

FROM DEEPHAVEN TO THE COUNTRY OF THE POINTED FIRS:

JEWETT'S GROWTH AS WRITER

by

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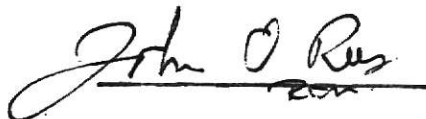
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Sarah Orne Jewett's early book, Deephaven (1877), has many similarities with her later masterpiece, The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896). Both books are narrated by a woman from the city who spends the summer in a small coastal village in Maine; the Deephaven narrator and her best friend are still girls at twenty-four, and the Country narrator is of more mature years. Both books consist of a series of loosely connected sketches characterizing the inhabitants of the towns. Both focus on similar themes. A comparison of the two works is instructive, however, not in demonstrating these obvious similarities, but in examining the differences that reveal Jewett's greater maturity in the later work. According to Richard Cary, she returns to the format of the earlier book "with a depth and tone impossible for her in 1877."<sup>1</sup> Important in explaining that depth is the realization that Jewett's themes in Country are presented with deeper understanding. This paper will first compare three closely related themes handled in both books, themes which sometimes seem to overlap but which retain distinctive features. They include a presentation of economic decline and the death of old values, an examination of man's relationship to nature, and a portrayal of human lives that are disappointed and frustrated by circumstance.<sup>2</sup> Jewett's more skillful use of the narrator, which contributes to the handling of theme, will be examined in the last section of the paper. Her treatment of both theme and narrator reveal a more affirmative vision of life.

The only important theme of the loosely connected sketches which comprise Deephaven centers on the decline of shipping and commerce, with the subsequent death of human vitality. Warner Berthoff explains that the energy "that went into commerce and community affairs now is spent in nostalgia and regret."<sup>3</sup> The young leave the town for factory jobs in the city and the old citizens grow older, clinging to a past way of life that is doomed to extinction. Deephaven "never recovered from the effects of the embargo of 1807, and a sand-bar has been steadily filling the mouth of the harbor."<sup>4</sup> The slowly growing sandbar only emphasizes the fact that the prosperous shipping days are over.

The reminiscences of Captain Sands help explain the change to the girls. He describes a past where "there was hardly a day in the year that you didn't hear the shipwrights' hammers, and there was always something going on at the wharves" (p. 156). Now however, there is nothing for the old captains to do but sit reminiscing about some "voyage and its disasters and successes" (p. 86), or arguing about "the tonnage of some craft that had been a prey to the winds and waves, dry rot, or barnacles fifty years before" (p. 87). Now the dories and whaleboats lie disused and rotting along the shore; the schooners are left to disintegrate by the wharves.

An emphasis on age permeates the book. It seems as though "all the clocks in Deephaven, and all the people with them, had stopped years ago" (p. 740), and the old folks continued doing whatever they had been doing before time stopped. People continue to wear old-fashioned clothes, and they even look like "exact copies of their remote ancestors" (p. 79). The girls feel somewhat uneasy in parts of the old Brandon house: the portraits in the best parlor seem to have taken a dislike to them and

"even the stair-railing was too high to slide down on" (p. 22). When the girls stop for old-fashioned tea at the Carews, they feel a sense of timelessness as if the "house and the people had nothing to do with the present, or the hurry of modern life" (p. 85). The only young people in the town are visitors from outside, and the narrators spend their summer getting acquainted, instead, with the aging residents of the community.

Deephaven emphasizes, in particular, the demise of the aristocracy. Indeed, the whole social class will disappear when its current old members die. The town's greatest pride is its connection with a rich shipowner and merchant, Governor Chantrey. Though he and his family have been dead for years, though only a few clumps of lilac are left to mark the spot where his elegant mansion once stood, and though his wharves are rotting, the town remains proud of its association with the gentleman. The members of the old families who do remain are treated with great respect, but they are "a feeble folk" (p. 70). These remaining aristocrats cling blindly to a past that has long since disappeared. Sunday church service is an occasion to wear old finery and to assert "their unquestioned dignity" (p. 75). The Carews continue to serve tea from their antique china, and Miss Honora is enobbishly thankful that no foreign element has intruded on the town. Deaf old Joshua Dorsey wears his hair in a queue and carries his father's cane. Among all the gentry there remains a "fierce pride in their family and town records, and a hardly concealed contempt and pity for people who were obliged to live in other parts of the world" (p. 71). The dying aristocracy so stubbornly clings to its old fashioned customs and attitudes that it refuses to acknowledge its own approaching death. Its members are insulated from reality because they direct their unwavering gazes backward.

