

CAPTAIN LITTLEPAGE AND THE NARRATOR

IN

THE COUNTRY OF THE POINTED FIRS

by

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B. A., Kansas State University, 1977

A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

Manhattan, Kansas

1982

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to my major professor, Steve Heller, whose steady reassurance and encouragement contributed so much to my confidence during the final semesters of work on this degree. I also thank him for his helpful comments and sensible suggestions concerning the Master's Report itself.

I am grateful to the other members of my graduate committee, Mary W. Schneider and Paul McCarthy, for their help in shaping and revising this Report.

My parents, Dr. and Mrs. Donald Peik, have always encouraged me in my work, and deserve the thanks of a daughter who has consistently found her own goals championed at home, and supported across the miles.

To my husband, Mory, and daughter, Rosaly, I owe a debt which can hardly be repaid. Their love, patience, enthusiasm, and unflagging faith in my abilities have made all my work on this degree possible. Mory and Rosy continue to inspire and sustain me in everything that I do. This Report is dedicated to them.

Willa Cather prefaced her edition of The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett with words of heartfelt admiration: "If I were asked to name three American books which have the possibility of a long, long life, I would say at once, The Scarlet Letter, Huckleberry Finn, and The Country of the Pointed Firs. I can think of no others which confront time and change so serenely."¹ Jewett's Country of the Pointed Firs has indeed found a lasting place among American letters; over the years a number of critics have come to regard it as a minor masterpiece. But is the story which Country tells really one of striking tranquility in the face of change? Many readers, lulled by the book's delicate style and soothing tone, have thought so. Yet beneath the unruffled surface of her story, Jewett reveals a somewhat darker truth; that inner conflict and real frustration often accompany the decision to meet and be part of changing times. Ultimately, accepting one's place in the course of things is satisfying because change is, after all, in accordance with the rules of nature; to defy time by clinging to what is past only increases one's sense of being out of step with the universe.

The Country of the Pointed Firs is structured upon a number of loosely connected episodes or sketches; it has no obvious plot, as most novels do. This prevents many readers from recognizing that there is indeed a central conflict going on in the course of this work: the narrator must try to reconcile her attraction to the past with the claims which the present-day world, that which is outside of Dunnet Landing, makes upon her. The "episodes" which she details in her record of Dunnet help to reveal her increasing

awareness of the two-fold responsibility she feels she must accept, an appreciation for days gone by which translates into active dedication to the years ahead. One episode in particular focuses for us that uneasiness with change which the narrator is concerned with resolving throughout the book--this is the encounter with Captain Littlepage. Both the captain's personal predicament and his story of the mysterious "country of the pointed firs" discovered by Gaffett help to define the narrator's reaction to Dunnet Landing, and her rightful place in relation to it.

Jewett criticism regarding Captain Littlepage's role in this story is divided into two general camps. Neither has sufficiently examined the full importance of the Littlepage encounter to our understanding of Country's narrator. One frequently expressed interpretation of the captain is that he is really a crazy man, sadly out of touch with reality and thus the one Dunnet resident who has no share in Dunnet Landing's lingering paradise. Richard Cary refers to him as "a captive behind the closed window of his addled mind," and suggests that he "long ago retreated into memories, and now into fantasy."² Paul John Eakin agrees, noting that Littlepage is "eloquent" in his concern over the decline of Dunnet, but that, unfortunately, he is not actually in touch with any part of the real world, having "come to live only in terms of his obsession, the narration of a strange tale which has taken the place of a lost sphere of action."³ Yet another critic, Martha Hale Shackford, goes one step further (or perhaps one step back) to make Littlepage into a kind of eternal riddle--not really insane, perhaps, but

impenetrable by nature: ". . . He was a thorough cosmopolitan, worldly-wise, efficient, yet an eternal child of mystery and romance: a mute, inglorious Marco Polo."⁴

Any of these interpretations must necessarily reduce the Littlepage incident in Jewett's book to the status of just one sketch among the many on "queer" but interesting Dunnet folk. The sheer length of the sketch, which makes it comparable in prominence only to the story of Joanna on Shellheap Island, would seem to indicate that Littlepage's significance is not to be ranked with that of Elijah Tilley, Abby Martin, or any stray member of the Bowden family reunion. Certainly the story of the ghostly northern country which Littlepage tells is more haunting than anything any other character has to offer. We should be aware of the fact, too, that despite his interest in the story, the captain is by no means so lost to reason that he can think of nothing else.

More generous commentators have made note of the captain's symbolic significance in terms of The Country of the Pointed Firs as a whole. Warner Berthoff identifies the captain's "waiting place" story aptly; he calls it

. . . in some ways . . . the boldest and most decisive passage in the book, for it secures that reference to the life of male action and encounter without which the narrator's sympathy for backwater Dunnet would seem myopic, sentimental. It is simply an old man's hallucination, yet also a fable of the ungovernable anonymous forces which have closed the village off from life and the world.⁵

This reading recognizes, as the "crazy captain" simplifications

do not, how important the interaction of opinions between Littlepage and the narrator really is. Littlepage's view of Dunnet in decline serves as a balance to the narrator's inclination to romanticize the scene. Although her original reaction to the captain's social criticism is defensive, there can be little question that he has started some wheels turning. We may credit the captain with nudging the narrator into any consideration of "time" at all. It is he, after all, who forces her to begin questioning which era she will finally take her place in.

Josephine Donovan belongs to Berthoff's camp. She, too, sees more in the captain and his story than the colorful description of an "addled" character. Donovan notes that "Captain Littlepage's tale is . . . set in the context of the subject of time. The captain himself seems like a creature out of ages past." Not only is the captain a clear symbol of someone for whom "time is out of joint," but his story of the mysterious country is an "image of a timeless place beyond the reaches of history."⁶ Far from insinuating that the captain's tale is a sign of his insanity, Donovan's interpretation allows us to see it as a sign of Littlepage's attempt to come to terms with the progression of time.

The captain has not made a satisfactory transition from the days of his prime to those of his retirement, it is true, but in his confusion lies his greatest importance in regard to the narrator. He is a prime example of the frustration which results from trying to hide from change.

Littlepage's very name would seem to indicate that his predicament is a miniature version of the major problem being worked out

throughout Jewett's book. Critics have tended to minimize the importance of the narrator's meeting with the "aged grasshopper," yet to do so is to minimize, too, the narrator's whole experience of Dunnet Landing. The captain's troubled reaction to the uncertainty which changing times bring is shared--and worked through--by Mrs. Todd's summer guest.

Littlepage and the narrator are clearly identified with each other in a number of ways. Their initial encounter takes place at the schoolhouse retreat where the narrator does her daily writing. On this occasion, she has gone to the retreat instead of joining with the rest of the community in a funeral procession for Mrs. Begg (a woman who, significantly enough, had grown up outside of Dunnet, and who had felt that "people lived too close together for her liking, at the Landing, and she could not get used to the constant sound of the sea" (p. 16)). The narrator feels a little guilty about abandoning the procession and muses: "Perhaps the Sunday gown I had put on for the occasion was making this disastrous change of feeling, but I had now made myself and my friends remember that I did not really belong to Dunnet Landing" (p. 19). This, the one time when the narrator openly admits her standing as an "outsider" at Dunnet, is followed immediately by the appearance of Captain Littlepage.

