The Country of the Pointed Firs Study Guide

The Country of the Pointed Firs by Sarah Orne Jewett

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896) is considered by many critics to be the masterpiece of Sarah Orne Jewett, one of the greatest "local color" writers of the nineteenth century. Jewett wrote stories and novels set in coastal fishing and shipbuilding towns of her native Maine. As in many of Jewett's stories, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* addresses themes of nostalgia, memory, and storytelling, as well as community, family, and friendship. Her character sketches of the aging population of seamen and the widows of seamen are inflected with the local Maine dialect, which she captured with accuracy and liveliness. In recent years, Jewett's works have been praised for their strong, independent, elderly female characters, of which her greatest creation is Mrs. Todd in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*.

In *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, the unnamed narrator is a writer from Boston who has rented a room for the summer in the home of Mrs. Todd in the fictional town of Dunnet Landing, Maine. Throughout the summer, the narrator is captivated by the quaint community of Dunnet Landing, populated by the elderly men and women of the declining shipping industry. Most of the people she meets are between the ages of sixty and ninety, and they all have stories to tell about the town, the sea, and the families who inhabit their tiny community.

Author Biography

Theodora Sarah Orne Jewett was born September 3, 1849, in South Berwick, a shipbuilding town inland from the Maine coast. Jewett suffered from arthritis as a girl and attended school only sporadically because of her ill health. Her real education came from her father, a doctor who often brought the young Jewett along with him on medical visits throughout the countryside. From these experiences, Jewett learned the art of detailed character observation. Her father also encouraged her to read the great works of American and European literature. At the age of sixteen she graduated from Berwick Academy.

Jewett's first story was published in a magazine when she was nineteen. Her real success began in 1869 when she was twenty, with the publication of one of her stories in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Her early stories were published under the pseudonyms Alice Eliot, A. D. Eliot, and Sarah C. Sweet. The *Atlantic Monthly* did not accept another of her stories until a few years later, when her work caught the attention of *Atlantic Monthly* editor and novelist William Dean Howells, who subsequently published many of her works. Howells encouraged Jewett to collect her published stories in her first book *Deephaven* (1877), named after the fictional town in which her tales were set.

In 1878, Jewett's father, her closest companion, died. The deep friendship Jewett had enjoyed with her father was replaced in 1880 by what became a lifelong companionship with Annie Fields. For the next twenty-nine years, Jewett and Fields enjoyed a relationship, which at the time was termed a "Boston marriage"□the two women lived, traveled, and entertained together. Jewett divided her time between living in Boston with Fields and staying in her childhood home in South Berwick, where she wrote prolifically. Jewett and Fields traveled throughout Europe on four different occasions. They developed a wide circle of friends, including many of the notable American and European literary figures of the day, such as Henry James, Rudyard Kipling, Christina Rossetti, and Mark Twain.

Throughout her life, Jewett published many stories in *Harper's*, *Century*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*. Her short story collections include *Old Friends and New* (1879), *Country By-Ways* (1881), *A White Heron and Other Stories* (1886), and *A Native of Winby and Other Tales* (1893). Her novel *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), indisputably Jewett's masterpiece, was hailed at the time as a mature work demonstrating the culmination of the author's literary development over nearly thirty years of publication. Jewett wrote three other novels: *A Country Doctor* (1884), *A Marsh Island* (1885), and *The Tory Lover* (1901).

In 1902, Jewett's life was forever changed when, on her fifty-third birthday, she fell from a carriage, suffering head and spinal injuries. Jewett never fully recovered, mentally or physically, from these injuries. Although she continued to entertain visitors and write personal letters, Jewett ceased writing professionally at this point. Jewett died on June 24, 1909, from a brain hemorrhage that followed a stroke.

Plot Summary

Mrs. Todd

The narrator of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is a writer from the city who has decided to spend her summer in the small coastal town of Dunnet Landing, Maine. She has rented a room in the home of Mrs. Todd, a woman in her sixties who serves as the local herbalist, offering herbal reme- dies to help heal the physical and emotional ailments of the local community. Mrs. Todd, however, is on friendly terms with the local doctor, as they both understand the importance of each other's role in the community. Mrs. Todd spends most of her days out gathering various herbs and plants to create the concoctions that she sells from her home.

The narrator has come to Dunnet Landing because she has a long piece of writing to complete by the end of the summer, but she is soon distracted by the goings-on in Mrs. Todd's house. She is expected to act as store clerk, selling Mrs. Todd's remedies from her doorstep while Mrs. Todd is out gathering herbs. The narrator soon realizes that she is not getting any writing done because of this activity, and rents out an old abandoned schoolhouse nearby as a place she can go to write.

Captain Littlepage

One day while the narrator is writing at the schoolhouse, Captain Littlepage, an old seaman in his eighties, stops in and proceeds to tell her a long story. He explains that he was retired from the sea sooner than he had wanted because of the wreck of a ship he was commanding. He describes the circumstance of the wreck, which left the few survivors stranded in a remote location near the North Pole. While waiting for a supply ship to carry him home, Captain Littlepage stayed in the cabin of an old Scottish seaman named Gaffett. Captain Littlepage tells the narrator the story told him by Gaffett.

Gaffett told Captain Littlepage of a shipwreck off the Greenland coast that happened many years earlier, and which only he and two other men survived. In a small boat they took from the wrecked ship, Gaffett and the men sailed further north into uncharted regions. There they discovered what appeared to be a town inhabited by people, but when Gaffett and the men stepped ashore, the town seemed to disappear, and the inhabitants appeared as ghosts. Captain Littlepage explains that Gaffett believed these creatures to be ghosts, or in a "kind of waiting-place" between life and death. Littlepage tells the narrator that he is the only person alive who still knows this story, as Gaffett has probably died.

Green Island

One day, Mrs. Todd takes the narrator out in a boat to Green Island, an outer island where Mrs. Todd's eighty-six-year-old mother lives with Mrs. Todd's brother, William. The narrator finds Mrs. Todd's mother, Mrs. Blackett, delightful, and observes that mother and daughter are very fond of one another. Mrs. Blackett invites them in for tea. William, who is about sixty, is very shy of meeting people and stays away from the house at first, but eventually comes in and is introduced to the narrator. The narrator takes a walk with William. Later, she takes a walk with Mrs. Todd, who tells the narrator that the man she married, Nathan Todd, now deceased, was not the man she loved. After a pleasant meal with Mrs. Blackett, the narrator and Mrs. Todd sail back to the coast.

Poor Joanna

One day, Mrs. Fosdick, an old friend of Mrs. Todd, comes from out of town to visit. The narrator finds Mrs. Fosdick to be enchanting company and the three women sit together for hours, discussing local gossip from decades earlier. Mrs. Fosdick and Mrs. Todd tell the narrator the story of a woman they refer to as "poor Joanna," long since dead. As a young woman, Joanna was treated badly by a man who used her and then ran off, never to be seen or heard of again. In shame, Joanna chose to move out to a small, uninhabited island off the coast, where she lived alone and never left for the remainder of her life. Various members of the local community stopped by her island occasionally to bring her food and supplies as gifts, but she remained reclusive throughout the many years she lived there.

Mrs. Todd explains that she sailed one day to the island with a pastor to visit Joanna and bring her a gift. The pastor was insensitive to Joanna's situation, but after the two women sent him out to walk around the island, Joanna confessed to Mrs. Todd that she had "committed the ultimate sin." (Exactly what she meant by this is not specifically indicated.) Later, the narrator asks a local seaman to take her in his boat to Joanna's long-since-deserted island.

The Bowden Family Reunion

Late in the summer, the narrator travels by carriage with Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett to a large reunion of the Bowden family, to whom they are related. The narrator is very pleased by the people she meets at the reunion, and is happy to see that both Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett enjoy themselves immensely. The narrator notes that there are many close ties among people at the reunion, although they see each other only once or twice a year. Mrs. Blackett, in particular, is clearly well-loved by everyone.

Elija Tilley

Walking along the shore near the end of summer, the narrator comes upon Elijah Tilley, an old seaman, who invites her to his cabin for a visit. Tilley talks with great sadness about the loss of his beloved wife, Sarah, who died eight years earlier. He explains that he never wants to remarry, and that he is content living by himself with the memory of his wife.

Goodbyes

At summer's end, the narrator leaves Dunnet Landing to return to her home in the city. Mrs. Todd dispenses with emotional partings and simply tells the narrator she is going out for a walk and will not be on shore to see her off.

Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4

Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4 Summary

The Country of the Pointed Firs is a collection of vignettes by an unnamed female narrator residing in the fictional town of Dunnet Landing, Maine, during one summer season around the end of the nineteenth century. The stories weave a web of the relationships and experiences of the young woman as she stays in this quaint town while working on a writing project that must be completed by the nd of the summer.

The narrator of the storyhas come to Dunnet Landing in June planning to stay for the summer and has chosen the small village because of its sense of neighborhood and the pleasant cottages with their windows that appear to be "knowing" eyes that look toward the sea.

The young woman takes residence in the home of Mrs. Todd, a local woman about sixty-year- old, who provides rooms for rent and also sells herbs to the townspeople to help with emotional and physical maladies as supplements to the town doctor's advice. The gathering of the herbs in the local environs takes up much of Mrs. Todd's day so the young woman has much time alone in the cottage.

Soon, however, Mrs. Todd asks the young woman to greet people who come to the cottage for help during the day. Although the young woman is happy to help and to meet the people of the town, she ultimately informs Mrs. Todd that the interruptions take too much time away from her own writing, the task for which she has come to Dunnet Landing and therefore has rented an old schoolhouse in which to write every day.