The death of Kate's aunt, Miss Brandon, is typical of the general decline of her class. She has been honored and respected in her lifetime and has lived her life devoted to the old customs and attitudes. Her single-minded vision of the world is typically aristocratic. She must "have had the highest opinion of its good manners" (p. 44). Despite her lofty opinion of the world, however, Miss Brandon lapses into insanity before her death. She dies with only the Widow Jim Patton to care for her. No blood relatives are able to come to the funeral, and even Mrs. Patton must admit that the mice and moths have made their way into the once-immaculate mansion.

A more devastating portrayal of the decline of the aristocracy can be seen in the situation of Miss Sally Chauncey. Her father had lost his money at the time of the embargo, gone partially insane, and died after years of poverty. Miss Chauncey lives in the crumbling mansion of her girlhood so immersed in fantasies of the past that she is unaware of the present. In the house, the once polished floors are dangerously rotting, empty fastenings on the wall mark places where portraits once hung, and cobwebs festoon every door. When Kate tells Miss Sally that her Aunt Brandon is dead, the old woman responds, "Ah, they say everyone is 'dead' nowadays. I do not comprehend the silly idea" (p. 233). Miss Chauncey remains paradoxically content in her illusion that the past is not gone, that she is still a girl wearing party dresses for fancy balls. Her death from exposure is not unexpected.

Much emphasis in Deephaven is placed upon the worth and merit of the old.<sup>5</sup> Kate and Helen praise their newly acquired friends by saying that it is "a great privilege to have an elderly person in one's neighborhood" (p. 44), and "to us there never will be such imposing ladies and gentlemen

as these who belong to the old school" (p. 45). They take pride in their association with the older members of the community, enjoying the rounds of visits and teas, the talks with the old captains, and their visits to the pleasant country cemetery. But though they verbally glorify the "romance and tragedy and adventure which one may find" (p. 65) in a quiet town, their observations belie their enthusiastic and optimistic words. Stevenson notes that although the town's immutability "may be attractive to the visitors, its effect on the inhabitants is not necessarily healthy."<sup>6</sup> No amount of youthful adulation can modify the fact that Deephaven and its inhabitants are inexorably and sometimes painfully dying.

The theme of decline and death permeates the Deephaven sketches; indeed, this is the only sustained theme in the series. Jewett's nostalgia for the past—for fading ways and old-fashioned values—is the single most important element of Deephaven.

The themes of Country are more subtly drawn and more varied than those of Deephaven, not focused on the single idea of the decline and death of the shipping village. As a matter of fact, Jewett includes a number of contrasting details which demonstrate that even though Dunnet Landing's best days are behind it, the village is thriving in a way that Deephaven is not. The dying aristocracy, so much a part of the Deephaven sketches, is omitted entirely from Country. Instead, the narrator involves herself with members of the thriving middle class. Moreover, the narrator is met at the wharf by a fine crowd of spectators, and "the younger portion of the company"<sup>7</sup> follows her with excitement up the street of the town. Unlike Deephaven where the only young people are summer visitors or up-country farmers visiting town for Sunday services, Dunnet