The captain, too, is an outsider in this community. Spotting him in the funeral walk earlier, the narrator recognizes him as "the one strange and unrelated person in all the company" (p. 16). Like her, Littlepage eventually breaks with the mourning villagers in order to seek out the schoolhouse on the hill. He knows the steep

footpath which the children have taught the narrator to use as a shortcut to the retreat, and is able to make his way along it, although the narrator knows Mrs. Todd would find it generally inaccessible.

Hearing the captain's footsteps, the middle-aged writer begins "feeling like a besieged miser of time" (p. 20) and as Littlepage begins a polite conversation she cannot "help wondering what errand had brought him out in search of me" (p. 21). Clearly, Littlepage is a messenger to the narrator as no other character in the book is meant to be. His predicament as someone in but not of present-day Dunnet is similar to hers, and the visiting writer recognizes instinctively a kind of bond between them.

The two share an obvious interest in literature. The narrator's use of many literary, mythological, and historical allusions throughout her account of Dunnet reveals her to be an enthusiastically well-read woman. What kind of material she herself is writing at the beginning of her stay at the Landing is never explicitly stated. Paul Voelker comments that "one cannot help thinking that she is trying to write one of the many romantic historical novels of the period, the type of novel characterized by Matthiessen as 'quiet and harmless, for it's thoroughly dead.'"7 Nevertheless, she has been trying hard to capture something of the surroundings she finds so inspiring. "The sentences failed to catch these lovely summer cadences," she admits, however (p. 18). Captain Littlepage's appearance signals the beginning of some much-needed help with her literary efforts.

When Littlepage arrives on the scene, his first words to the frustrated novelist are quoted from Paradise Lost, which, as he goes on to say, is "'the greatest of poems, I suppose you know?'" (p. 21).

He then explains that shipmasters in earlier days often did a great deal of reading in order to escape the boredom of days and nights at sea, especially since mingling with the crew was frowned upon; he himself "gave his time to the poets" (p. 29). Always an admirer of Milton, who is "'lofty, all lofty,'" he eventually decided that Shakespeare is the true king of poetry: "'Shakespeare was a great poet; he copied life, but you have to put up with a great deal of low talk '" (p. 21).

Voelker makes an important observation concerning this discussion of the poets:

The point of this little episode, which is lost on both the captain and the underdeveloped narrator, is that a poet of life, like Shakespeare, contains greater impact and truth than a poet of 'loftiness' like Milton. Only when the narrator comes to understand this and embraces all the truths of Dunnet Landing will she be able to create true literature.⁸

Literature which takes the lives of simple, ordinary folk as its subject matter is, according to Jewett, finally more satisfying than that which is "elevated" without being basically "human." Imparting this knowledge is a part of the errand which has brought Captain Littlepage on his unexpected visit to the narrator. It is a very important spark to her development--regardless of how "unconscious" the two are of what is happening.

Tellingly, although the captain helps encourage the narrator to write of life as it is lived, he shares to some extent her own initial inability to "capture" the flavor of experience in a way that can grip an audience. The narrator finds her mind wandering

from time to time as Littlepage begins his account of the voyage of the Minerva. During one dull interlude, she is even able to analyze just what the problem is:

Captain Littlepage spoke with a kind of slow correctness that lacked the longshore flavor to which I had grown used; but I listened respectfully while he explained the winds having become contrary, and talked on in a dreary sort of way about his voyage, the bad weather, and the disadvantages he was under in the lightness of his ship . . . (p. 26).

The good captain is ignoring some advice which Sarah Orne Jewett's father impressed upon her as she began her career in writing. "'Great writers don't try to write about people and things, they tell them just as they are,'" he told her.⁹ Because he fails to capture any of the spontaneity of the original scene--because he reproduces neither the speech, the motion, nor the pace of the experience he would describe--Littlepage generates only intermittently interesting material. But the story of the waiting place discovered by Gaffett (and related to Littlepage himself after the wreck of the Minerva) fires the captain's spirit and he tells it with all the emotion and vividness of detail which he is capable of feeling. Now the manner of expression is a reinforcement of the story's sense; Littlepage's wonder and excitement as he speaks recreate the original scene in all its eerie intensity. The narrator's interest no longer flags. The captain's story is thus a vivid example of the literary style he admires so warmly.

An interest in--and final aptitude for--capturing life "as it is" seems to stem from a certain childlike quality which both characters have carried into adulthood. When speaking of Paradise Lost, the captain looks "as pleased as a child" (p. 21). His great seriousness

as he begins his fantastic tale of the "waiting place" strikes the narrator as gently humorous, and she suppresses her amusement almost as a parent would for a child: "Now we were approaching dangerous ground, but a sudden sense of his suffering at the hands of the ignorant came to my help, and I asked to hear more with all the deference I really felt" (p. 24).

Although the captain is over eighty, he does not look it--except perhaps for a dulled look in his eyes, which disappears as soon as he begins his account of the mysterious country discovered by Gaffett. Then all dullness is replaced with the sharpness of youth, "a clear intentness that made them seem dark and piercing" (p. 32).

The narrator has a fleeting sense of having the upper hand during her encounter with Littlepage. She had been playing the schoolmarm before his arrival, "rapping to call the bees to order as if they were unruly scholars" (p. 18), and his excited story is in sharp contrast to her placid reasonableness. Yet elsewhere in her account, this middle-aged writer feels very much a child herself. Indeed, she initially arrived at Dunnet Landing full of "childish certainty of being the center of civilization of which her affectionate dreams had told" (p. 2).

Not long after the episode at the schoolhouse, Mrs. Fosdick comes to visit Mrs. Todd. As the two older women renew old times, the narrator has "an unreasonable feeling of being left out, like the child who stood at the gate in Hans Andersen's story" (p. 90). Because she is at first unfamiliar with the community and new to the people, she is frequently put in the position of a child being

introduced to its surroundings. Being a boarder at Mrs. Todd's home, she is occasionally made to feel almost childishly dependent in certain small ways, too. When Mrs. Fosdick arrives late for her visit, the narrator hints that dinner might after all be served while they wait for their guest; she is "meekly conscious of an inconsiderate appetite for my own supper after such a long expedition up the bay" (p. 88).

