The main themes in Sarah Orne Jewett’s “A White Heron”

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Abstract. The story, first published in 1886, is set in South Berwik, Maine, during the later decades of the nineteenth century. Sylvia, a nine-year-old girl lives with her grandmother in the peaceful and harmonious countryside when a young hunter suddenly comes into her life. The stranger wants her to reveal where he can find the white heron he wants to shoot and add to his collection. First suspicious, then enthusiastic, she finally refuses to tell him the secret. “A White Heron” evokes the rapid changes happening at that time in the wider historical context: the industrial revolution, the development of cities and the introduction of new values such as capitalism and materialism. Being a story of initiation, it focuses on the confusion of a little girl confronted with complex feelings and unexpected situations.

1. Introduction

Sarah Orne Jewett was born in South Berwick, Maine, in 1849, as the second daughter of a physician. As a child “she wished to become a doctor herself, but poor health thwarted that ambition”. Suffering from arthritis, she could not go to school regularly. Her father “encouraged her to read widely in his library and she accompanied him on his visits to patients in the countryside”.

The sympathetic depiction of local colour in the fiction of the writer Harriet Beecher Stowe had a great impact on Sarah Orne Jewett. She began to write and to publish herself in her late teens. She was not only a regional novelist whose works described Maine settings and personalities, but she also published poetry, literature for children and short stories. Her true gift was short fiction. In many of her works – including the collections of short stories The King of Folly Island (1888) and A Native of Winby (1893), as well as the novel A Country Doctor (1884) – the careful documentary record of landscape, people and dialect is described with understanding and sympathy. She deepened her knowledge of the country by accompanying her father on his medical calls. Sarah Orne Jewett loved her father deeply and it has even been argued that her adoration of her father was so strong that it prevented her from ever falling in love. Jewett’s relationship with her mother was less intense.

She based her personal life on close friendships with women and never married. She formed a very special friendship with Annie Fields, the wife of an editor and publisher. Personal tragedy brought them even closer together: “When Sarah Orne Jewett and Annie Fields [...] lost the most important men in their lives, Sarah’s father died in 1878 and Annie’s husband two years later, the two women found their friendship deepened by their mutual losses”. Her relationship with Annie Adams Fields was very intimate: it was “of a kind not uncommon at the turn of the century; indeed, such connections between women were called ‘Boston marriages’, a term that implied shared living quarters and a partnership that paralleled ordinary marriage in its intimacy and exclusiveness” (Baym 2003: 1587). Some critics argue that the nature of their relationship was closer to lesbian relations than to friendship but this hypothesis has never been verified.

The two friends began to travel widely in Europe and the Eastern United States. In 1869 the National Woman Suffrage Association was founded. “From the late 1870s onwards Sarah Orne Jewett was a member of a circle of prominent women writers and artists who lived near Boston. This group included Cecilia Thaxter, Sarah Wyman Whitman, Sara Norton and Marie Thérèsa Blanc” (Baym 2003: 1587). She published a lot of works from the 1880s onwards. In 1901 Sarah was seriously injured by falling from a carriage; “she never fully recovered her physical powers or her literary capacity, but she continued writing […] and visiting friends when her condition allowed”.

She died in 1909 in her native South Berwick, Maine.

In Jewett’s lifetime the industrial revolution was in full swing: “The stable, secure, and remote small town [she] knew and loved as a child was experiencing the economic, technological, and demographic pressures that transformed America” (Baym 2003: 1586). The industrial output grew exponentially, mineral wealth was
discovered and exploited, and the agricultural productivity increased dramatically. The transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869. The nation was trying to overcome the traumatic effects of the Civil War (1861-1865), which had been the tragic and “seemingly inevitable result of growing economic, political, social, and cultural divisions between North and South” (Baym 2003: 1223).

Women such as Orne Jewett spoke up for more equal rights in this male-dominated society. They wanted more than domesticity, submissiveness and innocence. After all, the end of the 19th century “brought many new opportunities for women in the United States and other industrial countries and Sarah Orne Jewett took advantage of them […] Women were being granted certificates to practice medicine and they were being admitted to universities [They were gradually […] allowed into full participation as citizens and professionals”.

When “A White Heron” appeared in 1886, as the title story in Sarah Orne Jewett’s collection A White Heron and Other Stories, the author was already known as “one of the finest local colour writers the United States had produced”. The story had been rejected before by the Atlantic Monthly magazine for being too sentimental, but it was “immediately recognized by critics as a treasure” and it soon became “the most admired and most widely anthologised of Jewett’s nearly 150 short stories”.