has its share of hometown youth.<sup>8</sup> The capable Johnny Bowden rows Almira Todd and the narrator to Green Island, fishes with the men, and acts as unofficial taxi-boy, driving a wagon for local travellers. On the narrator's second visit to Dunnet, in "William's Wedding," she shows surprise at his growth, explaining that "it had never occurred to me the summer before that Johnny was likely, with the help of time and other forces, to grow into a young man" (p. 148). Though Johnny is the only youth well known to the narrator, she also mentions others. The narrator tells Mrs. Hight of an engagement between a Caplin and "one of the younger Harrises" (p. 123). Captain Bowden's oldest is twenty-two. Mothers who have children sick with colds come to Mrs. Todd's door for cough remedies. And of course, the many young people of the Bowden family, though not from the village, reveal this family to be in no danger of extinction. Neither is commerce dying in Dunnet: a "smart young wholesale egg merchant" (p. 104) lives at the landing, and the fishermen do a lively trade. The town possesses a newspaper, and the citizens debate political issues fiercely. The narrator comments that she "felt a warm sense of comfort in the evident resources of even so small a neighborhood . . ." (p. 67). These details reinforce the impression that Dunnet is not a dying community.

Of course Dunnet is certainly changing, and, without doubt, some changes are for the worse. Jewett uses one character, Captain Littlepage, as the primary spokesman for the glory of the old days and the shortcomings of the present. He describes the advantages of the shipping days when folks "were some acquainted with foreign lands an' their laws, an' could see outside the battle for town clerk here in Dunnet; they got some sense o' proportion" (p. 25). He voices a valid viewpoint here,

and the narrator agrees that the loss of shipping "accounts for the change in a great many things,—the sad disappearance of sea-captains,— doesn't it?" (p. 25). But when Littlepage goes on to criticize the current society even more strongly, Jewett uses the narrator to temper his vehemence. He comments, "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. 26). The narrator tries to placate his anger by responding gently, "Oh no, Captain Littlepage, I hope not" (p. 26).

It is true, of course, that Littlepage helps to confirm, in John Eakin's words, the sense of Dunnet's "shrinking horizons . . . where the restless energy of the mind seeks an outlet in memories, fantasies, and visions."<sup>9</sup> But it is also important to note that while many characters in Deephaven echo and reecho the theme, Jewett uses only one character in Country who dwells upon change as a completely negative phenomenon.

Jewett's direct comments about her attitude toward change reveal that her increased maturity has modified the nostalgic (and negative) feeling she held toward change when she wrote Deephaven. Just three years before the publication of Country, in her preface to the 1893 edition of Deephaven, Jewett explains her youthful sentimentality by writing, "In those days . . . it was easy to be much disturbed by the discovery that certain phases of provincial life were fast waning in New England."<sup>10</sup> She goes on to say, "Tradition and time-honored custom were to be swept away together by the irresistible current. Character and architecture seemed to lose individuality and distinction . . . ." She notes that the money left behind by the tourist was "apt to be used



to sweep away the quaint houses, the roadside thicket, the shady woodland, that had lured him first" (p. 4). Yet in 1893, Jewett could write with hindsight given her by the passage of fifteen years. She could also say that "it was impossible to estimate the value of that wider life that was flowing in . . ." (p. 4). With greater insight she could now see that the "individuality and quaint personal characteristics of rural New England" (p. 5) had not vanished. "It appears, even," she writes, "that they are better nourished and shine brighter by contrast than in former years" (p. 5).

Certainly Jewett saw the destruction of old customs as regrettable, but the Dunnet she describes as a mature writer is not a rotting dying Deephaven. To repeat, then, Dunnet is changing, but it is not dying. This essential difference lends a different tone to the two books.

Most important in creating this tone is the emphasis on living over dying and on youth over old age. In Dunnet, the energy of youth can be exhibited in a character as elderly as Mrs. Blackett. Mrs. Blackett does not sit over high tea mourning the passage of old customs, like the Deephaven Carews. Instead, she is involved in living in the present—in chores around her house: sewing, gardening, and cooking for her son. The eighty-six year old woman turns her own carpet and then wonders why she feels somewhat tired the following week. She describes happy "Sunday nights in winter: we have a real company tea 'stead o' livin' right along just the same . . . an' we get a talkin' together an' have real pleasant times" (p. 50). She is interested in happenings in town, and Almira tells her "all the news there was to tell of Dunnet Landing and its coasts, while the old woman listened with delight" (p. 46). As Stevenson notes, old age in Country is often much like childhood.<sup>11</sup>

Mrs. Blackett is described "as if she promised a great future, and was beginning, not ending, her summers and their happy toils" (p. 41).

