An Ecocritical Study of Sarah Orne Jewett's

The Country of the Pointed Firs

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Contents

1. Introduction

The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896) is very often regarded as Sarah Orne Jewett's masterpiece. This collection of sketches features a woman writer who returns to a New England coastal town to spend the summer holidays seeking to find in this remote location the ease and inspiration to write a story. Upon her arrival she tries to detach herself from the life of the town and its inhabitants. Yet, soon she realizes that what actually sets her pen in motion is engagement in these people's lives and activities.

In this thesis I aim at explaining the role of nature both in the life of the narrator and the inhabitants of this small town. Starting from the pastoral associations of this setting, this work shows the complex relationship between nature, economy, culture and the body politics at a time when mainstream America was developing a capitalist model which would lead eventually to the obsolescence of this lifestyle. With the aim of analyzing those connections, I divide my thesis in three main sections.

In the first section –"The Author and her Time"– I introduce the writer and her work, focusing on the characteristic traits of the genre she cultivated, local color. Here I contextualize *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, which was published at a time when regionalist literature was becoming increasingly popular among urban elites, for whom it provided a source of stability in an ever changing world. Yet, as we will see later in this work, rural areas were undergoing their own changes linked in turn to the changes going on in cities.

The second section –"Communion with Nature"– starts the literary analysis of the work. It deals with the importance of communion with nature in *Country*, for the survival of this community seems to depend on its ability to adapt to the land. Here I delve on the connection

between Dunnet Landing and the pastoral landscape, as well as on the seeming isolation of this community. Detached from the main changes that were taking place in urban areas, this small town seems to operate outside of capitalist relations, and its inhabitants are only accountable for the good management of their resources. This withdrawal from the nation may have more than just aesthetic purposes.

In the third section –"Women and Community in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*"– I analyze the connection between women, nature, and community in *Country*. First, I delve on the reasons why this small town is constituted predominantly by women and how these characters challenge the dominant gender constructs. Then, I analyze the connection between women and the making of this community, as well as the importance with which community life is infused. In relation to this, empathy seems to be key to create and sustain this community, for it characterizes not only human relationships, but these people's relationship to the land. Jewett developed an example of a sustainable lifestyle based on the responsible management and fair distribution of resources.

The main sources I will be using for this are: second-wave feminist Josephine Donovan's work on *New England Local Color Literature* and *Sarah Orne Jewett*, which helped me to contextualize the author and her work; June Howard's *New Essays on The Country of the Pointed Firs*, whose various essays were enormously helpful when analyzing the role of community in this work, the presence of material culture, the intertwining of regionalism and nationalism, and the presence and dismantling of gender constructs. In turn, Coby Dowdell's, Judith Fetterley's, and Thomas Strychacz's essays helped me to better understand the play between region and nation, for they all deal with the intricate relationship between a place that seems to be isolated but whose construction may account for national purposes. Other

resources provided me with further knowledge for the ecocritical analysis of this piece, the most useful being Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* and Ken Hiltner's collection of essays *Ecocriticism. The Essential Reader*.

The main purpose of this thesis is to analyze whether the way of living depicted by Jewett was realistic or rather an idealization of life in rural areas and, also, which factors contribute to it being sustainable. Moreover, I aim at clarifying the role of women and the community in protecting and perpetuating this lifestyle, since a good, equitable relationship among the members of the community seems to be key to its survival, for care, cooperation, and a fair distribution of resources depend on it.

2. The Author and her Time

2.1. Sarah Orne Jewett and *The Country of the Pointed Firs*

Theodora Sarah Orne Jewett (September 3, 1849 - June 24, 1909) was an American writer best known for her works set in rural New England. She was born to a family with a solid social and economic position in the small town of South Berwick, Maine, in 1849, where she died sixty years later, in 1909. Her father was a physician and, as Annie Adams Fields stated in her preface to *Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett*, whenever the weather allowed it, he would take Jewett with him in his visits as a doctor through the New England countryside and coast –sometimes even if she had to miss school. During these trips he trained her in medicine, but she also developed a great sympathy for others: apart from being herself a delicate child, she also knew from an early age the suffering of other people. For these reasons, she attended irregularly the village school and Berwick Academy.

In addition to teaching her what he knew about medicine, her father became later on her advisor when writing, telling her to record life as she knew it, to "tell [people and things] just as they are" (Qtd. in Howard 18)[1]. Her mother and grandmother, in turn, familiarized her with women authors such as Jane Austen or George Eliot. As a result, her work, as Josephine Donovan argues in *Sarah Orne Jewett*, is permeated with a sense of loss, nostalgia for a world in which community was constituted and kept alive by strong women. According to Annie Fields, Jewett herself "was no recluse," and she enjoyed the company of her many friendships, with whom she kept regular correspondence (6).

As for the place in which she lived, South Berwick, it suffered together with the majority of New England small towns the consequences of the changes going on at that time in the rest of the country.[2] Bathed by the waters of the Piscataqua river, this allowed for vessels of a considerable size to navigate as far as the banks of the small town, even though this way of commerce was already in decline due to the rapidly developing process of industrialization and the expansion of the railroad. Eric Sundquist draws our attention toward the paradoxical effect of these advancements. He argues

> that the same communication and transportation developments that closed the nation's sectional divisions following the Civil War and brought isolated communities closer also began to destroy rural "islands" of life. Local color records in part the rustic border world rendered exotic by industrialism but now made visible and nostalgically charged by the nation's inexorable drive toward cohesion and standardization. (Qtd. in Howard 16)

[1] Jewett's dedication in *Country By-Ways* to her father makes reference to these trips: "My dear father; my dear friend; the best and wisest man I ever knew who taught me many lessons and showed me many things as went together along the country by-ways" (Qtd. in Howard 5).
[2] Another New Englander, Harriet Beecher Stowe, had depicted years before the decline of the shipping industry in Maine in her novel *The Pearl of Orr's Island: a Story of the Coast of Maine* (1861).

Yet, in spite of the already mentioned economic, cultural and social decline, the richness of South Berwick's natural landscape was steady and, living among wooded hills, streams and the open country, Jewett grew fond of nature. In fact, Annie Fields described her as "a true lover of nature," "one accustomed to tender communings with woods and streams, with the garden and the bright air" (6). This love of nature appears to have inspired many of her works, and it is apparent in her descriptions of the New England landscape. One of the works in which we can see her inclination toward rural landscapes is *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. This collection of sketches was first published in serial form in the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the various stories were later on assembled in an only volume. Nevertheless, before the novel was published Jewett added some new chapters. In addition, in a 1910 edition of the work, two Dunnet Landing stories –"A Dunnet Shepherdess" and "William's Wedding"– were inserted before the last chapter, and in 1919 another such story –"The Queen's Twin"– was added at the end of the book. Yet, as Marco A. Portales argued in his article about the history of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, most critics agree that there was not a convincing reason for these additions. Therefore, even though my edition of the novel does include these three chapters, I will focus on the original version of the work, alluding incidentally and only when necessary to these later additions.

By the time it was published Jewett had already established her reputation as a writer. Yet, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* has ever since been considered Jewett's masterpiece for its evocative characterizations of the people and the landscape, the quality of its style and its capacity to render everyday life meaningful (Howard 2).

2.2. Jewett and New England Local Color[3]

[3] Literary critics Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse have argued that local color and regional literature are two independent genres, the former providing an ironic portrayal of rural life and characters, and the latter

Even though Jewett's work was praised by critics, it was most often deemed *minor*. An instance of this kind of review is the following one, in which the reviewer emphasizes the fact that the work can be seen as inconsequential:

> [T]he *little* volume comes to its quiet ending, leaving the impression that, suggestive and delightful as such books are, they cannot, save in rare instances, leave any deep impression. . . . These *delicate* sketches of life hold the same place in literature as do their counterparts in painting, but no artist can rest an enduring popularity on such *trifles* light as air. (Qtd. in Howard 2; emphasis added)

This mixture of praise and criticism was typical of the contemporary reviews of local color literature. Indeed, Jewett was well aware that her work did not share the status of other literary works which dealt with less familiar themes. In a letter addressed to her good friend Annie Fields –dated June 1885–, she tells her she has met some old friends, one of whom asked her to recommend him something good to read. He notes, "good books of stories [detective ones] . . . none of your lovesick kind" (*Letters* 27). But why was it considered to be of a lower quality?