The story is set in New England and begins on a June evening some time in the late 19th century. Sylvia, a nine-year-old girl, is driving her cow back home when she meets a young hunter in the forest. First afraid and suspicious, she eventually agrees to take him with her to her grandmother, with whom she is living after having left her mother and the crowded town. Once there, the stranger explains to them that he is looking for a very rare and precious bird, a beautiful white heron that he has seen in the area and which he is ready to pay for. The next day, Sylvia and the hunter walk through the woods in search of the bird. The young girl gradually feels safer now and she is even attracted to the man. During the following night, she decides all by herself to climb a huge pine-tree from the top of which she thinks she can see the white heron’s nest. Her climb is very painful and dangerous, but once at the top, she catches sight of the nest. When she returns home, the hunter asks her if she found the white heron’s nest, but Sylvia refuses to reveal her secret.

We intend to focus our analysis on two main themes present in the story. The first one is the contrast between town and nature; the second the opposition between feminine and masculine attitudes and identities. This will finally lead us to discuss “The White Heron” as a story of initiation.

1. ‘Town’ versus ‘nature’

‘Town’ in the story symbolizes aggressiveness. It is known from the historical background that there were many changes in the cities at that time. Urban centres, industry and trade were developing very fast, and this process induced more materialistic attitudes. Sarah Orne Jewett experienced the industrial progress herself and she understood that one of its consequences would be “the ruin of the natural environment” (Schaeffert 2005). Moreover, this industrialised and increasingly capitalistic world was fundamentally patriarchal: men ruled and women were oppressed.

The hunter in “The White Heron” who comes from the town and enters the woods is the incarnation of urban culture and modernity. With his arrival he “upsets the daily harmony [of the controlled rural space], and potentially the life balance itself, of nature” (Ammons 2005). The hunter brings material objects into the countryside and he gives a weapon to Sylvia as a present. She considers the jack-knife as a treasure but for him it is valueless, because such objects are common in the town. Through this knife he brings an element of urban violence to the countryside. He also offers her money:

“I can’t think of anything I should like so much as to find that heron’s nest,” the handsome stranger was saying. “I would give ten dollars to anybody who could show it to me,” he added desperately, “and I mean to spend my whole vacation hunting for it if need be.” (Jewett 2003[1886]: 1591)

This fragment shows the great determination of the hunter who really wants to catch this bird. He offers ten dollars to anybody who can find the white heron, which is a big sum of money for Sylvia, but perhaps not for him. The offer of money is a typical materialistic gesture. The hunter only wants to possess the bird without taking into account Sylvia’s feelings, let alone the bird’s own interests. He is fascinated by birds but only in order to kill them and add them to his collection of stuffed birds. Stuffed animals seem to be alive, but of course, in
reality, they are dead: they have been transformed into sheer objects. This does not bother the hunter:

“Do you cage ‘em up?” asked Mrs. Tilley doubtfully, in response to his enthusiastic announcement.

“Oh, no, they’re stuffed and preserved, dozens and dozens of them,” said the ornithologist, “and I have shot or snared every one myself.” (1590)

Perhaps the hunter likes nature, but in a different way than Sylvia. He likes the birds stuffed and displayed in his room, whereas Sylvia loves them alive in nature, when they are chirping and flying around.

The previous fragment also shows the effect of local colour: Mrs. Tilley, the grandmother, is speaking the regional dialect, which creates an authentic sense of locale. Thus, the use of language helps to emphasise the rural and idyllic character of the fictional world. The local people in the countryside are deeply rooted in their region and its traditions; they have not been ‘spoil’d by the superficial elegance and sophistication of urban culture.

Nature is the symbol of peace and sensibility. In the countryside everything is harmonious. Sylvia feels very well living with her grandmother on a small farm. She likes the wood and the animals. Until the hunter arrives, Sylvia, her grandmother and the grandmother’s cow have enjoyed a serene life together. There has been no stressful situation at all. She often goes for a walk with the cow, so she is very familiar with the surroundings and enjoys the singing of the birds. Crucially, living with her grandmother, Sylvia has found a balance, which she had previously searched for in vain in the town:

Everybody said that it was a good change for a little maid who had tried to grow for eight years in a crowded manufacturing town, but, as for Sylvia herself, it seemed as if she never had been alive at all before she came to live at the farm.