Even as the narrator prepares to leave Dunnet, at the end of the book, she feels a certain childlike nervousness over her landlady's reaction. "Mrs. Todd had hardly spoken all day except in the briefest and most disapproving way; it was as if we were on the edge of a quarrel. It seemed impossible to take my departure with anything like composure," she says (p. 302). As David Stouck observes, this summer guest "never asserts her own identity in relation to other characters. . . . Like a child at their feet, she listens to their stories and reminiscences, reveling in the security offered by their age."¹⁰

Catherine Barnes Stevenson accurately pinpoints one possible interpretation of the frequent child imagery throughout the book: "In this place so full of childhood associations, the narrator acts out the impulse between her desire to retreat in time and her impulse to live as an adult in the present."¹¹ The child which remains alive in both the captain and the narrator represents that bit of the past which it is impossible for either of them to give up for good. Yet it is also a sign of that continued freshness of emotion which can serve adults well if it is rightly directed. As a literary woman and a person who must adapt herself to change, to "growing up" in the sense of finding a permanent slot in society, the narrator needs a certain childlike enthusiasm for the future. The captain has lost

touch with his peers because he unwisely insists upon idealizing the period of his youth, rather than looking ahead to continued productivity.

An even more obvious similarity between Littlepage and the narrator is that both have travelled a great deal. The narrator was, in fact, on a yachting cruise when she first spotted Dunnet Landing--and she leaves the village haven occasionally in order to return to her hometown (which is unnamed, but identified as "large.") The whole summer preceding William's wedding is spent in France, a place she has evidently visited before.

Littlepage's travelling days are over by the time the narrator meets him, but the captain's many years at sea are obviously of immense importance to him still. He knows a great deal of life in various parts of the world, and is greatly frustrated by his feeling of being cut off from first-hand experience of the world at large. His scathing criticism of Dunnet is based largely on that frustration:

I view it, in addition, that a community narrows down and grows dreadful ignorant when it is shut up to its own affairs, and gets no knowledge of the outside world except from a cheap, unprincipled newspaper. In the old days, a good part o' the best men here knew a hundred ports and something of the way folks lived in them. They saw the world for themselves, and like as not their wives and children saw it with them. They . . . could see outside the battle for town clerk in Dunnet; they got some sense of proportion. p. 28

This is strikingly sane criticism from a character who has been dismissed by some critics as a colorful crackpot.

Even the narrator realizes that there are times when she really must leave Dunnet, however reluctantly, to answer the calls of outside responsibilities. But Mrs. Todd resents any claims by

"outsiders" on the attention of those who live in Dunnet. When the narrator returns, at the time of William's wedding, from a trip to Paris, she finds the older woman almost resentful: "'I thought you comprehended everything the day you was up here,'" Almira says, insinuating to her newly-returned guest that she "had lost instead of gained since we parted the autumn before" (p. 289).

A comment of that kind must bring to mind Captain Littlepage's contemptuous assessment of the village of Dunnet: "'In that handful of houses they fancy that they comprehend the universe '" (p. 24). Obviously Littlepage does not take much stock in the kind of "progress" which has eliminated the need for people to interact regularly with communities outside of their own. There is a largeness of spirit, a knowledge of mankind, which modern-day Dunnet--a place not terribly modern by the narrator's standards--has lost since social conditions allowed it to turn in on itself. The captain makes a serious charge.

The narrator, on the other hand, knows that Dunnet has preserved many of those values which the captain himself no doubt championed in his youth. Although shipping is no longer a way of life for those in Dunnet Landing, the village is built on that past, and a certain nostalgia for the "boom" days unites the entire present-day community. Littlepage obviously fails to give credit where credit is due.

He also has no idea that life outside of the Landing is increasingly crowded, commercial, and technologically-oriented. Although people may travel more easily than they could in his day, they also face new pressures and a more impersonal social scene than

than the captain has ever imagined. Thus Mrs. Todd may not be far off the mark if she feels that the narrator has lost, not gained, by travelling outside of Dunnet. In her own way, Almira too is only trying to retain for a little while longer those values from the precious past which she and Littlepage both knew. The narrator is clearly torn between whether to live detached from the world in order to preserve a corner of safety and retreat, or to become a part of the world at large, and risk losing that shelter she loves so well.

Despite the fact that she shares some important characteristics and concerns with Captain Littlepage, Mrs. Todd's tenant is little inclined, at the time of their first meeting, to accept his harsh view of Dunnet Landing. Whereas the old man can find nothing positive to say of the present-day community, the narrator can hardly find fault with it. "The process of falling in love at first sight is as final as it is swift in such a case," she tells us of her first visit to this coastal haven, "but the growth of true friendship may be a lifelong affair" (p. 2).

She has not been in Dunnet long when she meets Captain Littlepage; her short experience up to that time has been only enough to reinforce her enjoyment of this spot. She has arrived in late June, "when the busy herb-gathering season was just beginning" and in "the prime of Mrs. Todd's activity in the brewing of old-fashioned spruce beer" (p. 6), a time of both great beauty and great activity for the region. It does not take long for her to feel like an active part of the village's life.

Mrs. Todd soon has the narrator working as a sort of business

partner, handing out "soothing syrups and elixirs" (p. 7) to the villagers--and finding so much pleasure in doing so that she begins ignoring the work on her writing which she is obligated to finish. She admits that "there was only one fault to find with this choice of a summer lodging-place, and that was its complete lack of seclusion" (p. 3). Eventually she realizes that her real work cannot get done as long as she continues with the pleasant task of serving her neighbors and she resigns her position, relieved that "Mrs. Todd and I were not separated or estranged by the change in our business relations; on the contrary, a deeper intimacy seemed to begin" (p. 9). By the time she meets Littlepage, she has of course found an ideal place of occasional retreat at the empty schoolhouse, so that even the "one fault" she had felt in connection with her stay at Dunnet has been effectively erased.

It is significant that the person whom the narrator has come to know best during her short stay up to that time is Almira Todd, a woman described by Sylvia Gray Noyes as one who "possesses a uniquely affirmative intelligence and rebuts negativism as if her life depends upon it. . . ."¹² Mrs. Todd is a warm and knowledgeable woman whose love for nature is a magnification of the narrator's own. The summer boarder takes "an occasional wisdom-giving stroll in Mrs. Todd's company" (p. 7), sips spruce beer in the evenings by her side, and awakens to hear her working in the garden: "You could always tell when she was stepping about there, even when you were half awake in the morning, and learned to know, in the course of a few weeks' experience, in exactly which corner of the garden she might be" (p. 4).

In this sheltered, cozy atmosphere of her landlady's home, it is no wonder that the narrator begins to feel that all of Dunnet must be an idyllic hideaway.

Partly because she knows Mrs. Todd to be a widow who is largely dependent on a "slender business and income from one hungry lodger to maintain her" (p. 7), the narrator admires her landlady's continual cheerfulness and is more than willing to be her companion on those cool fragrant evenings when Mrs. Todd feels that "she must talk to somebody." Then, we are told, the two women "both fell under the spell," and Mrs. Todd often confided things which "lay deepest in her heart" (p. 9). Under such circumstances, even the story of the man Mrs. Todd loved but could not marry must have seemed to the narrator terribly romantic--and perhaps just a little removed from reality. What is real to her is Mrs. Todd's seeming ability to soothe all wounds, and this fascinates her: "It may not have been only the common ails of humanity with which she tried to cope; it seemed sometimes as if love and hate and jealousy and adverse winds at sea might also find their proper remedies among the curious wild-looking plants in Mrs. Todd's garden" (p. 5).