There were three main reasons for that: because it was a predominantly female genre –most local colorists were women–, because it was set in a small place, and because it was concerned with everyday life, and most often with the world of women. For these reasons these writers were excluded from the canon of American literature of the 1920s. However, from the 1960s onwards the canon began to be challenged for its exclusions in terms of race,

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giving significance to rural life and voice to these characters, thus subverting the categories of center and margin. Yet, other critics, as is the case with June Howard –to whose stance I will adhere in this thesis–, have argued that this distinction is untenable, for Fetterley and Pryse's argument relies on an evaluative rather than analytic claim, that is, whether a work is considered local color or regionalist literature would depend on its effects upon the reader (Howard 24).

class, gender and sexuality (Howard 3), and ever since critics such as Josephine Donovan have revised Jewett's career within a tradition of women writers.

The notion of region as a subordinate space arose, as Raymond Williams has argued regarding the English novel, as a consequence of centralized cultural authority: "as a function of increasingly centralized states . . . 'region' came to take on its modern meaning of 'a subordinate area' " (229-30; qtd. in Howard 16). In addition, women writers such as Jewett or Mary Wilkins Freeman were portraying the New England region at a time when its population, financial prosperity, culture and political power were entering a relentless process of decline.

As for the fact that most local colorists were women, Perry D. Westbrook mentions in his work *Acres of Flint* (1951) three main reasons related to the context which could explain this. The first one is that back then men were far more interested in money-making than in the arts, while women were still excluded from business and industry, which relegated them to the domestic domain. The second one was that many men had died during the Civil War, and very often, those who survived suffered from 'postwar restlessness' and ended up moving to big cities or the West. The last reason Westbrook presents, migration, is closely related to the two previous ones. Due to the lack of economic opportunities in small towns, many people, especially men, took a chance in the West or in bigger industrial centers, thus leaving their homeplace to the care of women. Indeed, it seems natural that, since women were prevented from pursuing a professional career outside of the home, they would end up writing about the domestic domain and its surroundings, which was the world they knew best, although most often they did so not without including an implicit critique on the restrictive role they were assigned (Donovan, *New England*).

The New England local colorists portrayed a region in its decline combining an elegant style –a genteel imperative– and a seemingly transparent representation of the region. Jewett herself reserved a place for both accuracy and the imagination in her writing. In words of June Howard, "she accords places to both . . . an Arnoldian view of culture as 'the best that has been thought and said' and an uncompromising openness to everyday truth and common life" (19). For this reason, as Elise Miller has argued in her essay on realism and local color in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, the local colorists are said to belong to the long-standing tradition of literary realism. Literary critic Everett Carter has noted in his work *Howells and the Age of Realism* (1966) how William Dean Howells, as editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, advised contributors to write about people and places with which they were familiar, paying no attention to plot (118; qtd. in Donovan, *New England* 7). Jewett was aware of the impossibility of rendering life in a fully objective way, without selecting, organizing, or evaluating it, therefore she coined the expression *imaginative realism* to refer to her writing style (Donovan 9). Together with other women writers like her, she developed a tradition which differed from the sentimentalism which had dominated the literature written by and about women since the eighteenth century (Donovan 4). As Josephine Donovan argues in her work, these women "moved beyond a negative critique of reified male-identified customs and attitudes . . . [they] created a counter world of their own, a rural realm that existed on the margins of patriarchal society, a world that nourished strong, free women" in their writing (3).

Yet, New England local color was part of a "genteel literary culture" (Howard 9) that was highly dependent on Annie and James T. Fields' ideas. The latter was the literary expert of the publishing house Ticknor and Fields, while Ticknor was in charge of the business area. He knew that in order to create an American readership they had to determine cultural

authority and create an appropriate market. In words of Richard Brodhead, "Fields found a way to identify a certain portion of that writing as distinguished – as of elevated quality, as of premium cultural value; then to build a market for that writing on the basis of that distinction" (54-5; qtd. in Howard 10). Indeed, James T. Fields solidified this distinction both by printing those works which were most elevated, and by differentiating the production features of these volumes in order to make them appear more serious and distinguished. At the end of the 1850s Ticknor and Fields purchased the *Atlantic Monthly*, which served as well to confirm the authority of these works. Moreover, the Fieldses' home worked as a sort of institution in which the couple –and after James' death Annie– organized cultural and literary meetings. To this aim, the educational system was also key in the establishment of a series of New England local color works as national literature.

This was the system Jewett and the other local colorists joined by writing about the home and everyday life in rural New England. In spite of all the difficulties to gain recognition, these women formed a strong literary tradition that was still developing at the time when Jewett joined it. They combined successfully their participation in the masculine domain of the marketplace and a world of female kinship in which they supported each other. This latter was responsible for the literary influence they exerted upon one another, and it prompted the development of an affective bond among them. Now we know that they did not simply belong to a long-standing tradition of women realist writers, but that their work has influenced later women writers such as Edith Wharton, Willa Cather and Ellen Glasgow, among others (Donovan, *New England* 2).

3. Communion with Nature

There exists an undeniable bond between the inhabitants of Dunnet Landing and the environment in which they live, and with which they maintain an apparently harmonious relationship. Jewett provides the reader with a narrative that resembles the pictorial form of the pastoral –she herself makes reference to French painter Millet, who is best known for his depictions of rural life–. She creates an idealized portrayal of life in rural New England, sometimes overlooking the harshness of the weather or manual labor. But, what does this apparent withdrawal from the nation tell us about Sarah Orne Jewett, or about her characters in *Country*? Does this alleged withdrawal reflect Jewett's complete disengagement from the changes that were taking place at the time throughout the whole country, such as the process of industrialization and commercialization? Or does this withdrawal implicitly mark, precisely, the author's stance toward these changes? Do this village and its inhabitants work as a source of stability in a world that is being rapidly transformed? And, finally, can this work function as a unifying force in post-Civil War America, or does it, instead, reinforce divisions in terms of race, ethnicity, and class?

3.1. The Pastoral Trope

The pastoral has been a recurrent motif in the arts since the classical period. It has shaped ever since our understanding of nature, and therefore it is present in the work of many artists and scientists dealing with nature to the present day. For instance, in the late eighteenth century the Romantic poets criticized the destructive effects of the Industrial Revolution, and later on, in the second half of the twentieth century Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, one of the foundational works of ecocriticism which analyzes this theme with regards to the harmful practices of the agricultural industry of the time, draws from this theme as well.

Terry Gifford distinguishes in his book *Pastoral* (1999) three variations of this trope. It may refer to those literary works in which characters flee the frenzy of the city for a retreat in the countryside, a form which dates back to ancient Alexandria and which becomes a key theme in European poetry during the Renaissance (Qtd. in Garrard 33); it may apply to any literary work in which country and city are implicitly or explicitly opposed; and finally, it may refer to those works in which the hardships of rural life are passed over and labor and village life are idealized. In *Country*, the narrator is eager to help dig the potatoes for Mrs. Todd's chowder, she even compares potato- and gold-digging: "There is all the pleasure that one can have in gold-digging in finding one's hopes satisfied in the riches of a good hill of potatoes" (Jewett 44).

These three forms do not necessarily exclude each other, but in many works, as is the case with *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, all of them may converge. According to Gifford, the first form appeared before the world realized the imminence of an ecological crisis and provided the set of cultural assumptions and literary conventions that helped to construct natural landscapes in Europe and postcolonial America. The second one, which is a less specific form of pastoral, arose during the Romantic period, when the dichotomy between countryside and city became more apparent due to mass urbanization.[4] And finally, the last form emerged in the twentieth century when Marxist criticism gained prominence (Qtd. in Garrard 34). But, in this thesis, instead of apprehending these forms as if they referred to different types of pastoral works, I wish to emphasize that these are rather different characteristics that may apply to the pastoral depending on the perspective we adopt. In fact, these three pastoral forms correspond to three different approaches to the trope throughout

[4] The process of urbanization during the Hellenistic period resulted in the emergence of a new genre, the bucolic idyll, which provided an idealized portrayal of a rural landscape and which became one of the first known predecessors of the pastoral (Garrard 35).

history, namely during the classical period, during the Romanticism and during the twentieth century. Yet, as Garrard notes, there are two main themes that appear consistently throughout history: the spatial opposition between country and city, with their associated features, peacefulness and abundance, and hysteria, immorality and impersonality, respectively; and the temporal opposition past versus present, in which the past is infused with a sense of serenity and harmonious coexistence with nature, and the present is portrayed as fallen (35). At this respect, Raymond Williams noted in his work *The Country and the City* (1973) that while pastoral has always been permeated by nostalgia for a better, simpler past, different things held different values at different times, and what we now see as a virtue may have been considered a flaw at some other point (12; qtd. in Garrard 37). In general, pastoral has provided an unrealistic representation of social and environmental history with the aim of creating a locus for the feelings of loss and alienation from nature which would aggravate during the Industrial Revolution (Garrard 39). We could say, therefore, that Ken Hiltner was right when he concluded that, partly, the fact that we care about the environment has been constructed by artists and writers (xiv). He quotes John Muir to exemplify the interest in nature that aroused during the Modern Era,

> Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is necessity; that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life. (Qtd. in Hiltner xv).