[… ] Sylvia whispered that this was a beautiful place to live in, and that she never should wish to go home. (1588)

But the hunter introduces conflict and stress in this peaceful countryside setting. The hunter tells Sylvia of his quest and wants her to disclose where the bird has its nest. They talk a lot and for Sylvia he becomes the first male person from the city of whom she is not afraid. She starts to like the hunter and hesitates whether to tell him or not where the bird lives. Through the hunter modernity and industrialisation approach Sylvia and her world. For a while she forgets where her natural place is in the world, but in the end she remembers, and realises that she cannot reveal the secret and thus betray the bird. She has to protect nature and its animals. She cannot allow this man to kill the beautiful white heron. She does not want him to destroy this harmonious, peaceful place. She refuses the money and with it, the materialism of the town. She rejects her first male friend in order to protect nature and its inhabitants.

The hunter comes alone to the countryside. He does not speak about his friends or relatives. He appears to be alienated from them, whereas Sylvia lives in perfect harmony with her grandmother and the animals which are her friends. In nature there is a kind of unity between the inhabitants, in opposition to the town, where individualism prevails. It is important to note that the countryside in the story is represented as being positive. The natural familiarity of this region is threatened by the modernism and capitalism of the town.

The town is a place dominated by men, whereas the countryside is rather feminine in this story: the grandmother, the little girl, the cow. This brings us to the second main thematic opposition of the story.

2. Masculinity versus femininity

The second main theme we wanted to discuss is the gender opposition embodied by the hunter and Sylvia. The hunter is the incarnation of masculinity. First, even if he says he loves birds, he wants to possess them by killing them, whereas Sylvia stands for femininity, innocence and purity, and is depicted as an integral part of nature, respectful and protective of it (her name is derived from Latin silva, “wood”):

There ain’t a foot o’ ground she don’t know her way over, and the wild creatures counts her one o’ themselves. Squer’ls she’ll tame to come an’ feed right out o’ her hands, and all sorts o’ birds. Last winter she got the jay-birds to bangeing here, and I believe she’d ‘a’ scanted herself of her own meals to have plenty to throw out amongst ’em, if I had n’t kep’ watch. (1590)

Secondly, the hunter uses weapons, which stand for aggressiveness, violence, power and typical masculine competition. The hunter’s guns and knives can be seen as phallic symbols, emphasizing the strength, virility and
almightiness of men in general. This frightens the young girl: “Sylvia would have liked him vastly better without
his gun; she could not understand why he killed the very birds he seemed to like so much” (1591).

The man also symbolizes the materialism imported from the developing industrial cities at that time. The
fact that he wants to pay for the white heron presents a sharp contrast to the conception that Sylvia has of nature
and of life in general. But Sylvia’s reaction to the proposition of the hunter is not so negative: “No amount of
thought, that night, could decide how many wished-for treasures the ten dollars, so lightly spoken of, would buy”
(ibid.). The offer of money is tempting, especially as Sylvia and her family are relatively poor.

Understandably perhaps, at this point in the story Sylvia begins to change her mind. The hunter, first seen
as an enemy or potential aggressor, becomes less fearful:

The next day the young sportsman hovered about the woods, and Sylvia kept him company, having lost her first fear of the
friendly lad, who proved to be most kind and sympathetic. […] [a]s the day waned, Sylvia still watched the young man
with loving admiration. She had never seen anybody so charming and delightful; the woman’s heart, asleep in the child,
was vaguely thrilled by a dream of love. Some premonition of that great power stirred and swayed these young creatures
who traversed the solemn woodlands with soft-footed silent care. […] [t]he young man going first and Sylvia following,
fascinated, a few steps behind, with her gray eyes dark with excitement.

[…] At last evening began to fall, and they drove the cow home together, and Sylvia smiled with pleasure when they came
to the place where she heard the whistle and was afraid only the night before. (ibid.)

This fragment shows how the relationship between the two characters evolves. When she met the hunter, Sylvia
was very afraid. She had had a bad experience with another boy at school before and she did not want anything
like it to happen again. She sees men as enemies and is very suspicious. But something happens in her while they
are walking in the forest. She feels fascinated by the hunter, even if she does not agree with the way he treats
animals. In spite of the fact that she is only nine, she is experiencing a very strong and puzzling feeling for the
very first time: she is falling in love with the man. In a latent manner this impulse is sexual too. But Sylvia is far
too young to cope with such feelings and that is why, after being attracted by the man, she finally represses her
erotic attraction and rejects him.