William, too, seems younger than his middle-aged years. The narrator compares him on the trouting expedition to a "growing boy" (p. 115). When he talks with Esther, he looks "oddly like a happy young man rather than an ancient boy" (p. 126), and the "William's Wedding" sketch ends the collection on a promising, not despairing note. "They were going to be young again now, she and William, to forget work and care in the spring weather" (p. 151). These older characters are quite different from the "feeble folk" (p. 70) of Deephaven.

The most important difference that lends an air of vitality to Dunnet is the presence of Almira Todd. Eakin calls her the "essense of the village world"<sup>12</sup> for she is involved with the activities of the community, and is known and depended upon by all. With her herbal remedies, Almira is a life-giver, vital and strong, resisting the ills of age. She is "alert and gay as a girl" (p. 95) on her way to the reunion, and says of herself, "Keep me movin' enough, an' I'm twenty year old summer an' winter both" (p. 131).

For the most part, then, the characters of Country are involved in living in the present, not in mourning the past. Cary notes that only two females, Joanna and the Queen's Twin are abnormal.<sup>13</sup> Littlepage might also be added to the ranks of the infirm. The alternatives clearly exist, however, in the person of Almira and her family. Decline and death, although still comprising a significant theme in Country, no longer have the paramount importance they were given in Deephaven.

In her early book, Jewett explored briefly a second theme that was to be developed more fully in Country, man's relationship to nature.

In Deephaven, however, some natural images seem miscellaneous and random rather than thematically important, for though they may be interesting picturesque details, they do not contribute to a unified view of man and nature, nor do they create a sustained impression. A few natural images do further a continuing concern, for the most part emphasizing the destructive power of nature as implied in natural images stressing death and in those emphasizing situations in which man is dominated by nature.

Details which fall into the "picturesque" category include descriptions like that of the Brandon house where "the lilacs were tall, and there were crowds of rosebushes not yet out of bloom; and there were box borders, and there were great elms at the side of the house and down the road" (p. 20). Additionally, some of the description of local fishing customs or superstitions are interesting local color but not developed as part of a sustained impression of nature. "When the moon is very bright and other people grow sentimental, we only remember that it is a fine night to catch hake" (p. 85). Helen also recalls a superstition about the stripe on a haddock: "they say that the Devil caught a haddock once, and it slipped through his fingers and got scorched; so all the haddock had the same mark afterward" (p. 112). To be sure, some natural description in Deephaven is precise and lovely. "After dinner Kate and I went for a walk through some pine woods . . . ; the mosses and lichens which had been dried up were all freshened and blooming out in the dampness. The smell of the wet pitch-pines was unusually sweet, and we wandered about for an hour or two there . . ." (p. 168). Other descriptions make fresh comparisons. The old sailors are described in terms of creatures from the sea: "their hair

looked like the fine sea-weed which clings to the kelp-roots and mussel-shells in little locks" (p. 78). Yet as interesting as these random images may be, they do little if anything to establish a greater pattern of unity within the book.

The natural images which do emphasize a clear thematic point are focused in one way or another on the disabling power of the Deephaven environment or on death itself. Cary points out a natural metaphor of Deephaven's decline: a big flounder the girls find trapped inside the hull of an old rotting schooner. "Like the rightly named flounder—partially disabled, lethargic, and self-satisfied—Deephaven is trapped in a world from which no escape seems possible."<sup>14</sup> The sunset viewed from the lighthouse provides another image which relates to the emphasis on death elsewhere in the book:

. . . I remember best one still evening when there was a bank of heavy gray clouds in the west shutting down like a curtain, and the sea was silver-colored. You could look under and beyond the curtain of clouds into the palest, clearest yellow sky. There was a little black boat in the distance drifting slowly, climbing one white wave after another, as if it were bound out into that other world beyond. (p. 39)

This image is striking, but the weakness of much of the natural imagery in Deephaven is that the meaningful or even symbolic images are haphazardly arranged and seem to have equal weight with the merely picturesque.