Mrs. Todd bears no ill will toward the young woman and even makes a visit to the schoolhouse under the pretense of looking for tansy. Tansy grows nicely in the schoolyard, having been trampled down so much all spring, which makes it grow so much better in the summer. Mrs. Todd thinks the tansy is like many people who have hard youths but are determined to make the most of their selves before their lives are over.

One day, the young woman watches a funeral procession out the schoolhouse window and notices Mrs. Todd, who is visibly and authentically grief stricken over the burial of the woman known as Mrs. Begg. The young woman also notices another mourner in particular for his unusual manner and gait, which reminds her of a grasshopper and as he moves closer she realizes that the man is Captain Littlepage, a well-respected man in town.

As the funeral procession moves out of sight, the young woman muses about the lack of companionship or news from out of town. Her thoughts will not land on paper and she imagines they are airborne, refusing to cooperate. Wondering if she should have joined

the funeral procession, she feels a pang of grief for the situation but rationalizes that she is not really a part of the Dunnet Landing community. She returns to her writing.

Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4 Analysis

The author uses the narrative tone so that the reader can view the experiences from the young woman's point of view, which provides much information without the need for much dialogue. Already it is established that Mrs. Todd is a kind, compassionate woman as evidenced by her authentic grief at Mrs. Begg's funeral in contrast to some others who are not so genuinely moved.

Mrs. Todd also seems to be the wise old sage of the town, dispensing advice along with her herbs and potions. She has a practical and hopeful way about her when using the metaphor of how some people are like the tansy near the schoolhouse, which is trampled on but ends up being beautiful and resilient just like people who experience difficult childhoods.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 Summary

Later on that afternoon, the young woman is distracted by the sound of footsteps approaching the schoolhouse and she looks up to find the distinguished Captain Littlepage standing in the doorway. The young woman knows a little bit about the elderly gentleman from the talk in town and knows that he is not married. A common girl, who keeps his house, assists him; the eighty-year-old Captain keeps his own wardrobe and appearance in dapper condition.

The mention of Mrs. Begg's funeral launches the Captain into a discussion of where people go when they die and the young woman asserts that one day everyone will know. The Captain believes that people can discover the information sooner than that if they want to and launches into a story about his last sailing adventure. The Captain would not have left the sea as early as he did had it not been for the frightening experience he encountered as a commander of a ship on a journey near the North Pole.

Bad weather forced the Captain's ship off course and to crash into rocks somewhere near the North Pole, where the he remained with the few survivors waiting for rescue. Captain Littlepage then spent much time in the company of a Scottish seaman named Gaffett who relayed the eerie story of another shipwreck off the coast of Greenland a few years earlier.

Gaffett and one other man being the only survivors, sailed north, away from the wreckage, and came upon the specter of a town which seemed to be inhabited by people who disappeared when Gaffet and his companion stepped ashore. It was only when Gaffett and his friend retrieved their boat and departed that the town's structures reappeared and the ghostlike figures stood on the shoreline and taunted the departing sailors. It was as if the whole town, which seemed to be held together by a cobweb-like structure, just vanished at the intrusion of Gaffett and his friend.

According to Captain Littlepage, Gaffett believes the people to be the spirits of recently deceased people waiting for passage to another life. Captain Littlepage is the only living person to know of this story as Gaffett is probably long dead himself. The young woman asks whether it may have been hunger, which caused Gaffett to see the apparitions, but Captain Littlepage firmly denies it. Whatever the source of the mystery, the young woman is taken in by the Captain's bright eyes and vigor while relating the tale.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 Analysis

Storytelling is an important element in the novel as an efficient way to deliver much information and insight into a character's beliefs and experiences. It is clear from Captain Littlepage's retelling of the spectral city and its inhabitants that the Captain wants to believe that it is true. Because of his age and the fact that he is a former sea

captain, it is interesting and comforting to him to think that his soul may go to an island and wait on a ship for transport to another life.

The Captain can sense that the young woman is someone to whom he can entrust his stories and perspectives and invites her over to see some of his treasures from his seagoing adventures. The symbolism of the encounter in the schoolroom is important for the knowledge, although it is not of a scholarly nature, which is shared between this unlikely pair.

Chapters 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12

Chapters 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 Summary

Mrs. Todd convinces the young woman to take the short boat trip to a nearby island to visit Mrs. Todd's eighty-six-year-old mother, Mrs. Blackett. Mrs. Todd also needs to pick some pennyroyal and the best in the area grows on the small island where Mrs. Blackett lives with Mrs. Todd's brother, William. As the small boat approaches, the older woman sees that she has visitors and waves wildly. Once the boat docks, Mrs. Blackett is there to greet them and it is clear that mother and daughter have a bond of friendship as well as the expected familial one.

The young woman likes the diminutive Mrs. Blackett immediately and muses that the older woman does not seem much more advanced in age than her daughter. A sprightly walk and positive attitude shine through and it is evident where Mrs. Todd gets her wise demeanor, although Mrs. Todd takes after her father who was a stout man.

Having offered to dig a few potatoes for chowder, the young woman explores the garden area of the island and is surprised by the stealthy appearance of William, Mrs. Todd's brother, who is also in his sixties and favors their mother. William offers to show the young woman around the island a bit as the chowder cooks and after supper.

Soon after, Mrs. Todd shows the young woman the pennyroyal patch and shares with her companion that her deceased husband, Nathan, was not the man she truly loved. The young woman decides that she and Mrs. Todd must be friends now that the older woman has divulged such a precious secret. After supper, William and Mrs. Blackett sing a few songs before Mrs. Todd and the young woman must head back to the mainland. The young woman enjoys the relative isolation and serenity of Mrs. Todd's home and is perplexed to learn that an old friend of Mrs. Todd's, Mrs. Fosdick, is in town and will be coming to the house for a visit. It is widely known about town that Mrs. Fosdick is a perpetual visitor yet every household values her company. The young woman likes Mrs. Fosdick right away and looks forward to spending time with these two older women as they reminisce.

Chapters 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 Analysis

The heartiness of the people of Maine and the seafaring stock from which they come is a major theme in the novel. Mrs. Blackett still lives an industrious life off the land on an island in spite of her advanced years. Only once does the elderly woman acknowledge the possibility of her infirmity due to age or illness. A positive attitude pulls her out of the temporary state as she declares that Mrs. Todd has an herb or potion for anything she may need in the future.

The lives of these people cannot be easy on this rocky coast, yet they are truly tender hearted and empathetic in spite of any stalwart veneer. Perhaps it is the suffering that

has made them vulnerable in the right places and at the right times. The secret is in knowing the right times when surviving a seafaring life in New England. This is also the reason why visits, especially like the one from Mrs. Fosdick, are so valued. Company is a valued commodity and the sense of community is maintained in spite of hardships.

Chapters 13, 14 and 15

Chapters 13, 14 and 15 Summary

One evening Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Fosdick join the young woman in her room where she has built the first fire of the season to ward off the chill from a rainstorm. The conversation of the two older women gravitates to the discussion of a woman referred to as "poor Joanna."

Years ago, when Mrs. Todd was newly married, there was a girl in the town named Joanna, who was engaged to be married to a man from Massachusetts. At the last minute the man refused to marry Joanna and ran away back to Massachusetts to marry someone else and was never heard from again. Joanna's humiliation prompted her to give away her half of the family farm and move to a nearby island where she vowed to live out her life alone. Apparently, Joanna felt that she was not fit to live with other people and the isolation was her self-inflicted punishment.

For awhile, curious townspeople would sail by in the hopes of catching a glimpse of the forlorn girl who never again left the island. Mrs. Todd recalls the only day she and the town's minister visited Joanna on the island. Joanna asked the newly married Mrs. Todd to love her new husband and to not return to visit again. Joanna reveals that she has committed the ultimate sin but Mrs. Todd does not know what she means by that. Joanna also asks that if the time should ever come that Joanna would require serious medical attention she requests that only Mrs. Blackett make the trip to the island. That was the last time Mrs. Todd ever saw or spoke to Joanna.

Joanna is buried on the island and the whole town still remembers the crowds of people who sailed to the island on that September afternoon for the funeral. The young woman is intrigued by Joanna's story and asks Captain Bowden, with whom she is sailing one afternoon, if he will take her to Joanna's island.

Upon docking, the young woman realizes that there is nothing left of Joanna's life there but the pile of rocks from the foundation of her house and some wildflowers. As the young woman looks over the pine landscape, she muses that the isolated Joanna must have seen the island in just this way on so many summer afternoons. It occurs to the young woman that each person has a place inside, which is remote and islanded where only great regrets and great happiness live.

Chapters 13, 14 and 15 Analysis

The author leaves nothing to chance and literally plants the metaphor of isolation in the young woman's mind for the reader. The remote and secret places inside each person where great regret and happiness live are like the island where Joanna sequestered herself to live out her shame and humiliation. Despite well-intentioned interventions,

there are some things that are too personal for public display, and each person has a "Joanna's Island" inside where no boat or visitor is welcome.

The author again utilizes the technique of storytelling to impart local color of the legends and also the stalwart nature of the people who live in this part of the country. The young woman, who has come to the town to write, is finding more of an education by listening, which will ultimately gives depth and substance to her work later on.

Chapters 16, 17, 18 and 19

Chapters 16, 17, 18 and 19 Summary

Mrs. Todd invites the young woman to accompany her to the annual Bowden family reunion, which is to be held that day a little further up North Country. The reunion date has been moved up a few days so the announcement of an imminent departure surprises the young woman who is delighted at the invitation just the same.

