and her companions venture outside the village for the Bowden family reunion, they travel through a sparsely-populated area of individual family farms where the residents appear eager for idle gossip and news, the implication being that they are relatively self-sufficient and seldom find the need to travel to nearby towns. The chain of islands surrounding Dunnet Landing presents a similar portrait of self-sufficiency and relative isolation. Mrs. Todd's mother, Mrs. Blackett, and her brother, William, live on Green Island, which the

narrator imagines to be its own “complete and tiny continent” with its farm, forest, fish-house, small flock of sheep, pasture land, and all the basic needs for survival (87). In the happy reunion between Mrs. Todd and her family, the reader gathers that such visits are infrequent and that Mrs. Blackett’s visits to the mainland are likewise few and relatively far apart. Dunnet Landing’s shores during this era would have served as an only slightly more populated center for what appears to be its many satellites of individual families and farms.

It is during the first phase of industrialization that a town like Dunnet Landing would have seen its height of activity and success. Technological advancements of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century would have initially benefitted the economy of a town with such natural resources. Again, while Jewett does not clearly demarcate these historical shifts in Dunnet Landing, she does provide subtle glimpses of this village as it experienced each phase of the industrial revolution in turn. The enticement of activity and industry would have been the nature of Mrs. Todd’s restlessness while still living on Green Island with her mother. The thriving success of Dunnet Landing during this phase provided the impetus for her move from Green Island to the mainland. Captain Littlepage perhaps gives the clearest indication that Dunnet Landing’s “change for the worse,” as he now sees it, is in stark contrast to the more bustling city it was during this phase in which men “saw the world for themselves” (72-3). He even hints at a period of greater material wealth in declaring that “their houses were better within an’ without” (73). In contrast, he now deems the village to be “full of loafers” as the occupation that previously employed the young men of the village has been removed from its shores (72).

The mid-nineteenth century marked the advent of a second phase of industrialization, instigated by the development of new methods and technologies such as electrical power and factories. There is general consensus that, from this time into the early twentieth-century, the

rapid consolidation of resources to further the aims of a capitalist market economy resulted in a national trend toward urbanization with more widespread impact and, for some, devastation than was seen in the earlier phase of the revolution. As more and more of the economy and labor force relocated to these metropolises, smaller cities, such as Dunnet Landing would have been, were abandoned and left reeling by, not only the loss of their natural industry, but the very literal loss of population. The pace of this loss would have been increasing during the lifetime of Mrs. Todd up to the point of the narrator's discovery of the village at the latter end of the century. In his classic study of this historical development, *The Incorporation of America*, Alan Trachtenberg states that

In the 1880's, as much as 40 percent of the population of rural townships seemed to disappear. Images of bustling, frenetic cities arose against a background of abandoned farmhouses and deserted villages, and many Americans pondered the change with regret and lament. (114)

As outlined in the previous chapter, Jewett depicts a community literally deprived of its population and youth, in some cases as a result of abortion. Her employment of the abortion issue metaphorically underscores the deaths of these smaller towns and villages—the abortion of the literal progeny of Dunnet Landing becomes symbolic of the aborted future of Dunnet Landing itself. The result, as the narrator comes to find, is an entire community living in a perpetual state of mourning despite their determination to carry on. Just as all parties aided in their own demise by their willingness to embrace the excitement of experience and progress, with the clarity of hindsight, all parties must now mourn together for their shared loss.

Jewett was not alone in her lament for the loss of that time before the age of the machine. In his seminal work *No Place of Grace* T.J. Jackson Lears explores the variations of a counterculture that was beginning to fear that the technological movement they had embraced as progress was the same movement that would be the death knell of everything that made

humanity wonderful; they feared they had traded the garden for greater efficiency and knowledge: “Toward the end of the nineteenth century, many beneficiaries of modern culture began to feel they were its secret victims” (xiii). An antimodern sentiment based in the despair of “overcivilization” had affected not only intellectuals, but had “pervaded the middle and upper classes,” groups with which Jewett certainly could identify (Lears 4, xiii). This discontent was not simply a condescending moralizing on behalf of the social elites:

It was a sign of a broader transatlantic dissatisfaction with modern culture in all its dimensions: its ethic of self-control and autonomous achievement, its cult of science and technical rationality, its worship of material progress. During the 1880s, on both sides of the Atlantic, one begins to sense a restive desire for a freshening of the cultural atmosphere. Haltingly, half-consciously, Europeans and Americans alike began to recognize that the triumph of modern culture had not produced greater autonomy (which was the official claim) but rather had promoted a spreading sense of moral impotence and spiritual sterility—a feeling that life had become not only overcivilized but also curiously unreal. (Lears 4-5)

In their search for a more authentic life, these antimodernists sought out cultural alternatives to “urban artifice,” sometimes opting for the restoration of “a rustic or childlike ‘simple life’” (Lears 5).

In the gardens of Jewett’s *Country of the Pointed Firs*, we find the embodiment of an ideal that is antithetical to all of the dimensions of modern culture cited by Lears. As previously noted, the publication itself stands in rebellion to the authoritative regime of discursive control that had taken root in Jewett’s time. Mrs. Todd’s occupation as an herbalist and the village midwife positions her as the stalwart opposition to the official modern culture’s evolution toward scientific control over the gynecological field. The villagers in general exhibit remarkable capabilities in terms of hard work and self-reliance, but Jewett is careful to depict the co-dependent nature of their community’s survival as opposed to modernity’s praise of “autonomous achievement.” The women are meticulous in maintaining their formal parlors, but

the execution is much simpler and serves the purpose of strengthening social bonds among family and friends rather than standing as a testament to an individual's "material progress."

The assumption that Jewett was a part of this counterculture yearning for a more authentic and simpler life is not simply guesswork. In an essay published in *The Atlantic Monthly* titled "From a Mournful Villager" (1881), Jewett indulges in her nostalgia for American culture's great losses as a result of the insurgence of industry and the incessant march toward progress. In particular, Jewett eulogizes the loss of the front-yard garden which represents for her a "very paradise in childhood" (669). She imagines that "people are sorry, without knowing why, to see the fences pulled down" around these more intimate gardens and replaced with the "handsome ornamental fences and their high posts with urns or great white balls on top" in pursuit of modern ideals (667). She acknowledges that the disappearance of these gardens perhaps indicates "a stronghold on [woman's] way from the much-talked of slavery and subjection to a coveted equality," but also questions the wisdom in trading off "this prim corner of land where [woman] was queen" for the opportunity to be "sorely tempted by the devil with a sight of kingdoms of the world and the glory of them" (666-67). Indeed, while this essay was published several years prior to *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, its message outlines many of the issues that appear to be of central importance to Jewett, and serves to establish her personal credentials as a nostalgic antimodernist.