Sylvia wants to find her own identity, her own voice. She is trying to discover the place she is meant to
occupy in society and in the world in general. She represents the feminine character in her love of nature, animals
and peace. Despite her young age, she embodies qualities that are typically associated with women: innocence,
purity, naivety.

3. A story of initiation

In Sarah Ore Jewett’s short story we can discover that Sylvia has to cope with sudden changes in her habits
brought about by the intrusion in her life of a man coming from the town. As such it could be regarded as an
initiation story, by which we mean “a kind of short story in which a character – often but not always a child or
young person – first learns a significant, usually life-changing truth about the universe, society, people, himself
or herself”.[10]

At the beginning of the story we learn to know Sylvia, a nine-year-old girl, who left the crowded
manufacturing town where she used to live with her mother, to go to her grandmother in the countryside. Sylvia
did not feel well at all when she was living in the town. Now that she lives on the farm of her grandmother, she
feels happier, she thinks that she has found her place in the world, being surrounded by nature, animals and wild
life. But an unexpected element enters her life and brings tension and confusion with it. The arrival of the hunter,
who has lost his way, makes her question what she thought to be certain before.

The first reaction she has is suspicion. She does not feel safe in the presence of this masculine character.
The hunter represents all that she hates and fears: town, aggression, materialism. But he is determined to find the
rare bird and manages gradually to ‘tame’ Sylvia. The girl feels very confused when the stranger she hated at the
beginning begins to open the doors of an unexpected world for her. Little by little, her distrust disappears and she
begins to have confidence in him. On the second day, when they are walking through the forest to find the white
heron, Sylvia feels attracted to the man and falls in love with him. This feeling is unknown to her. It is radically
different from anything she had ever felt in the presence of men. She is confused and loses former certainties.
The world in which she found innocent happiness and peace is suddenly changing much too fast for her.

This change in Sylvia’s behaviour is also expressed by the story’s structure. There are two parts in the
story and the second part begins after the amazing day that she spent with the hunter, searching for the bird. The
second part opens with her journey to reach the top of the pine-tree, which indicates the climax of the story.
During the second night Sylvia decides to find the white heron’s nest and to tell the hunter where it is. In the forest, there is a huge pine-tree. It is the tallest tree she has ever seen and she has always thought that if she managed to climb the tree and reach the top of it, she would be able to see the whole world. That is the reason why she silently moves out of the farmhouse, walks through the forest and begins to climb the pine-tree. This turns out to be very difficult:

The way was harder than she thought; she must reach far and hold fast, the sharp dry twigs caught and held her and scratched her like angry talons, the pitch made her thin little fingers clumsy and stiff as she went round and round the tree’s great stem, higher and higher upward. (1592)

But the narrator describes a curious relationship between the pine-tree and the young girl:

The old pine must have loved his new dependent. More than all the hawks, and bats, and moths, and even the sweet voiced thrushes, was the brave, beating heart of the solitary gray-eyed child. And the tree stood still and frowned away the winds that June morning while the dawn grew bright in the east. (1593)

This fragment illustrates the strong, almost personal bond that exists between Sylvia and nature (note that the tree is referred as a “he” not an “it”). Sylvia does not only love nature, she is part of it.

Climbing the pine-tree may be seen as a kind of mystical experience. Once at the top of the tree Sylvia knows that she will be able to see things that nobody else could see. She can (almost) see the world from above as a bird would. The pine-tree thus becomes a kind of ‘tree of knowledge’. Sylvia suffered a lot to reach the top, it was a long and painful job, but the result was worth the effort.

At this point in the story Sylvia is still determined to reveal to the hunter where the white heron lives:

She knows his secret now, the wild, light, slender bird that floats and wavers, and goes back like an arrow presently to his home in the green world beneath. Then Sylvia, well satisfied, makes her perilous way down again, not daring to look far below the branch she stands on, ready to cry sometimes because her fingers ache and her lamed feet slip. Wondering over and over again what the stranger would say to her, and what he would think when she told him how to find his way straight to the heron’s nest. (1593)

After her journey at the top of the pine tree, she comes back home and finds her grandmother and the hunter searching for her:

The grandmother and the sportsman stand in the door together and question her, and the splendid moment has come to speak of the dead hemlock-tree by the green marsh.

But Sylvia does not speak after all, though the old grandmother fretfully rebukes her, and the young man’s kind, appealing eyes are looking straight in her own. He can make them rich with money; he has promised it, and they are poor now. He is so well worth making happy, and he waits to hear the story she can tell.