Back then nature began to be widely viewed as both inviting and renewing, as people's natural home (xv).

It is also worth noting that, instead of developing an interest in nature for the sake of nature, pastoral has most often presented the natural world as serving to meet the needs of people or as responding to their feelings and emotions (Garrard 35-36). Many critics have argued, among them Lynn White Jr., that the present environmental crisis will not recede until we realize that there is a reason for the existence of nature independently of its function as a source of material and spiritual well-being for humans (10, 14; qtd. in Garrard 38).

3.2. The American Pastoral: The Pastoral in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*

The pastoral in America draws on the work of Henry David Thoreau and Thomas Jefferson's agrarianism, defined by Garrard as "a political ideology . . . that promoted a land-owning farming citizenry as a means of ensuring a healthy democracy" (49), what suggests that this kind of pastoral is more focused on our relationship with the land as a working place rather than a site of aesthetic value. Yet, the pastoral landscape is always to some extent constructed as a source of pleasure and fulfillment, even if it is presented also as a source of economic sustenance (Garrard 56).

As for the kind of setting we find in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, it resembles what Leo Marx called the "middle landscape" in his 1964 work *The Machine in the Garden*. This "middle landscape" is a place between the city and the wilderness. In Marx's words about the middle landscape in Virgil's *Eclogue I,* "[t]his ideal pasture has two vulnerable borders: one separates it from Rome, the other from the encroaching marshland. It is a place where Tityrus is spared the deprivations and anxieties associated with both the city and the wilderness" (22; qtd. in Garrard 37). That is to say, both the city and the wilderness are to be avoided, as none of them can provide people with all they need to lead a complete, fulfilling life.

Robin Magowan has analyzed in his article "Pastoral and the Art of Landscape in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*" the extent to which the art of this novel has been informed by pastoral concepts. According to Magowan, Jewett's work achieved balance and resolution thanks to the introduction of the pastoral form, which gives coherence to the different chapters which constitute it, this way turning these more or less independent pieces into a whole, united masterpiece. In Magowan's words, pastoral is "capable of gathering up the several, disparate elements of her craft and of welding them together in a new whole" (230). In addition, Magowan explores the connections between the pastoral of Jewett's 1896 book –a pictorial style– and the work of American impressionist Winslow Homer (24 February 1836 - 29 September 1910) and French painter Jean-François Millet (8 October 1814 - 20 January 1875), who were best known for their scenes of rural life during the nineteenth century. In fact, in a later Dunnet Landing story –"A Dunnet Shepherdess"–, the narrator makes a reference to Millet when she compares Esther Haight to a figure of Millet: Esther was "far away in the hill pasture with her great flock, like a figure of Millet's, high against the sky" (Jewett 121).[5]

Yet, the presence of some elements undermines the aforementioned pastoral characteristic that the region is harmonious and inclusive. For instance, during the Bowden reunion Mrs. Todd expresses her animosity towards some members of the family who, apparently, claim illegitimately their belonging to it. As Fetterley and Pryse have noted, the portrayal of Mrs. Todd's animosity as a temporary deviation represents the unwillingness of the narrator to

[5] The influence of Millet shows itself in a letter Jewett addressed to Mrs. Whitman during her stay in Martinsville in September 1895. She notes: "I sleep in a little back bedroom whose window gives on a lane and a stone wall and a potato field, where the figures of J. F. Millet work all day against a very un-French background of the pointed firs that belong to Maine, like the great ledges they are rooted in" (*Letters* 114).

accept discord as an element of this family and the region they belong to (238; qtd. in Dowdell 1).

In *Country* a woman writer returns from the city, probably Boston or New York, to a small coastal town in which she had already been some time before. She chooses this tranquil location to spend the summer both because she is trying to escape the bustle of city life, and because she is also searching for inspiration; she believes this experience will revitalize her imagination and creativity. With respect to the first idea, Garrard himself stated that the pastoral landscape has been apprehended as a source of stability in contrast to the ever-changing urban world: "At the root of pastoral is the idea of nature as a stable, enduring counterpoint to the disruptive energy and change of human societies" (56). Indeed, nature is presented as a sort of mirror reflecting an ideal correspondence between the person and the environment, as if the one complemented the other (Magowan 230-31). According to Magowan, William Blacket represents this ideal relationship of communion with nature, an ideal of "silence and complete sympathy" equalled by his mother, Mrs. Blackett (231). Moreover, it appears that he has a counterpoint in nature: ash trees. Mrs. Todd implies in her comment about ash trees that they resemble her brother: "They ain't got the resolution of other trees" (Jewett 84). Later on, Mrs. Todd's observation about the pointed firs assumes the significance of a compliment to Mrs. Blackett: "Every such tree has got its own livin' spring, there's folks made to match 'em" (Jewett 84).

It is apparent that the objects in *Country* are not there simply as stage props, or rather for their aesthetic value. Instead, they are telling, meaningful, they help characterize both the characters and the setting. In words of Elizabeth Ammons, "In these ways we come to see that objects — 'things' — do not exist as interesting texture, a nice travel book background

for ‘story,’ in Jewett’s narrative. They *are* story” (88). Ammons explores the presence of material culture and empire in Jewett’s novel in an article entitled “Material Culture, Empire, and Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs*.” According to Ammons, Jewett is a material culturalist, someone who reads and interprets objects, places, and rituals and who therefore creates a particular version of them which opposes other versions (82). Robert Blair St. George has defined material history as “a history more about daily routine than about exceptional deeds, more about common houses, fences, and fields than about country estates and Copley portraits” (3; qtd. in Howard 81). Ammons states that the aim of material history is “to offer a truthful and persuasive version of past life in a region as ordinarily experienced by ordinary inhabitants” (82). Objects, places, and rituals become, therefore, material texts that can be analyzed. She calls our attention to the artificial nature of the text we are *consuming*, which, like the gingerbread house in the Bowden Reunion, is an artistic version of a presumably real place and series of events (82). Namely, some of the most prominent material texts Jewett presents in *Country* are houses and ritual feasts.

Magowan also states that the pastoral very often expresses “man’s dream of a perfectly ordered, self-contained, civil existence” (231), as is the case with the narrator, who portrays Green Island as the epitome of wholeness. She says about Green Island that “[o]ne could not help wishing to be a citizen of such a complete and tiny continent and home of fisherfolk” (Jewett 40). Williams had already stated that pastoral was not merely nostalgic, but it could also be utopian and proleptic at the same time. These idealizations imply that a return to a *simpler* past when people and nature belonged to a continuum, instead of being separated or opposed, is the right way through which we can escape a chaotic present in which people are alienated from nature. In words of Williams, idealizations imply in their celebration “the

consciousness of the very different present from which the restoration will be a release" (18; qtd. in Garrard 37).

As for the lack of division between human and non-human nature, Elizabeth Ammons analyzes the harmonious inscription of Dunnet Landing's houses within the larger natural environment. As she notes in her article on material culture and empire in Jewett's masterpiece, these houses blend into, with their "smallness, woodenness, and clever adaptability to terrain," and stand out from the surrounding natural environment, they "punctuate it brightly with their whiteness against the dark pines" (83). This landscape represents both the social and the individual realms in Dunnet Landing, where each house is distinct and yet they make up a more or less homogeneous community with no divisions of class. Ammons analyzes the narrator's first description of the houses along the landing:

> the few houses . . . seemed to be securely wedged and tree-nailed in among the ledges by the Landing. These houses made the most of their seaward view, and there was a gayety and determined floweriness in their bits of garden ground; the small-paned high windows in the peaks of their steep gables were like knowing eyes that watched the harbor and the far sea-line beyond, or looked northward all along the shore and its background of spruces and balsam firs. (Jewett 1)

Through the description of the town and its landscape, the narrator is able to imply the values of its inhabitants. These houses suggest, with their adaptability to the terrain, that these people believe one should try to adapt to one's environment rather than try to subdue it. In addition, Ammons states that these dwellings remind us of the typical Yankee values of pragmatism, cautiousness –the watchful eyes–, good humor –the gardens–, and plainness (84). There is apparently no split between outside and interior spaces; for instance, we are

told that the scents from Mrs. Todd's garden enter the house freely, the breeze comes in, and "the low end-window of the house [is] laden with not only sweet-brier and sweet mary, but balm and sage and borage and mint, wormwood, and southernwood" (Jewett 3). The garden works as an extension of the house, with no division, and therefore Almira can come into and out as if these were two different rooms.