This sense of nostalgia and the romanticization of simpler, rural living as a backlash against industrialization are evident from the first few pages.<sup>26</sup> The reader's initial introduction to the story's narrator is as "a lover of Dunnet Landing" (61). This is no innocuous statement as

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<sup>26</sup> While the nostalgia and sentimentality of Jewett's narrator would seem to fit the definition of local color that I argue Jewett transcends, this chapter will illustrate the ways in which Jewett avoids retreating into the more isolated concerns of regionalism and places her stories within the larger national dialogue of fragmentation and loss.

Jewett immediately details the illusion of sentimentality with which the narrator associates the town: she “returned to find the unchanged shores of the pointed firs, the same quaintness of the village with its elaborate conventionalities; all that mixture of remoteness, and childish certainty of being the centre of civilization of which her affectionate dreams had told” (61). The narrator loves Dunnet Landing because she views it as representative of something constant and stable in a world of rapid change. She perceives it as the embodiment of better days with its “quaintness” and “childish certainty” of totality and singular wholeness. The “strange and pungent odors” arising from Mrs. Todd’s garden evoke in the narrator “a dim sense and remembrance of something in the forgotten past” (62). The narrator’s nostalgia is invoked by the very sort of “front-yard garden” Jewett mourns in her earlier essay, and as Jewett suggested in that same essay, embodies that connection to America’s formerly innocent state of being which has become lost in the bustling city. As suggested by the title of the first chapter, the narrator views Dunnet Landing as a paradisiacal realm to which she can “return” from an aggressive and soul-eroding world (61).

The narrator’s perception of Dunnet Landing’s shores as “unchanged” seems to be based in a contrast to the presumably larger city from which she has traveled seeking “seclusion and uninterrupted days” (63). Her assumptions prove to be ironic in light of the changes this seaside village has already undergone—its gradual decline and ultimate death as a result of urbanization. While Dunnet Landing must indeed seem “quaint” in comparison to the larger city from which the narrator presumably hails, we come to find that some of its residents do not appreciate this simplicity and mourn the loss of industry to the same extent that she and other characters mourn a more ambiguous “premodern” and “‘authentic’ alternative” to their current reality (Lears 5). Indeed, the fact of the narrator’s gender becomes important in appreciating her romanticization

of Dunnet Landing as a paradisiacal realm. The changes wrought by industrialization and urbanization were experienced differently by men and women, so gender perspective marks a crucial distinction in Jewett's text for a more clear understanding of precisely what is being mourned and by whom.

While the male experience of increased industrialization and capitalist economics tended to be one of increased freedom and stimulation, the female experience, as previously indicated, increasingly became an experience of domestication and suppression. Whereas earlier agrarian societies saw a more equitable relationship between the sexes, the newer cities of the late nineteenth-century, with their particular convergence of urbanization and socially-defined Victorian gender roles, saw a widening of inequality between men and women. In her study of this period, Barbara Easton describes the divergent experiences of each gender:

In the agrarian society of Puritan New England, men and women had been interdependent, and family life and economic interest had merged. Husbands and wives needed each other's labor for survival, and needed each other for emotional support and for the raising of a family. In the towns of the nineteenth century these relationships were undergoing profound changes. Women who no longer did productive work were economically entirely dependent upon either their husbands or their fathers. Men needed wives to bear and raise children, to take care of their social and emotional needs, but not to participate in the family economy. (394)

Jewett casually relays this transformation through generational depictions of the various families of Dunnet Landing. The older generation of wives seemed to enjoy this more equitable relationship: the daguerreotype Mrs. Todd shows the narrator portrays a family in which the "far-off look" of seafarers is "inherited by girls and boys alike"; Mrs. Fosdick's recollections are of her entire family joining her father at sea; even Captain Littlepage argues that the "wives and children" of seafaring men often saw the world alongside their husbands and fathers (94, 73). By the time Mrs. Todd is old enough to marry, however, there is no mention of her joining Nathan at

sea. Mrs. Todd is described as being in her sixties; therefore, we can assume that she would not have been of marriageable age until after the emergence of that second phase of the industrial revolution and the advent of those Victorian ideologies which located woman in a social sphere separate from man. Likewise, even without children to anchor her, Sarah Tilley waited as a patient angel in her home for Elijah rather than joining him at sea.

The narrator's conversation with Captain Littlepage, however, reveals that men had a different vantage point from which to view the evolutions of industry in Dunnet Landing. Littlepage mourns the loss of the shipping industry in Dunnet Landing because he believes that "it made men of those who followed it" (72). He admires the fact that shipmasters were more inclined to "get the habit of reading," implying that, not only the pursuit of industry, but also the pursuit of knowledge hold distinctly masculine benefits which are sorely lacking in the absence of such an outlet (73). While both genders mourn a time before the industrial revolution vacated and betrayed their beloved village, the manifestation of that mourning in each gender clarifies their respective opinions regarding which historical era was the golden age for which they yearn. The female characters, particularly the narrator and Mrs. Todd seem to be actively seeking a means of restoring a rather ambiguous point in time prior to industrialization—as Jewett states in *From a Mournful Villager*, a time of innocence before women abandoned the gardens where they were "queen" for a chance to be "sorely tempted by the devil." Littlepage, on the other hand, views Dunnet Landing's more masculine, economically vibrant era as the one to be restored. In short, the same rapidly changing world of industry and urban society that resulted in dominion for one sex seems to have resulted in a fall for the other.

