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Connecting to the Feminine and to the Inner Self in Sarah Orne  
Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of English  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in English

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by  
Misty D. Powers  
December 2002

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Dr. Mark Holland, Chair  
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Keywords: Sarah Orne Jewett, The Country of the Pointed Firs,  
"The Foreigner," Feminine, Mother, Daughter

ABSTRACT

Connecting to the Feminine and to the Inner Self in Sarah Orne

Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs

by

Misty D. Powers

In Dunnet Landing, Jewett creates a feminine world that is characterized by its depth and its moral and emotional significance. There is a foundation in the real world of human feeling, and while there is much grief and sorrow in this community, there are also possibilities for happiness. The connection to death and loss is what gives much in this feminine world meaning. Grief is only a part of the journey. Out of death and sorrow come strength and a restoration to wholeness. Mrs. Todd has learned this and she passes her knowledge down to the narrator. The narrator's journey is a return to a simpler, older way of life. It is a return to the mother, but it is also a return to self, an inversion of a trip to the frontier. The narrator's connection to Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett helps her to reconnect with and restore herself.

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DEDICATION

To my husband, whose perseverance is inspiring.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to my committee for their support and guidance throughout this process. Their valuable insight and suggestions have helped more than they know.

I would also like to thank my family. Their patience and their prayers have been a blessing. I thank them for showing me what it means to walk in faith; I know that all things are possible if I only believe.

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CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

In Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg states, "Nineteenth-century American society provided but one socially respectable, nondeviant role for women--that of loving wife and mother" (213). In this patriarchal society, the domestic sphere became a place where women "[. . .] valued one another" (64). In a world where they were not welcomed or wanted as anything more than subservient wives or mothers, what other choice did women have but to make a special world of their own? Smith-Rosenberg indicates that:

Uniquely female rituals drew women together during every stage of their lives, from adolescence through courtship, marriage, childbirth and child-rearing, death and mourning. Women revealed their deepest feelings to one another, helped one another with the burdens of housewifery and motherhood, nursed one another's sick, and mourned for one another's dead. It was a world in which men made only a shadowy appearance. Living in the same society, nominally part of the same culture (bourgeois, farming, or working-class), certainly members of the same family, women and men experienced their worlds in radically

different ways. Female rituals rigorously excluded male kith and kin, rituals so secret that men had little knowledge of them, so pervasive that they patterned women's lives from birth to death. (28)

These women who possessed little or no control in the male-dominated world outside of the domestic sphere "possessed status and power in the lives and worlds of other women" (64).

According to Smith-Rosenberg, "An intimate mother-daughter relationship lay at the heart of this female world" (64).

This primary bond became strained, however, as new opportunities for women began to emerge towards the close of the nineteenth century:

Not until economic and intellectual change offered bourgeois daughters (and, far more slowly, working-class daughters) viable alternatives to their mothers' domestic roles did generational conflict and criticism mar this unself-conscious intimacy. Then, however, daughters began to experience their mothers' lives as oppressive. Mothers, ignorant of the new world their daughters wished to enter, pressed inappropriate advice and sought to control where earlier they had gently aided. Many mothers experienced as a personal rejection their daughters' repudiation of the domestic role they, the mothers, had so faithfully followed. Harsh generational conflict broke forth as

psychological factors compounded institutional change.

(33)

The mother-daughter relationship is an important one in Sarah Orne Jewett's novel, The Country of the Pointed Firs. This novel was published in 1896 at a time when this conflict between generations was becoming more pronounced. Jewett must have been well aware of the changes occurring between women at the close of the century. Ironically, 1896 was the same year that Harriett Beecher Stowe, a writer who had a tremendous influence on Jewett's work, died. Pointed Firs was also published only five years after the death of Jewett's mother. It is not out of the question then that Jewett was preoccupied with the relationship between generations of women as she suffered the loss of two important women in her own life within such a short period of time.

In Pointed Firs, Jewett presents a community of women who share a strong connection to each other. This female community possesses a unique bond from which they gather strength and revitalization. However, this community is not without its faults. One fault, for example, is its close mindedness and its rejection of anything new or strange as presented in Jewett's short story, "The Foreigner," which also takes place in Dunnet Landing. In this story, the women of the community reject Captain Tolland's new wife, a foreigner, because she does not conform to their expectations and they disapprove of her behavior

at a church gathering. The lack of communication and understanding between the community and Captain Tolland's wife lead to her rejection. The only friendship that she finds is in Mrs. Todd and her mother, Mrs. Blackett.

Mrs. Todd and her mother are the central characters in this female community. Through them, the nameless narrator of The Country of the Pointed Firs, a visitor to Dunnet Landing, discovers important truths about herself as well as humanity in general. This thesis examines how Jewett develops the idea of domesticity in The Country of the Pointed Firs. The novel transcends the patriarchal idea of the angel in the house, an idea that is explored, for example, in Stowe's The Pearl of Orr's Island. Piety, purity, submission, and domesticity are all virtues that are portrayed by the angel in the house. While the idea of the angel in the house often becomes sentimentalized in literature, Jewett presents the reader of Pointed Firs with a more purely feminine space than that of the angel in the house.

While The Country of the Pointed Firs does focus on the female community and the domestic lives of the female characters, there is also a masculine world present in this work. The main occurrence of this is found in Captain Littlepage's relation of the story of the "waiting place" to the narrator. Captain Littlepage's story meets the requirements of the typical male adventure story of the nineteenth century. What makes this story unique, however, is the manner in which it is accepted or related

to in this intimate female community. Jewett subtly exposes some dangers involved in these masculine narratives in The Country of the Pointed Firs.

This thesis also briefly discusses how the ancient myth of Demeter and Persephone surfaces in Pointed Firs. The use of the mother image will reveal, on a deeper level, the strong bond that connects Mrs. Todd and her mother. This myth also plays an important part in understanding the relationship between Mrs. Todd and other female characters in The Country of the Pointed Firs. An examination of how this myth is presented in the novel, as well as its importance in the relationships between the women, will provide greater understanding of the connection to the feminine. It will also help one to understand a woman's quest for completion and for restoration, much like the quest the narrator experiences while she is in Dunnet Landing.

The opening chapter of The Country of the Pointed Firs is suggestive of Persephone's journey home to her mother, Demeter. This chapter, aptly titled, "The Return," follows the narrator as she is once again returning to Dunnet Landing. The ocean carries her from the male-dominated world of Boston, where she is a writer, to the female community in Dunnet Landing. The mother figure she is returning to takes the form of Mrs. Almira Todd, "whose first name brings to mind the Latin word, alma, soul" (Ammons, Conflicting Stories, 47). Not unlike "Persephone's mother, Jewett's Almira Todd, a supernaturally attuned and yet

ultra-earthbound 'mother,' will spend the summer resuscitating a lost world for her liberated 'daughter' up from the city" (47). The world of the mother becomes a source of strength and solace for the narrator who is in search of a quiet place to pursue her writing. Even Mrs. Todd must return to the world of her mother, a place where she finds peace, contentment, and strength, for revitalization. It is in their mothers' world, this strong female community, where both women discover what identifies them as a member of this community. At the same time, the women recognize that they are each unique individuals within the community. Ultimately, in this time period when women appeared to be torn between two worlds, the traditional world of their mother and the new world that had opened before them, the Country of the Pointed Firs shows the importance of being rooted but having the ability to grow into the new world.