It is clear, then, that in *Country* both men and women downplay the distinction between inner and outer spaces. The division between nature outside of the houses and the very houses is somewhat blurred, i.e., they merge in a sort of continuum: houses harmonize with and extend to include the natural world. As Bailey puts it, "Mrs. Blackett's final gift to the narrator is the view from her bedroom window of 'field and sea and sky' which is 'the real home, the heart of the old house' " (291). It seems that Jewett's ideal home would be a house that merges with its surrounding natural environment (Bailey 291).

Mrs. Blackett's house is also described as being merged within nature. First, the narrator tells us that the house seems to have roots, as if it had grown out of the earth in that precise place: "It was one of the houses that seem firm-rooted in the ground, as if they were two-thirds below the surface, like icebergs" (Jewett 39). Then, we get to know that both the formal entrance and the kitchen entrance are surrounded by plants and flowers, the former with its "orderly vine," and the latter with a "mass of gay flowers and greenery, as if they had been swept together by some diligent garden broom in a tangled heap" (39). It seems that Mrs. Blackett's house is oriented towards the earth, with which it forms a sort of continuum. Yet, the narrator portrays a different type of nature when she describes Elijah Tilley's house. In this house the grass has grown too much, nature is not domesticated anymore and therefore it implies the abandonment of the house, the absence of visits from family or friends: "the

long grass grew close against the high stone step [of his front door], and a snowberry bush leaned over it, top-heavy with the weight of a morning glory vine that had managed to take what the fishermen might call a half hitch about the door-knob" (119-20). Here we see that wild nature clashes with the ideal of domesticated nature, for it lives on the fringes of humanity, while the latter is at the service of human beings or, at least, it harmonizes with their way of living. This shows the incompleteness of a solitary life that parts from the pastoral ideal of communion between the individual and the land. Still, the narrator interprets the flowers on the mantelpiece as a symbol of the man's wish not to be completely cut off. On the one hand, the flowers might be read as a tribute to her deceased wife, who made the house a livelier place with her presence; and, on the other, they may represent his willingness to receive guests at some point. What is clear is that he has not resigned himself to leading a life completely separated from society.

As Ammons has stated, the narrator manages to guide us until the end of the story, and we end up sharing her idea that "Dunnet is a wonderful, psychically recoverable, 'real' part of the American past that we need to go back to, at least periodically or in spirit, to reconnect with the essential mysterious healing values of matrifocal, preindustrial, rustic America" (89). Yet, this problem is inherent to the interpretation of any text. If we pay attention, the story itself offers a contradictory view on the validity and reliability of written texts. The schoolhouse chapter undermines the traditional Western assumptions about the authority of the written word and teachers (Ammons 90). Remember that the narrator's pen remains idle until she begins to experience life in Dunnet Landing. For this reason, we could say that this book argues the importance of learning about life directly from life (90). It is necessary that the narrator stops giving priority to written texts in order to learn. In words of Ammons,

> only when the narrator leaves the schoolhouse and Littlepage behind — only when she gets out from behind the desk, rebels against the teacher, and resolves instead to learn from what she sees and hears out of school — does she really put herself in the position of having something to teach. (91)

In general terms, Magowan associates pastoral with a "summer vision of life" which is even more valuable due to its ephemeral nature (230). Therefore, we could say that pastoral is an art which arises in perspective. Similarly, the narrator's portrayal of nature and village life as inspiring and renewing depends entirely on her perspective as an outsider, which is what ultimately gives things their significance. Indeed, as I mentioned before, the values associated with the pastoral landscape are cultural and politically constructed at a given time, rather than inherent to that place.

3.3. Regionalism, Imperialism and the Nation in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*

It seems that Dunnet Landing has got stuck in time, it is as if this place has been cut from the rest of the American world. Yet, this does not mean that there are no traces of it in the novel. Instead, we find a complex interweaving of both adscription to and rejection of dominant values, sometimes in relation to the changes that the postbellum nation-state was undergoing. In the following paragraphs I will try to explain, on the one hand, why some critics have stated that this village has lost its connection to the larger American world and, on the other, why other critics have defended that this connection has not been lost completely, but has been rather transformed. But first, what are the elements that suggest that this place has been cut from the American world?

In relation to Jewett's seeming withdrawal from the nation in *Country*, in this story houses are presented as the realm of women, which does not differ greatly from the nation's

construction of the domestic domain. Yet, what is new is that they are also the site of business and, in consequence, the source of economic well-being in the region (Ammons 84). For instance, Almira Todd's sources of livelihood are her business as the town's herbalist and the occasional rental of a room in her home. This lack of division between the home and the workplace was hard to sustain at the end of the nineteenth century, when a well-developed class system based on capitalism, with supervisors and workers, was already well established both in cities and small towns (84). In Dunnet Landing there are no "factories, warehouses, stores, other commercial buildings, multiple dwellings, mansions, and slums" (84). In words of Ammons, Dunnet Landing is "preindustrial, unusually free of corrosive class divisions, and remarkably untouched by violence, crime, or unsightly poverty" (84).

It is clear that in this sense *The Country of the Pointed Firs* withdraws from the nation and stands for a sort of counter world to urban, capitalist America. Yet, critics such as Coby Dowdell have developed a different reading of the relationship between region and nation in *Country*. Dowdell has pointed out that in Mrs. Blackett's sitting room the division between regional and national spaces is blurred, suffused; in his words, "[it] absorbs and recasts the national and the international as regional spaces" (10). The presence of both "pictures of national interest" and "landscapes of foreign order" suggests that the ones are analogous to the others, and thus deconstructs the division between center and margin. In the end we realize that region cannot be separated from nation. Consequently, the representation of region as an autonomous, self-contained unit, becomes almost impossible, and even more if the representation responds to the necessity of the nation to create, protect, and maintain regionalist literature as part of a process of national unification in the aftermath of the Civil War (Gleason 27). In words of Dowdell, there exists a "difficulty inherent in representing the

region as an autonomous space while ensuring fidelity to the nation's investment in consolidating, protecting, and perpetuating regionalism" (15).

In turn, Elizabeth Ammons has noted that the Bowden reunion both affirms and celebrates old traditional American values such as loyalty to the family, motherhood, and patriotism. The members of the Bowden family rejoice in their memories of an older, simpler America before the advent of industry, technology and mass urbanization (91-2). Yet, by celebrating the Bowden ancestry the ritual also celebrates the transplantation of Anglo-Norman culture from Europe to America (92). Thus, the reunion commemorates white imperialism, the colonization of Indian land by white people of English and Norman descent (92). There are several oblique references to imperialism throughout the novel, very often in the form of souvenirs from exotic places and colonies, such as the reference to the West Indian curiosities in Mrs. Begg's house, the drinking mugs from the island of Tobago –a British colony back then– in Mrs. Blackett's house, the coral pin, the quaint Indian basket, etc. It seems that the narrator situates this small town in the center of a vast empire (93). Ammons explains the significance of these objects in the following terms:

> Colonial artifacts in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* inscribe on an otherwise homogeneous material landscape the presence of obvious racial and ethnic differences that are successfully contained and therefore controlled by being totally surrounded by — taken into and reduced to minority status within — the dominant culture, which celebrates and affirms its white roots each year at the Bowden reunion. (93)

This reminds us of John Brooke's ideas on "collective ritual practices," since he argued that they serve for a group to deal with conflicts and division by putting the emphasis on those values the community shares (Qtd. in Ammons 94.) With regards to these collective

practices, Elizabeth Ammons states that "[t]he Bowden reunion is about racial purity and white cultural dominance" (96), it celebrates the Bowdens' Anglo-Norman ancestry. According to Ammons the ancientness and saintliness of this clan are reinforced through the use of various classical references throughout the work: the comparison of Mrs. Todd to Antigone (Jewett 49), or the comparison of the Bowdens to a group of ancient Greeks (100). But the family's Anglo-Norman heritage is also invoked in several occasions thus noting the ancientness of its line:

> We were no more a New England family celebrating its own existence and simple progress; we carried the tokens and inheritance of all such households from which this had descended, and were only the latest of our line. We possessed the instincts of a far, forgotten childhood; I found myself thinking that we ought to be carrying green branches and singing as we went. (100)

Then she goes on to identify the particular heritage of this family. She notes "the curiously French type of face that prevailed in this rustic company" (102); and she remarks that "it is the Norman Englishman, not the Saxon," who ventures into a new world (103). She dwells on the subject of ancestry and heritage, and imagines the past of this family: "So . . . their ancestors may have sat in the great hall of some old French house in the Middle Ages" (105). Ammons states that Dunnet Landing, as presented by the narrator, is built on the ruins of the Indian civilization, and houses are decorated with the trophies of empire. Therefore, even though these houses do articulate a vision of preindustrial, matrifocal harmony, health, and happiness, they also stand for white colonial settlement and dominance (97).