As Lears explains in his work, the manifestation of antimodernist nostalgia took many different forms. Clarifying the form of nostalgia adopted by Jewett's many characters and their

respective reactions to that nostalgia, can therefore tell as much about what they believe they have lost as anything else. To this end, one particular metaphor of lost innocence and Dunnet Landing as an Edenic alternative to the modern world, which has also received surprisingly little scholarly attention, is particularly relevant as a framing device for this conversation—Captain Littlepage’s curiously specific references to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. In fact, no other literary work is referenced in *Country of the Pointed Firs* with the same specificity. During this scene in the novel, the narrator has sought to distance herself from the constant flux of community at Mrs. Todd’s home by relocating to the village schoolhouse to work. After attending a funeral in the village, Captain Littlepage makes his way to the schoolhouse whereupon the narrator invites him in to chat and to rest. After Littlepage claims a seat by the window, the narrator suggests that he should instead take the “place of honor” at the teacher’s desk (69). Littlepage refuses, stating that he prefers the “happy, rural seat of various views” which he has by the window overlooking the “wooded shore” of Dunnet Landing (69, 70). He then clarifies for the narrator that his statement was a quote from “the greatest of poems,” *Paradise Lost*: “it’s all lofty, all lofty” (70).

No other explicit mention of *Paradise Lost* is made throughout the text, but when applied as a broad framework for the novel, the existence of parallels is staggering. For instance, the “wooded shore” that Littlepage looks upon reminds the reader of the famous New England pointed firs from which the novel takes its title. In *Paradise Lost* as Satan makes his way through Earth in an attempt to reach Eden, Milton specifically names fir trees as being one of the many obstacles guarding Paradise:

So on he fares, and to the border comes  
Of Eden, where delicious Paradise,  
Now nearer, crowns with her enclosure green,  
As with a rural mound the champaign head  
Of a steep wilderness, whose hairy sides  
With thicket overgrown, grotesque and wild,

Access denied; and overhead up grew  
Insuperable highth of loftiest shade,  
Cedar, and pine, and fir, and branching palm,  
A sylvan scene, and as the ranks ascend  
Shade above shade, a woody theater  
Of stateliest view. Yet higher than their tops  
The verdurous walls of Paradise up sprung. (4.131-43)

In the village of Dunnet Landing, the firs also stand in “ranks” to guard the perimeter of their “sylvan scene.” These firs keep the houses of Dunnet Landing “securely wedged and tree-nailed in among the ledges” (61). The town’s shoreline is “all covered by the great army of the pointed firs, darkly cloaked and standing” (80). In Eden, the trees stand to guard against intrusive outside forces, such as Satan; in Dunnet Landing, it is the threatening modern world which Jewett’s iconic pointed firs attempt to keep at bay. The narrator’s early romanticized depiction of Dunnet Landing sets it up as though it were the solution to the problems of the modern world; yet, for some reason this solution is fragile enough to need an army to guard it.

Littlepage’s particular quote in this scene is the phrase used by Satan to describe his view of Eden from his lofty perch upon first coming to Earth (*PL* 4.247). It is significant that the quote is delivered by one of the remaining harbingers of Dunnet Landing’s former industry. The narrator also recalls Mrs. Todd telling her that “Captain Littlepage had overset his mind with too much reading” (70). In one deft maneuver, Littlepage becomes associated not only with industry, but with the potentially devastating effects of choosing knowledge over a simpler, more balanced life. In Eden, of course, it was ultimately the Tree of Knowledge that led to Adam and Eve’s fall from grace and banishment from Paradise. For Jewett’s purposes, the Tree of Knowledge becomes synonymous with the rise of the industrial age and its ability to affect a second sort of fall for humanity. Now in his old age, Littlepage shuns the teacher’s chair, the seat of knowledge, for a chance to look out upon Paradise, but it was not so long ago that all of

Dunnet Landing had embraced the excitement and progress promised by the shipping industry's presence.

The seduction which the combined forces of industry and knowledge wrought was the ultimate cause of Mrs. Todd's fall, as it was for other residents of Dunnet Landing as well. Like Eve, she chose to reach for the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, to seek out "more scope" (Jewett 97). One can imagine her questioning the merits of her previously simple existence with the same sort of skepticism Eve does in her attempt to gain some measure of autonomy from Adam:

If this be our condition, thus to dwell  
In narrow circuit straitened by a foe,  
Subtle or violent, we not endued  
Single with like defense, wherever met,  
How are we happy, still in fear of harm? (*PL* 9.322-26)

As was the case in *Paradise Lost*, however, Sin was born into the world of Dunnet Landing not from a particular action itself, but upon the mere thought of rebellion and divergence from the predominant ideology of Victorian society.<sup>27</sup> And in keeping with the metaphor, it is not until Mrs. Todd actually enacts her desires and gives in to lustful temptations that she becomes the eternal companion of Death, forced to live forever with the knowledge that she aborted her child and passing on the means to do so to other women.<sup>28</sup>

As has already been pointed out, however, it is in the ability to view the abortions of these women, not only as literal acts in time, but as a larger metaphor for the aborted and stagnant environment of Dunnet Landing that lends the novel its power. The narrator has come to Dunnet Landing in hopes of finding the paradise she feels has been lost in the world. While

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<sup>27</sup> In *Paradise Lost*, Sin is born of Satan the moment he begins to think of rebellion against God, not when he finally acts upon his plan (2.747-60).

<sup>28</sup> Satan gives in to lust and impregnates his own daughter, Sin. In an especially gruesome description of violent childbirth, Death is ultimately born of Sin into the world (*PL* 2.778-87).

she does form intimate connections with some of its inhabitants, the reality of their fir-guarded community does not turn out to be the haven of quaint and unvarnished innocence she had hoped for. Like Mrs. Todd, many of Dunnet Landing's other residents have experienced their own betrayals as an indirect consequence of the once-vibrant shipping industry and its subsequent loss. The narrator catches a glimpse of the allure this must have held for its youth from one particular vista in Dunnet Landing:

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 island-ground, the mainland shore and all the far horizons. It gave a sudden sense of space, for nothing stopped the eye or hedged one in,--that sense of liberty in space and time which great prospects always give. (92)

Mrs. Todd followed this enticement from the confines of her home to the shores of the mainland and ultimately found her dreams derailed. Her exposure to experience and knowledge resulted in a dead child, a dead husband, dead "plans," and because of her literal lack of progeny, a dead future (Jewett 95). She now focuses her energy on maintaining her own garden, which "push[es] back against the gray-shingled wall" of her house and keeps her "sheltered enough from the busy world" (62). The garden she has created, like the pointed firs of Dunnet Landing, protects her from the wide world, but this garden is one of death rather than a restoration of Eden. Rather than finding paradise, the narrator finds a town which has turned in upon itself in a state of slow decay and deterioration.