## CHAPTER 2

### MRS. TODD: HERBALIST AND HEALER

The Country of the Pointed Firs reveals a strong female community nestled in the seafaring village of Dunnet Landing. The everyday lives, past and present, of the women in the village are explored by the narrator, an outsider who comes to this place of refuge to concentrate on her writing. What the narrator discovers is an incredible bond of friendship with the inhabitants of the village, particularly with Mrs. Almira Todd. This amazing woman has lived a full life and is a healer in many ways. However, Mrs. Todd's life has not been without sorrow, and her connection to death and loss suggests a deeper, greater understanding of life. Through her revelations to the narrator, we learn what has led Mrs. Todd to the life she has chosen to lead.

Mrs. Todd is connected to death through her occupation as a healer and also, literally in part by name; "todd" is related to the German word, "todt," for death. By providing the villagers with herbal remedies for their ailments, she works closely with the sick and has experienced death as the final result of illness. Furthermore, living in a seafaring village has also brought death to Mrs. Todd's door, as her husband, and most assuredly others in the community, have lost their lives at sea.

Such a close connection to death undoubtedly leads Mrs. Todd to live her life in an open manner. The openness of her life is represented by the openness of her home--with doors and windows that are hardly ever shut to the outside world--which becomes symbolic of Mrs. Todd's personality. She willingly shares her home as freely as she shares the intimate details of her life. A "deeper intimacy" develops between the narrator and Mrs. Todd as Mrs. Todd "would feel that she must talk to somebody" and the narrator "was only too glad to listen" (Jewett 8). Mrs. Todd has witnessed death firsthand, and she realizes the importance of developing lasting friendships and making the most of every moment before death overtakes her. It is important for Mrs. Todd not to shut her life or her home off to the outside world.

Mrs. Todd is, in fact, strongly connected to a woman greatly respected in the community of this outside world. Mrs. Todd's mother, Mrs. Blackett, is greatly admired in the community for her strength of character and her compassion. Mrs. Blackett is perhaps even more admired and respected for the "golden gift" of "tact" which "is a kind of mind-reading" that she possesses (38). Mrs. Blackett uses this gift to make her guests feel so much at home around her. Mrs. Todd has learned a tremendous amount from her mother in regards to making others feel welcome in her home, as evidenced by the narrator's comfort in Mrs. Todd's presence as well as in her home.

Mrs. Todd herself plays an important role in the narrative structure of the novel; indeed, it centers on her. In "Going in Circles: The Female Geography of Jewett's Country of the Pointed Firs," Elizabeth Ammons suggests that the structure of the novel is like a spider's web. The center of the novel is "Mrs. Todd's house at Dunnet Landing, place of shared habitation and point of repeated return and embarkation" (85). From this central location, the narrator and Mrs. Todd travel back and forth into the community. Ammons suggests that

the narrative continually turns back to where it has been, enriched by its journey out, but not needing to alter or improve upon the nucleus: the relationship between the narrator and Mrs. Todd. All that 'happens' in this book is that the circle expands.

(86)

From this point of view, Mrs. Todd is central to the unfolding of the story itself. Without Mrs. Todd, the narrator would be unable to make a connection to the other characters in Dunnet Landing and would not learn how to gain the "judgment an' experience" that only Mrs. Todd can teach her (Jewett 8). Mrs. Todd's wisdom is imperative if the narrator is to grow and learn from the experience of living in this female community. Only Mrs. Todd can teach her how to listen to what is being said when there is silence or how to look beyond the surface to the inner self. The wisdom that Mrs. Todd has gained throughout her life

will be passed down to the narrator who she hopes will learn how to be an important part of the community as well. Mrs. Todd is recognized for her strength and knowledge, and she must share her experiences with the narrator so that she can benefit those around her. By listening to Mrs. Todd's stories and watching how she interacts with other characters, the narrator will gain valuable insight on how most to benefit from the years she still has left. The narrator herself is aware of this as she "hoped in her heart" that she would be like Mrs. Todd, as well as her mother, as she "lived on into age" (88).

As the narrator's relationship with Mrs. Todd deepens, Mrs. Todd reveals "all that lay deepest in her heart" when she shares the story of the man she truly loved but was forbidden to marry (8). While Mrs. Todd has been sharing this great secret with the narrator, she has been standing on the braided rug. In his article, titled in part, "The Braided Rug, Pennyroyal, and the Pathos of Almira Todd," Ron Welburn prefers to revise Elizabeth Ammons' view of the novel being structured as a spider web. Welburn argues instead that the novel is designed more as Mrs. Todd's braided rug and views "the structure and meaning of action in Pointed Firs as a series of radiating cores linked by braiding as one would connect the braids in a rug" (73). Both Welburn and Ammons, however, agree on the point that Mrs. Todd is the center of the novel. Welburn indicates that Mrs. Todd maintains a "central position and dominating emotional energy" (73).

Welburn then takes a closer look at Mrs. Todd's braided rug and her use of pennyroyal. In an interesting and informative look at the rug-making process, it is stated that

braided rugs are composed of bits of fabric and discarded clothing and several colors are employed. The rings in Mrs. Todd's rug are black and gray, colors that easily would stand for somberness, disappointment, and loss. Her rug's two colors suggest trouser material commonly used for such purposes by New Englanders. [. . .] 'Sometimes sentiment is interwoven in these New England rugs. Occasionally one finds heartaches.' (74)

As Mrs. Todd has just related the story of the man she truly loves but was forbidden to marry to the narrator, we find the first reason for Mrs. Todd's broken heart. Mrs. Todd is standing in the "centre of [the] braided rug" with "its rings" appearing "to circle about her feet" (Jewett 9). Mrs. Todd's position on the rug indicates that sorrow and loss surround her life.

Mrs. Todd reveals to the narrator a second reason for her sorrow at a later point in the novel. Mrs. Todd intimates that she is thankful her husband, Nathan, died before he learned "what he'd had to know" if they had "lived long together" (40). That is, before her husband discovered that Mrs. Todd's "heart was gone out o' [her] keepin' before [she] ever saw Nathan" (40).