At this respect, Karen Oakes has affirmed that, most likely, Jewett was aware of the theories about cultural dominance and racial purity –white supremacy– in the aftermath of the

American Civil War and at the turn-of-the-century. In fact, she gives us a different reading of one of the members of the Bowden family, Mrs. Todd. She argues that Mrs. Todd's heritage is, metaphorically, mixed-race, because her herbal and medicinal knowledge comes from both her colonial ancestors and the Indians. In a later Dunnet Landing story, "The Foreigner," we even learn that she has been taught also by a French woman from the Caribbean colonies. This somehow corroborates Jennifer Bailey's appreciation that "Almira's wisdom . . . is based on the knowledge that a complete individual is one who maintains distinctiveness alongside a commitment to communal life" (286).

Even though *The Country of the Pointed Firs* might seem at first sight to represent an ascetic withdrawal from the nation, some critics have argued that, in fact, the development of a tradition of regionalist literature served to unify the nation by providing images of its peoples' seemingly common past. In this respect, critics such as Richard Brodhead and Amy Kaplan have defended that regionalist literature has helped to consolidate nationalist narratives. Kaplan notes that the readership of regionalist works, primarily middle-class city dwellers from Boston or New York, is "solidified as an imagined community by consuming images of rural 'others' as both a nostalgic point of origin and a measure of cosmopolitan development" (251; qtd. in Dowdell 3). Brodhead notes that literary regionalism from the second half of the nineteenth century functioned as publicity for the tourism from the cities thanks to the portrayal of the region as geographically and culturally distinct. The region is presented as a "self-contained unit," a "corrected or idealized version" of the industrialized America of the time (150-1; qtd. in Dowdell 3).

However, even though her fiction served national purposes, her work can still be considered to some extent to be disconnected from the America of the period. As Judith

Fetterley has noted in her article "Not in the Least American," Jewett is "unAmerican" not only in her themes, but in the narrative form to which she ascribes herself, the sketch. She chooses to write sketches, which bear a marginal status in comparison to more prestigious forms as the novel, but this gives her the freedom to write about a marginal place, and marginal characters, to write regionalist fiction (885). In addition, in words of Fetterley,

> regionalist fiction seeks to construct women as storyful rather than storyless and to connect having and telling stories to their [women's] sanity and survival. . . . In seeking to empower persons made silent or vacant through terror to tell stories which the dominant culture labels trivial, regionalism seeks to change our perspective and thus to destabilize the meaning of margin and center. (887)

Giving a voice and reading a group that had been traditionally silenced or marginalized undermines the opposition between margin and center and casts doubts on the promoters of those values and meanings (887).

Fetterley goes on to state that regionalist literature calls into question those hierarchies based on racial difference as well but, as I mentioned before, in spite of Mrs. Todd's metaphorically mixed-race heritage, *Country* celebrates racial purity and, as we can draw from Mrs. Todd's comments during the reunion, these people may not be as inclusive as the narrator seems to think. In fact, the narrator's position itself suggests that, although it may seem at first sight that she has achieved inclusion, she cannot escape her condition as an outsider. Even though she is eventually accepted by the community,[6] she cannot evade her duties as a writer, her role in the larger world of market exchange. As she states at the end of the novel, "I had only lived in Dunnet until the usual distractions and artifices of the world

[6] Robin Magowan interprets the coral pin Almira gives to the narrator as a token of her final acceptance (234).

were no longer in control" (Jewett 151). As Robin Magowan has stated, the narrator aims at achieving self-dissolution, anonymity, acceptance (234). She acknowledges that there is something unique in each of us, but it is precisely this common characteristic what unites humanity. She ends up going back to the city, apparently, her native environment. Yet, she expresses her ambivalence toward these two worlds when she says that she fears to feel like a foreigner in the world outside of Dunnet Landing.

Jewett herself felt this ambivalence. Although she moved to Boston to live with Annie Fields in 1880, she kept her family home in South Berwick. She, like the narrator, must achieve both distance and connection in order to write about Dunnet Landing (Sarah Way Sherman 204; qtd. in Dowdell 4).

4. Women and Community in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*

In this section I will analyze the reasons why the population of Dunnet Landing is constituted predominantly by women and the role they perform in it. In addition, I aim at explaining in which sense this fictitious world challenges the dominant constructs about gender roles, as well as the importance with which community life and empathy are infused as forms of life. Finally, I will also deal with the significance of friendship, something the author manifested in all her work and, specifically, in *Country*.

4.1. The Female World of Dunnet Landing

4.1.1. The Gender Implications of Pastoral

The gender implications of pastoral were first explored in *The Lay of the Land* (1984), a psycho-historical study by Annette Kolodny. In this work she states that during the years of settlement America was associated with a feminine, mother-like figure who had the power to

comfort and help settlers relieve the stress caused by life in Europe. In her words, "the move to America was experienced as regression from the cares of adult life and a return to the primal warmth of womb or breast in a feminine landscape" (Qtd. in Garrard 51). Garrard further develops this topic, and he argues that this feminine landscape was the site of Old World fantasies about plenitude and fulfillment, even though its interpretation might be somewhat ambiguous. First, "as a nurturing maternal presence, the land could be the object of puerile but essentially harmless regressive fantasies," and second, "as the (desirable) Other of a self-consciously virile frontier society it needed to be worked out, tamed" (51). Similarly, Louise Westling argues in her work *The Green Breast of the New World* (1996) that Emerson and Thoreau helped to consolidate the "imperialist nostalgia" that had been traditionally at the basis of the American pastoral. Westling defined this nostalgia as "a sentimental masculine gaze at a feminized landscape and its creatures that masked the conquest and destruction of the 'wild' continent" (Qtd. in Garrard 53).

A racial dimension adds up to this inequality in gender associations. As Garrard notes, "Indians have historically been reduced to a mere feature in the pastoral landscape," while for African Americans pastoral is a reminder of the trauma caused by plantation slavery and lynchings in rural areas (54). It is clear then, that the meaning and connotations of pastoral depend essentially on the perspective of the viewer, and what for a white middle-class readership might be a sort of *locus amoenus* for other groups might be the site of violence and abuse. In this respect, in *Country* we see that Indians are attributed all the stereotypical features perpetuated by white colonists. This imperialistic conception inspires the common stereotypes held by white people about the Indians that we can observe in the story when talking about Shell-heap Island: the Indians are said to be lazy, cruel, slippery, and uncivilized, and they are treated as foreigners. In fact, in *Country*, this clichéd

characterization, and the link which is established between the Indians and Shell-heap Island confirms the extent of Joanna's self-imposed exile, i.e., how much she has detached herself from the ideal community of Dunnet Landing.

4.1.2. The Socioeconomic Context

As for the fact that most inhabitants in Dunnet Landing are women, Bailey argues that this could to some extent be explained by the socioeconomic context of the geographical area in this period (284). In words of Bailey, "[s]he [Jewett] was inspired by the circumstances of her childhood and upbringing to dramatize a world in which women are naturally dominant" not only numerically, but in terms of social position as well (285). In the past, male New England had been the provincial utopia of Emerson and Thoreau: the centre of a great shipping trade and a lucrative textile industry, it had been a thriving cultural and commercial world, where writing gave women a voice (284). Yet, at the time when Jewett became a consolidated writer, rural New England was suffering an economic recession caused among other reasons by the infertility of the soil and the effects of the harsh climate on crops, which led to the decline of the farming industry. Moreover, other regions were then thriving on the wheat market and the country increased the importation of wool, which caused rural exodus and, consequently, the steady decay of social, cultural and economic life in New England (Westbrook 4-5). But there were other reasons for this decline, according to Perry D. Westbrook: on the one hand, many soldiers, "having been struck with postwar restlessness and the lure of easy money in the West and in the cities" did not go back to their birthplace in the countryside (5); and, on the other, the seafaring industry had entered a process of steady decay as well that had began with the English blockade (1812-15), and had worsened due to the loss of the whale fishery, the expansion of the railroad, the construction of bigger ports

and the obsolescence of the sailing vessel (7). All this accounts for the absence of working-age men in Dunnet Landing, which is instead a community run by women in which women's labor remains outside of the marketplace. In words of Westbrook, New England women became "custodians of a village culture," the guardians of an endangered way of life (8).