Mrs. Todd bemoans the fact that her mother, Mrs. Blackett did not arrive last evening and will not be able to attend the big event. No sooner do the words leave Mrs. Todd's mouth than Mrs. Blackett is spotted coming up the hillside having been dropped at the shore by William who is going back to the island and foregoing the family event. Mrs. Blackett needs only a cup of tea and a few minutes of rest and she will be ready to travel.

Suddenly the day seems very festive for the young woman, who is seated by Mrs. Blackett in the second seat of the wagon that is being driven by Mrs. Todd alone in the front. Mrs. Blackett's high spirits are infectious and she urges Mrs. Todd to speed the horses so that they may reach the reunion site quicker. On the way, Mrs. Blackett points out places of interest to the young woman such as the island where Mrs. Blackett's sister lived with her husband and children. As the young woman watches the old woman's gaze in the direction of the island, Mrs. Blackett admits that it is hard to fathom that her sister is dead and long gone when it seems as if she is still living there. Mrs. Blackett shakes her melancholy as she catches views of the line of carriages ahead on the road, as well as the multitude of boats sailing into the coastline to drop off their cargo of Bowden lineage.

When the ladies arrive at the reunion site, the young woman is struck by the gentlemanly manners of the young men who greet them and take the horse to the barn for food and rest. Immediately Mrs. Blackett is whisked away on a cloud of attentive well-wishers who are thrilled that she has made this trip. Mrs. Todd has her own circle of companions too and the young woman watches a carefree, jovial Mrs. Todd, so different from the one with so many responsibilities in the community.

In deference to her age and beloved status in the family, Mrs. Blackwell is given a position of honor in the front of the family parade, which moves in rows of four down the hillside into the beautifully prepared grove. The majestic pine trees stand as a backdrop for this family gathered for a sumptuous feast. Wildflowers and oak leaves decorate the tables as the old family homestead stands guard at the top of the hill watching all the descendants.

Mrs. Todd remarks to the young woman that she is so pleased that she is sharing the day with the family and is particularly emotional when mentioning Mrs. Blackwell's place of honor in the parade a short while ago. The young woman catches bits and pieces of

conversations among the family members and from one such discussion gleans the fact that Sant Bowden, who is probably descended from a great French general, has a wealth of military knowledge and strategic thinking, yet never had the ambition to do anything with it and is also hindered by his fervent fondness of alcohol.

Mrs. Todd tries to temper any negativity about Sant and shares the fact that there is a rare sprig of laurel that grows wild in a place on the Bowden's Maine homestead. Because the climate is not conducive for this plant, it does not thrive and Mrs. Todd visits it occasionally just to see its sad blooms. To Mrs. Todd, this laurel plant is just like Sant Bowden, containing huge potential but is out of its own element and unable to thrive.

There is only one person that Mrs. Todd has no interest in seeing in this huge gathering of relatives and that is her dead husband's cousin, Sarah Jane Blackett. Fortunately, Sarah Jane does not see Mrs. Todd in the great mix of people, which relieves Mrs. Todd of the burden of pretending delight at seeing the woman again. This hurdle out of the way, Mrs. Todd is free to enjoy the balance of the afternoon and bask in the warmth of the extended Bowden family.

The feast draws to a close with the consumption of many desserts, the showpiece being a huge gingerbread house crafted in the likeness of the Bowden family homestead. Some of the men give speeches and overall the young woman is struck by the values, creativity and loyalty exhibited by this huge gathering of New England stock.

Finally it is time to leave as the afternoon wanes and carriages are brought from the barn and the seafaring guests move down the hill to their boats. The reunion will be held again next summer and the young people who see their friends all the time are not fazed by this declaration. The thought of the calendar making a complete turn before these people will see their dear ones again has a more poignant meaning for the older people and the young woman notices longer goodbyes and grasps that last a little longer than normal.

Mrs. Todd, Mrs. Blackett, and the young woman chatter the whole way home, which makes the time go by quickly. The only drawback to the day is that William did not attend and both Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett note that not as many of the older people came. They rationalize that maybe there aren't as many older folks to come anymore, but they had held out hopes of seeing more.

Chapters 16, 17, 18 and 19 Analysis

The sense of community is strong in this part of the country where people make their living from the land and the sea and have to rely on each other more so than people living in cities do. The pride and sense of heritage and lineage is evident in all the vignettes in the book, but the Bowden family reunion is the strongest example. In this small town, the lines of family and community cross over each other as so many of the

people are related by blood or marriage that the reunion is more like a picnic for the whole town.

There is such a strong feeling of respect for having survived the weather and the passing of time that the older people are revered and given places of prominence at the reunion. Mrs. Todd is moved to tears when mentioning the sight of Mrs. Blackett in the front row of the reunion parade right next to the minister. Mrs. Blackett is also revered for her kindness and youthful spirit as evidenced by the swarm of people who are thrilled to see her and it is unofficially recognized that Mrs. Blackett is the "queen" of the event.

At this point in America's history, New England is becoming more industrialized and moving away from a fishing economy, which is forcing some of the people to move away and the Bowden reunion is a sentimental event which marks the passing of time and the diminishing nature of the only lifestyle most of these people has ever known. Stylistically, the author masterfully captures the local color of the Maine coastline by verbally painting images of the landscape and the people whose accents and unrefined grammar securely lock the characters into this time and place.

The significance of the pointed firs in the novel's title comes to life in this section, particularly in the description of the stand of fir trees that line the back wall of the grove in which the family is feasting. On three sides of the grove are views of the massive transient sea but the line of fir trees stands resolutely in place as if to signify the solidity and permanence of the lineage of the inhabitants of this place and the unfading spirit they possess as vital and fresh as evergreens.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

As the summer winds down, the young woman is very familiar with Dunnet Landing and explores the paths and trails regularly. One day as she walks along the shoreline an old ship called the *Miranda* catches her eye and she pauses to study the lines and strength of the sailing vessel. Soon a gruff voice breaks the young woman's reverie and she looks up to find the figure of Elijah Tilley and is delighted to have the chance to speak to this seasoned fisherman for the first time since her arrival in June.

At first the young woman senses that Elijah is the type of person who is so suspicious of others that others cannot help but be suspicious of their own selves. The young woman engages Elijah in conversation about the ship and today's fishing and eventually the two become friendly. The young woman cannot help but feel compassion for the beaten down demeanor of the old man and is reluctant to part company. It is Elijah who breaks the encounter with the announcement that he needs to cook dinner, but then surprisingly invites the young woman to his house. There are not many visitors now that Elijah's wife Sarah, whom he calls poor dear, has passed away. The young woman accepts the invitation and visits Elijah later that afternoon.

The young woman is struck by the coziness of the sturdy house and notes that everything must still be in place exactly like Elijah's wife had left it before she died. The young woman is also surprised to have found Elijah knitting in a chair by the window, a pastime he employs during the off-season from fishing. As the two new friends engage in conversation this afternoon, Elijah admits that he grieves for his wife every day and his pain is not easing up like other people had told him it would.

Elijah shares little details about the simple joys of being married to the poor dear, and the young woman notices a tear that escapes and runs down the harrowed cheeks of this old seaman. Elijah shows the young woman the best room in the house, which is sparingly furnished and she imagines the years of saving and the trip to a bigger town in order to bring back each carefully selected piece of furniture in Elijah's boat.

Elijah admits that he has no interest in remarrying although eight years have passed since the poor dear's death, preferring to remain in the house and live a solitary life in honor of his wife. The afternoon has been a revelation for the young woman but it is getting late. She begins to leave and asks if she may visit again and Elijah says he would welcome another visit.

Chapter 20 Analysis

The author provides another character sketch in the form of Elijah Tilley, whom the young woman encounters on an afternoon stroll. Through Elijah the author is able to characterize the traits and code of values for the people who live in Dunnet Landing.

The sense of connection to the sea is so important to Elijah as is an undying devotion to his dead wife, whose memory is preserved in the house just as her furnishings and knick knacks remain untouched.

There is no real plot in the novel, just encounters and experiences of a summer spent in a small coastal town, but the author's use of metaphors and similes make the book very engaging. Early in the book, the young woman notes that the houses of Dunnet Landing have windows that appear to be knowing eyes that look out to sea. In this chapter, the young woman notices that the idle lobster boats tied up at the shoreline seem to be taking an afternoon nap in the sun. The author describes Elijah being hunched over his intense knitting as if he were hastily shortening the very thread of time. This technique makes the writing more interesting and imparts so much more about the local color than mere statements of facts.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

The summer has come to an end and the young woman prepares to leave to return to the city. Mrs. Todd has made arrangements for the trunks to be taken to the wharf where Captain Bowden will help load them onto the ship, which will carry the young woman away from this summer place.

Mrs. Todd informs the young woman that there are a few things on the kitchen table for her to take with her and leaves saying that she has errands to run. The young woman runs after Mrs. Todd to say a proper goodbye, but the older woman will not turn around and waves the young woman back to the house.

The little package on the kitchen table contains a basket, which had been prized by Mrs. Todd. In it sits a supper for the boat trip, some fresh herbs and a little leather box containing the coral pin which Mrs. Todd had tried to give to poor Joanna on the only day she had visited the isolated woman on the island.

With a little time left before the ship's departure the young woman climbs to a vantage point from which she can see all of Dunnet Landing and can even see Mrs. Todd weaving in and out of the growth as she stops to inspect some herb or other along her way into town. Finally the young woman boards the ship and gazes wistfully, as Dunnet Landing grows smaller and smaller and finally blends into the coastline of Maine.