This latter scene unfolds in Mrs. Todd's "sainted" place, the place "where pennyroyal grew" (40). Pennyroyal is an "herb of the womb used as an emmenagogue to induce menstrual flow and expel the afterbirth" (Welburn 75). Pennyroyal, used by Native Americans, also has "another, carefully acknowledged practical use: it should be avoided by pregnant women presumably because its ingestion in tea form could result in miscarriage--in other words, pennyroyal is by extension an agent for inducing abortion" (75). Welburn questions if this is the "'Indian remedy' Mrs. Todd dispenses to her neighbors with 'whispered directions'" and also if "in the heart of the pennyroyal chapter, [. . .] the emotional center of the novel, we find the book's most cryptic language" which has to do with Mrs. Todd, "two men, love, loss of both men for different reasons and an implied self-induced loss" (76).

Welburn suggests that Almira Blackett's love for the man she could not marry resulted in a pregnancy that she aborted with the use of pennyroyal. He questions:

Why else would the pennyroyal mean so much to her memory of her lover while she planned her future with Nathan? Her maiden name Blackett would confirm her being projected according to conventional mores of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with her silent and absolute, archaic grief about the loss of her lover, and the self-administration of a secret substance to end her

pregnancy and thereby losing her child. Her sense of loss for Nathan is not as deep. Pennyroyal, then, may be the 'mysterious herb' fragrance blowing in as Mrs. Todd stands on her rug [. . .], and may have disguised the chamomile tea she gives the narrator [. . .]. Her memories are most vivid when she and the narrator visit the secret place of the pennyroyal; but near or at her home she has absorbed and assimilated its fragrance and meaning. (76)

With so much in this novel being understated, it is not inconceivable that this has happened as Welburn suggests. If Welburn's point of view is indeed correct, that Mrs. Todd has aborted her child, then this adds yet another level to Mrs. Todd's sorrow and loss. Imagine how this must have devastated Mrs. Todd, at the time, Miss Blackett. She is in love with a man she cannot marry, carrying his child, and is forced to make a decision. She cannot choose to bring her child into this world and expect either herself or her child to be an accepted member of the community. Miss Blackett, therefore, chooses life through death.

Knowing the close relationship Mrs. Todd has with her mother, the younger woman had to have felt that she would be missing out on the special relationship between a mother and her child, perhaps even continuing the cycle with a daughter of her own. It is Mrs. Blackett's love that transforms her daughter and

helps her to rise up from where she has fallen. Mrs. Todd herself relates to the narrator that "you never get over bein' a child long's you have a mother to go to" (Jewett 30). Mrs. Todd finds strength and comfort in her mother's presence and even looks to share this love with Joanna, as "the love in mother's heart would warm her" (59). The love that Mrs. Blackett used to help her daughter could be shared with another woman, "poor Joanna," who has descended into an abyss of loneliness and guilt. Mrs. Todd is rescued by her mother's love from the loneliness and guilt that she suffers; Joanna, however, refuses to be rescued by those who reach out to help her and lives the life of a hermit until her death. One must be willing to allow one's self to return from the depths of sorrow but Joanna feels that she must endure her suffering alone and pushes away the outside world.

Not completely unlike Joanna, Mrs. Todd, who is ironically the center of this community, also lives a somewhat secluded life. Her house is "retired and sheltered [. . .] from the busy world" (6). The narrator also frequently alludes to a sense of loneliness that surrounds Mrs. Todd. She speaks of the "remoteness of a daily life" that Mrs. Todd leads (40). After gathering her belongings to leave at the end of the summer, the narrator remarks that Mrs. Todd's "little house had suddenly grown lonely [. . .] and looked empty," much as it had on the day the narrator arrived (100). As the house is an extension of Mrs. Todd, the reader understands that Mrs. Todd will once again

return to her life of loneliness. When the narrator leaves Dunnet Landing, "the final image of the book is one of separation, solitude, and mortality" (Donovan 111). Recalling the myth of Demeter and Persephone, Demeter's grief begins once again as her daughter, Persephone, returns to the other world. Although the narrator has been in this world, she is not a part of it and must return to her life in Boston, leaving Mrs. Todd alone once again.

According to Paul John Eakin, the narrator "experiences her deepest insights into the character of her friend when she sees her in attitudes of [. . .] isolation" (221). Isolation is important as well as necessary to Mrs. Todd. Just as the narrator has used this trip to Dunnet Landing to revitalize herself, Mrs. Todd uses her herb-gathering voyages as a time to gather strength for herself so that she, in addition to her healing herbs, will be able to help others. The strength and revitalization that she finds in times of isolation and seclusion are necessary for this allows her to build herself up in order to lift others from where they may have fallen.

Mrs. Todd, this woman who has descended into the very depths of sorrow and risen a stronger woman because of it, who has seen some of the "chapters" of her life "come to their natural end," knows the value of living (Jewett 100). She returns a healer who understands how precious life is and looks to share what she has experienced and learned with others.

According to Mrs. Todd, "'tain't worth while to wear a day all out before it comes" (68). Mrs. Todd knows the importance of valuing the present moment and makes the most of the moments she has. Her "peculiar wisdom that made one value [her] pleasant company" has enabled the narrator to learn a great deal about living, as Mrs. Todd hoped that the narrator would in the beginning of the novel (74).

Using Mrs. Todd's own words to describe her, "Life ain't spoilt her a mite" (25). Living has only made this "landlady, herb-gatherer, and rustic philosopher" a stronger, more beautiful person (28).

'There's sometimes a good hearty tree growin' right out of the bare rock, out o' some crack that just holds the roots [. . .], but that tre'll keep a green top in the driest summer. You lay your ear down to the ground an' you'll hear a little stream runnin'. Every such tree has got its own livin' spring; there's folks made to match 'em.' (74)

Mrs. Todd is one of them; the bare rock is life and the stream is her heart, her life source, and her inner self. Something vital and alive has sprung up out of harsh reality and experience. Her greater understanding of life enables her to share her healing powers, both physically and psychologically, with others. As Demeter attempted to share the gift of immortality with Demophon, Mrs. Todd, having been so close to death in many ways,

has a tremendous capacity for life and shares her peculiar wisdom with those who surround her in this intimate female community. She seeks to bless those who will take of her unique gifts and finds a type of healing for herself as she is able to extend to those in need. In Sarah Orne Jewett: An American Persephone, Sarah Way Sherman indicates, "The nurture of Demophon is particularly interesting because the infant prince is presented as a substitute for the lost daughter" (85). By providing her healing powers to others, Mrs. Todd is caring for the narrator, her symbolic daughter, during her absence and perhaps even for the child she has supposedly aborted. In this way, Mrs. Todd has never lost a child but is able to keep her alive and close at hand.

Throughout The Country of the Pointed Firs, Mrs. Todd is described with such phrases that bring to mind the figure of an ancient goddess. Among other things, she is compared to a sibyl and to a witch; there is the suggestion that Mrs. Todd is connected to a very ancient past surrounded by secrets and mystery. She recalls primal femininity with her rotund figure and her vast amount of knowledge. The mother/daughter relationship is an important one in the nineteenth century but the Demeter/Persephone relationship allows a mother to be a daughter and lets a relationship develop between women. As stated by Helen Luke, "[. . .] the daughter is the extension of her [the mother's] very self, carrying her back into the past and

her own youth and forward to the promise of her own rebirth into a new personality, into the awareness of the Self" (qtd. in Murdock 99). The loss of the daughter is a loss of the young and untroubled part of self. It brings forth change as one shifts focus to the inner self and to the work of the second half of life (99).