As Thomas Strychacz pointed out in his article "The Kitchen Economics of Sarah Orne Jewett," several second-wave feminist critics have interpreted Jewett's fictional world as a "matriarchal community" that contrasts with "the urban, upper class, capitalist, industrial, male-dominated civilization" at the turn of the century (Donovan, *New England* 56), since she draws a link between women's world and community driven societies. Among those critics is Josephine Donovan, who argues that this "precapitalist, preindustrial matriarchal community" is characteristic of New England local color, and that women writers who belonged to that genre saw the turn of mainstream America as a threat to their freedom and to the survival of "the natural, rural world they loved so well, and which was their refuge" (56). In this respect, Fetterley and Pryse talk about the counter hegemonic possibilities of female literary regionalism, which is achieved through the trope of "decenteredness." According to them, Jewett writes "out of place," meaning "a socioeconomic realm dominated by white men and subject to their ideologies of nation, property, and power" (Qtd. in Strychacz 54). Similarly, Strychacz reads Dunnet Landing as a community whose members make a living outside of the marketplace in a seemingly preindustrial, precapitalist economy.

Fetterley and Pryse and Sandilands agree that Mrs. Blackett's kitchen is not only the basic metaphor of the matrifocal family, but it is first of all "a site of challenge to discourses of nationhood and to rationalized attitudes toward the environment" (54). In a way, it is a place

disconnected from ownership, for it lacks the exchange relations that rule the urban marketplace (Strychacz 54). The feasts in Green Island and during the Bowden reunion contrast with the harsh economic reality of the years of the economic depression (1893-1896). For instance, in Green Island neither money nor alienated labor is required to prepare a meal that seeks to be complete (54). Green Island seems to be untouched by the material and cultural conditions at a moment when the "cry of distress is heard on every hand; business is paralyzed; commerce is at a standstill; riots and strikes prevail throughout the land" (Harvey 3; qtd. in Strychacz 54). By contrast, in *Country* women's labor seems to operate outside of capitalist relations. In words of Nancy Glazener, "exchange relations are bypassed or stalled" (221; qtd. in Strychacz 55). This way, Jewett's 'utopias' remind us of the tradition of Jeffersonian agrarianism: "economic autonomy, the production of useful goods, creation of a virtuous, independent, but community-minded republican citizenry" (Strychacz 55), something like a residual archaic world. Indeed, in this idealized space citizens are the manufacturers of many of their goods, e.g., women sew their own clothes, they grow and fish their own food, they even produce their own remedies. More than many other, Dunnet Landing is an independent community.

In addition, critics such as Harvey, Kaplan, Donaldson or Glazener have argued that Jewett's communities are unrealistically unified and they are "riddled with unexamined assumptions about white supremacy and upper-class noblesse oblige and preoccupation with Anglo-American (or Anglo-Norman) privilege" (Strychacz 54-5), and the "emergent corporate and consumer capitalism, class warfare and mass immigration" are left out of Jewett's fictional towns. For this reason some critics argue that Jewett promotes "deceptively simple accounts of cohesive small New England village life" (55). She is criticized for producing an idealized portrait of her region, dismissing this way the reality of a country split

by competing groups, values, and class and economic concerns, even though we acknowledge that this idealization of rural life had also the power to provide the "solace of continuity and cultural stability" to urban elites at a time when they were losing their cultural authority in rapidly developing cities (Donaldson 43; qtd. in Strychacz 56).

4.1.3. The *Femina Economica* in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*

Gary Snyder points at the importance of community values or shared responsibility for taking care of the environment in every place. He raises the question of the commons, "the contract a people make with their local natural system" (73), and which was the prevailing system in village economies of Europe and England during the Middle Ages (73). It was conceived as a sort of larger being (76), "a level of organization of human society that includes the nonhuman," "a step toward integrating ecology with economy" (76). Snyder foredooms that

> [e]ventually our complicated industrial capitalist / socialist mixes will bring down much of the living system that supports us. And (...) the loss of a local commons heralds the end of self-sufficiency and signals the doom of the vernacular culture of the region. (76)

In *Country*, there seems to be an implicit treaty between human activity and the resources the land provides. As Strychacz has pointed out, for nature to 'serve' everybody the basket can't be laden beyond its capacity, and its weight is much easier to carry if shared. Strychacz uses Jewett's image of Mrs. Todd's boat to illustrate how a more equitable distribution will facilitate the development of a country: "like Mrs. Todd's boat, fully laden but afloat because of a careful distribution of weight, the ship of state requires all stakeholders in the American economy to learn how to distribute resources more equitably if it is to sail on" (63-4). In a similar vein, Patrick D. Murphy states in his work *Ecocritical Explorations in Literary and*

Cultural Studies that ecological understanding is essentially grounded in interdependence and mutual aid, rather than self-reliance (20).

Strychacz also argues that Jewett bases the events of the excursion to Green Island on various theories of political economic thought. She shows us "how a healthy polity might organize a productive distribution of resources and wealth," thus "challenging the theory of economy that's based on the figure of the *homo economicus*," which is ruled by "natural and universal laws about self-interest, competitiveness, the accumulation of capital and secure property rights" (56). She challenges society's belief in this man of infinite desires (56). Opposing this view is Green Island's economic and productive 'polity,' which privileges Thomas More's theory of the 'moderate sum' (56). The narrator and Mrs. Todd's harvesting of potatoes calls on late nineteenth-century discourses about gold as an immutable locus of value, thus implying the ever stable value of the riches of the land (56). Jewett presents the image of the *femina economica*, that

> suggests a capacity to renew the logic that humans faced with the fact of scarce resources act in predictable ways, make rational decisions, and obey utility functions, while contesting the presumption of mainstream economics that rational economic behavior manifests in self-interest, market exchange, and a desire for profit. (Strychacz 57)

In potato digging they recall More's *Utopia* also because they seek sufficiency rather than frugality; restraint doesn't allow them to fill the bucket more than possible, since this would lead to a too heavy basket and, in the long run, to a meager supply (59). This raises questions about the source of economic well-being in a small-scale commonwealth in which production is based on the logic of sustainability and mutual help (58-9). In short, Jewett promotes a

"rational husbandry of land and resources conjoined with the advantages of equitable distribution" (60). Therefore land is portrayed as serving human beings, but with some limits.

4.2. The Individual and the Community in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*

In *Country* Jewett developed a new way of telling the experience of her protagonist. As Elizabeth Ammons has argued, Jewett 'weaves' two patterns that are interrelated: on the one hand, there is a linear pattern in which the narrator goes from "solitary absorption" to "an understanding of and participation in the community" (Qtd. in Howard 21); on the other hand, she develops a radial, pattern-like network as the narrator strikes up several friendships with the various inhabitants of Dunnet Landing. In this sense, *Country* resembles what Sandra Zagarell has called the "narrative of community," which she differentiates for being a predominantly female production, as well as for showing a clear preference for what she describes as an "episodically structured portrait of daily collective life" and for giving "literary expression to a community they [the authors] imagine to have characterized the preindustrial era" (Qtd. in Howard 21). Marcia McClintock Folsom has also studied this trait of Jewett's style, which she explains as the "interweaving of narration and dialogue" (Qtd. in Howard 21-2). Similarly, in his essay "Withdrawing from the nation," Coby Dowdell analyzes the structure of the story as a "pattern of withdrawals" in which the narrator retreats to the fringes of community in a recurrent manner (2), that is, the author alternates stories about communal life with stories about Dunnet Landing's loners.

There are throughout *Country* several characters whom Bailey describes as pathetic or incomplete individuals because they are out of the community. Captain Littlepage is one of the loners who inhabit this small town. He laments the degeneration of Dunnet Landing in recent years since the decline of the shipping trade. For him "the world were a great mistake

and he had nobody with whom to speak his own language or find companionship" (Jewett 80). In the Schoolhouse chapter, he complains that Dunnet Landing is "full of loafers now . . . There's no large-minded way of thinking now: the worst have got to be best and rule everything; we're all turned upside down and going back year by year" (25-6). As we can draw from this passage, he values a past when the New England farmer was also a travelled mariner, who would treasure in his house relics from many places abroad (Westbrook 6). He is moved by the terrible loss of dignity, pride, and masculine assertiveness when he recounts the story of the shipwreck, which he values especially because it comprises the conventional male terms of a challenging and adventurous occupation (Bailey 287). Captain Littlepage was not an exception, and his position was shared by many New Englanders who grieved the passing of a way of life. Stowe wrote the following when reflecting on one of those coastal towns:

> A ship-building, a ship-sailing community has an unconscious poetry ever underlying its existence. Exotic ideas from foreign lands relieve the trite monotony of life; the ship-owner lives in communion with the whole world, and is less likely to fall into the petty commonplaces that infest the routine of inland life. (291)

Littlepage is so convinced that the past was far better than the present that he has been unable to move on. Like him, William Blackett, Elijah Tilley and Santin Bowden cling to the past to such an extent that this diminishes their social contact in the present and leads them to a life of solitude (Bailey 287). In words of Bailey, "they have allowed a fading past to drain their present lives of substance, purpose or form" (287), while the women, like the pointed firs, are an ever present symbol of constancy (287). It is the men in Dunnet Landing who have been

unable to value everyday life in a small town, who have disregarded the possibility of communion with its other inhabitants.