No, she must keep silence! What is it that suddenly forbids her and makes her dumb? Has she been nine years growing and now, when the great world for the first time puts out a hand to her, must she trust it aside for a bird’s sake? The murmur of the pine’s green branches is in her ears, she remembers how the white heron came flying through the golden air and how they watched the sea and the morning together, and Sylvia cannot speak; she cannot tell the heron’s secret and give its life away. (1594)

This fragment illustrates that “the story no longer seems to be merely about a choice between nature and someone who would destroy it but between ‘love’ – a woman’s love for a man – and loyalty to something else, something that inevitably leads to loneliness and isolation” (Griffith 2005). The fact that Sylvia does not want to betray the white heron indicates that, after being attracted by the new world the hunter offered, she eventually rejects all that he represents to come back to nature.

The choice of the white heron is not insignificant. A bird is an animal which is not so familiar to men. One can see it, but rarely approach it or touch it. Moreover, it symbolizes a dream that all mankind has in common: birds can fly, whereas men will never be able to do so without a machine. That is also why birds are so mysterious. The fact that the bird of the story is a white heron underlines the mystery. In the 19th century herons were hunted because people used their wonderful feathers to decorate their hats. In Sarah Orne Jewett’s short story the white heron can therefore come to stand for values such as purity, grace, majesty, and elegance.

The fact that Sylvia refuses to give the white heron to the hunter allows us to establish a symbolic link between the white heron and her own virginity. Sylvia is falling in love with the hunter. This is a very unsettling experience. The feeling of “loving admiration” (1591) is so strange and so strong that she would do anything to
pleased him, even sacrificing what is the most precious to her. Of course Sylvia is far too young to consider the possibility of really offering her sexual innocence to the hunter. But Sylvia has a woman’s heart that is being awakened: “the woman’s heart, asleep in the child, was vaguely thrilled by a dream of love (ibid.). The heron might therefore symbolically anticipate the loss of her virginity. Sylvia is by no means ready to surrender either to a man.

This reading of the story might be related to the biography of the author. We have pointed out that Sarah Orne Jewett always refused to marry. She was very close to her father and some critics said that she never wanted another man in her life for that reason. Following the argument of Kelley Griffith Jr (2005), we could thus argue that “Sylvia’s rejection of the hunter represents Jewett’s own decision not to get married. [...] Because of her deep emotional attachment to her father, she could never give up her childhood and become a mature woman. Instead, she chose to remain incomplete emotionally”.

4. Conclusion

The story shows the complex reaction of Sylvia when a representative of modern urban culture suddenly enters the idyllic rural world she shares with her grandma and all her companions in nature. The hunter not only offers her money to obtain the rare bird he wants to add to his collection of stuffed dead animals, but he also wakes up in Sylvia the first stirrings of erotic attraction. In the end, Sylvia turns down the deal. Refusing to enter the logic of a harder masculine world based on money, violence and possession, she does not ‘sell’ the beautiful white heron for money and the prospect of love. She decides that her loyalty to nature and her personal integrity – including her virginity – are more precious.

In our discussion we have had to leave many questions unanswered. Thus, we could wonder about the future development of Sylvia within the fictional world. Does the story suggest how Sylvia is likely to react the next time when a similar tempting offer is made to her? How realistic is her position in the longer run, considering that she is now almost on the brink of puberty (within the sphere of her private life) and considering also the relentless progress of modernity (within the broader context of America’s economic and social history)?

It would also be interesting to speculate a little bit further about the correlations between the story and the author’s life. Such an analysis could take a more explicitly psychoanalytical turn (the tree-climbing experience might then be regarded as an allegory of sexual initiation). Or it could take as one of its starting points the attitudes and moral judgments expressed by the narrator in the story, who becomes much more overt in the last paragraphs of the text. From a narratological viewpoint too, the management of time in the text and the skilful use of variable focalisation would also provide interesting points of entry into the story.

The critical reception of this story appears to be another theme worth investigating. How has this woman’s story – about a girl turning down a man – been understood and assessed by literary critics and historians? How popular was it in the male-dominated world of literary studies until the advent of feminism and gender studies, and have there been specific feminist readings of the story?

All these and undoubtedly many more questions that could be asked here testify to the richness and density of this classic short story, but they go beyond the scope of the present paper.

Bibliography

Primary text


Secondary texts


Griffith, Kelley Jr. “Sylvia as Hero in Sarah Orne Jewett’s ‘White Heron’”. Consulted (28.05.2005) at:


[1] The present text is an edited version of the paper originally submitted by these students [Dirk Delabastita].