Chapter 21 Analysis

The poignancy of the young woman's departure from her summer home is almost palpable due to the author's masterful crafting of characters and technique. The young woman describes the fleeting passing of her days on the island as if they had been a handful of flowers flung to the sea wind. This beautiful imagery imparts so much more information than a recounting of the days on a calendar could ever hope to do.

Probably the most important person in the novel is Mrs. Todd, whose sentimentality is half-heartedly hidden in an officious manner but the image of Mrs. Todd unable to say goodbye to the young woman face-to-face speaks volumes about the depths of the older woman's emotions.

The bond of friendship is an important theme in the story, especially the ties between the strong women in the area. Mrs. Todd leaves gifts for the departing young woman, small in scope, but huge in sentimental value as an attempt to strengthen the bond and create an indelible memory of one perfect summer.

Characters

Mrs. Blackett

Eighty-six-year-old Mrs. Blackett is Mrs. Todd's mother. She lives on Green Island with her son William. Mrs. Blackett is very lively, as well as extremely healthy and active for her age. The narrator meets Mrs. Blackett for the first time on Green Island, where the elderly lady shows a warm, comfortable hospitality that quickly dispenses with formality, and she treats her new acquaintance like an old friend. Mrs. Blackett enjoys teasing her sixty-seven-year-old daughter by treating Mrs. Todd as if she were the frailer of the two. Mrs. Blackett comes to shore toward the end of the novel to attend the Bowden family reunion. She is clearly a great favorite among many people and the narrator refers to her as a "queen" because of her much favored status in the community.

William Blackett

William Blackett, who is about sixty years old, is Mrs. Todd's younger brother. He lives on Green Island with his mother, Mrs. Blackett. William is very shy of people, especially women, and stays away when the narrator first lands on the island. Eventually, however, he comes in to meet the narrator. Later, William takes the narrator for a walk on the island, showing her a lookout point that he describes as the most beautiful view in the world. The narrator is quite certain the island is the only place in the world he has ever been. At the Blackett home, the narrator learns that William loves to sing. On the day of the Bowden family reunion, William does not show up because of his extreme shyness, even with his own extended family.

Mrs. Susan Fosdick

Susan Fosdick is an old friend of Mrs. Todd, who visits her from out of town. The narrator is apprehensive at first that Mrs. Fosdick, an unknown guest, will be joining the household for a time, but, upon meeting Mrs. Fosdick, she immediately likes her. Mrs. Fosdick talks of old gossip with Mrs. Todd, while the narrator listens. She brings up the story of "poor Joanna," which the narrator finds very sad and intriguing.

Captain Littlepage

Captain Littlepage is an old retired sea captain who stops by the schoolhouse to talk with the narrator one afternoon. At first, she finds his talk dull, but eventually becomes engrossed in the story he tells of a shipwreck he experienced, which left him stranded at a remote missionary station near the North Pole. There he met an old seaman named Gaffett, who told him a mysterious story of his own shipwreck years earlier. Captain Littlepage tells Gaffett's story of discovering a mysterious village in uncharted territory in the North Pole region, in which the inhabitants seemed to be ghosts, or creatures in a

waiting-place between life and death. Captain Littlepage tells the narrator that he believes he is now the only living person who knows of Gaffett's discovery.

The Narrator

The unnamed narrator of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is a writer from the city, perhaps Boston, who has decided to stay the summer in the small coastal town of Dunnet Landing, Maine, to complete a long writing task. She is frequently distracted from her writing, however, by the local inhabitants who seek her out and tell her their stories. While in Dunnet Landing, she rents a room in the home of Mrs. Todd, the local herbalist. Mrs. Todd includes her in a variety of excursions and visits that acquaint the narrator with the aging inhabitants of the town and the tales they have to tell about themselves and other members of the community. Mrs. Todd takes the narrator to visit her mother and brother on Green Island, introduces her to Mrs. Fosdick, and brings her along to a large family reunion. At the end of the summer the narrator leaves Dunnet Landing, taking with her a sense of the nostalgia, loss, and loneliness that characterizes the aging population of this shipping village. She also, however, has enjoyed the vitality, strong sense of community, and storytelling skills of these people, who she probably will never see again.

Elijah Tilley

Elijah Tilley is an old seaman whom the narrator encounters one day near the end of her stay in Dunnet Landing. He invites the narrator to visit him in his small cabin, where he tells her about his deceased wife, Sarah, who died eight years earlier. Tilley's life still revolves around his happy memories of his wife, almost as if she were still alive.

Mrs. Almira Todd

Mrs. Almira Todd is the local herbalist of Dunnet Landing. She spends her days gathering plants, flowers, and herbs, from which she brews various remedies for the emotional and physical ailments of the local population. Mrs. Todd and the local medical doctor, however, are amicable with one another, as they both understand the importance of each other's role in the community. The narrator rents a room in Mrs. Todd's house for the summer and spends much of her time with Mrs. Todd over the course of the summer. Mrs. Todd is the narrator's entry into the local community; she introduces her to various people, tells her about the local inhabitants, and takes her on various excursions. On a walk one day, Mrs. Todd tells the narrator that the man she married, Nathan Todd, was not the man she really loved. Although she never reveals who this true love was, she explains that he, too, married someone else. Another time, Mrs. Todd takes the narrator in a sailboat to meet her mother and brother, who live on an island. When Mrs. Todd's old friend Mrs. Fosdick visits, the narrator is again made privy to important stories about people who once lived in Dunnet Landing. Toward the end of the narrator's stay, Mrs. Todd takes her to the Bowden family reunion.

Themes

Community

Community is one of the central themes of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. The entire novel focuses on the narrator's description of the tiny community of Dunnet Landing. As the central character, Mrs. Todd functions as a touchstone by which the narrator is able to perceive the lines that interconnect the individual members of the community. The narrator meets or hears of many members of the community through Mrs. Todd, and learns of their relationships to one another. Although most of the people she meets—all of them over the age of sixty and either widowed or widowers—seem to lead generally solitary lives, the strong community ties that hold Dunnet Landing together are clearly indicated.

The Bowden family reunion demonstrates most powerfully the strong communal ties among the town's citizens. The lines between family and community are in fact blurred, as a wide network of people turn out to be related to each other through ties of both blood and marriage. Thus, the Bowden family reunion is more like a town gathering. The narrator also observes that, although the various members of the family and town live on remote farms or islands and may only see each other once a year, the bonds of affection and shared memory maintain a sense of interconnection that transcends geographical distance. Mrs. Blackett, for instance, who lives on a remote island and rarely comes ashore, turns out to be the "queen" of the reunion, sharing strong affections with everyone at the gathering. There is a poignancy to the narrator's portrayal of this community because it represents a disappearing segment of Maine culture.

Storytelling

The narrative of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* consists of a series of encounters the narrator has with various town members who proceed to disclose to her long stories of their pasts. It becomes clear that the stories these characters tell are stories they have told many times before to many people. As the narrator returns from her encounters with each of these characters and relates the stories to Mrs. Todd, Mrs. Todd nods knowingly, indicating that she herself has heard all of these stories before. Jewett thus explores the theme of storytelling as it relates to community, friendship, and personal identity. That is, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is in part a tale about the role played by storytelling in the lives of individuals, in their relationships to others, and in their sense of community as a group of people who share a common set of stories. Each character appears to define him or herself by the stories that they repeatedly tell to anyone who will listen, and the community of Dunnet Landing is largely defined by the sense of a common history as passed down through storytelling. The story of "poor Joanna," for example, is told to the narrator by both Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Fosdick, and concerns a woman whose personal history now belongs to the history of the community. Through

this novel, Jewett celebrates the human urge to narrate stories, as indicated by the narrator's need to repeat to the reader all of the stories she was told during her summer at Dunnet Landing.

Memories and Nostalgia

Memories and nostalgia are important themes in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. All of the people the narrator meets are between the ages of sixty and ninety, with the bulk of their lives behind them. Hence, many of these characters live primarily in the past, nursing their memories, both bitter and pleasant. The town has changed because of the decline in the shipping industry, and there are many aging sailors and sea captains who once led lives of adventure, travel, and physical challenge. They express a strong sense of nostalgia for both their own personal past and for what the town was like during their youth. Captain Littlepage, for instance, describes with nostalgia days long past when the town thrived on the shipping industry, and all the men spent much of their time at sea. Elijah Tilley, another aging sailor, also lives in a world of memory and nostalgia. His life revolves around the memory of his now deceased wife, and he is overcome with nostalgia for the happiness he enjoyed in days long gone. Throughout *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Jewett portrays an aging community in a period of economic decline, the members of which live nostalgically in the past in a world of personal and communal memories.

Style

Narrative Voice

The Country of the Pointed Firs is narrated in the first-person, meaning that the narrator is a character in the story and that the perspective she presents to the reader is limited to her own personal observations. The narrator is not named at any point in the book, and little direct information about her is provided. She indicates that she is middle-aged, is a writer, and has come to Dunnet Landing from the city to spend the summer working on a long writing piece. Critics have often praised Jewett for the skill with which she creates the narrative voice in this novel; the narrator is not simply an objective observer of the events she records, nor is she overly intrusive in imposing her own opinions on the reader.

Embedded Narrative

Throughout the narrative of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Jewett employs a literary device known as an embedded narrative or story-withinthe- story. In other words, in telling the story of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, the narrator includes long quotations from other characters as they relate their own stories to her. With one character, Jewett creates an even more complex embedded narrative when the narrator quotes Captain Littlepage as he tells her the story of a shipwreck told to him many year earlier by Gaffett, another aging seaman. Thus, there are three layers of narrative embedded within the overarching narrative.