By contrast, the character of Mrs. Blackett represents the opposite pole to Dunnet Landing's loners, as if she stood for their counter-model. She is the epitome of selflessness and self-abnegation. She subordinates her desires in favor of other people's desires and needs. Individual and community merge in her. Indeed, when the narrator visits her in Green Island, the front room is unlocked, and she is welcomed into the most social room in the house. The narrator describes the place as follows:

> 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. Afternoon visits and evening festivals must be few in such a bleak situation at certain seasons of the year, but Mrs. Blackett was of those who do not live to themselves, and who have long since passed the line that divides mere self-concern from a valued share in whatever Society can give and take. (Jewett 42)

Dowdell reads these details as signifying the wholeness of Mrs. Blackett's life. Indeed, this description and the representation of Elijah Tilley's house contrast starkly. While the former is inviting and welcoming, the latter shows the extent of his inhabitant's solitude. His front door, the formal entrance to the house, is barricaded with grass, and inside the dining room is locked, which makes clear that it has fallen into disuse. In contrast, Green Island can be regarded as a whole, however small, continent that incorporates communities in land through Mrs. Blackett (Dowdell 288). At the end of her stay, the narrator herself becomes aware of the possibility of human bonds across space: "one revelation after another was made of the constant interest and intercourse that had linked the far island and these scattered farms into a

golden chain of love and dependence" (Jewett 82). Meanwhile, Elijah Tilley's house shows the lack of interaction between his only inhabitant and the outside world. As Donovan has argued, it seems that transcendence provided by the community is perhaps the most significant in the work ("A Woman's Vision of Transcendence: A New Interpretation of the Works of Sarah Orne Jewett," *New England* 5).

Following this dichotomy between community and isolation, Jewett develops two different ways of interpreting the story of Poor Joanna. The first interpretation sees the retelling of the story by the other inhabitants of Dunnet Landing as a communal act seeking to affirm those values Joanna rejects, not taking into account the perspective of the woman seeking to affirm her right to choose (Dowdell 7). The second one, which is rather associated with the narrator, interprets the discourse of the villagers as "a way of keeping Joanna, the one driven out, connected in some way to her community" (7). This second interpretation approaches Joanna's act as her exercise of her right to decide over her own life and destiny, i.e., as an attempt at creating a new, independent way of living rather than a "misguided struggle" (8). Jennifer Bailey's reading of the story of Poor Joanna resembles this latter, as she sees the story of this character as a tale of freely chosen self-denial (288).

In this regard, Dowdell affirms that in *Country* the division between individual and community is blurred and, as we have seen, the narrator herself oscillates between these two 'poles.' This way, while proximity is necessary in order to write about the community of Dunnet Landing, the narrator retreats several times to the margins of this community, and the culmination of this distancing from the town takes place in the chapter about her pilgrimage to Shell-heap Island (12). In this chapter, once again, the division between individual and community is blurred, since the narrator suggests that the traffic of pilgrims between inland

towns and the island links the two worlds (12). In words of Dowdell, "withdrawal from the region is a journey toward a new kind of collective association" (13), that is, the narrator exposes the universality of Joanna's plight (14). In her view, Joanna's life has both solitude and society (Bailey 290). She gives us a universalized moral insight acknowledging once again that it is possible to draw links across time and space:

> In the life of each of us, I said to myself, there is a place remote and islanded, and given to endless regret or secret happiness; we are each the uncompanioned hermit and recluse of an hour or a day; we understand our fellows of the cell to whatever age of history they may belong. (Jewett 75)

Eventually, the coral pin Mrs. Todd gives to the narrator confirms the identification between her and Joanna (Bailey 290). She herself has been oscillating between inclusion and exclusion, "[a]s a visitor, she is accepted by the community, but as a controlling narrator, she is never part of it" (290). In the end, the 'visitor' vanishes and the 'outsider' comes back; the narrator has to leave the peace and simplicity of life in a small town and return to an outer world in which she fears she will feel like a foreigner.

The final image of community in the work takes place during the Bowden Reunion, in which the Bowden family gather to celebrate their lineage. Soon after that event the narrator has to go back to her life in the city, where she fears she will now feel as a foreigner. Yet, this summer stay has been transcendent, for the memory of it will comfort her no matter when or where she is. In words of Donovan, "the world that the narrator has been part of for that summer is one of a community that transcends the passage of human time and the frailty of human bonds" (*New England* 111).

4.2.1. The Role of Empathy in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*

Another feature Marcia McClintock Folsom identifies as being key to Jewett's method is empathy. As she states when talking about the narrator and Mrs. Todd in her article about Jewett's style in *Country*: "Different in their knowledge of Dunnet Landing, the two women are alike in their impulse to see into and beyond casual conversation, gesture, and expression, or details of houses, weather, and landscape, to identify the larger human significance of each small outer sign" (Qtd. in Howard 22). Indeed, we also see the narrator advocate the importance of empathy when she reflects on Mrs. Blackett, about whom she says: "Tact is after all a kind of mind-reading, and my hostess held the golden gift. Sympathy is of the mind as well as the heart" (Jewett 43). We could say that both she and the characters she depicts are deeply empathetic. According to Annie Fields in her Preface to the author's letters, "Miss Jewett wrote of the people who grew out of the soil and the life of the country near her heart, not about exceptional individuals at war with their environment" (10). As has been mentioned before, Jewett wrote about the people who try to understand their environment and who try to adapt to it rather than simply subdue it to their needs.

Indeed, Bailey stated that it is apparent that in Jewett's work and life few things, if any, had the moral and spiritual value equal to a loving understanding between women (285). Similarly, Annie Fields points out that "The young writer of these Deephaven sketches was possessed by a dark fear that townspeople and country people would never understand one another" (7-8). In this respect, Willa Cather emphasizes in her Preface to the volume *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories* the key role of empathy as one of the required traits to write a noble and enduring piece, something she attributes to Jewett. In her words, "[i]f he [the artist] achieves anything noble, anything enduring, it must be by giving himself

absolutely to his material. And this gift of sympathy is his great gift; is the fine thing in him that alone can make his work fine" (9).

We may be familiarized with the American cliché, "as American as motherhood and apple pie," but reading or listening to the story of mothers was very rare back then in American literature (Fetterley 893). In her essay, Fetterley first introduces us to Stowe's short story "The Pearl of Orr's Island,"[7] in which a boy and a girl called Moses and Mara grow up together in New England at the beginning of the nineteenth-century. Fetterley examines the reasons why Moses considers Mara inferior and treats her with contempt, and she identifies empathy as one of those qualities that taint Mara for life (890). In addition, she mentions as well the case of Tom Sawyer, whom she addresses as "the American boy who can do no wrong in the nation's eyes, despite the cries of tormented cats and aunts" (890). Yet, according to Fetterley, the dismantling of these constructs begins with empathy (889), however unAmerican empathy might be. At this respect, Fetterley points out, Jewett is unAmerican, since she presents women as storyful, thus nullifying the assumption that women are passive and have nothing to say (880).[8] Moreover, Jewett also challenges the notion of women as rivals for the attention of men typical of Western literature, and presents them as essentially empathetic toward each other and toward men.

In this sense, it is evident that friendship was one of the pillars of the life of the author, and her acquaintances seemed to be aware of this. Annie Fields wrote about Jewett that "[s]he was no recluse, and loved her world of friends and was a brave spirit among them; using herself to the top of her bent in spite of trammelings of ill health" (6), and that her letters

[7] Sarah Orne Jewett acknowledged this story, which she had read in her youth, was a source of inspiration for her later work (Donovan, *Sarah Orne Jewett* 8).
[8] As Edwin Ardener has pointed out, women have historically constituted a "muted group, the boundaries of whose culture and reality overlap, but are not wholly contained by, the dominant (male) group" (Qtd. in Bailey 283-284).

show, above all, the power that lies in friendship to support both the giver and the receiver (11). Similarly, Josephine Donovan comments in her book on Sarah Orne Jewett that late in life she acknowledged how much her circle of friends had meant to her, for friends give us transcendent moments which give meaning to our daily life and encourage us to carry on. In fact, much of Jewett's literary work –including *The Country of the Pointed Firs*–, as all great fiction, deals with those moments in which characters rise above the monotony of their everyday life. Jewett's model for such transcendence was her circle of friendships and in much of her writing, as in her life, this kind of bond has transcending powers (15).