As was illustrated through the story of Joanna, seduced by a "shifty-eyed, coaxin' sort of man" similar to the toad-like Satan whispering temptations in Eve's ear, the fallen state of Dunnet Landing appears to have had an impact on nearly everyone in the town<sup>29</sup> (117). Besides Mrs. Todd and Joanna, nearly every other family is childless, every husband widowed, or every

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<sup>29</sup> *PL* 4.798-809

woman left isolated and bereft in some way. For instance, the Tilley's appear to have had no children. Also, a fleeting mention is made that most of Mrs. Fosdick's children "had died before her" in direct correlation to their involvement in the shipping industry (102). The examples are not entirely without exception, but are indeed numerous. Some younger family members appear at the Bowden Family Reunion, but this takes place outside of the village itself. Dunnet Landing seems almost entirely populated by the elderly and this leaves one to wonder what will happen to the village once this generation passes on. There appears to be no physical way for this village to continue on.

Toward the conclusion of his scene with the narrator, Captain Littlepage offers an admonition that seems to remind the reader that these concerns are more than just a localized issue; through him Jewett offers a warning of national relevance. Just as the nation did not fully understand the impact of industrialization until long after the devastation had been wrought, so the villagers of Dunnet Landing are only able to understand their demise in hindsight. In the fallen state in which Dunnet Landing finds itself, Littlepage is now able to retrospectively assess their fatal mistakes: "We have not looked for truth in the right direction" (71). He does not indicate what that "right direction" may be, but his shunning of the teacher's seat in favor of the Edenic view and Mrs. Todd's persistence in tending her own garden in an attempt to restore the one lost are perhaps indication enough of the intent behind his statement. The impact of industry and its ensuing loss forged an irreparable breach between innocence and experience in this town that is detrimental. Adam and Eve recognize a similar breach after awakening from their first sexual indulgence after partaking of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge: they "found their eyes opened, and their minds / How darkened; innocence that as a veil / Has shadowed them from knowing ill, was gone" (*PL* 9.1053-55). Just as Milton's Sin found that the gates of hell could

not be closed once opened, the garden, once lost, cannot be regained.<sup>30</sup> Innocence, once breached, can never be fully restored. This is what Americans at the turn of the century were coming to realize, and no amount of action or legislation could overturn that verdict.

As their conversation comes to a close, Jewett sounds an ominous note of caution: “There was a silence in the schoolhouse, but we could hear the noise of the water on a beach below. It sounded like the strange warning wave that gives notice of the turn of the tide” (74). She had employed similar language in “From a Mournful Villager”: “The true characteristics of American society, as I have said, are showing themselves more and more distinctly to the westward of New England, and come back to it in a tide that steadily sweeps away the old traditions” (665). The tide that Jewett envisions is the transformation of the official culture and value system of America to accommodate the advances of modern science and technology. That same transformation had led to the tensions between dominant ideology and the individual rights of women which serves as context for her stories. Attempts to strengthen and enforce social conventions of Victorian morality were the reaction against this rising tide, but Jewett knew, as Milton suggests in *Paradise Lost*, that any such conventions were “mere shows of seeming pure” rather than true “Simplicity and spotless innocence” (4.316, 318). Jewett imagines her New England villages with their front-yard gardens, the same sort of garden Mrs. Todd maintains, to be one of the last holdovers from a life of true simplicity—a life that is fast dying and appears lost forever.

Nevertheless, Jewett understands that one cannot simply stand idle in despair of such a realization. While Mrs. Todd’s efforts to maintain her garden may not offer her any chance of truly restoring innocence, she remains a likeable character because of her conscious choice to

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<sup>30</sup> *PL* 2.883-84.

continue living as authentically as she knows how. The narrator also understands the futility in attempting to halt the forward march of progress. She mourns the loss of communities like Dunnet Landing, but knows she must inevitably return to her life in the city. Indeed, she views her own departure from Dunnet Landing as a death of its own: “I and all my belongings had died out of it... So we die before our own eyes; so we see some chapters of our lives come to their natural end” (199). But while this death is to be mourned, just as Paradise is to be mourned, the need to take each day as it comes is one that Jewett seems to suggest was decided long before by Adam and Eve. The narrator’s final backward glance as “Dunnet Landing and all its coasts were lost to sight” (201) echoes of Milton’s depiction of Adam and Eve’s mournful last view of Eden:

They looking back, all th’ eastern side beheld  
Of Paradise, so late their happy seat,  
Waved over by that flaming brand, the gate  
With dreadful faces thronged and fiery arms:  
Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon;  
The world was all before them, where to choose  
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:  
They hand in hand with wand’ring steps and slow,  
Through Eden took their solitary way. (*PL* 12.641-49)

And so Jewett’s narrator returns once more to the world leaving Paradise, with its Miltonesque “apple trees and bits of garden ground,” behind her—mournful, but resolute nonetheless (200).

## CHAPTER IV

How art thou lost, how on a sudden lost,  
Defaced, deflow'ed, and now to death devote?

--John Milton, *Paradise Lost* 9.900-01

If Jewett's novel employs *Paradise Lost* as its analogous foundation, then investigating the comparisons between the two should ultimately enrich Jewett's text through interaction of the primary themes in the two works. As was illustrated in the previous chapter, Jewett's use of this metaphor provides a sophisticated intersection between two issues of importance for nineteenth-century Americans: the decline in birth rates due to women taking control of their reproductive bodies and the perceived decline of a way of life due to industry taking control of the nation. Using Milton as a primer for *The Country of the Pointed Firs* exposes a provocative depiction of both "what" has happened (the abortion of lives, voices, and innocence) and "how" it happened (the fragmentation of the American soul due to industrial infiltration). One could argue that it becomes Jewett's re-envisioning of the modern-day fall of man.

Jewett's original 1896 publication of the novel was comprised of twenty-one chapters and included the "what" and "how" that has been discussed in this thesis, but Jewett had opted in those chapters to leave the issues at hand, both in Dunnet Landing and in the nation, without a clear resolution. As a realist author, this conclusion most accurately reflected the unresolved state of affairs in the world; moreover, in *Paradise Lost* it is the fate of Adam and Eve after their fall to wander the earth irresolute until their eventual death. It seems, however, that as an artist she simply could not resist troubling the waters of Dunnet Landing just a bit more. A few years

after the original chapters were distributed in book form, she published further Dunnet Landing stories: “A Dunnet Shepherdess,” “William’s Wedding,” and “The Queen’s Twin.” While Jewett never authorized the inclusion of these chapters with the original novel during her lifetime, they were posthumously added in various formats, most notably in an edition edited and introduced by Willa Cather, whose chapter sequence and organization this thesis uses as its source. While there is much scholarly debate over the textual legitimacy of including these chapters, there were at least a handful of Jewett’s friends and contemporaries, such as Cather and Jewett’s sister Mary, who believed that she would have approved of the edited compilations<sup>31</sup> (Goheen 40).