Local Dialect

The use of local dialect is characteristic of the fiction of "local color" writers of the nineteenth century, and Jewett has often been praised for her use of local Maine dialect in her stories and novels. In *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, she quotes many different characters in Dunnet Landing whose speech is inflected with the local phrasing and idioms of coastal Maine. Mary Ellen Chase observed in a 1968 introduction to *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories*:

> Even fifty years ago Mrs. Todd's speech would be easily understood anywhere along the coast of Maine; yet she and her language are bound to become anachronistic, unconscious contributors to the social history of a region.

Critics often note the accuracy and naturalness of Jewett's use of local Maine dialect in the dialogue of her characters. In 1962, Richard Cary observed, "The natives [in

Jewett's fiction] speak a language which has the color and texture of the soil they walk upon." Cary continues:

> The felicity of her style is most manifest in her management of native idiom. She extracts the peculiarities of speech from the earth of their origin, turns up their roots with some of the soil still clinging, yet preserves unharmed their vibrant connection with life.

Plot

Critics often point out that *The Country of the Pointed Firs* does not have a complex plot or strong dramatic development. The plot in this novel has been described as episodic, meaning that it is structured as a series of relatively isolated events or incidents, each of which individually does not develop along a clearly indicated line of narrative movement. However, this is not seen as a weakness in the story. Rather, the episodic plot structure conveys to the reader the atmosphere of the sleepy, rural town of Dunnet Landing, in which the biggest event of the year is a family reunion, and most of the characters are elderly people who spend their time reflecting backward on their past, rather than looking forward to any particular goals or hopes or dreams for their futures.

Character Sketch

The Country of the Pointed Firs is to some extent made up of a series of character sketches. The narrator moves the story along by describing her series of encounters with a number of the local inhabitants of Dunnet Landing. A character sketch is a brief description of a particular person, real or fictional, that provides the reader with a strong sense of who the person is in a short piece capturing the essential elements of that person. Jewett offers a series of character sketches of Captain Littlepage, Mrs. Blackett, William Blackett, and Elijah Tilley, among others. The importance of each character to the narrative is indicated by many of the chapter titles, which simply name the character to be sketched within that chapter. The portrayal of the character Mrs. Todd, whom critics generally agree is Jewett's greatest character in all of her fiction, provides the overarching character sketch of the book.

Historical Context

Decline of the Shipping Industry

The Country of the Pointed Firs takes place some time in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This time in U.S. history is significant to Jewett's setting in a shipping and fishing village of coastal Maine.

The heyday of Maine's economy were the years 1830 to 1860, when fishing and shipbuilding were the dominant industries, and coastal towns were centers of economic and cultural prosperity. As a result of developments in industry and changes in the economy, however, the merchant shipping industry in Maine suffered a severe decline in the years following the Civil War. Industrialization developed roughly over the course of the second half of the nineteenth century in the United States. Industry, employing masses of laborers in urban settings to perform factory work, drew from the rural areas to the cities many young people in search of work.

The fictional town of Dunnet Landing portrayed in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is thus a realistic depiction of the conditions of Maine coastal towns from which most of the young people had fled. They left behind an aging population who recalled the great days of the shipping industry when a majority of the male population were sailors, fishermen, or shipbuilders.

The Status of Women

Jewett's stories, such as *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, focus on strong-willed, financiallyindependent women, often widows whose lives do not revolve around men. Jewett herself never married, choosing instead to focus her personal life on a close female companion. Although she and her female characters enjoyed personal and financial independence, Jewett did not live to see the granting of the right to vote to women in the United States.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, when Jewett lived and wrote, women in the United States struggled to obtain the right to vote. The U.S. women's suffrage movement□the struggle for the right for women to vote in local, state, and national elections□can be dated from the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, held in Seneca Falls, New York. The first national convention of the newly formed women's movement was held in 1850. In 1869, the National Woman Suffrage Association was founded with the intended strategy of calling for an amendment to the United States Constitution granting women the right to vote. Also in 1869, the American Woman Suffrage Association was founded to push for amendments to state constitutions allowing women the right to vote. In 1890, these two organizations merged to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association. Prominent women in the suffrage movement included Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone, and Susan B. Anthony.

In 1890, Wyoming became the first state that allowed women to vote. Over the next thirty years, fourteen more states granted women the right to vote. In 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution guaranteed women the right to vote on an equal basis with men□ten years after Jewett's death.

Local Color, Regionalism, and Realism in American Literature

Jewett is widely considered to be one of the greatest "local color" writers of the nineteenth century. Local color writing emerged in the United States in the period after the Civil War, and remained popular throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century. Local color writing focuses on the specific features of character, dialect, folklore, and customs of a particular region of the country, often a small community in a rural area. Bret Harte, an early local color writer, portrayed the culture of gold mining towns in the West. Mark Twain drew from his childhood growing up along the Mississippi River to write his stories and novels. Harriet Beecher Stowe and Mary E. Wilkins Freemen, as well as Jewett, depicted the quaint community life of small towns on the East Coast. Local color stories often have a tone of nostalgia for the disappearing communities and ways of life affected by industrialization.

Originating in the Midwest in the 1880s and 1890s was the development of regionalism in American literature, which shared similarities with local color writing. The most representative Midwestern regionalist writer was Hamlin Garland, whose stories of the hardship endured by pioneers on the Great Plains are represented in his collection *Main-Traveled Roads* (1891).

Local color writing is seen as a transitional style that led to realism in American literature. The focus of local color writers on accurately portraying the characteristics of a specific region lent their works a strong element of realism. However, local color stories are often tinged with romanticism, nostalgia, and a tendency to overlook the darker elements of any character or community. Jewett's fiction, particularly *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, is considered a transitional work that bridges the gap between local color writing and realism.

William Dean Howells, novelist and *Atlantic Monthly* editor, ushered in a new realism in American literature that allowed for critique of and commentary on contemporary social, political, and economic issues. Howells was a strong influence on Jewett and helped to launch her literary career. Jewett, in turn, exerted a strong influence on the novelist Willa Cather, who turned for inspiration to her childhood in the pioneer town of Red Cloud, Nebraska, in her major works of regional, local color fiction.

Critical Overview

Jewett is widely regarded as one of the best American local color authors of the nineteenth century, and *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is indisputably her masterpiece. At the time of its initial publication in 1896, Jewett was firmly established as one of the leading writers of her day and a master of the "local color" tale, vividly portrayed through her Maine coast characters in previous stories. Paula Blanchard observes that, by 1891, Jewett "was one of America's best-loved and most admired authors."

The Country of the Pointed Firs was warmly received by British and American critics of the day, who saw in Jewett's narrator a mature version of her earlier narrators. The book was praised for its avoidance of the sentimentality and quaintness that could be detected in her earlier works, as well as the more skillful degree of involvement on the part of the narrator with the events and characters she describes.

In an 1897 review of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Alice Brown opined, "*The Country of the Pointed Firs* is the flower of a sweet, sane knowledge of life, and an art so elusive that it smiles up at you while you pull aside the petals, vainly probing its heart." Brown concluded, "No such beautiful and perfect work has been done for many years; perhaps no such beautiful work has ever been done in America."

In her preface to a 1925 edition of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Willa Cather ranked Jewett's novel along with *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) by Nathaniel Hawthorne, and *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) by Mark Twain, as the three most enduring works of nineteenth-century American fiction. From the mid-1920s through the 1950s, however, Jewett's works fell out of popularity and her once prominent literary name receded into the background of American letters. The label of "local color" writer contributed to a general regard for Jewett's work as beneath the standards of the literary cannon. Further, many critics regarded her work as minor in its scope and significance, primarily due to the focus of her stories on seemingly insignificant details of the lives of older women. Barbara H. Solomon, writing in 1979, explained the neglect of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* throughout the mid-twentieth century was due to the fact that "it is so thoroughly a woman's book about the world of women□old women at that." Solomon continues:

> The women of Dunnet Landing, capable, busy, and sensible, are Jewett's subject, and as long as the topic of women's activities and their relationships with one another seemed unfashionable, the novel was invariably thought of as a "minor" masterpiece or "quaint" classic.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, critics took up her works with renewed interest. Since the early 1960s, Jewett's works, particularly *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, have been given a broader scope of interpretation and critical analysis. Feminist critics in particular saw her fictions as the work of a proto-feminist. Such critics praised her

portrayal of strong female characters, her attention to the details of domestic life, and her focus on women as the central figures within a small community.

In a 2000 edition of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, the biographical note observes that the continuing power and significance of this more than one-hundred-year-old novel is due to the fact that "[t]he artistry of Jewett's creation . . . remains as alive and fresh and accessible as the day Jewett wrote the first chapter."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Brent has a Ph.D. in American culture, specializing in film studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses on the history of American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses the theme of death in Jewett's novel.

On first reading, Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* may strike the reader as lighthearted and quaint, depicting a series of quirky elderly characters in a quiet, sleepy town where not much happens. However, there is an atmosphere of darkness and death that permeates the novel, constituting a central focus of the narrative.

The inhabitants of Dunnet Landing encountered by the narrator are all between the ages of sixty and ninety years old. Because of their advanced age, they carry with them an awareness of their own approaching death. The awareness of their own mortality fills these characters with a sense of nostalgia, as they often seem to inhabit memories long past as much as they do the present. These characters are all facing their own impending deaths and whatever afterlife awaits them. It seems as if the narrator herself, gazing out from the shores of Dunnet Landing, gets a glimpse into the afterlife toward which her acquaintances gaze. One morning, looking out at an island offshore with Mrs. Todd, the narrator notes, "The sunburst upon that outermost island made it seem like a sudden revelation of the world beyond this which some believe to be so near."