Demeter and Persephone are two aspects of the same goddess, so Mrs. Todd can also be Persephone, Queen of the Underworld; this is suggested by the way Mrs. Todd is connected to death, to depth, and to the inner self. The myth of Demeter and Persephone is about loss and recovery. Mrs. Todd is an image of grief, as is Demeter, but it is through this loss, because of the pain she has suffered, that she finds her connection to the source of life, her inner self.

## CHAPTER 3

### CAPTAIN LITTLEPAGE: A MASCULINE NARRATIVE

Some of the most popular works in nineteenth century American literature by authors such as Herman Melville, Mark Twain, and James Fenimore Cooper capture the imagination with heroes who remove themselves from civilization and journey into the wilderness or unknown for various reasons, either as a means of escape or exploration or to obtain a desired goal. Priscilla Leder argues that abandoning "the constraints of civilization in favor of a world without boundaries" does bring freedom, but it is a freedom with its own unique dangers (29). As Leder states,

Without geographical boundaries, an explorer can become lost, and outside the social boundaries by which he defines himself, his very identity can be lost. Unable to locate himself, the protagonist feels as if he may be dissolved into the confusion that confronts him. This danger is manifest in the confusing landscapes, threatening encounters, and inconclusive endings of many of the works of American fiction. (29)

While The Country of the Pointed Firs primarily focuses on the feminine world, Jewett subtly weaves a masculine narrative, such as those found in the popular nineteenth century works of these other authors, into her own novel. Captain Littlepage, an

old seafarer who does seem to be dissolved into the confusion that confronts him, relates the story of the "waiting place" and the "fog-shaped men" to the narrator.

During her visit with Mrs. Todd, the narrator discovers that she is not accomplishing what she should with her writing and rents a schoolhouse where she can work in seclusion away from the busyness of Mrs. Todd's home as it is the season for her popular spruce beer. Following Mrs. Begg's funeral service, instead of joining the remainder of the community in the walking funeral procession, the narrator retreats to the deserted schoolhouse where she can work in isolation. She begins to regret this decision, however, while watching the others walk by, because she makes herself as well as her friends "remember that I did not really belong to Dunnet Landing" (Jewett 13). She begins to "wish for a companion and for news from the outer world" but she returns to her work and to "the half-written page again" (13). Immediately following this, Captain Littlepage, perhaps suggestive of the narrator's half-written page, comes to visit the narrator.

This old seafarer is described as "an aged grasshopper of some strange human variety" (13). In his article, "Nature and the Circles of Initiation in The Country of the Pointed Firs," Richard G. Carson makes the interesting statement that the grasshopper is a "parasitic insect that lives off, rather than contributes to, the communal good" (155). Unlike Mrs. Todd or

her mother, who both make great contributions to the community, Captain Littlepage only “‘chirps’ about his past adventure in the Arctic and spins stories of ‘fog shaped men’” (155). But storytelling is a talent that this old sea captain does possess, as it is obvious that he captures the narrator’s attention with his news of the outer world.

Captain Littlepage’s narrative begins with an account of the events surrounding his Arctic voyage. Following a shipwreck that left him and his crew stranded, Captain Littlepage happens upon a secluded mission. Carson suggests that “the foundering of his ship ‘Minerva’ (the Roman goddess of Wisdom) is symbolic of his frozen quest for knowledge” (156). Captain Littlepage does very much indeed thirst for knowledge as evidenced by the vast amount of reading that he does while aboard ship. According to the sea captain, “‘A shipmaster was apt to get the habit of reading [. . .]. A captain is not expected to be familiar with his crew, and for company’s sake in dull days and nights he turns to his book’” (Jewett 17). Captain Littlepage, of course, did more than his fair share of reading. Mrs. Todd states that “‘he’s been a great reader all his seafarin’ days. 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’” (25). And the narrator gets to see some part of Captain Littlepage at his best when she notices that “the dulled look in his eyes had gone, and there was instead a clear intentness that made them seem dark and piercing”

as he begins to relate to her the special knowledge of the waiting place that he has gained during his Arctic voyage (19).

Perhaps the most astounding detail of Captain Littlepage's narrative is the fact that he strongly believes it to be true, although he has not experienced these events firsthand. The story actually comes to him through Gaffett, another seafarer who is stranded at the mission, and is more or less a deathbed confession as Gaffett "was afraid he should never get away" from the mission to tell his story (Jewett 20). Gaffett, the sole survivor of a polar expedition, desired to share his knowledge with Captain Littlepage so that Captain Littlepage could perhaps "interest the scientific men in his discovery" (20).

According to Leder,

The arctic expedition Captain Littlepage recounts contains all the elements of the characteristically American male journey into the unknown: to seek the pole is to travel beyond the boundary of human knowledge in search of some ultimate end. (29)

In great detail, Leder points out some similarities between the male narrative found in The Country of the Pointed Firs and Edgar Allan Poe's The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym. Leder indicates this comparison is significant because it "can illuminate the ways in which Jewett reappropriates the classic American encounter with a terrifying wilderness" (29).

Pym's narrative also "provides an account of another fictitious polar exploration that encounters an unearthly presence" (29). In Captain Littlepages's narrative, this unearthly presence appears in the form of a town that disappears when it is approached. The town is populated with "blowing gray figures that would pass along alone, or sometimes gathered in companies as if they were watching" (Jewett 21). When Gaffett and another man approached and began to chase one of these fog-shaped men, it "flittered away out o' sight like a leaf the wind takes with it, or a piece of cobweb" (22). These peculiar shapes would also "make as if they talked together but there was no sound of voices, and 'they acted as if they didn't see [the men] but only felt [the men] going towards them'" (22).

In Pym's narrative, the men are "nearly overwhelmed by the white ashy shower that fell" on them and their canoe (Poe 882). And as Pym and Peters "rushed into the embraces of the cataract," a "chasm threw itself open to receive [them]" (882). However, according to Pym, "there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow" (882).

Leder indicates that in both of these narratives, "the loss of perceptual boundaries parallels a loss of metaphysical boundaries" (30). Captain Littlepage insists that the town Gaffett spoke of was "a kind of waiting-place between this world

an' the next" (Jewett 22). And both Pym and Captain Littlepage use nonspecific terms to describe what they see. According to Leder, "The word 'figure' in each description suggests a disturbing shape that the narrator cannot or will not identify as human" (30). Leder suggests that "these ghosts frighten because they cannot be identified with known human experience" (30). Because these men are faced with "such pervasive uncertainty," they become "bewildered and disoriented" (30). Like the other explorers in the American male narrative, they are threatened with a loss of identity because they are no longer within the boundaries (30).