Of these additional chapters, “A Dunnet Shepherdess” and “William’s Wedding” have an explicit connection in plotlines and offer an intriguing study as to whether Jewett wrote them as a way of providing the resolution that the original publication lacked. Milton, after all, included both the problem and the ultimate resolution for his epic within the first few lines of text:

Of man’s first disobedience, and the fruit  
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste  
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,  
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man  
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,  
Sing Heav’nly Muse. (*PL* 1.1-6)

Milton’s restoration can only be found through the salvation of Christ, the “one greater Man” which he references in line 4. Being familiar with this work, as Jewett undoubtedly was, it does not seem unreasonable to hypothesize that she may have viewed the lack of a path for the restoration of Dunnet Landing and its residents as a sign of the work’s analogous

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<sup>31</sup> For instance, “William’s Wedding” had not progressed beyond draft form at the time of Jewett’s death and many question the artistic integrity of its inclusion (Goheen 38). In her detailed exploration of the publication history of *Country of the Pointed Firs*, Cynthia Goheen argues that all published editions of the novel after Jewett’s death are a violation of Jewett’s original intentions.

incompleteness. In the first additional chapter which followed the publication of *Country of the Pointed Firs*, “A Dunnet Shepherdess,” Jewett is careful to establish a consistency of characters and themes between the new work and the original novel before going on to complicate the characterization of William Blackett and to introduce a new model for feminine choice and heroism in the character of William’s long-time love, Esther. “William’s Wedding” presents a potential resolution of the relationship between these two characters and, therefore, a potentially metaphorical resolution for the concerns of the nation. The primary question in this potential resolution becomes whether or not William serves symbolically as that “one greater Man” which Milton indicates is man’s only hope for restoration. Is he Dunnet Landing’s long-suffering Christ-figure? It is the deliberate thematic connection between these additional chapters and the original novel which makes them worthy of consideration in this thesis. Even in her adamant stance regarding the artistic integrity of Jewett’s original publication, Cynthia Goheen acknowledges that as an artist, Jewett would not have felt prohibited from “returning to characters, scenes, or, less tangibly, to themes treated in previous works” (36).

The most obvious means of establishing consistency between the original work and its subsequent additions is in the treatment of certain primary characters, such as Mrs. Todd, William, and even the narrator. Particularly through Mrs. Todd, Jewett reasserts the allusion to death and the role of the midwife’s herbs in the literal and metaphorical death of the village. In the first scene of “A Dunnet Shepherdess,” the narrator awakens one morning to the sounds of Mrs. Todd chiding her brother William as she applies a lotion to his face. True to form, Mrs. Todd is the more dominant personality between the two and insists that he cooperate with her; therefore, the narrator’s first impression in this chapter is one of the male “meekly submitting to being smeared, as to his countenance, with a most pungent and unattractive lotion of pennyroyal

and other green herbs” (155). The lotion is allegedly being applied to ward off mosquitoes, but the singular mention of pennyroyal as opposed to any of the “other green herbs” recalls the allusions to abortion from Jewett’s original novel which are so crucial to a complete understanding of its importance.

To ensure the reader does not miss her more subtle clues, Jewett then describes Mrs. Todd in terms of mythological and literary allusions that are more blatant: “I was reminded of Medea’s anointing Jason before the great episode of the iron bulls” (155). While this particular episode is an instance of Medea helping Jason to complete superhuman tasks such as yoking fire-breathing bulls, one cannot forget that she ultimately exacts revenge upon Jason by murdering her own children.<sup>32</sup> The ambiguous nature of Mrs. Todd’s intent, as suggested by this allusion, reminds the reader of the relationship she has formed with the community as a whole. As midwife, the novel suggests, she has provided the means for abortion and birth control to multiple women in Dunnet Landing, but she also figures as a beloved and well-meaning figure in the village who seems intent on restoring a paradisiacal realm with her own two hands. In both senses, the comparison to Medea is apt.

For good measure, however, Jewett injects one more comparison for Mrs. Todd; as the narrator observes Mrs. Todd relaxing momentarily, she imagines her “to be lost, though not poorly, like Macbeth, in her thoughts” (156). In Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth becomes tormented by her own guilt after conspiring with her husband to murder the wife and children of their perceived enemy, Macduff. While the narrator insists Mrs. Todd is not lost as “poorly” as Shakespeare’s villainess, the allusion nonetheless invokes a reminder of willful death, particularly the death of children. Jewett is able to establish the original novel’s same

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<sup>32</sup> See Euripides’ *Medea*, translated by Rex Warner, New York: Dover Publications, 1993.

general foundation in this new chapter within its first few pages simply through her depiction of the all-important Mrs. Todd.

Jewett also reasserts her theme of the spiritual damage inflicted by industrialized society through her portrayal of Dunnet Landing and the narrator's nostalgic response to its fir-lined shores. In the original chapters, the narrator is portrayed as "a lover of Dunnet Landing" because of its "quaintness" and "remoteness"; it appears to her as the embodiment of all "her affectionate dreams" (61). She is "affectionate" towards this village because she holds it to be, as Jewett establishes at the beginning of "William's Wedding," the antithesis of that which she is seeking respite from: "the hurry of life in a large town, the constant putting aside of preference to yield to a most unsatisfactory activity" (187). In short, the impersonal and relentless pace of industrialization has left the narrator feeling fragmented and unhappy; she imagines herself as "a poor, incoherent being" until she returns to Dunnet Landing (188). By reminding the reader that her narrator comes to Dunnet Landing in hopes of regaining something which she feels she has lost in the busy modern world, Jewett easily reestablishes the framework of *Paradise Lost* that was outlined in her original work.