Captain Littlepage describes to the narrator the story he was told by an aging seaman years earlier about a mysterious town near the North Pole. Captain Littlepage describes this town as a "waiting-place between this world and the next," in which the inhabitants all seem to be ghosts. Captain Littlepage's obsession with this town full of ghosts suggests his preoccupation with his own impending death, as if he himself were occupying a waiting-place between life and death. Dunnet Landing, likewise, seems to be a sort of waitingplace between life and death, in which the inhabitants, with one foot in the grave, look back on a long life and gaze into the distance at the afterlife which awaits them. At one point, the narrator describes Mrs. Todd as if she were one of the ghosts inhabiting the "waiting-place between this world and the next" described by Captain Littlepage; the narrator momentarily feels as if Mrs. Todd "would now begin to look like the cobweb shapes of the arctic town."

Nonetheless, the inhabitants of Dunnet Landing, though approaching the age at which death lurks just around the corner, seem astoundingly hale and hearty, as if they could almost overcome death with their vitality. The narrator says of the old fishermen who continue to live and work around the port, that the sea

> affected the old fishermen's hard complexions, until
> one fancied that when Death claimed them it could
> only be with the aid, not of any slender modern dart,
> but the good serviceable harpoon of a seventeenthcentury
> woodcut.

In addition to nearing their own deaths, the inhabitants of Dunnet Landing have all experienced the deaths of loved ones. In part because it is a seaport, the town is inhabited largely by the widows of sailors, most of whom were lost at sea. When Mrs. Todd shows the narrator the Bowden family graveyard, she observes that it contains the remains of few men, because most of them were drowned in shipwrecks or buried at sea. There are, however, several old men encountered by the narrator who are widowers. The narrator, in fact, does not meet any married couples during her summer at Dunnet Landing. The widows she becomes acquainted with include Mrs. Todd, Mrs. Blackett, and Mrs. Fosdick. Mrs. Begg, whose funeral the narrator attends, is said to have survived three husbands, all lost at sea. The widowers include Captain Littlepage and Elijah Tilley.

Elijah Tilley, whom the narrator meets toward the end of her stay in Dunnet Landing, is a widower whose entire life is consumed with the memory of his wife, who died eight years earlier. He tells the narrator, "I can't git over losin' of her no way nor no how." His entire home is devoted to keeping the memory of his wife alive, as he maintains it in the exact same manner she had. Thus, although he has been living alone for eight years, his home looks more like that of a fastidious housewife than of an aged seafaring man. The narrator describes his living room as a "clear bright room which had once enshrined his wife, and now enshrined her memory."

In addition to the deaths of their husbands and wives, the aging population of Dunnet Landing has survived the deaths of many other loved ones. Mrs. Fosdick, for example, "had been the mother of a large family of sons and daughters,□sailors and sailors' wives,□and most of them had died before her." While visiting Mrs. Todd, Mrs. Fosdick informs her host of the recent death of her sister Louisa.

Although the aging inhabitants of Dunnet Landing are constantly reminded of death, this does not lessen the pain caused by the loss of even one beloved individual. As Elijah Tilley says of his deceased wife, "There ain't one o' her old friends can ever make up her loss." Likewise, the narrator notes that the loss of Mrs. Begg, a lifelong friend of Mrs. Todd, is a source of great sadness. Watching the funeral from afar, the narrator observes that Mrs. Todd "held a handkerchief to her eyes, and I knew, with a pang of sympathy, that hers was not affected grief." Thus, while Dunnet Landing seems to be a town characterized by death, this does not mean the citizens are immune to the sense of loss and sadness that accompanies the death of a loved one.

In addition to contemplating their own impending deaths, and the deaths of loved ones long since gone, the inhabitants of Dunnet Landing often attend funerals of the newly dead. Funerals are, in fact, community events central to the life of the town, serving in part to bring the community together, as most everyone seems to know everyone else. The narrator comments that, because friends and relatives live so far apart on isolated islands and remote farms, "Even funerals in this country of the pointed firs were not without their social advantages and satisfactions."

Early in the story, the narrator attends the funeral of Mrs. Begg, and later watches the funeral procession from a window. The narrator explains that "Mrs. Begg had been very

much respected, and there was a large company of friends following her to her grave." Attendance at the funeral procession and funeral service affirms a person's membership in the community, as indicated by the narrator's sense of regret at not joining the procession. She realizes, "I had now made myself and my friends remember that I did not really belong to Dunnet Landing."

Even the funeral of "poor Joanna," who had lived in self-isolation on Shell-heap Island for many years, was attended by the entire community. Mrs. Fosdick explains that the day of Joanna's funeral, which was held on Shell-heap Island, "there wa'n't hardly a boat on the coast within twenty miles that didn't head for Shell-heap cram-full o' folks an' all real respectful, same's if she'd always stayed ashore and held her friends." Mrs. Fosdick notes that those who attended the funeral "had real feelin,' and went purpose to show it." Thus, even the most lonely and isolated member of the community becomes the focus of communal mourning upon her death.

The narrator experiences the end of her summer's stay in Dunnet Landing as a loss akin to that of death. As the book opens, she compares her feeling for the remote town to the feeling of love at first sight, which only deepens with time. She explains:

> When one really knows a village like this and its surroundings,
> it is like becoming acquainted with a single
> person. The process of falling in love at first sight
> is as final as it is swift in such a case, but the growth
> of true friendship may be a lifelong affair.

Because her attachment to the town is akin to one person's love for another human being, leaving the town is likewise experienced as the loss of a loved one. Sailing away from the coastal town to return to the city, the narrator observes, "Dunnet Landing and all its coasts were lost to sight." By the same token, the narrator feels as if taking her leave from the town is akin to experiencing her own death. Describing her empty room in Mrs. Todd's house after she has packed to leave, the narrator observes:

> When I went in again the little house had suddenly
> grown lonely, and my room looked empty as it had
> the day I came. I and all my belongings had died out
> of it, and I knew how it would seem when Mrs. Todd
> came back and found her lodger gone. So we die before
> our own eyes; so we see some chapters of our
> lives come to their natural end.

The overall effect of Jewett's treatment of the theme of death in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is to address the universal human concern with mortality. Seeing the aged of Dunnet Landing, the narrator, a middle-aged woman, is reminded of her own approaching old age and death. She looks to Mrs. Blackett, in her eighties, and Mrs. Todd, in her sixties, as role models of old age, and thinks, "I hoped in my heart that I

might be like them as I lived on into age, and then smiled to think that I too was no longer very young." She goes on, "So we always keep the same hearts, though our outer framework fails and shows the touch of time."

We all must die. Yet the narrator takes comfort in the immortality of nature and the human spirit, in spite of the death which inevitably awaits each individual. Commenting on the funeral of Mrs. Begg, the narrator notes that the funeral procession looks "futile and helpless"—an indication of the feeling of futility and helplessness, that is, powerlessness, of human beings over the forces of death. Yet the narrator goes on to observe, "The song sparrows sang and sang, as if with joyous knowledge of immortality, and contempt for those who could so pettily concern themselves with death." Of course, the birds themselves are not immortal, but Jewett suggests in this passage that nature is immortal, as is the human soul.

Source: Liz Brent, Critical Essay on *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, in *Novels for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Graham discusses the representations of time in Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs*.*

Feminist theory has recently offered new perspectives on Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. Much of this recent scholarship is based on the work of Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan, who argue that females and males, because of socially constructed experiences, may espouse different values and speak in different voices. Briefly stated, the feminine perspective is cyclical, inductive, and communal; the masculine perspective linear, deductive, and hierarchical. Elizabeth Ammons argues that the narrative structure of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is structured in opposition to masculine narrative: "Instead of being linear, it [*The Country of the Pointed Firs*] is nuclear: the narrative moves out from one base to a given point and back again, and so forth, like arteries on a spider's web." Josephine Donovan, like Ammons, finds Jewett's preference for non-linear plots "an essentially feminine literary mode expressing a contextual, inductive sensitivity, one that 'gives in' to the events in question, rather than imposing upon them an artificial, prefabricated 'plot.'" Karen Oakes comments on the "feminine fluidity" in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*; and Ann Romines perceives the structure of the book, with its gentle ebb and flow, as replicating "the domestic rhythms" that women know.

One feminist perspective that has not been fully addressed in discussions of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is time, a concept that elucidates both structure and theme in Jewett's work. The feminist theory of time as articulated by the French poststructuralist Julia Kristeva suggests that Jewett offers a vision of life that includes the masculine, linear time and the feminine, cyclical time, yet ultimately transcends both to achieve monumental time.

In "Women's Time," Kristeva perceives linear time as an effort to define patterns when none may exist, to distort the relationship between synchronic events by forcing them into an orderly sequence of cause and effect. Because linear time suggests and repeats the hierarchical power relationships dominating Western civilization□one event or person controlling others□Kristeva criticizes linear time for being "at once both civilizational and obsessional." She identifies linear time as masculine. Juxtaposed to linear time is cyclical time, which Kristeva identifies as feminine because it is validated by "gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature . . ." Natural processes, such as the menstrual cycle and seasonal cycle, symbolize and reinforce the notion of time and events recurring without cessation and without agency. Monumental time is realized through mythology, what Kristeva calls "the archaic (mythical) memory." Kristeva is especially interested in resurrection myths as a revelation of monumental time. Although patriarchy has largely erased or rewritten resurrection myths, Kristeva believes that monumental time is essentially feminine because it extends the concept of cyclical time beyond the natural, temporal world: cyclical time is "*repetition*," while monumental time is "*eternity*." Kristeva wants to reclaim the feminine impulse behind mythic accounts of immortality, and she writes "of

the various myths of resurrection which, in all religious beliefs, perpetuate the vestige of an anterior or concomitant maternal cult . . ."