Pym and Peters do appear to be in imminent danger as they are drawn closer to the cataract "under the influence of a powerful current" (Poe 881). It would also seem as if they were beginning to lose their identities as Pym relates that he "felt a *numbness* of body and mind--dreaminess of sensation--but this was all" (881). Although Pym realizes that he should be experiencing terror at this point, he feels none. Pym is losing control, leading to a loss of identity, as they are going deeper into this world where boundaries are absent. On the other hand, Gaffett and the sailors in Captain Littlepage's narrative are able to escape this fate because when they did make a final attempt to get close to the town, "'Those folks, or whatever they were, come about 'em like bats; all at once they raised incessant armies, and come as if to drive 'em back to sea'" (Jewett 22). Their

presence is not wanted in this world and so they escape with identities intact.

While Poe's intent is to involve his readers in the confrontation, "Jewett's narrative strategy serves to distance her reader from it" (Leder 31). Because The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym was published as Poe's retelling of the supposed events, with the preface being written by the true Pym, Poe's "elaborate strategy does more than simply suggest veracity; it confuses the distinction between truth and fiction" because like Pym and Peters, the reader "experience(s) the blurring of an essential psychological distinction" (31-2). The reader will recall that Pym's narrative ends at the point where he sees the white figure. Leder suggests that

despite the editorial note indicating that the subsequent chapters were lost, the impression is one of the inadequacy of language itself in the face of unstructured, unclassifiable experience. The figure recalls the whiteness of the whale in Moby-Dick, which terrifies because it reveals the arbitrariness and fragility of the means by which experience is classified. In a sense, Poe's readers themselves are confronted with the dissolution of boundaries that accompanies the penetration of unknown territory in classic American male adventure novels. (32)

While Captain Littlepage's narrative may portray that dissolution, Jewett attempts to distance the experience from the reader. The story that Captain Littlepage shares with the narrator comes to him from Gaffett; it does not recount Captain Littlepage's own experience. The story does become a part of the narrator's experience at Dunnet Landing, however, and she recounts the story to a reading audience as told to her by Captain Littlepage. Unlike Pym's narrative, there are no first person accounts of the events. Jewett also distances her reader by allowing the characters to question Captain Littlepage's sanity with comments such as, "I felt sure that Captain Littlepage's mind had now returned to a safe level" or "'I was afraid 'twas one o' his flighty spells'" (Jewett 24-5). Leder suggests that

[. . .] by treating the tale as a literary work rather than a literal account, Jewett's narrator and Mrs. Todd in effect dismiss the question of the tale's foundation in truth and the disturbing question of the captain's sanity. In a sense, the captain himself reinforces their attitude: he intersperses his story with comments about his reading and about his admiration for Shakespeare and Milton, and he casts his description of the 'attack' of the gray figures in the language of Milton. (32)

While Captain Littlepage's narrative may be treated lightly by the narrator and by Mrs. Todd, both of whom accept his tale as having only "an air of truth," it is taken seriously by Captain Littlepage, to the point of overwhelming him (Jewett 24). He struggles with the knowledge that the discovery of this waiting place is not accepted in the community in which he lives. He is frustrated because, "'In that handful of houses they fancy that they comprehend the universe'" (15). In Captain Littlepage's mind, he has the answers, but there is no real proof to support his tale of the fog-shaped men and the waiting place. Leder states

Those blowing gray figures can never yield that certainty. Gaffett and the captain are mistaken not in their belief that the ghost city exists but in their conviction that its existence can be measured, verified, and used as objective proof of life after death. This conviction, more than the tale itself, makes the captain seem 'overset.' Because Captain Littlepage and his male counterparts in American fiction demand objective knowledge, experiences that defy scientific verification disorient and terrify them. (33)

What becomes particularly interesting about Jewett's novel is how the female community of Dunnet Landing relates to this male

narrative and its significance in their world. Ann Douglas, in the Feminization of American Culture, suggests that the

American women of Melville's generation were trying to replace the masculine vision of history as a series of political and economic facts enacted and marshaled by men, by incorporating its central themes into the feminine themes of natural cycles and community. (qtd. in Leder 35)

Through the use of the male narrative in The Country of the Pointed Firs, Jewett is able to subtly demonstrate the importance of those natural cycles and community.

After the captain has completed his narrative, the narrator comments,

Gaffett with his good bunk and the bird-skins, the story of the wreck of the *Minerva*, the human-shaped creatures of fog and cobweb, the great words of Milton with which he described their onslaught upon the crew, all this moving tale had such an air of truth that I could not argue with Captain Littlepage. (Jewett 24)

Words or phrases such as "the great words of Milton," "this moving tale," and "an air of truth" suggest that the narrator does not believe Captain Littlepage's narrative to be the gospel; instead, she appears to be captivated by the story itself and by the aged captain's great talent in storytelling. Likewise, Mrs.

Todd appears to think that the captain "had overset his mind with too much reading" (14). She also states that he has some "'great narratives'" and that "'some o' them tales hangs together toler'ble well'" (25). Both women have a great appreciation for Captain Littlepage's talent as a storyteller and seem to give no credit to his tale.

While his talent as a storyteller is admired, Captain Littlepage is isolated outside of this community of caring women. He clings to the past and to the hope that someone will prove the truth of the waiting place and comments that "'Twill be a great exploit some o' these days'" (23). When he sees a map of North America hanging behind the narrator in the schoolhouse his eyes become "fixed upon the northernmost regions and their careful recent outlines with a look of bewilderment" (23). Captain Littlepage has become confused and enervated and is lost in his narrative. When his "determined look and the seafaring, ready aspect that had come to his face" is replaced by "the old, pathetic, scholarly look," it seems as if the captain's hope has disappeared and he is left to live in the isolation, confusion, and frustration that surrounds him (Jewett 23).

What Captain Littlepage does not realize is that "the world beyond this which some believe to be so near" does exist in Dunnet Landing (Jewett 25). It is found on Green Island where Mrs. Blackett lives; "the sunburst upon that outermost island made it seem like a sudden revelation" to the narrator as she

imagines that this is the world beyond (25). The island reveals itself through the "shadow that had fallen on the darkening shore" as a "gleam of golden sunshine struck the outer islands, and one of them shown out clear in the light, and revealed itself in a compelling way to our eyes" (25). Mrs. Todd asks of the narrator, "'Can't we see it plain?'" as if to suggest that this is not an unapproachable town where fog-shaped men dwell. Green Island is real and is a place where one is welcome; Mrs. Blackett is real and so is the relationship that Mrs. Todd has with her mother. As Leder indicates, however, "Mrs. Todd's age, sixty-seven, invites the inference that her mother has gone to heaven" (36). At Green Island,

Heaven and earth become one place, life and death part of one process. The place that the narrator associates with the end of life, perhaps recalling the funeral procession she has just witnessed, is in actuality the home of the mother, the beginning of life. The image describes a circle, evoking the cycle of birth and death that transcends the linear progress of history. (Leder 36)

Jewett uses Captain Littlepage's narrative to pull the world beyond into this world. She demonstrates that both worlds exist in the other, as there is death in life and life in death. They are not two separate worlds, as Captain Littlepage believes, with one waiting to be discovered. Throughout The Country of the

Pointed Firs, Jewett combines these two worlds into one and it is mainly through Mrs. Todd where we find the evidence of the world beyond present in this one. Leder further indicates that, "Mrs. Todd seems part of the other world of the ghost city in the act of using her wisdom to refresh and nourish the narrator; the same gesture that binds women to each other draws the next world into this" (37). It is Mrs. Todd's close connection to death and the experiences that she has that give both worlds meaning.