It is thus with sentiments of warm admiration for Dunnet and its citizens that the narrator comes to her meeting with Captain Littlepage. Because she feels comfortable interacting with the villagers, and may even nurture secret hopes of truly fitting into the community later, she can afford to be somewhat condescending to the disillusioned captain at first.¹³ Since his myopia concerning Dunnet's decline has resulted in his literal isolation from fellow townsmen, the narrator's idealization of the same place tends to look healthy in comparison. Yet as we

have noted (see Berthoff, p. 153), her version of Dunnet is myopic too--an important point as we begin to trace her development.¹⁴

If she allows herself to idealize her perceptions of Dunnet Landing, she may lose sight of the resources available to her within the society she was born to, as Littlepage has in his.

The encounter with the captain, then, is a powerful jolt to the rosy picture which the narrator has been forming of Dunnet. It is her first face-to-face encounter with someone who is not only dissatisfied with the village he lives in, but is positively not coping in it. Mrs. Todd's garden has evidently not provided the "proper remedy" for his particular problem.

At first the narrator is able to distance herself from the implications of Captain Littlepage's message. She finds his conversation dull at times, harmlessly amusing at others. The captain finally falls silent as he notices that her thoughts are "unkindly wandering" (p. 27), and the narrator is moved to listen more attentively. Only then does the captain, whose "errand" the narrator has again been pondering, begin his blast against Dunnet's recent decline. By the time he concludes, with his opinion that "' . . . 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'" (p. 29), his audience has been taken somewhat aback. "'Oh no, Captain Littlepage, I hope not,'" she says soothingly, evidently unsure of how to take his remarks and unwilling to countenance his pessimistic viewpoint. The pair then falls silent, listening to the sounds of the sea below. "It sounded like the strange warning wave that gives notice of the turn of the tide," recalls the narrator (p. 30).

The tide does start to turn as Captain Littlepage proceeds (in Chapter 6) to give his account of the "waiting place" once discovered by Gaffett. His story, fantastic as it is, encourages the narrator to take one more step toward recognizing Dunnet in more realistic terms than she has until now. This is because the "waiting place" in many ways is Dunnet Landing.

The parallels between the ghostly country of the pointed firs and its earthly counterpart in Dunnet are several. Dunnet Landing is not, of course, "a place where there was neither living nor dead" (p. 37), but as a community it is, of course, very much on the brink of extinction. The area which Gaffett's expedition discovers, according to Littlepage, is "pretty near like any town" in "any wild northern spot" (p. 37). Its inhabitants are all shadowy, "fog-shaped" figures who "'acted as if they did n't see us, but only felt us coming towards them,'" according to Gaffett (p. 38). His description of the ghostly people's silent communication ("'They would make as if they talked together, but there was no sound of voices,'" (p. 38)) has its counterpart later, in the narrator's description of Mrs. Blackett and her son William: "I could believe that he and his mother usually spoke very little because they so perfectly understood each other. There was something peculiarly unresponding about their quiet island in the sea. . ." (p. 223).

Gaffett's crew is unable to communicate with any of the figures, who withdraw when approached, and although the seamen make massive entries in their journals about the place, there comes a day when all are convinced that they must leave. As their ship pulls out to sea, the shapes on shore suddenly "raise incessant armies, and

come as if to drive 'em back to sea'" (p. 38).

Although the narrator has yet to recognize it fully, Dunnet too is on its guard against the invasion of modern society. In many ways a quiet, peaceful spot, it too stands "'at the edge o' the water like the ridges o' grim war; no thought o' flight, none of retreat'" (p. 38). There is an undercurrent of sadness and pathetic tenacity there which this summer guest has yet to discover. It will also take some time before she understands that in this place, so out of the way of fast-paced civilization, she herself is a "messenger of fate" (p. 235), a sign of the infringements by outside civilization which Dunnet "feels coming toward them." It is, very clearly, "a kind of waiting-place between this world an' the next," whatever Gaffett's uncharted island might be.

Understanding, as we must, that the captain's story is not just a verbalization of his own "hallucination," it becomes clear that we are to understand it, instead, as an extension of his earlier social commentary. Surely there is no reason to believe that Captain Littlepage originated the "fantasy" of Gaffett's mysterious country himself.¹⁵ He says that he heard the account from Gaffett, and therefore we may assume that if the story is anyone's hallucination, it is Gaffett's. Littlepage believes it, in part, because Gaffett himself vouched so fervently for its validity. It is Gaffett's experience; but Littlepage undoubtedly sees something of the story's application to his hometown of Dunnet, and therefore is much inclined to regard it as significant. Its frightening picture of a society which wants to beat the outside world from its shores squares with the captain's own belief that Dunnet has "narrowed down" fearfully over the years. He regards this blind attack on the outside world as a dangerous

thing. It is of course ironic that he himself has withdrawn into his past rather than trying to remedy the situation in Dunnet; in fact, he balks at every little change that Dunnet has allowed. "These bicycles offend me dreadfully," he confesses at one point; "they don't afford no real opportunities of experience such as a man gained on a voyage" (p. 29). Evidently the captain recognizes the necessity of change even though he is unable to accept it for himself.

Berthoff suggests that Littlepage's "fearful mid-world is what those who go out from a Dunnet Landing must enter; good reason then to stay home--even though it be to wither and stiffen in a setting which, in its mild and permissive way, is only another kind of mid-world, half way over to death."¹⁶ As we have seen, however, Littlepage is the last person to recommend that people stay at home; indeed, when he is restricted to Dunnet following his retirement, he is unable to adjust at all, and retreats into unhappy isolation. The kind of home base which he himself idealizes is one which is in keeping with its times--open-minded enough to allow new ideas to come in and out, yet secure enough to weather a certain amount of change. It is unfortunate that he as an individual does nothing to actually establish such a society in Dunnet.

The Landing, then, is a "waiting place" in that it is a community which is fading out of existence. It is a "waiting place," too, for the narrator personally, for it is the spot where she works out the commitment to the life she must lead outside of this seaside village. She is in a limbo between the past and the present which must be worked out--and work it out she does, as Country of the Pointed Firs progresses.

Littlepage's strange story is aparked just as the narrator is again feeling "very eager to know upon what errand he had come" (p. 23). The captain, on his part, speaks most earnestly: "'We may know it all, the next step . . . Certainty, not conjecture, is what we all desire'" (p. 23). Certainty is what both Littlepage and the narrator lack--certainty about where they fit in society, about how to deal with change. The captain's story seems to indicate that, ironically, one can only be certain about one thing: that life is mysterious, fluid, and sometimes frightening; therefore, man's only real choice is to remain open to the experiences which changing times will bring. Obviously the captain himself has not abided by this "lesson," but he evidently feels he must pass on that message to the writer at the schoolhouse. That is a major part of his errand to her.

Still, the newcomer is not quick to pick up on the captain's suggested meaning. His story is weird enough--and her delight in Dunnet strong enough--to allow her to hide from some of his uncomfortable implications, despite the fact that "all this moving tale had such an air or truth that I could not argue with Captain Littlepage" (p. 42).