Although the concept of time as feminine and masculine has been addressed only recently as part of the postmodern conversation, Sarah Orne Jewett, almost a hundred years ago, depicted the three visions of time□linear, cyclical, and monumental□in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*.

Captain Littlepage, Joanna Todd, and Elijah Tilley . . . living in linear time, are stunted; Almira Todd, by embracing cyclical time, flourishes, although her vision is limited in time and space. Woven through each section is the vision of the narrator, a woman visiting Dunnet Landing. It is her vision that fully integrates life's experiences and reaches beyond the temporal for the mythic and eternal, thus typifying the monumental concept of time.

Although linear time can be dynamic if it is conceived as a progression moving ceaselessly into the future, the linear characters□because they have suffered a loss from which they cannot recover□ freeze time at different points on the continuum of past, present, and future. Captain Littlepage's loss is the decline of the shipping industry. Unable to recognize the recurring processes of life that remain, Littlepage is obsessed with the future. He wonders about an afterlife he once heard about: a town at the end of the world where people are shadows, "a kind of waiting place between this world an' the next." Dismayed that his former life has become a shadow and obsessed with the shadowy life that may await him, Littlepage becomes the story he cannot forget: His life is a waiting place between the temporal and the eternal.

While the Captain has an uneasy hope for the future, Joanna Todd, dead 22 years before the narrator comes to Dunnet Landing, abandoned hope because she assumed that her Calvinist God would not forgive the awful thoughts she had when she was jilted: "I have committed the unpardonable sin; you don't understand. . . . my thoughts was so wicked towards God that I can't expect ever to be forgiven. I have come to know what it is to have patience, but I have lost my hope." Without hope, she deliberately arrested her life, neither mourning for her lost relationship nor hoping for future joy. Significantly, there was no clock on Shellheap Island where Joanna Todd lived in cold isolation in a frozen present. Although one might expect only male characters to embody masculine time, the characterization of Joanna Todd shows that Jewett assumes a non-essentialist position. Margaret Roman notes that "Dunnet Landing is a place wherein the allocation of gender roles is called into question."

The last section about characters who live in linear time concerns Elijah Tilley, a fisherman who cannot move forward from the death of his wife eight years before. He tells the narrator, "Folks all kep' repeatin' that time would ease me, but I can't find it does. No, I miss her just the same every day." In his grief, he makes their house a shrine to his wife, refusing to change anything from the way it was eight years before.

The obsessions of Captain Littlepage, Joanna Todd, and Elijah Tilley are civilizational, as Kristeva suggests linear frameworks are, because their disappointments derive from

patriarchal institutions, institutions moribund or repressive. Sailing, Captain Littlepage's occupation, had virtually died out by the late nineteenth century, the publication date of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, as steamdriven ships replaced clipper ships. Sailing is an appropriate industry to represent not only New England society, but also the patriarchal nature of American capitalism since sailing was an exclusively male industry. It is the repressive nature of Calvinism, another moribund patriarchal institution in Jewett's New England, that (mis)leads Joanna Todd into a life of self-imposed isolation. Mrs. Fosdick, Almira Todd's friend, comments that New Englanders no longer talk about unpardonable sins as they used to. Calvinism was losing its vigor even when Joanna Todd was still alive as indicated by the ineffectual Parson Dimmick, who could not comprehend her pain. Almira Todd laments that "he seemed to know no remedies, but he had a great use of words."

The story of Sarah Tilley represents a third institution often spiritually and emotionally destructive to its participants: marriage. Although Elijah deludes himself into remembering his marriage as idyllic, the memories he recounts suggest that his wife suffered from the destructive effects of a patriarchal society that placed women in a subservient role. Elijah Tilley's wife was a timid woman afraid of bad weather, afraid to tell her husband she had broken a cup, afraid to sail to Green Island. Rather than understanding or helping his wife overcome her fears, Elijah Tilley worsened her fears by staying out late and laughing at her timidity. Elijah Tilley speaks fondly of his wife; however, it is Almira Todd, valuing Sarah Tilley as an individual, who provides the wife's first name, while Elijah, by referring to his wife only as "poor dear," strips Sarah of her individuality. To Almira Todd, Sarah was one of the finest people she knew: "There's some folks you miss, and some folks you don't, when they're gone, but there ain't hardly a day I don't think o' dear Sarah Tilley." To Elijah, Sarah is an endearment, an object of sympathy and mild ridicule, and finally a symbol of the past wherein he traps himself.

Juxtaposed to Captain Littlepage, Joanna Todd, and Elijah Tilley, who suspend growth by refusing to accept process, Almira Todd embraces life. John Hirsch writes about Almira Todd: "She stands in counterpoint to Captain Littlepage with his Miltonic invocation and narrative, to the saintly poor Joanna, and to the Carlyle-like remorse of Mr. Tilley." Almira Todd's acceptance of recurring process is evident immediately in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* when she reveals she has been jilted. She fondly remembers her love for the man, but, unlike Joanna Todd, she does not lose hope; later she marries someone else. When Mr. Todd dies, she is not like Elijah Tilley, defining her being in terms of the patriarchal institution of marriage. Instead, she finds joy in her medicinal herbs. Almira Todd enjoys reminiscing about the past, but she is never trapped there. Appropriately, Almira Todd is a naturalist, a vocation that allows her to embrace cyclical time. The herb plot Almira Todd values symbolizes her character just as setting symbolizes the character of the stunted people. The waiting place represents Captain Littlepage's own life of waiting. Shellheap Island does not make Joanna the way she is; instead, its cold isolation reflects her nature. By making his home a shrine, Elijah has entombed himself with his wife's memory. The life-giving, healthrestoring herbs, in turn, symbolize Almira Todd's own full and productive life.

The first and last sections of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* are a repetition of Almira Todd's communion with nature. The title of the first chapter is "The Return" and the last chapter "The Backward View," so that the book folds back into itself, emphasizing the cyclical nature of life. In the first section, the narrator describes the timeless repetition Almira Todd enjoys when she tends her herb plot:

> There were some strange and pungent odors that roused a dim sense and remembrance of something in the forgotten past. Some of these might once have belonged to sacred and mystic rites, and have had some occult knowledge handed with them down the centuries. . . .

In the last section, the narrator again observes Almira Todd's participation in the ceaseless process of nature: "Now and then she stooped to pick something,□it might have been her favorite pennyroyal,□and at last I lost sight of her as she slowly crossed an open space on one of the higher points of land, and disappeared again behind a dark clump of juniper and the pointed firs." The first section and the last section, thus, encircle the entire book in a recurring vision of life as typified by Almira Todd's communion with nature.

In the Green Island and Bowden reunion chapters, sections 3 and 5, Jewett emphasizes the value of companionship and draws a striking contrast to the solitary lives of Captain Littlepage, Joanna Todd, and Elijah Tilley. The companionship in section 3 is the intimate, non-obsessive relationship of Mrs. Blackett and her children William and Almira. Mrs. Blackett and William live on an island as Joanna does, but their lives are not constricted. Life blooms there as the name "Green Island" implies, while Joanna's Shellheap Island is a fearful place associated with cannibalism. Joanna lived alone, not wanting visitors and never leaving the island. Mrs. Blackett and William, though, have each other for company, enjoy visitors, and travel to the mainland. William has an eccentric shyness that keeps him from most people, but it apparently does not stunt his life as Joanna's self-imposed, bitterly sought isolation did. While Joanna had no hope for herself, Mrs. Blackett, even in old age, "promised a great future, and was beginning, not ending, her summers, and their happy toils." Although Almira Todd no longer lives on Green Island, she shares in its heritage□what Melissa McFarland Pennell calls "the network of community."

Elizabeth Ammons identifies the center of the book as the Green Island section: "Instead of building to an asymmetric height, it [the book] collects weight at the middle: the most highly charged experience of the book, the visit to Green Island, comes at the center of the book . . ., not toward the end." However, section 5, the Bowden reunion, is equally central to the heart of the book by showing the value of this primal need for companionship, which reaches from the present to the far distant past. It is section 5, in which the narrator witnesses the rejuvenation of Almira Todd, that best explains the value of companionship:

> The excitement of an unexpectedly great occasion was a subtle stimulant to her disposition, and I could see that sometimes when Mrs. Todd had seemed limited and heavily domestic, she had simply grown sluggish for lack of proper surroundings. She was not so much reminiscent now as expectant, and as alert and gay as a girl.

Solitude, of course, is not without value. The first and last sections attest to Almira Todd's necessary solitude as a naturalist, and the narrator herself rents the schoolhouse because she needs a solitary place to write. The book suggests, however, that companionship provides the energy an individual needs to use solitude creatively rather than obsessively. Both the Green Island section and the Bowden reunion section stand as the nucleus of the book.

Sarah Orne Jewett, in a letter to Horace Scudder, admitted that she could not do as William Dean Howells suggested and write plot-driven works: "I have no dramatic talent. The story would have no plot. . . . It seems to me I can furnish the theatre, and show you the actors, and the scenery, and the audience, but there is never any play!" Jewett may have had no talent for masculine narrative structure, but this so-called weakness creates a strength of a different sort. The structure of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* can be conceived as one circle inside another, with the timeline represented by Captain Littlepage, Joanna Todd, and Elijah Tilley intersecting both. . . .