According to Nina Auerbach in her study Communities of Women, "freedom for women is freedom in the sphere of the soul" (26). There is also freedom for women in "attaining access to the heavens" (26). These are not physical boundaries as those actually explored in the realms of the male adventure narrative but spiritual boundaries. In The Country of the Pointed Firs, Jewett explores the emotional and spiritual connections of women instead of focusing on women's physical or domestic boundaries or limitations. Doing so enables her to examine the universal human experience instead of entering a world that is limited in both time and space.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE GHOST-MOTHER: MRS. TODD'S FOREIGN EXPERIENCE

The opening chapter of The Country of the Pointed Firs reveals the small seafaring village of Dunnet Landing. This village exists between "the rocky shore and the dark woods" (Jewett 5). The forest and the sea are traditionally used in literature as symbols of wilderness and represent the unknown; these are spaces where anything can happen. The houses in Dunnet Landing exist within these boundaries, yet there is a sense of hospitality and comfortableness within them. Dunnet Landing is the setting for The Country of the Pointed Firs, but it is also where some of Jewett's short stories take place as well, several of which include the characters we are familiar with from Pointed Firs, including the narrator, Mrs. Todd, and Mrs. Blackett. One is left with the impression that the majority of these stories are all a part of the experience the narrator has in Pointed Firs. One such story, "The Foreigner," does include these characters, as well as others, and suggests yet a deeper connection with the unknown, the place where anything can happen.

Late one evening when the narrator is alone in her room, Mrs. Todd comes to keep her company as "the first northeasterly storm of the season was blowing hard outside" (Jewett 225). The narrator informs us that the "Summer was coming to a sad end that

night" (225). In The Country of the Pointed Firs, this was a signal that time was drawing near for the narrator to return to her other life in Boston, bringing an end to the narrator's visit with Mrs. Todd. There also seems to be "danger offshore among the outer islands" where Mrs. Blackett lives, and Mrs. Todd is obviously concerned for her mother's safety (225). She is perhaps drawn to the narrator's room with the desire of passing through the storm with someone else.

As the weather rages around them, Mrs. Todd begins to relate a chilling tale to the narrator about a night when the weather was similar to the one they are presently experiencing. The narrator begins to dread that she has asked Mrs. Todd to share with her any ghost stories that she might know, but Mrs. Todd proceeds to share her own experience as the weather reminds her of the night Captain Tolland's wife died. "The Foreigner," Mrs. Captain Tolland's story, however, is not one that would haunt the narrator "on every dark stormy night" as she fears; rather, it provides the narrator, as well as the reader, greater insight into Mrs. Todd's character (227).

"The Foreigner," like many of the stories in The Country of the Pointed Firs, is a story within a story. In this case, Mrs. Todd is recounting past events to the narrator. The narrator does not move into the story herself but allows Mrs. Todd to narrate her own story. This narrative device is significant because it makes "Mrs. Todd herself as much of the focus of the

story as the story she tells" (Pryse 246). The story that Mrs. Todd tells the narrator at this particular time is the story of the foreigner. Marjorie Pryse suggests that in this story, "the nature of foreign experience is the central concern" and she questions, "What is foreign about Mrs. Todd? What does the narrator need to 'translate' about her in order for the reader to understand her?" (246). It is through the story of the foreigner that we learn much about a unique and somewhat "foreign" Mrs. Todd.

One will recall from the Introduction that Captain Tolland's wife was a foreigner who was not accepted in the intimate female community of Dunnet Landing. Captain Tolland and some other seafaring men, Mrs. Todd's father included, had met her while they were at a port in Jamaica. Her first husband and children had died from yellow fever while they were there waiting to get passage to France, her original home, and their money had also been stolen from her husband while he was dying. She had been left alone and had started singing and playing her guitar to earn money. After some other men began to harass her, Captain Tolland and the other Dunnet Landing men took her with them. Instead of giving her "money to pay her passage home to France, or wherever she wanted to go" as Mrs. Todd felt they should have, the men drew lots and Captain Tolland took her back to Dunnet Landing as a wife (230).

After the women of the community reject Captain Tolland's wife because of the way she sings and dances at a church gathering, she is treated as an outsider and isolated from this community. Because she is different, it is difficult for the others to approach or get close to her. It is easier for them to reject the unfamiliar rather than to embrace it.

Only Mrs. Blackett treats this foreigner with kindness. Mrs. Todd does not offer her friendship to this lonely, rejected woman until Mrs. Blackett harshly criticizes her daughter for her behavior:

'What consequence is my supper?' [. . .] 'or your comfort or mine, beside letting a foreign person an' stranger feel so desolate; she's done the best a woman could do in her lonesome place, and she asks nothing of anybody except a little common kindness. Think if 'twas you in a foreign land!' (Jewett 233-4)

Mrs. Todd finally reaches out to this woman and discovers when she unexpectedly visits the foreigner during supper that "'twas the same with me at home, there was only one plate'" (234).

Their friendship is sealed when Mrs. Todd speaks of her mother and the foreigner calls Mrs. Blackett an angel. Mrs. Todd sees the tears in the other woman's eyes at this point; even in her absence, the mother has connected them.

Whether Mrs. Todd realizes it or not, Mrs. Blackett knows that her daughter needs this woman as much as Mrs. Captain

Tolland needs her. Captain Tolland is out at sea at this point, and Mrs. Todd has been recently widowed. It is as if the mother senses the loneliness of each woman and knows they can learn from each other. At this stage of her life, Mrs. Todd either does not have much to offer, besides her company, or she is unwilling to share her life as intimately as she does with the narrator some forty years later. She does, however, learn a great deal from Mrs. Captain Tolland; this foreign woman shares her unique knowledge of plants and herbs with Mrs. Todd.