When the old man ends his tale and invites her to look over a collection of things he brought home from the sea long ago, she is relieved and feels sure that "Captain Littlepage's mind had now returned to a safe level" (p. 43). What he has had to say has obviously threatened her cozy vision of Dunnet Landing as a secure and lasting haven. As he leaves, she is aware that he speaks to her "as if I were a fellow ship-master on the lee shore of age like himself" (p. 43). Her hazy recognition that Captain Littlepage's predicament must speak to her own is an important part of the narrator's experience as she comes to terms with her place both in Dunnet and out of it.

It may well be that the captain's obvious concern about the "waiting place" influences the narrator in another important way as well. As Voelker has suggested, Littlepage's opinion that writers should attempt to be "poets of life" as Shakespeare was, is one the narrator eventually shares. But Littlepage also strongly suggests, in his roundabout way, that this frustrated writer should take on as her particular subject matter the life of Dunnet Landing.

The captain is very disappointed that Gaffett never recorded his experience at the secret northern country, despite the fact that he had the documentation necessary to do so. "He was always talking about the Geographical Society, but he never took proper steps, as I view it now . . .," Littlepage explains. And, further: "He said he was waiting to find the right men to tell . . . He had all his directions written out straight as a string to give to the right ones. I wanted him to trust 'em to me, so I might have something to show, but he wouldn't . . . 'Twill be a great exploit some o' these days'" (p. 40). It is a heavy loss to the captain to have no chance to seek out the country of the pointed firs for himself--it would even be a wonderful experience to be able to re-live Gaffett's discovery second-hand, through some detailed written account. Obviously Captain Gaffett's failure to leave his records behind has prevented all of humanity from knowing for certain of that place between this world and the next.

This obvious concern for preserving experience so that others may share in it and know it for themselves is relevant to the narrator. If future generations are to know anything of this "waiting place" she has known in Dunnet Landing, she will have to make some record

of it. Since the narrator is the one who knows and loves it, she--relying on no one else to do the job--must be willing to take the responsibility of saving it for the future. The captain has thus suggested to her the significance of literature which is built of ordinary--but timeless--experience. He has also guided her toward a solution to the problem of "facing" time: the past can be carried, living and breathing, into the present, through books.

Again, the fact that Littlepage is unable to live contentedly in his community need not minimize the importance of what he has to say. In terms of his effect on the narrator, he cannot be ignored. When Mrs. Todd is told of the narrator's encounter with the captain, she reinforces the younger woman's suspicion that Littlepage has not been talking pure nonsense: "'Some o' them tales hangs together toler'ble well,'" the landlady admits. "'Some thinks he overdid, and affected his head, but for a man o' his years he's amazin' now when he's at his best.'" Her final comment on the captain is enthusiastic: "'Oh, he used to be a beautiful man!'" (p. 44). Littlepage is surely not meant to be reduced to a comic character whose interest in a "waiting place" is merely pathetic. His refusal to be a part of his times is clearly unhealthy, yet it is a sign to the narrator of what she must avoid for herself.

After his first meeting with the narrator Littlepage himself never reappears as a speaking character in The Country of the Pointed Firs. As a character he therefore recedes in significance. References to him are few but noteworthy. What remains most important is how the narrator develops now that she has met with him and had her

first taste of criticism aimed at the society she loves so well. Her future welfare depends very heavily upon her ability to see Dunnet as it really is. That, in turn, calls for a recognition of both the heroism and the failure which is to be found there. Unless she is able to put the past and present into a reasonable perspective, she is in danger of worshipping this faded past--only to lose sight of her very real responsibility to the future. The fact that Captain Littlepage continues to be mentioned from time to time throughout the book should reinforce our awareness of the narrator's situation.

Not surprisingly, Captain Littlepage's disparaging assesment of Dunnet pains the narrator, who has felt its real charm full force. Yet as she spends more and more time in this protective community, she must inevitably face the fact that Dunnet has always had its share of problems. Various critics have shown that the sketches in Country of the Pointed Firs form a pattern of alternating happiness and sadness. Waggoner, for example, comments:

The theme embodied in the sketches concerning Green Island and further developed in the sketches concerned with the reunion might turn the book into an idyll--a pastoral idyll--if it were not countered in any way. The needed contrast comes in sketches of wasted lives, misfits and hermits, deserted farms, and barren islands.

But, he goes on to say:

. . . these pictures of waste and frustration, importantly though they function to round out the picture and to help keep the work true to its realistic intention, embody only the minor theme . . . existing to enrich the major theme embodied in Green Island and the reunion.¹⁷

Richard Cary says that the pattern of life in Dunnet "reflects

the unabating influence of the sea," and that Jewett's structure "conveys the rhythmical rise and fall of communal existence." He numbers as "five crests of gayety" the scenes concerning the narrator's arrival in Dunnet, Green Island, the Bowden reunion, Esther Hight's farm, and William's wedding; these are off-set by three "troughs of sadness or tragedy"--the walking funeral, Shellheap Island, and the narrator's departure. Captain Littlepage's story, according to Cary's theory, is one of several more minor instances of pathos and humor.¹⁸

These observations are worthy reminders that Jewett's book is not to be taken as a purely sentimental tribute to days gone by. Although a rather "timid psychologist," as Perry Westbrook has called her,¹⁹ Sarah Orne Jewett was also realist enough to want to show that no way of life is wholly perfect. However, the narrator of her book--as we have seen--comes dangerously close to believing that Dunnet Landing can serve as the solution to all of her cares, at the beginning of her stay there. Therefore, the fact that the book has recurrent images of waste, loneliness, and sadness cannot be considered of minor importance in the story of her development; they are vital reminders of the reality which she must finally accept.

Cary's suggestion that there are alternating waves of joy and sorrow helps to describe the narrator's natural movement toward facing time and change--although Cary himself is evidently more concerned with how Jewett's readers get to see Dunnet than with how its central comes to terms with the place. The problem with his "wave" description is that it is a little too clean, as if scenes of unabated happiness alternated with those of unremitting despair. Actually, each wave has both clear water and some debris--in varying

combinations. The lives the narrator comes to know during her stay in Dunnet Landing are not one-dimensional, and there is really no scene in the whole book which does not contain both pain and joyfulness.

The narrator, then, is continually made to sift through the incidents of triumph and despair which she observes, in an effort to discover whether or not Dunnet can actually serve her as a place of retreat from the newer and noisier world outside. The process of putting everything into proper perspective is not necessarily a conscious one, yet it eventually leads to a very conscious decision by the narrator. At the end of the book, she is ready to take her leave from Dunnet Landing.

As the narrator gets to know her adopted village better, it becomes increasingly evident that the nostalgia which Littlepage feels for the days of his youth has considerably colored his recollection of the past. Although Mrs. Todd's summer guest is clearly uneasy with what the captain has to say of present-day Dunnet, she is probably inclined, at the time of her meeting with him, to imagine Dunnet in its hey-day as the very picture of security, for then its quiet way of life would have been in full flower. In this assumption she is incorrect. Time and again, after her talk with Littlepage, she hears stories of disappointment and emptiness which prove that Dunnet was never the scene of untempered contentment.