4.2.2. The State and the Region in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*

Amy Kaplan comments on the role of empathy to understand a literary form that "dramatizes and itself enacts connections between locations in a centralizing political and cultural economy" (Qtd. in Howard 25). As I mentioned before, Jewett's concern with communication and interconnectedness is apparent throughout her work. She was able to infuse her work with both a vivid sense of locality and a strong sense of interconnectedness (Howard 26-7). According to June Howard, instead of being mutually exclusive, both isolation and interconnectedness must be achieved (27), and she relates this idea to one of the constitutive traits of modernity according to Anthony Giddens, who argues that people must interact with other people both inside and outside their community. In a world that is increasingly globalized, people must get involved with other locals and, at the same time, they must interact with others across distance thus developing a network of global connections (Jay Martin; qtd. in Howard 26).

In *Country*, when the narrator talks about the "golden chain of love and dependence" (Jewett 82), she affirms the possibility of human bonds across time and space (Howard 28).

As Jennifer Bailey has put it, "[t]he real and ideal landscapes of Mrs. Blackett, Almira and Joanna, that reach effortlessly from the present to the distant past, are islands geographically removed from and yet emotionally linked to the mainland and the community" (290). Jewett aimed at depicting as faithfully as possible the mind and nature of her native land, very often advocating the importance of community and interconnectedness. This way, in an excerpt from "A Mournful Villager," she expresses her concern for the loss that derives from isolation: "People do not know what they lose when they make way with the reserve, the separateness, the sanctity of the front yard of their grand-mothers […] [W]e Americans had better build more fences than take any away from our lives" (127; qtd. in Howard 25). Here we see how the narrator criticizes this American tendency towards individualism. However, paradoxically, as Jay Martin has noted, it looks like Jewett built a "fictive fence" around her own birthplace (Qtd. in Howard 25), something Susan Gillman noted as well, since this place seems to be different from the rest of the United States at that time (Qtd. in Howard 25). Nevertheless, a deeper analysis may show that actually, the line that divides centre and margin might be blurred in *Country*, since both centre and margin could be regarded as region, as the pieces that conform the whole puzzle that is America, or even the world. It depends on the perspective one adopts. Gary Snyder acknowledges this quilt-like nature of the world in his essay "The Place, the Region, and the Commons," in which he affirms, "A place on earth is a mosaic within larger mosaics—the land is all small places, all precise tiny realms replicating larger and smaller patterns" (71).

Even the literary form with which Jewett works is defined by being subordinate to national culture but, while adopting this form, she infuses her work with a radical rejection of the subordinate position of region, thus destabilizing the validity of the hierarchy. It looks like, as Howard has pointed out, the notion of place arises from each individual's consciousness

rather than any social hierarchy (28-9). Indeed, in her short story "A Late Dinner," Jewett writes: "One never hears much about Brookton when one is away from it, but, for all that, life is as important and exciting there as it is anywhere" (Qtd. in Howard 29). Here, Jewett not only affirms the inherent value of region, but the intrinsic value of ordinary life (Charles Taylor; qtd. in Howard 29).

5. Conclusion

I began this thesis by contextualizing *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and Sarah Orne Jewett, a writer whose work has been traditionally deemed minor. This critique responded to the prejudices of the time. On the one hand her work belonged to a 'minor' genre, the literary sketch. And, on the other hand, she was a woman writer talking about women and everyday life in small rural areas. For these reasons her work was never considered great literature, and reviews at the time were very often a mixture of praise and scorn (Rohloff 33).

After that I also delve on the significance of communion with nature in *Country* and on the role of the pastoral as a theme. In this novel communion with nature, together with communion with other people, is presented as one of the most transcendent experiences in life. Indeed, in order to have a complete, whole life, communion must be achieved both with one's surroundings and with other people. At this respect, Dunnet Landing is an example of a small, cohesive community that lives harmoniously within their natural landscape.

This small town is depicted as a rural 'island' that stands outside of capitalist relations and the marketplace, and instead is formed by an independent, landowning community of craftsmen, farmers and fishermen. They cultivate but do not exploit the land, and that seems to be key for their survival. The land serves man but with some limits, so that it can regenerate itself. Jewett seems to draw from the tradition of Jeffersonian agrarianism, which

advocated the moral benefits of a social and political system based on political decentralization combined with widespread land ownership and farming. This kind of lifestyle would allow people to develop strong bonds both with other citizens and with the land. Yet, this way of living is endangered, we cannot forget that Dunnet Landing has an aging population, i.e., there are no young people to substitute the older generations, and as a consequence this community has its days numbered.[9]

Subsequently, I delve on the relationship between gender and nature in *Country*, and what I found out is that, while nature can be seen as a nurturing, maternal presence, the key to keep a healthy, sustainable relationship with it is empathy, a 'golden gift' held by the women of this community. Empathy is presented as the basis of a sustainable living; caring and sharing are two things that belong to this community and could prevent an ecological crisis.[10] In relation to this ethical model, this society recalls More's *Utopia* for these people seek sufficiency rather than austerity, as well as the figure of the *femina economica*, who is confronted with its 'antithesis' the *economic man*. Community life is also infused with much significance in this work, for the survival of this community depends on the fair, equitable sharing of the land they inhabit. Similarly, ecocritics such as Douglas A. Vakoch has argued in his work *Feminist Ecocriticism* the importance of relationality to create and promote egalitarian alternatives to Western society (6).

It is true that *Country* advocates the intrinsic value of region, of everyday life, of the rural world and its inhabitants -especially female. Yet, more recent analysis of this work cast

[9] For a deeper insight into New England's demographic decline in the second half of the nineteenth century, see Holly Jackson's article " "So We Die before Our Own Eyes": Willful Sterility in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*."

[10] Similarly, ecocritics such as Marti Kheel and Patrick D. Murphy have advocated the importance of empathy in order to care and respect not only other individual beings, but larger ecological processes (Kheel 208; Murphy, *Transversal Ecocritical Praxis* 11).

doubts on this apparent withdrawal from the nation. While Jewett advocates the value of region, her writing seems to respond to the needs of an increasingly centralized state. In the aftermath of the American Civil War, the United States sought to unite its population by promoting images of its people's seemingly common past, tracing back to the days of Anglo-Norman settlement in the east coast. Apparently, the protagonists of this story are of Anglo-Norman descent, and the narrator praises the bravery of those who came to the 'New' World with the noble purpose of achieving freedom. The narrator praises the racial purity of the Bowden family. Yet, she excludes racial difference from this community. Indeed, the only reference to racial difference appears when she talks about Shell-heap Island, for it had been inhabited by Indians in the past, to whom she ascribes the traditional stereotypes perpetuated by white colonialists.

As for what future research could be made on *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, while working on this thesis I came upon some ideas that could be further developed. First, it would be interesting to analyze the connection between the politics of land-ownership and enclosure in relation to nature in this work.[11] Another path could be to study Jewett's work in light of Donna Haraway's notion of "Cyborg writing." Is nature marked as non-innocent in *Country*? Does this collection of sketches celebrate the desire for communion with nature while unveiling the myth of unity? Does Jewett call attention to the cultural artificiality of our position with regard to the natural world?[12] Finally, one could also focus on the 'ironies' within this work, i.e., the conflicting ideas present in this collection like, for instance, the dismantling of gender constructs and support of class and ethnic hierarchies.[13]

[11] John Lucas explored this relationship in the works of John Clare and George Crabbe (Kerridge; in Kerridge and Sammells 9).
[12] Gretchen Legler explores Haraway's notion of "Cyborg writing" in Kerridge and Sammells' *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature* (73).
[13] Jeffrey A. Lockwood develops this theme in his essay "Ecofeminism: The Ironic Philosophy" (In Vakoch 123).

In conclusion, what is clear is that, in spite of it serving the purpose of national unification, and however non inclusive it may be –with its praise for white Anglo-Norman ancestry, and its lack of class division and difference– *The Country of the Pointed Firs* has meant a step forward in the advancement of women toward equal rights and it provided early environmentalists with a life model that emphasizes the role of empathy and which could serve as an example of a sustainable living.

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