Mrs. Todd relates that Captain Tolland's wife "'taught me a sight o' things about herbs I never knew before nor since; she was well acquainted with the virtues of plants. She'd act awful secret about some things too, an' used to work charms for herself sometimes'" (234). Mrs. Captain Tolland also had "so much information that other folks hadn't" and made Mrs. Todd "imagine new things" (235). This foreign woman is a wealth of knowledge and information for Mrs. Todd, who openly receives what Mrs. Captain Tolland shares with her. Mrs. Todd's immense knowledge and use of herbs is not something that has been passed down from her mother as much useful knowledge is passed down through generations; it has been learned from a foreign woman from a foreign land. This is not a knowledge that was already present in Dunnet Landing but rather comes to Mrs. Todd from an outside, or other, world. Once Mrs. Todd learns this mysterious knowledge of herbs and their uses, she, in turn, takes on the dark

qualities of being foreign or unknown. Her connection to this continues to deepen as Mrs. Todd grows older and her knowledge increases.

Mrs. Captain Tolland needs Mrs. Todd's friendship and company desperately because she is alone and isolated in a foreign land. She is in a community where people cannot or do not try to understand her, she has no family to turn to for comfort, and she has just found out that her new husband has died at sea. She receives the news of her husband's death on her "fete day," the festival of the saint after whom a person is named; it is a day celebrated as a birthday (236). This day that should be celebrated as a day of life and birth turns to a day of death and mourning for the twice-widowed foreigner. She collapses from the shock of the news, and Mrs. Todd comments to the narrator, "'I had known what it was to be a widow, myself, for near a year, an' there was plenty o' widow women along this coast that the sea had made desolate, but I never saw a heart broke as I did then'" (Jewett 236).

Even before the news of her husband's death reaches her, Mrs. Todd comments that Mrs. Captain Tolland "'wore a fixed smile that wa'n't a smile; there wa'n't no light behind it, same's a lamp can't shine if it ain't lit. I don't know just how to express it, 'twas a sort of made countenance'" (235). There is something missing in her life; something has already gone out of her, and the news of her husband's death seems to push her over

the edge of life into death. She loses hope, gives up on a life that has treated her unfairly, and slowly begins to die.

Mrs. Todd cares for her throughout the last few months before her death; however, Mrs. Blackett "'was the one who gave her the only comfort'" (237). As with Joanna Todd of Shell-heap Island, only Mrs. Blackett can bring some relief to those leaving this world to go into the next. Mrs. Blackett is the center of this community and domestic world of women. Her hospitality and self-forgetfulness comfort those who reach out to her.

In The Country of the Pointed Firs, the narrator wonders why Mrs. Blackett "had been set to shine on this lonely island of the northern coast" and reasons that it "must have been to keep the balance true, and make up to all her scattered and depending neighbors for other things which they may have lacked" (38).

Mrs. Blackett is significant in The Country of the Pointed Firs, as well as in "The Foreigner," because she represents the connection to the mother's love. The image of the mother is important in Jewett's work; much of Mrs. Todd's story is Mrs. Blackett looking out for her daughter. But Mrs. Blackett extends that love to others in need, as she does with Joanna and with the foreign woman. Mrs. Blackett is able to make people feel at home, and if they feel this way then they do not feel alienated.

It is Mrs. Todd, however, who keeps watch over Mrs. Captain Tolland on the night she dies. She tells the narrator that there "'Twas a gale that begun the afternoon before she died,

and had kept blowing' off an' on ever since'" (239). And before Mrs. Todd describes what happened on the night of the foreign woman's death, the narrator relates that Mrs. Todd "[. . .] then stopped to listen to the wind, and sat for a moment in deferential silence, as if she waited for the wind to speak first" (243). She then leans "forward toward the fire with an arm laid on either knee, as if [. . .] consulting the glowing coals for some augury" (243). The information that she desires to tell the narrator has only been told to a very few, and Mrs. Todd appears to be waiting for permission from the outside world, her own inner self, to share her foreign experience or knowledge with the narrator.

Mrs. Todd then tells the story of what happened on the night of the foreign woman's death. Mrs. Todd was keeping watch over the last few moments of life when Mrs. Captain Tolland suddenly and seemingly without reason, "[. . .] set right up in bed with her eyes wide open'" (244). When the Captain's widow stretches her arms towards the door and Mrs. Todd looks in that direction, she beholds "[. . .] a woman's dark face lookin' right at us'" (244). Mrs. Todd describes what she sees as "[. . .] a pleasant enough face, shaped somethin' like Mis' Tolland's, and a kind of expectin' look'" (245). The dying woman appears to be satisfied and questions Mrs. Todd with "'You saw her, didn't you?'" (245). The foreign woman explains that the dark face they saw was her mother. While Mrs. Todd had been left somewhat

shaken from the experience, this information calms her and she is  
“‘[. . .] lifted to somethin’ different as I never was since’”

(245). Mrs. Tolland asks the same question again as she dies and  
Mrs. Todd tells her that she saw the mother and that “‘[. . .]  
*you ain’t never going to feel strange an’ lonesome no more’*”

(245). The foreign woman then passes into the next world and  
Mrs. Todd feels as if mother and daughter have left together.  
She explains to the narrator that she “‘[. . .] never called it  
beyond reason that I should see the other watcher. I saw plain  
enough there was somebody there with me in the room’” (245).

Marjorie Pryse suggests that, “The real foreigner now seems  
to be not Mrs. Tolland but her mother--the ghost. But the  
experience of having seen the ghost makes Mrs. Todd an equal  
foreigner” (247). Mrs. Todd has become foreign because she has  
“[. . .] caught a glimpse of death and returns to tell about it”  
(247). When she interprets that experience for the narrator, it  
is her belief that “[. . .] there’s something beyond this world;  
the doors stand wide open. ‘There’s somethin’ of us that must  
still live on’; we’ve got to join both worlds together an’ live  
in one but for the other’” (Jewett 245).

Pryse suggests that, “For the narrator, Mrs. Todd is like  
someone who has journeyed to another world and come back to tell  
the story” and compares Mrs. Todd’s experience to a sea voyage  
(248). During a sea voyage, one explores to “‘this side of the  
world or the other,’ like those ‘sailors and coastwise

adventurers by sea' whose families the narrator had sympathized with earlier" (Pryse 248). By the time Mrs. Todd brings her story full circle, she is the one who has been on a journey to the other side of the world in the moment in which she saw the ghost of Mrs. Tolland's mother (248). Mrs. Todd brings the news of her own adventure back and shares it with the narrator as she had only previously done with a very few. But Mrs. Todd has not been on a real ship and her news of the other world is so well disguised as a ghost story that one could miss its subtle meaning. Pryse suggests that Mrs. Todd's "ship" and the "news" with which she returns are connected as

It is her anxieties, her fears and her memories, which are tossed about as she and the narrator sit indoors while the season's first 'nor'easter' rages outside. In earlier nineteenth-century American fiction, we are accustomed to seeing real battles with the elements (in Moby-Dick, for example) as metaphors for experience; in 'The Foreigner,' Mrs. Todd's experience seems at first to be only a metaphoric 'sea voyage'-- yet it is as real a battle as women in her circumstances can have. It is a story about a woman's anxieties and the way she tries to calm them; it concerns Mrs. Todd's inner life in more detail than even the sketches in The Country of the Pointed Firs; and it illustrates the way in which Mrs. Todd tries to

'join both worlds together an' live in one but for the other.' (Pryse 248)

Pryse further suggests that it is "too easy" to label one world as a man's world of action where they engage in "real battles" while the women stay at home in their world (248). She argues instead that

'The Foreigner' suggests that while the women's experience of the storm may have nothing to do with the immediate effects of battling it (they sit indoors knitting), the real storm for the women is the one anxiety creates. And the real anxiety for women is not that of being cut off from the physical elements but of feeling separated from that 'other world' where 'mother' resides, and therefore where it is not necessary to feel 'strange an' lonesome.' (248)

This is evidenced by Mrs. Tolland's comfort, even in the face of death, when she knows that her mother is with her. The reader also sees this throughout The Country of the Pointed Firs whenever Mrs. Todd is reunited with her own mother. Both women find a peace and tranquility in the mother's presence that cannot be experienced in the world that does not include their mothers.