The first real insight she is afforded into the past has to do with Mrs. Todd's great love, the man she could never marry because of the difference in their stations. Until the trip out to Green Island, when Mrs. Todd explains in some detail how her life was

affected by the loss of that relationship, the narrator has seen little of the real pain attached to Almira's story. But the pennyroyal on the Island moves Mrs. Todd to explain her feelings in full: "'My heart was gone out o' my keepin' before I ever saw Nathan,'" she says of her husband (speaking of her spouse for the very first time to the interested visitor), "'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'" (p. 77).

The older woman speaks sadly of having always remembered "'the other one'" whenever she sat listening to her husband in the fields of pennyroyal. Then, says the narrator, the landlady "looked away from me and went on by herself. There was something lonely and solitary about her great determined shape. She might have been Antigone alone on the Theban plain" (p. 78).

The narrator, face to face with her older friend's anguish, begins to see that Mrs. Todd's life has in some ways been truly hard: "An absolute, archaic grief possessed this countrywoman; she seemed like the renewal of some historic soul, with her sorrows . . ." (p. 78). Every age throughout time has had its share of troubles. Every age finds some people who are dragged down by sorrow as well as those who triumph above it.

Soon after her visit to Green Island, the narrator hears another story of crossed love. This one is about "poor Joanna," a woman who very obviously did not find paradise in Dunnet Landing. The description of Nathan Todd's cousin begins as Mrs. Fosdick and Mrs. Todd reminisce about various "odd" characters who flourished long ago, but are no longer to be found in the district. Captain Littlepage's name comes to the narrator's mind as a possible exception,

but the two older women do not mention him--a sign that the good captain was sane enough in his younger days, and no doubt appreciative of the unhappiness which people like Joanna suffered at the time; only old age and unchecked nostalgia have caused him to forget the trials he witnessed long ago.

Joanna's experience of being crossed in love alienated her from everything and everyone--herself, her community, her God. After being deserted by the man she had hoped to marry, she retreated to her neat, well-cared-for hermitage on Shellheap Island, repenting until her death of "the unpardonable sin" she believed she had committed: "'I was in great wrath and trouble, and my thoughts was so wicked towards God that I can't expect to be forgiven'" (p. 121). Even if Jewett does not force us to accept the fact that, despite her admirable self-sufficiency, Joanna was insane, and "a young life was uselessly wasted for itself and others," as Westbrook points out,²⁰ she evidently uses the story to reveal one kind of Dunnet experience of which the narrator had so far been unaware.

A number of slighter references to problems in the past suggest that Almira and Joanna were not the only unlucky and unfulfilled people in the community during Littlepage's "golden era." Mrs. Todd points out an island which is shared by two farmers whose families have not spoken to each other for three generations, "'even in times of sickness or death or birth'" (p. 53). Later still, on their way to see Abby Martin, Mrs. Todd tells the narrator of "'three good hard-workin' families that come here full o' hope an' pride an' tried to make something o' this farm, but it beat 'em all'" (p. 257).

Even at the Bowden picnic, that joyful and invigorating assertion of community, the narrator sees signs of trouble: "More than one face among the Bowdens showed that only opportunity and stimulus were lacking,--a narrow set of circumstances had caged a fine able character and held it captive" (p. 174).

Thus the captain's idealized description of Dunnet's past is proved to have been misleading. As the narrator comes to know the Landing more fully, she must continually reassess the glowing perception of present-day Dunnet which she felt at the time of her meeting with captain. Once her blind passion for the place has given way to a stable and reassuring friendship with it, she is able to see some of the community's shortcomings without feeling threatened by them.

Part of her increased insight is a direct result of her meetings with various troubled villagers--none of whom she had seen before her talk with Captain Littlepage. Abby Martin, the "Queen's twin," amuses Mrs. Todd and the surprised narrator by her insistence on living out Queen Victoria's life at her modest home in "a particularly disappointing part of the northern country" (p. 260). But she is also quite clearly a woman who is to be pitied. Mrs. Todd remarks that because of her hard life, "'you might say that Abby'd been a slave'" even if "'there ain't any slave but has some freedom'" (p. 262).

An encounter with Elijah Tilley, the retired seaman who is "sore stricken and unconsolated at the death of his wife" (p. 190), is also an eye-opener. Cary describes Tilley as one who "has no resources left from the vigorous life except the memory of his dead wife and the routines which remind him of her. He knits, keeps

shipshape house, and constantly refers to his 'poor dear.'"²¹ The narrator feels sorry for him, and wonders as she leaves his home about where his wife is "and what she knows of the little world she left" (p. 205), a clear indication that Captain Littlepage's story of the "waiting place" is finding some striking associations in her experience at Dunnet.

Although Elijah's problem is not as extreme as Abby Martin's it is surprising enough to the narrator, who is always ready to see Dunnet in the best light possible. Elijah is not crazy, but he certainly lacks the majestic stature of Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett, for example--at best he is "'worthy enough . . . but he's a ploddin' man,'" as Almira says (p. 206).

There are, again, a number of minor references to Dunnet folk who are downright mean or narrow-minded. One such fellow is an acquaintance of Mrs. Todd's who lives near Green Island; this man, a sheep owner, "grudged the little salt and still less care which the patient creatures needed" (p. 52). His kind of petty stinginess is of course completely foreign to the Blacketts of Green Island; it is evidently behavior which the narrator had not been witness to during her earliest days at the Landing.

All these minor figures and their problems might have been introduced into the story only for colorful effect, but chances are excellent that they were not. For the narrator find that even those people she knows best and loves whole-heartedly are not always a perfectionist's ideal. Mrs. Todd, generally delightful, has a few small shortcomings. She can be short and gruff-tempered-seeming when her emotions are highly aroused. There are times when the

narrator appears for breakfast only to find her landlady preoccupied with plans for an expedition she wishes to make that day. On those occasions Almira is "absent-minded and sparing of speech," her tenant says, "as if I had displeased her, and she was now, by main force of principle, holding herself back from altercation and strife of tongues" (p. 135).

Mrs. Todd's usual geniality can sometimes be matched by an unwillingness to accept new members into her fold when she finds them undeserving. A woman who accosts Almira's carriage on the way to the Bowden picnic, introducing herself as a Bowden, too, is later dismissed by the impatient herbalist as "'not a member o' our family'" because only her first husband had been a Bowden. The landlady's expansiveness, apparently, has its limits.

It is a rare day when this elderly widow is on perfectly happy terms with her brother William. The problem is partly her and partly his. There can be no question that William Blackett would be uncomfortably out of place in any society but that which is made possible by his mother at Green Island. Although he "requires the respect due to age" (p. 68), he seems in many ways an aging momma's boy--bashful, untraveled, unemployed. Perry Westbrook sees William as a "neurotic, the victim of shyness of painful that he will not sail his boat past Dunnet Harbor for fear of being seen." (This, Westbrook suggests, is the result of having to rest content with seeing Esther Hight, the woman he eventually marries, just once a year.)²² He is of course in many ways the epitome of patience and good will, yet even his devoted sister, Almira, occasionally feels annoyed by his shy and tentative ways.