At two other points in the book Jewett returns to this theme of nature's destructive force. In her final Deephaven chapter, Jewett describes the fury of an autumn storm:

It was a treacherous sea; it was wicked; it had all the trembling land in its power, if it only dared to send its great waves far ashore. All night long the breakers roared, and the wind howled in the chimneys, and in the morning we always looked

fearfully across the surf and the tossing gray water to see if the lighthouse were standing firm on its rock. It was so slender a thing to hold its own in such a wide and monstrous sea. (p. 242)

Nature is an overwhelming power in this description, but neither is the effect continued in the passage nor is the idea further examined. In the next line Helen forgets her fear. "But the sun came out at last, and not many days afterward we went out with Danny and Skipper Scudder to say good by to Mrs. Kew" (p. 242).

But in only one chapter, "In Shadow," does Jewett use natural imagery to create a single sustained impression. In this sketch, Kate and Helen return to visit a poor family, only to discover that both parents have died since their first visit and that the father's funeral is to occur that very afternoon. The stark natural imagery reinforces the harshness of life for these poor people. There are "gnarled pitch pines" that stand "close together, as near the sea as they dared" (p. 205). These trees look as if "their savage fights with the winter winds had made them hard-hearted" (p. 206). The girls thoughtfully leave the house to climb on the rocks and into "some of the deep cold clefts into which the sun could seldom shine" (p. 214). They wonder, "What could it be in winter when there was a storm and the great waves came thundering in?" (p. 205). The poor man had died at the moment when the tide began to ebb, and the sky grows cloudy as the funeral procession leaves. The girls note that "a strange shadow had fallen over everything. It was like a November day, for the air felt cold and bleak" (p. 220). A forlorn kitten with faded braid around its neck runs across the road in fear.

The futile struggle of the poor dead man is further reflected in some natural details. "There were some great sea-fowl high in the air, fighting

their way toward the sea against the wind, and giving now and then a wild, far-off ringing cry. We could hear the dull sound of the sea, and at a little distance from the land the waves were leaping high, and breaking in foam over the isolated ledges" (pp. 220-221). The girls predict a desolate future for the little cottage. "It is not likely that anyone else will ever go to live there" (p. 222). The thistles which the poor farmer had fought for so long "will march in next summer and take uncollected possession" (p. 222). And the narrator imagines a "fireless, empty, forsaken house, where the . . . snow has sifted in at every crack; outside it is untrodden by any living creature's footstep. The wind blows and rushes and shakes the loose window-sashes in their frames, while the padlock knocks--knocks against the door" (p. 223). Wild nature reclaims the cottage, and the family is beaten: the parents are dead; the children are separated. The situation seems utterly without hope.

Although the impression of nature in this one chapter in Deephaven is strongly unified, Jewett shows greater skill in her handling of the theme of man's relationship to nature in her later book. In Country, she moves beyond the one-sided emphasis on death in "In Shadow" to explore the theme more thoroughly. Thus in the later book, man can both struggle against the natural world and live in harmony with it; nature can dominate him or it can uplift him. The contrasting images provide a better balance and develop the theme more completely.

For example, sometimes in Country the power of nature serves to overwhelm and dwarf man, making him appear as insignificant and ineffectual as the "In Shadow" farmer. The view of Mrs. Begg's funeral seen from the schoolhouse window is described in these words:

"The bay-sheltered islands and the great sea beyond stretched away to the far horizon southward and eastward; the little procession in the foreground looked futile and helpless on the edge of the rocky shore" (p. 20). The narrator stands watching until the funeral procession "had crept round a shoulder of the slope below and disappeared from the great landscape as if it had gone into a cave" (p. 21). With the wide vista of sea and shore as background, man appears unimportant; his concerns seem petty.