Although Almira Todd leads a successful life, her vision is limited. When she and Mrs. Fosdick discuss Joanna Todd, Almira Todd agrees with her friend that "Everybody's just like everybody else, now; nobody to laugh about, and nobody to cry about." The narrator thinks about eccentrics like Captain Littlepage and William, but says nothing. As a naturalist, Almira Todd has a concept of life that is limited to the temporal; she does not transcend space and time as the narrator does. Michael Vella writes, "the narrator learns to perceive within the flux of nature and history something transcendental and permanent within mortal man, something which serves for her as an intimation of immortality."

By accepting and transcending process, the narrator embraces monumental time. Just as nature and its processes affirm cyclical time, collective memory and recurring myths affirm monumental time. On the one hand, the narrator is delighted by the singularity she perceives in the people in Maine; on the other hand, she constantly searches beyond the familiar and limiting boundaries of the here and now for monumental time. One representation of monumental time is myth. Priscilla Leder writes, "Jewett frequently evokes mythology, especially that of the Greeks, who seem to signify an origin, a kind of prototype of western culture." Using Greek myth, the narrator compares Almira Todd to Antigone: "There was something lonely and solitary about her great determined shape. She might have been Antigone alone on the Theban plain. . . . An absolute, archaic grief possessed this countrywoman; she seemed like a renewal of some historic soul. . . . " The mythic connection becomes historical when the narrator compares the Bowdens to the Greeks who created those myths:

> . . . we might have been a company of ancient Greeks
> going to celebrate a victory, or to worship the god of
> harvests in the grove above. . . . we were no more a
> New England family celebrating its own existence
> and simple progress; we carried the tokens and inheritance
> of all such households from which this had
> descended, and were only the latest of our line.

Again using history to erase temporal differences, the narrator finds a connection between Joanna Todd and others that the solitary woman could not perceive. Although Joanna Todd chose to isolate herself, the narrator believes she, like Almira Todd, was linked to others by a need for both solitude and companionship. On the one hand, all people are like Joanna in that some part of them is "remote and islanded." This need for seclusion helps people to "understand our fellows of the hermitic cells to whatever age of history they may belong." On the other hand, even isolated people can find joy in human contact. The narrator, as she stands on Shellheap Island and hears the laughter of children from a nearby boat, is sure that Joanna too must have enjoyed hearing such sounds on a summer afternoon. Joanna Todd, thus, is connected to events before her birth since her isolation imitates the hermitic life of the medieval age; she is also connected to events after her death since the narrator experiences feelings of kinship to the long dead woman.

In addition to using a mythic concept of history to reveal monumental time, the narrator embraces, as Kristeva does, the idea of immortality. Elizabeth Ammons writes that *The Country of the Pointed Firs* "anticipates . . . the feminist task of reconstructing, or if need be invention, a resolutely female spiritual context that can reclaim the energy of degraded symbols and images. . . . " This immortality is not grounded in Calvinism or other civilizational theology, which the narrator call one of the "contrivances of man." Rather than being sectarian, her immortality is a universal belief in resurrection. When the narrator watches a funeral procession, she hears the sparrows singing "as if with joyous knowledge of immortality, and contempt for those who could so pettily concern themselves with death." Occurring as it does in the Littlepage section, this attitude meliorates the Captain's unhappiness with the end of sailing and of life itself. Michael Hobbs notes that the narrator can identify with the Captain's isolation "since she herself is an outsider" to Dunnet Landing; however, unlike Littlepage, she can comprehend timelessness and immortality in the world around her. The immortality of Joanna Todd is also affirmed when Almira Todd describes how a sparrow graced her funeral: "She'd got most o' the wild sparrows as tame as could be, livin' out there so long among 'em, and one flew right in and lit on the coffin an' begun to sing. . . . " Joanna, believing in her unforgiving god, had no hope for an eternal life, but the presence of the sparrow suggests she found it in spite of herself.

The sparrow is one symbol of immortality; the sea is a larger symbol of not only immortality but also infinity. In the Green Island section, the narrator, standing on the edge of the island and looking out at the sea, experiences a "sense of liberty in space and time." She achieves this freedom more fully in the conclusion of the book when she experiences the limitless feeling that comes from being at sea with all land invisible:

"Presently the wind began to blow, and we struck out seaward to double the long sheltering headland of the cape, and when I looked back again, the islands and the headland had run together and Dunnet Landing and all its coasts were lost to sight." Kristeva writes that embracing a feminist perspective allows one to achieve a "fluidity" that opposes "the threats of death which are unavoidable whenever an inside and an outside, a self and an other, one group and another, are constituted." In *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, the sea symbolizes this kind of fluidity, allowing the narrator to transcend the ending of her experiences in Dunnet Landing and to escape the finality of death. Captain Littlepage, Joanna Todd, and Elijah Tilley cannot achieve this kind of fluidity because they set themselves apart from others. Embracing monumental time, however, the narrator transcends superficial change to see that one part of the world and another, the mythical and the historical, the immortal and the temporal are the same.

Source: Margaret Baker Graham, "Visions of Time in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 32, No. 1, Winter 1995, pp. 29-38.

Adaptations

The Country of the Pointed Firs was recorded on audiotape in 1982 by Jimcin Recordings, read by Cindy Hardin, and distributed by Books on Tape.

Topics for Further Study

Jewett is considered one of the best American regional writers of the nineteenth century. Other important American regional, or local color, writers include Harriet Beecher Stowe, Bret Harte, Mark Twain, and Willa Cather. Research and write an essay about one of these writers and her or his major works. How would you describe this author's literary style? What major themes are treated in the author's works?

Jewett was known for her accurate and endearing portrayals of the Maine coast and its inhabitants. Several notable painters from Maine have depicted their own visions of the landscape and inhabitants of Maine, including Winslow Homer, Edward Hopper, and Andrew Wyeth. Write an essay about one of these artists and his major works. How would you describe his style of painting? What does he convey about the landscape and people of Maine through this visual medium? Pick one of this artist's paintings to discuss in detail.

In *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Jewett describes a large community event, skillfully portraying the general sense of the event while paying attention to the details of character interaction. Write a description of a large community or family event that you have attended, such as a wedding, family reunion, or holiday celebration. What were the important events of the day? What were some of the significant interactions between various members at this event? What was your own experience of the event?

The stories told by the local inhabitants in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* may be categorized as oral history□tales passed down from one generation to the next through oral, rather than written, storytelling. It is often valuable to record in written form the oral histories of elderly people in their community or family. Think of a story that has been told within your own family or community and write it down the way you recall it having been told. You may want to ask someone to tell the story again, or ask about stories you have not yet heard. Why do you think it is important to preserve this story in written form?

Compare and Contrast

1890s: In the women's suffrage movement, American women struggle to obtain the right to vote in local, state, and national elections. The only nation in the world that allows women the right to vote at the national level is New Zealand, beginning in 1893.

Today: Women in the United States and more than one hundred other countries have full voting rights. Some nations continue to deny women the right to vote. Many women in the United States now hold political office at the local, state, and national levels. However, no woman has ever been elected president or vice president of the United States.

1890s: In the aftermath of the Civil War, Maine's once-thriving shipbuilding and fishing industries are in decline, causing economic depression in the coastal towns. The homes of many inhabitants in the coastal towns of Maine are filled with relics from around the world, brought home by the sailors of days past.

Today: Maine remains one of the most economically depressed states in the eastern United States. With the lowest income per capita in New England, Maine's rural populations along the coastline suffer the greatest poverty. Maine's primary industries are the manufacturing of timber into paper products and the tourist industry. Although the lobster industry remains important, the fishing industry is no longer a significant portion of the Maine economy. Many relics of the heyday of Maine's shipping industry, once kept in private homes of seamen and their descendents, are collected in the Maine Maritime Museum.

What Do I Read Next?

A Country Doctor (1884) is Jewett's novel based on her father's experiences as a doctor serving inhabitants of rural Maine.

The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett (1925), edited and with an introduction by Willa Cather, includes Jewett's major short stories from throughout her career.

Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852), by Harriet Beecher Stowe, is the masterpiece novel of one of the leading "local color" writers of the nineteenth century and a major influence on Jewett. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was an extremely influential antislavery novel published before the Civil War.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884), by Mark Twain, is one of the greatest American novels of the nineteenth century and a major work of "local color" writing. It concerns the experiences of a white boy, Huck Finn, after he runs away from home in the company of Jim, an escaped slave. Twain was a personal acquaintance of Jewett.

The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson (1960) is a definitive collection of Dickinson's poems. Dickinson, a New England poet contemporary to Jewett, is considered one of the greatest American poets of the nineteenth century.

My Antonia (1918) is considered the masterpiece of Willa Cather, a regionalist author of Nebraska pioneer life. Cather was a personal acquaintance of Jewett and was strongly influenced by her "local color" fiction.

Further Study

Church, Joseph, *Transcendent Daughters in Jewett's "Country of the Pointed Firs,"* Associated University Press, 1994.

Church explores mother-daughter relationships in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*.

Howard, June, ed., *New Essays on "The Country of the Pointed Firs,"* Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Howard offers a collection of recent critical essays on *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, covering such topics as community, gender, realism, regionalism, and nationalism, by a variety of literary critics.

Roman, Margaret, *Sarah Orne Jewett: Reconstructing Gender*, University of Alabama Press, 1992.

Roman explores issues of the representation of women in Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*.

Silverthorne, Elizabeth, *Sarah Orne Jewett: A Writer's Life*, Overlook Press, 1993.

Silverthorne provides a biography of Jewett.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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