As with many of her other most interesting references, Jewett's deft ability to forge a connection between these two themes is once again seen in a moment subtle enough to be almost entirely overlooked. In "A Dunnet Shepherdess" Jewett seems to suggest that the land itself holds an organic sense of its own futility as the narrator notices when she goes fishing with William Blackett: "The moment that I began to fish the brook, I had a sense of its emptiness... It is the same certainty that comes when one knocks at the door of an empty house" (160). The pagan symbol of the fish is associated in many cultural mythologies with fertility and was later

appropriated by Christians as a symbol of life force in general.<sup>33</sup> The fact that this stream produces no fish echoes of the barrenness of the village itself; moreover, Jewett's invocation of the metaphor of "empty houses" reminds the reader of the emptiness which will inevitably be mirrored in the town as its older generation dies off, leaving no progeny behind them. The cohesive connection between empty streams, empty houses, and empty wombs is, like many of Jewett's more sophisticated passages, subtle; nonetheless, the apparent contagion of emptiness from these women to the town and into the actual land supports precisely the metaphorical reading this thesis suggests.

Having established thematic connections between her original chapters and these later ones, Jewett's challenge then is to complicate her prior portrayal of William as a likeable, but emasculated figure unable to develop because of the shipping industry's abandonment of Dunnet Landing's men. When the narrator first meets William, he is described as a diminutive "elderly man, bent in the shoulders" with a certain "bashfulness" and "timid air" that seems to give him a feminine appearance (91). Indeed, the narrator is surprised to find that "He looked just like his mother" compared to Mrs. Todd's more dominant stature (91). Mrs. Blackett even goes so far as to say that "William has been both son an' daughter" to her since Mrs. Todd moved out of her mother's home to seek a more independent future (88). The narrator's first glimpse of William in "A Dunnet Shepherdess" as a man "meekly submitting" to his sister reinforces this earlier portrayal.

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<sup>33</sup> Many mythologies from a variety of cultures have links between fish and fertility, but one example in particular is seen in the Egyptian story of Isis and Osiris. Osiris was dismembered and had his body parts scattered upon the sea. Isis attempts to gather them, but a fish swallows the penis before she reaches it. In this way, both fish themselves and the sea become symbolic of holding the seed of life. See "Osiris and Isis" in *The Oxford Companion to World mythology*. David Leeming. Oxford University Press, 2004. *Oxford Reference Online*.

The narrator's opinion of William Blackett begins to evolve as she wanders through the quiet woods of Dunnet Landing by his side. She marvels that he seems to transcend the "noisy world" she has become accustomed to (162). His silence begins to be interpreted as his ability to exist on "a different level" of understanding, rather than the mere bashfulness she had earlier mistaken it for (161). As her knowledge of William becomes pleasantly disoriented, the narrator is surprised to discover William's true motivation for these periodic outings to fish in a barren stream: it is a convenient excuse to visit the woman he has long been in love with, a shepherdess who lives high on the hillside of Dunnet Landing. Once more, without explicitly saying much at all, Jewett has begun her transformation of William into a viable candidate for Milton's "greater Man" with the potential to restore Dunnet Landing.

This transformation is essential to the pseudo-resolution she ultimately offers in "William's Wedding," but the most intriguing function of "A Dunnet Shepherdess" is the introduction to an alternative feminist heroine to Mrs. Todd—Esther Hight. Unlike Mrs. Todd, Esther repudiated a pursuit of knowledge or "scope" and chose a life keeping watch over sheep, an animal typically employed as a symbol of innocence and purity: "she gave up schoolteachin' and went out to tend her flock"<sup>34</sup> (163). She has for years been perched on a hilltop high above Dunnet Landing doing just that and taking care of her elderly mother. Esther's name allows for a loosely biblical interpretation of her role as shepherdess. In the biblical story of Esther, she is the literal savior of her people as she intercedes with the king on their behalf to thwart a plot to

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<sup>34</sup> In biblical allusions, the people of Israel are described as sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36) and Christ is described as a "good shepherd" because he sacrifices his life for his sheep (John 10:7-9). In many ways Christ is both shepherd and sheep; he is frequently referred to as the lamb of God, a reference meant to indicate his purity and willingness to sacrifice.

murder them all.<sup>35</sup> In this sense, it is easy to read Esther as having watched over Dunnet Landing for all those years. Indeed, she maintains a certain height above the village, as suggested by her last name, serving as a sort of beacon for those below: “You can see the sea from the top of her pasture hill” (170). Barker-Benfield indicates that by the end of the nineteenth century, “The one job that men willingly left to women was teaching” since it lacked the inherent excitement of the business world (21). That Esther opts for self-sacrifice and rejects the opportunity to advance her own career, her own claim to the fruit of the tree of knowledge as a schoolteacher, marks her as an obvious contrast to Mrs. Todd who actively sought the activity and restless energy which the industry of Dunnet Landing’s shores provided. In her original novel, Jewett avoided providing a tidy depiction of heroines in her female characters; “A Dunnett Shepherdess” leaves the reader to wonder whether she has relented on that front. Is Esther then the savior of Dunnet Landing?

Jewett certainly portrays Esther in a strong and favorable light. The narrator’s first impression of Esther is one of her “with her great flock, like a figure of Millet’s, high against the sky” (163). Jean Francois Millet was a realist painter of the mid-nineteenth century who famously depicted scenes of laboring peasants in a manner that evinced his admiration for their noble contribution to the survival of the human species. His 1858 painting, “Shepherdess with her flock,” portrays a young woman with her sheep in precisely the noble manner that Jewett suggests, upright and sturdy against a warmly-colored sky whose rays seem to shine in approval upon the shoulders of the shepherdess. Esther’s smile reflects the “noble patience” and “uncomprehended sacrifice” suggested by these peasant figures of Millet (Jewett 170). Jewett even directly suggests that she has benefitted from being “untouched by the fret and fury of life”;

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<sup>35</sup> In the King James version of the Bible, see the Book of Esther, particularly 7:2-4.

furthermore, her voluntary removal from that “busy world” which Jewett’s narrator and Mrs. Todd seek respite from has resulted in Esther’s spirit being “refined instead of coarsened” (169). It is Esther’s conscious decision to excuse herself from the questionable progress of the world that appears to have allowed her to preserve some element of purity upon her hillside.