None of this diminishes Dunnet in the narrator's estimation, however. She loves every one of the people she meets there--from the oddest to the most magnificent--with the reverence she continues to feel for these representatives of the past. But as her understanding of this community and its past increases, she may also be learning to accept her own society--the "modern world" outside of Dunnet--in a way she had been unable to do before. Although Boston, New York, and Paris may be noisy, industrialized places, they probably afford no more real problems than Dunnet ever has. The troubles each era faces may differ, but troubles in some form are clearly guaranteed. Perhaps more importantly, the problems of any historical period are revealed to be largely those of the individual spirit, which is formed with the capacity for "archaic grief." Time and change cannot do away with the universal experience of pain; in fact, the inevitableness of sorrow makes it a kind of link from each age to every other.

Until the narrator was actually witness to some of the sadness which Dunnet contains, she had been unwilling to see it as a real place in the real world. It had been, instead, a safe and protected place away from the unpleasant pressures of modern society. By recognizing that no time or place can ever be an unassailable haven, she makes possible another step toward a necessary acceptance of the "new world" outside of Dunnet Landing. Captain Littlepage, who wants to live out his recreated vision of a day gone by, is the symbol of those who refuse to participate in anything but an impossibly ideal society of their own imaginings. The narrator passes

the captain's home as she rides toward the Bowden family reunion, and finds him totally uncommunicative: "I tried to speak to him, but he did not see me. There was a patient look on the old man's face, as if the world were a great mistake and he had nobody with whom to speak his own language or find companionship" (p. 143).

This image of the captain cramped behind his closed window ought to remind us, too, of Littlepage's earlier role as an advisor to the narrator on her writing. His sad disintegration into one who is unable to communicate with the rest of the world is indication enough of how important change and growth are to the artist. A person who is not in contact with the world cannot write about any part of it; one who refuses to meet the times as they change will lose that all-important perspective on the things he would describe.

Thus the narrator moves toward a solution to her problem even as it becomes increasingly evident that the Landing cannot serve as a permanent retreat for her. In a very real sense, its flaws allow her to be more hopeful about her place in the future. Each generation is connected by a thread of universal experiences, of which some pain is a part. But the strongest fibers of that unending thread are made up of much more positive values, which can make life in any time period rewarding and refreshing, if only they are recognized. A growing population and increasing technology can never kill the human capacity for love and courage. These virtues have existed throughout time, and will continue to be found even when Dunnet Landing itself is but a memory.

The three people who are closest to the narrator's heart--William, Almira Todd, and Mrs. Blackett--are all associated with symbols of

historic endurance. William Blackett's wordless communication reminds the narrator of the power of silence in the world: "One need not always be saying something in this noisy world," she notes (p. 223). All of nature communicates itself very well to mankind without having to utter a single word, and it has spoken in this way for centuries. William's island is "solidly fixed into the still foundations of the world, against whose rocky shores the sea beats and calls and is unanswered" (p. 223). The trout fishing which William loves so much connects him in yet another way with water and fish, both centuries-old symbols of life and renewal.

A second form of universal communication is associated with William, for Mrs. Blackett's son is also a singer. Timid as he is, he is prevailed upon to sing a duet with his mother, and the narrator finds his voice to be "a little faint and frail . . . but . . . perfectly true" (p. 82). She notices immediately that this is "the silent man's real and only means of expression, and one could have listened forever, and have asked for more and more songs of old Scotch and English inheritance and the best that have lived from the ballad music of the war" (p. 83). His natural feeling for music connects him with past, present, and future, just as his eternal boyishness blurs the usual distinctions between one age and the next.

The narrator is attracted by that trace of an accent left over from "Chaucer's time" which William shares with his community. And she is quick to see "what might have been an old scar won long ago in battle" (p. 248) in the smear of pennyroyal lotion which Almira has spread across his face at one point. William has a mild

yet courageous attitude toward life which transcends all time.

His sister, Almira Todd, is also in touch with life forces which cannot be exterminated by outside pressures. Her natural habitat is in her garden and in the fields surrounding Mrs. Blackett's home on Green Island. The herbs she tends have, as Sylvia Gray Noyes remarks, "something superstitious, something mythical" about them.²³ The narrator awakens in the morning to "strange and pungent odors that roused a dim sense and remembrance of something in the forgotten past. Some of these might once have belonged to sacred and mystic rites . . ." (p. 4). Almira tends her garden lovingly, and uses the available vegetation to create soothing medicines and cool drinks for the people in her area. Thus she is involved with nourishing and nurturing a whole community--physically in one sense, but spiritually as well.

The narrator sees mythic proportions in her landlady's capacity to take care of the earth and the people around her: "Her height and massiveness in the low room gave her the look of a huge sibyl, while the strange fragrance of the mysterious herb blew in from the little garden," she says of her at one point (p. 10). Elsewhere she is likened to a caryatide as she "mounted a gray rock, and stood there grand and architectural" (p. 46). Still later, Almira is compared to Medea, for she "could not have been more conscious of high ultimate purposes" (p. 290) had she been the Greek sorceress herself.

Francis Pike sees Mrs. Blackett as "the most vivid embodiment of love in the book."²⁴ After visiting her on Green Island, even Dunnet Landing looks dreary to the narrator by comparison; she says that "it seemed large and noisy and oppressive as we came

ashore" (p. 85). Almira Todd's mother combines a number of traits which make her a symbol of timelessness and comfort. Like her children, she is vibrant and youthful--"you felt as if she promised a great future, and was beginning, not ending, her summer and their happy toils" (p. 61). She is "one of those who do not live to themselves, and who have long since passed that line that divides mere self-concern from a valued share in whatever Society can give and take" (p. 63). At the Bowden family reunion, she is "the mistress by simple fitness of this great day" (p. 173), a symbol of that endurance and continuity of fellowship which the reunion itself is meant to celebrate.

Interestingly enough, Mrs. Blackett is linked to Captain Littlepage in a number of ways. When the narrator first sees Green Island pointed out to her, the "sunburst upon that outermost island made it seem like a sudden revelation of the world beyond which some believe to be so near," she says, in a clear reference to the captain's "waiting place." Later, at the Bowden reunion, Mrs. Blackett makes her connection with the discouraged sea captain even stronger. When Almira Todd mentions Captain Littlepage's strange stories and comments, "'... You always catch yourself a-thinkin' what if they was all true, and he had the right of it'" (p. 169), Mrs. Blackett expresses her desire to see the aging captain again. "'We always have known each other,'" she comments wistfully.

With those words, Mrs. Blackett links Captain Littlepage--a man living in the past--with herself, and with the narrator--a woman who belongs to the future. "Mrs. Blackett's world and mine were one from the moment we met," according to the narrator, and now we

see that that world is Littlepage's too. It is a place which does, after all, contain frustration and pain in the face of change, but it also offers a solution to the problem: love, and "a perfect self-forgetfulness" (p. 73), of which Mrs. Blackett is the embodiment.