According to Pryse, "The Foreigner" also "[. . .] involves the juxtaposition of the dead Mrs. Tolland and her mother, and the living Mrs. Todd and her mother; but the pattern comes to include the narrator as well" (249). The narrator is considered

to be a foreigner in Dunnet Landing where she is only a summer visitor; she is not native to this village. Because she is characterized as a foreigner, "[. . .] she is either trying to escape urban turmoil or, more accurately, to find inner peace. Her presence there suggests that she, too, feels cut off from that 'other world'" (Pryse 249). The story that Mrs. Todd shares

[. . .] allows the narrator to become reunited with her own inner life, just as Mrs. Todd has had a consoling experience of the 'other world' and has 'come back' to tell about it. Just as the narrator stated at the beginning when she became aware of Mrs. Todd's worries about her mother, by the story's end she has also 'thought as [she] had never thought before of such anxieties' [. . .]. Yet in thinking about them, and particularly by telling her story, she is also able to ease them. Mrs. Todd's story, far from telling her 'something that would haunt [her] thoughts on every dark stormy night, [. . .] gives her something to mitigate those thoughts. (Pryse 249)

By sharing her experience of the other world and her own inner life with the narrator, Mrs. Todd is able to help ease her anxieties. While Mrs. Todd may be storyteller and landlady for the narrator, she also takes on the form of the narrator's mother. Their relationship becomes more than that between storyteller and listener and landlady and renter; it becomes that

between mother and daughter. Women come together to share and they "[. . .] sit together around the home fire on a stormy night not merely to entertain each other [. . .] but to teach each other, to pass down from mother to daughter the ability to 'live in one world but for the other'" (Pryse 249). As in The Country of the Pointed Firs, these stories that Mrs. Todd, as well as others, share with the narrator are not solely for entertainment; these are stories that help the narrator adjust to her life in the "other" world.

There is hope still left in Dunnet Landing despite the decline of the seafaring lifestyle. The women of this community learn to

[. . .] discover new resources and inner strength. Mrs. Todd's narrative opens 'the doors' for her narrator, who finds in the 'old prophetess' [. . .] new reasons for telling stories. The doors that 'stand wide open' depict the sibyl-storyteller in the process of giving birth. 'There's somethin' of us that must still live on'--in daughters, and in stories. (Pryse 250)

The narrator, in turn, takes part in this birthing process as she writes the stories that will be shared with the reading audience. The narrator, like Mrs. Todd, may not be a mother herself, but she is a woman artist and she finds a way through her writing, a metaphor for giving birth, to communicate and pass down her

knowledge to another time or place, ensuring that it does live on. The narrator must become a part of this inner world of Dunnet Landing so that she is able to translate and reveal for the outside world the spiritual values and rituals that are so important in the intimate female community. Mrs. Todd is her connection and guide throughout the process.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

The reader does not know much about the narrator; we do not even know her name. What we do know about her is that she is a writer who lives in Boston. She returns to Dunnet Landing with the hope of finding a secluded place where she can concentrate on her writing. What she discovers, however, is so much more. The narrator finds Mrs. Todd and her mother, Mrs. Blackett, in the intimate female community of Dunnet Landing. Mrs. Blackett may be the queen of this world, as is demonstrated at the Bowden reunion, but Mrs. Todd is where the narrator centers her story. By sharing her stories and her inner self with the narrator, Mrs. Todd helps the narrator find a reconnection with herself.

Mrs. Todd is concerned about people, yet she is also an image of grief. Through her connection to death, she finds life that she shares with others. She is also a storyteller and her stories are revelations. But the message that she brings is not obvious; one must travel around the rings of her stories (much like the braided rug she stands upon) until one reaches the center, the true meaning of what she shares. The deeper that one goes into her stories, the greater the meaning that is found. The knowledge that she shares with the narrator will help the narrator once she returns to the bigger, harsher world of Boston.

Mrs. Todd also knows how to plant and how to nurture, not only her mysterious herbs but people as well. These qualities of the feminine in Mrs. Todd help others to find their true humanity. The narrator, who has been in the world of the patriarch, finds a reconnection to the feminine when she comes to Dunnet Landing.

While the narrator is not from Dunnet Landing and does not share the same past as the people there, she is able to recognize the ties that bind this intimate female community together. She shares in their rituals, and by connecting to this world, she is reaching out to something she can take with her when she leaves, something that will help to comfort and sustain her when she returns to a male-dominated society. If the narrator forgets what she has reconnected to in Dunnet Landing, she will lose her way in the outside world. She must remain connected to the feminine in order to stay balanced in the masculine world.

At the time of her departure, the narrator has completely immersed herself in this female world of love and ritual. The female community she finds in Dunnet Landing reminds the narrator of her origins and tells her to keep the rituals of the community for there is healing in the rituals of ordinary living. These women know and share pain. This knowledge and awareness of their own pain, as well as the pain of others, creates a connection and there is an understanding in this that allows them to communicate through silence.

The narrator's journey to Dunnet Landing is not a heroic quest about power or control. It is a return to a simpler, older way of life. It is a return to the mother, but it is also a return to self, an inversion of a trip to the frontier. The narrator's connection to Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett help her to reconnect with and restore herself. By understanding her roots and connecting with generations past, the narrator is able to move forward into the future. A return to the mother means that the daughter becomes the mother and the mother loses her role but it is also about a deepening of experience. When the narrator reaches her inner self, she discovers the wisdom of Mrs. Todd, of the mother.

In Dunnet Landing, Jewett has created a feminine world that is characterized by its depth and its moral and emotional significance. There is a foundation in the real world of human feeling, and while there is much grief and sorrow in The Country of the Pointed Firs, there are also possibilities for happiness. The connection to death and loss is what gives much in this feminine world meaning. Grief is only a part of the journey. Out of death and sorrow come strength and a restoration to wholeness. Mrs. Todd has learned this and she passes her knowledge down to the narrator, who in turn shares it with a world outside Dunnet Landing.

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