The nobility of Esther, however, has apparently not been enough to halt the decline of her village. Does Esther function as a decoy to disguise the more traditional resolution Jewett will ultimately offer? In the biblical story, after all, Esther’s ability to save her people is only manifested through her husband, King Ahasuerus; moreover, according to Milton, paradise is to be restored by a man, not a woman. As they leave the rural hillside and head back toward the village, the narrator imagines a more masculine quality in William than had previously been seen. There is a “dark stripe across his mild face,” a result of the remaining pennyroyal lotion his sister bestowed upon him to ward off the conspicuously absent mosquitoes, but the narrator now imagines it to be “an old scar won long ago in battle” (170). This is Jewett’s first such description of William in this light and it seems to stem from the narrator’s new understanding of his long-suffering patience and persistence. His transformation as a character is complete; his willingness to sacrifice for the actualization of pure love marks him as the potential “one greater man” that Dunnet Landing is in need of.

The last event to take place in Jewett’s beloved Dunnet Landing is the wedding of William to his long-time love Esther in “William’s Wedding.” It would be easy to view their wedding as a happy and triumphant occasion because of its proud reception within the village and the end of many years of self-denial by the two lovers. Perhaps Jewett intends to give everyone their happy ending after all. What appears to be an easy reading with Jewett, however, should probably always be given a closer look. Superficially, Jewett seems to take her

transformation of William from feminine to masculine one step further into a sort of victorious coronation: “if William ain’t lookin’ just like a king!” (196). After marrying his queen, Esther, William has all the appearance of a man in control: “There he comes, and he’s strikin’ right in across the open bay like a man” (191). His entire demeanor seems more confident, more upright. When he comes to visit his sister, the narrator notices a subtle change in the dynamic between the couple. Whereas up on the hillside Esther was described as an “Atalanta” running from William, he has now apparently captured her and taken possession: “at last she was his own”<sup>36</sup> (197). Several elements of the Atalanta story are interesting in relation to Jewett’s allusion. It is said that she was left on a mountaintop to die by her father when she was young, just as Esther has spent her life on the hillside of Dunnet Landing. Once she was rediscovered by her father she agreed to be married to the first man that could outrun her in a foot race. William’s perseverance in waiting for Esther does result in a marriage, so in this sense he outruns her. Does Jewett suggest that the patriarchal order of society must be reestablished in Dunnet Landing as a prerequisite to the restoration of paradise? Must the shepherdess of Dunnet Landing, the best hope for a feminist heroine, be taken possession of in order to move forward?

Attempting to decide if one gender has won over the other does not adequately account for Jewett’s ending. Neither man nor woman needs to be rebuked or redeemed in Dunnet Landing because neither gender is solely responsible for the town’s decline. William and Esther are a product of the social environment in which they live, as are Mrs. Todd, Joanna, and all the Dunnet Landing villagers. An entire generation of lost children cannot be resurrected. A town’s demise in the nineteenth century at the hands of industrialization cannot be resolved with one

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<sup>36</sup> Ultimately, over an offense to the gods Atalanta and her husband are turned into lions. This is of additional interest to the development of the William/Esther storyline because their punishment was meant to keep them apart as it was believed at the time that lions could not mate with their own.

decisive act. William and Esther seem to be the only two individuals in the village that refused to be tempted by the fruit of the tree of knowledge, but what does their stalwart integrity do for a dying village? Had Adam and Eve refused Satan's seduction they may have held on to Eden, but what would that have meant for all of mankind?

William's wedding to Esther is ambiguously optimistic, but there is one fact that keeps it from being entirely triumphant. The practical problem of a future generation has still not been solved. When William is first introduced in Jewett's earlier chapters, he is described as being "about sixty" (91). Esther's exact age is not given, but her history and the "worn face" that the narrator vows to remember suggests she is similar in age to William (170). The question of whether or not this couple is still able to bear children is dubious at best. One could argue that the lamb Esther carries at the end points to rebirth and a renewed fruitfulness through marriage; indeed, William is careful to "make a nest for the lamb out of an old sea-cloak at Esther's feet" (197). There is a viable alternative case to be made, however, that this lamb is nothing more than a surrogate child wrapped in the vestiges of a dead industry. Furthermore, Esther has sold the remains of her flock to a "well off" family on the other side of the hill (189). Though she keeps the one small lamb, who has been orphaned, it seems significant that the last remaining symbol of true purity in Dunnet Landing—Esther's flock—has now been relinquished, not to another romanticized peasant like herself, but into the hands of the wealthy. Not only will William and Esther's long-awaited union bear no fruit, but, while triumphant in tone, it simultaneously signals a sort of resignation toward the ultimate fate of the village.

And so Jewett addresses the lack of a resolution within her original novel with the fruitless resolution of "William's Wedding." The restoration of the proper patriarchal order through William's possession of Esther becomes almost a parody of Milton's restoration of Eden

through his “one Greater man.” It has all the markings of a triumphant ending, but their future will be just as barren as the remaining inhabitants of Dunnet Landing. The damage that has been wrought in this village cannot be undone by either male or female.

## CHAPTER V

### EPILOGUE

In Jewett's language we may still trace the alienation of history as well as the dream of history. Finally, it is because we, her readers also possess this history that we may interpret her works. With this key we recognize her swerves and realignments. Without some lines of continuity the words would be unintelligible. No text without its shadow.

—Sarah Sherman, *Sarah Orne Jewett, An American Persephone*

If it is not the aim of Jewett's text simply to provide warm-hearted, quaint sketches of endearing character of the New England region, then what is her aim? Working within a template of death, lost paradise, and fruitless resolutions, does Jewett follow the trend of other realist authors whose work often seems to ignore the bright and the good in the world for the sake of exposing the dark, hopeless struggle of life? For those who dare to look beneath the surface, does Jewett offer any opportunities for enlightenment that masterpieces are typically endowed with, or does she simply seek to depress with a pervasive mourning for the loss of her villages and a way of life she feels is gone forever? What, as readers and scholars, do we take away from such a work? What did Jewett contribute to the "discursive explosion" of her era?

Jewett's somewhat murky and inconclusive conclusion is appropriate because it is an accurate reflection of the uncertain times in which she lived. Conclusions and decisions in women's lives were not easily resolved during the nineteenth century because their lives were so completely impacted by their surrounding social environment. A symbiosis of consequence was at work between these women and their context: society sought to regulate the individual who in

turn was forced into desperate and often impossible situations that then caused society to react against the individual who was merely a product of that society. The chain of causality and responsibility goes on and on, and each element in the equation modifies the other in its turn. This relationship was all the while driven by the larger impetuses of industrialization and urbanization, two forces beyond the control of both society and the individual. Jewett has managed to capture both a theoretical understanding of the nineteenth century and its practical implications for humanity by giving voice to some of the individual voices that might have experienced it, particularly those of women.