Of this elderly woman and her children, then, the narrator concludes: "Their counterparts are in every village of the world, thank heaven, and the gift to one's life is only in its discernment" (p. 287). At last the narrator is ready to leave Dunnet and return to her real home in the outside world.

Her final visit to the Landing, for William's wedding, gives her "an odd feeling of strangeness," and she even feels briefly "as if I had after all lost my hold of that quiet life" (p. 284). No violent, dramatic circumstance has forced her to feel she must leave this coastal retreat, yet she has grown through her experiences here, and part of her growth as a well-adjusted individual inevitably requires that she set up her life elsewhere. As she parts from the house she has shared with Mrs. Todd for so long, she gives a parting glance to her old room, now stripped bare of its belongings, and remarks: "So we die before our own eyes; so we can see some chapters of our lives come to their natural end" (p. 303). This woman loves Dunnet Landing as much as ever, but she has come to see that she can and must survive outside of its shelter. As she takes the boat away from the shore of her personal "waiting place," the wind begins to blow, so that when she looks back again, "the islands and the headland had run together and Dunnet Landing and all its coasts were lost to sight" (p. 306).

Of course, she has not really left this fading civilization for good. She has learned that it may be kept alive forever if she is only willing to record its story, and record it she does. Captain Littlepage's predicament has helped her to see that no one can hold on to the past, except insofar as it can be preserved through literature. He has shown her that although facing change may be difficult, it is finally necessary, and that to refuse it is unnatural. Finally, she is made aware that change can help to make people more appreciative of the greatness which is everywhere, if they will only seek it out.

Captain Littlepage's errand at the schoolhouse is, in effect, to set the narrator free. Blind devotion to the past, as his case proves, is far more dangerous than giving oneself up to the future could ever be. Thanks in part to this aging captain, the story of The Country of the Pointed Firs is one of a woman who comes to terms with time.

Notes

¹ Willa Cather, Pref., The Country of the Pointed Firs, by Sarah Orne Jewett (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1925), Vol. 1, p. xviii. All textual references are to this edition and appear in parenthesis after each quotation.

² Richard Cary, Sarah Orne Jewett (New York: Twayne: 1962), p. 147.

³ Paul John Eakin, "Sarah Orne Jewett and the Meaning of Country Life," American Literature, 38 (1967), 508-531; rpt. in Appreciation of Sarah Orne Jewett, ed. Richard Cary (Waterville, Maine: Colby College Press, 1973), p. 153; hereafter cited as Appreciation.

⁴ Martha Hale Shackford, "Sarah Orne Jewett," Sewanee Review, 30 (1922), 20-26; rpt. in Appreciation, p. 67.

⁵ Warner Berthoff, "The Art of Jewett's Pointed Firs," New England Quarterly, 32 (1959), 31-53; rpt. in Appreciation, p. 153.

⁶ Josephine Donovan, Sarah Orne Jewett (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1980), pp. 104-05.

⁷ Paul D. Voelker, "The Country of the Pointed Firs: A Novel by Sarah Orne Jewett," Colby Library Quarterly, 9 (1970), 201-213; rpt. in Appreciation, p. 241.

⁸ Voelker, p. 242.

⁹ Francis O. Matthiessen, Sarah Orne Jewett (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1929), p. 14.

¹⁰ David Stouck, "The Country of the Pointed Firs: A Pastoral of Innocence," Colby Library Quarterly, 9 (1970), 213-220; rpt. in Appreciation, p. 252.

¹¹ Catherine Barnes Stevenson, "The Double Consciousness of the Narrator in Sarah Orne Jewett's Fiction," Colby Library Quarterly, 11 (1973), p. 8.

¹² Sylvia Gray Noyes, "Mrs. Almira Todd, Herbalist-Conjurer," Colby Library Quarterly, 9 (1972), p. 643.

¹³ Eugene Hillhouse Pool, "The Child in Sarah Orne Jewett," Colby Library Quarterly, 7 (1967), 503-509; rpt. in Appreciation, p. 224. Pool suggests that the narrator's condescension for Littlepage and his story is an indication of that "knowledge of herself as an adult" which at the end of the book finally "calls her home from vacation in a mature acknowledgement of the responsibility to return." Thus, says Pool, Jewett "walks midway between what she would like to be and what she must necessarily be" (p. 225).

¹⁴ Voelker makes note of the fact that Captain Littlepage's remark that the people of Dunnet Landing "'fancy that they comprehend the universe'" is a "clear echo of the narrator's conception of the town in the first chapter . . . (an) attitude toward the town which she must repudiate before her development is complete" (p. 242).

¹⁵ Berthoff, as we have seen, says that Littlepage's story is "simply an old man's hallucination . . ." (p. 153). Paul John Eakin remarks that "Littlepage seeks refuge in a dream-vision of a

strange Arctic 'waiting place' of shades . . ."(p. 219) from the isolation he feels at Dunnet Landing. As we have already noted, the concept of the captain as an "addled" character would seem to reinforce the misconception that he himself dreamed up the mysterious waiting place.

¹⁶ Berthoff, p. 153.

¹⁷ Hyatt H. Waggoner, "The Unity of The Country of the Pointed Firs," Twentieth Century Literature, 5 (1959), 67-73; rpt. in Appreciation, pp. 166-67.

¹⁸ Cary, Sarah Orne Jewett, p. 150.

¹⁹ Perry Westbrook, Acres of Flint (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1981), p. 67.

²⁰ Westbrook, p. 65.

²¹ Cary, Sarah Orne Jewett, p. 147.

²² Westbrook, p. 63.

²³ Noyes, p. 644.

²⁴ Fike, p. 178.

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CAPTAIN LITTLEPAGE AND THE NARRATOR

IN

THE COUNTRY OF THE POINTED FIRS

by

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B. A., Kansas State University, 1977

AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

Manhattan, Kansas

1982

Captain Littlepage is an important character in The Country of the Pointed Firs in that both his personal predicament and his story of the mysterious "waiting place" speak to the narrator of the importance of adapting to the times as they change. Captain and narrator share a number of significant characteristics and concerns; at the time of their meeting, each idealizes a particular time period and its way of life. Littlepage dwells on his memories of the days of his prime, cutting himself off from normal interaction with the present. His unhappy relationship with the rest of the world serves as a reminder to the narrator that no time or place--including the present-day Dunnet which she loves--can serve as a permanent retreat from the world at large; resisting change is, in the end, unnatural and unhealthy.

The ghostly "waiting place" which Littlepage describes has a number of parallels in Dunnet Landing itself. Certainly Dunnet serves as a "waiting place" for the narrator as she moves toward a decision to leave this haven for the "outside world" she was born to. As she spends more time in Dunnet, she is increasingly able to see that pain and joy are universal experiences, and that heroism is possible in any circumstances--regardless of the inevitable material changes which come with time.

Littlepage indicates, during their encounter at the schoolhouse retreat, that the past which this narrator reveres may be kept alive most effectively through her writing. This account of Dunnet proves him right.