However, an expansive vista is just as likely to uplift the heart and make one feel above those petty concerns. At the highest point of Green Island, the narrator describes the view before her. "It gave a sudden sense of space, for nothing stopped the eye or hedged one in,— that sense of liberty in space and time which great prospects always give" (p. 46). William describes a similar sense of connection with space and time when he comments happily that Esther can see the sea from the top of her pasture hill. It is as if the contact between them is maintained throughout the solitary year by the remote visual assurance that they share the same world. Stevenson notes that Esther is "visually and symbolically in touch with the sea," which can be seen as "a principle of life, growth, and future possibility."<sup>15</sup> On her way to the Bowden reunion, the narrator again experiences a sense of freedom when she glimpses the sea:

When I had thought we were in the heart of the inland country, we reached the top of a hill, and suddenly there lay spread out before us a wonderful great view of well-cleared fields that swept down to the wide water of a bay . . . . It was a noble landscape, and my eyes, which had grown used to the narrow inspection of a shaded roadside, could hardly take it in. (pp. 84-85)

Man's struggle against nature, the deadly contest for existence, is only occasionally portrayed in Country. Robert Rhode suggests that in Jewett's writing "nature—in the form of trees, water, and wind—was . . . waiting to repossess the land that the New Englanders, a dying society, must ultimately relinquish."<sup>16</sup> Though this is not the dominant impression of nature in Country, this element does exist, most notably in the "Queen's Twin" chapters.

"Poor land, this is!" sighed Mrs. Todd . . . . "I've known three good hard-workin' families that come here full o' hope an' pride and tried to make something o' this farm, but it beat 'em all . . . . Seems sometimes as if wild Natur' got jealous over a certain spot, and wanted to do just as she'd a mind to." (p. 136)

The narrator echoes this sentiment in her description. "There was a vigor of growth, a persistence and savagery about the sturdy little trees that put weak human nature at complete defiance" (p. 136). But it is important to note that Mrs. Todd limits her comments on "wild Natur'" only to a "certain spot." Nature is not always savage.

Fike makes this point clearly. "But nature in the book crowds out human life only where the human beings involved fail to understand and accommodate themselves to its laws."<sup>17</sup> He mentions Joanna and Esther as two examples of humans who have adjusted to their natural environments. Joanna manages well on the little rocky island of thirty acres, where the trees are stunted, and the ground is likely to be covered with spray in a winter storm. She braids rushes into mats for the floor of her hut and makes sandals for her feet. She keeps hens, raises a garden, and gathers clams. Almira comments, "'You can always live well in any wild place by the sea when you'd starve to death up country, except 't was berry time" (p. 64). Berthoff makes a similar observation about



the "Green Island" chapters, which make the reader feel "the power of nature along this coast to sustain an equable degree of life."<sup>18</sup>

Even "up country" it is possible to make a living as long as one has an understanding of the ways of the natural world. Esther uses the poor land of the high ledges as sheep pasturage, and she makes her venture successful by carefully shepherding. Left to themselves, the sheep would fall prey to dogs, but Esther's understanding and patient devotion keep her sheep thriving.

Perhaps of even greater significance than the more balanced handling of the nature theme in Country is the additional focus on nature provided by Almira Todd. Her understanding of the natural world is both mystical and down-to-earth; it can make her feel sorrow or sustain her with strength. The theme, then, reaches a complex depth in the person of Mrs. Todd that is nowhere evident in Deephaven.

First, Mrs. Todd's association with the natural world is often characterized by folksy down-to-earth common sense. Her knowledge of plants allows her deeper understanding of her fellow man. Nature often acts as a mirror of human weakness and strength. She explains that the tansy in the schoolhouse lot grows so well because it is scuffed by the school children all spring "like some folks that had it hard in their youth, and were bound to make the most of themselves before they died" (p. 19). She greets particular plants as if they were friends in need of encouragement, and she comments approvingly on an ash tree that is growing well. "Last time I was up this way that tree was kind of drooping and discouraged. Grown trees act that way sometimes, same's folks; then they'll put right to it and strike their roots off into new ground and start all over again with real good courage" (p. 84). She describes