As a part of the discursive tapestry surrounding matters of sexuality and birth control that Foucault draws our attention to, Jewett's truly lasting value lies in her ability to get this work published at all against the dictates of law. *How* she said it is important enough to merit scholarly consideration, but having devoted much attention to understanding *what* she has said, the remaining factor to consider is *why* she said it. As Foucault suggests, the issue at hand for Victorian Americans was not so much to suppress what was being said about these issues, but to control the conversation, to manipulate the output. The dominant powers of Jewett's era sought to remove any of that control from the hands of the very people whose lives it affected most directly. In a very real sense, Jewett's goal then is to give control of the conversation back to women. She gives them the voice which had been stifled.

She does much more, however, than simply let those women speak. In her study, Capo argues that

as early as antiquity birth control has depended on the actions of women, who had both effective contraceptives and a female network to transmit the needed information, passing knowledge orally from one generation of women to the next.  
(11)

By delivering her message through the series of clues that she did, Jewett does not simply serve as a mouthpiece, but as more of an active messenger in the sense that Capo suggests. This distinction is important because this is the means by which women can take control of, not just their voices, but their very lives, in spite of any repressive laws implemented by a patriarchal society with a different set of interests. So in order to understand more fully how Jewett imagines women can regain such control, it is only appropriate that the conclusions she reaches be interpreted, not through the perspective of Adam or the “one Greater man” (as Milton envisioned it), but through the eyes of the women to whom she has devoted so much ink. We have seen the ambiguity in Esther’s fate, her female self-sufficiency having been re-appropriated into the patriarchal order. What of Jewett’s two other most important representative females?

Our final glimpse of Mrs. Todd is just as ambiguous as William’s wedding. Jewett tantalizingly dangles hope before her readers, but, as a realist, cannot exclude doubt from her conclusion. We see this uncertainty in the narrator’s farewell to Mrs. Todd:

Close at hand, Mrs. Todd seemed able and warm-hearted and quite absorbed in her bustling industries, but her distant figure looked mateless and appealing, with something about it that was strangely self-possessed and mysterious. Now and then she stooped to pick something—it might have been her favorite pennyroyal—and at last I lost sight of her as she slowly crossed an open space on one of the higher points of land, and disappeared again behind a dark clump of juniper and the pointed firs. (200)

This is a woman who, unlike Joanna, has resolutely maintained a connection with her community in spite of its inevitable stagnancy; this confidence and tenacity makes her an admirable figure. The reader is not allowed to forget, however, that life has left her alone and clinging to her pennyroyal. She may be “appealing” and “self-possessed,” but she is also “mateless” and “mysterious.”

This childless, mateless path forward in life, however, has quite a different implication than does the path chosen by other women in the novel. At the risk of taking the metaphor too far, I find it interesting to imagine Mrs. Todd as one of Jewett's modern-day representations of Eve. If *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is a reimagining of the fall of man, the loss of paradise, then we can also imagine the plight of these women as the plight of Eve after the fall. Does Jewett entertain the notion of what might have happened had Eve chosen a different path? Esther, for instance, can be seen as a representation of an infallible Eve—an Eve who did not succumb to the temptations of the fruit of knowledge, but remained pure. As already discussed, Mrs. Todd would be representative of an Eve who did partake of the fruit, but what of her fate after the fall?

In Milton, there is a moment of anxious discussion between Adam and Eve after they learn what their fate will be as a result of disobeying the dictates of God. They are both to be banished from Eden, but it is Eve's particular punishment to be subjected to the order of patriarchal rule and to bear children in pain and misery:

Thy sorrow I will greatly multiply  
By thy conception; children thou shalt bring  
In sorrow forth, and to thy husband's will  
Thine shall submit, he over thee shall rule. (*PL* 10.193-96)

In a final desperate attempt to circumvent this judgment, Eve attempts to persuade Adam to refuse its tenets. Rather than wandering the earth in misery, waiting for an eventual death, and bearing children who will also be exposed to misery and death, Eve suggests that they simply refuse to cooperate:

in thy power  
It lies, yet ere conception to prevent  
The race unblest, to being yet unbegot.  
Childless thou art, childless remain; so Death  
Shall be deceived his glut, and with us two

Be forced to satisfy his rav'nous maw. (*PL* 10-986-91)

Of course, Adam convinces Eve to accept the verdict that had been handed to them, and mankind persists in the fallen state they have inherited ever since. Perhaps this is the root of Mrs. Todd's "appealing" nature in spite of the agony she endures with knowledge of past transgressions. While she is not heroic in any traditional sense of the word, perhaps her heroism lies in her ability to carry out the alternative that Eve could not. In other words, though she has partaken of the fruit of the tree, Mrs. Todd refuses to partake of the punishment which Eve endured as a result. She makes the willful decision to "childless remain," preventing any "unblest" progeny from "satisfy[ing] [Death's] rav'nous maw." She cannot avoid the passage of time, but she chooses to do so on her own terms rather than by the dictates of man.

The confrontation of time is the only path left for the narrator as well. Ultimately, Mrs. Todd retreats once more behind her army of pointed firs and, as with the innocence Dunnet Landing embodies for her, is "lost" to the narrator. This strain is echoed again with the land as the narrator sails away from its fir-lined shores: "when I looked back again, the islands and the headland had run together and Dunnet Landing and all its coasts were lost to sight" (201). In saying her goodbyes the narrator recognizes finally that what was lost cannot be regained. She came to Dunnet Landing seeking restoration but found that its inhabitants were seeking the same thing. Jewett brings the narrator full circle: what started as a "return" to Dunnet Landing, her potential paradise, ends as a "return to the world" (198). This return to the world is essential for the narrator as it is left to her to be the voice for women whose lives have been altered irrevocably by the process of modernization.

There is a solid case to be made that this is Jewett's contribution to that great discursive explosion occurring in Victorian society. Certainly, one can live a life conforming to the

dominant ideology, as do characters like Sarah Tilley. Jewett is careful not to be critical of these choices—they have a beauty of their own. But without a say in the debate regarding their own physical bodies, without a viable platform for having their voices heard, these choices are not satisfying for every woman; therefore, the beauty of lives like Joanna’s and Mrs. Todd’s must also be acknowledged. The choices of a modern-day Eve may leave one “mateless,” and they may “childless remain,” but any path which also enables that woman a voice and a measure of control over her own life can also be inherently “appealing.”

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