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### Sarah Orne Jewett on Nineteenth Century Feminism

Sarah Orne Jewett, a Nineteenth Century American novelist, poet, and author of short stories, addresses and analyzes the nature of feminism in the 1800's through her works, "A White Heron" and "A Winter Courtship." "A White Heron" follows the journey of a young girl who meets a charming stranger in the woods, and must ultimately decide whether to protect the location of a rare white heron or sacrifice her own moral value and thirst for liberation in order to win his affections. "A Winter Courtship," on the other hand, takes a more lighthearted approach by introducing readers to some older townsfolk who, having no one else, decide to court each other in the midst of an interaction in which they're traveling from Sanscrit Pond to North Kilby. Both offer commentary on the intrinsic female experience and the introspective challenges culminated by the male presence in relation to freedom and sovereignty. Jewett's rhetoric within these pieces is subtle, at times; however, the message remains the same: in order for a woman to realize true liberation, she must reject the narrative perpetuated by society that male needs must take precedence over all other aspects of life.

The most significant evidence for the contention that a woman must reject the idea of male superiority in order to understand true sovereignty is offered at the climax of "A White Heron": "Sylvia felt as if she too could go flying away among the clouds. Westward, the woodlands and farms reached miles and miles into the distance; here and there were church

steeple, and white villages, truly it was a vast and awesome world” (Jewett, “The White Heron” 34). Sylvia peers beyond the world that she knows, and quite literally sees the world of opportunity open before her own eyes. The narrator continues to say, “The birds sang louder and louder. At last the sun came up bewilderingly bright. Sylvia could see the white sails of ships out at sea, and the clouds that were purple and rose-colored and yellow at first began to fade away. Where was the white heron's nest in the sea of green branches, and was this wonderful sight and pageant of the world the only reward for having climbed to such a giddy height?” (Jewett, “The White Heron” 35). Here, Sylvia realizes that the world has so much more to offer than conformity in exchange for companionship, and she begins to realize that finding the location of the white heron is not the only thing in life that has the potential to give her that feeling of fulfillment and wholeness that she so desires. Jewett chose to incorporate these same values into her own lifestyle: she lived unconventionally in terms of her relationships and blatantly renounced these same societal expectations of submission and servitude that were alluded to in her works. In fact, the biographical document titled, “Sarah Orne Jewett,” published by *Gay & Lesbian Biography* even suggests that she may have been involved in intimate relationships with women rather than men. It states, “By her early twenties, it was clear that she was developing a heavy ‘dependency’ on her female friends even as her writing was achieving some success via publication in literary journals” (Tyrkus & Bronski, “Sarah Orne Jewett” 4).

There is one fleeting moment in “A Winter Courtship” that also reflects this sentiment by a more contrasting means, and it must be noted that although this moment is short-lived, it is arguably the most important introspective instance in the entire piece. The narrator recounts, “The lady of his choice was, as she might have expressed it, much beat about. As she soberly

thought, she was getting along in years, and must put up with Jefferson all the rest of the time. It was not likely she would ever have the chance of choosing again, though she was one who liked variety” (Jewett, “A Winter Courtship” 53). Readers can see with a weighty transparency that Fanny Tobin agrees to these circumstances (the circumstances being a courtship with Jefferson) somewhat hesitantly, and can gather that this response is almost exclusively out of societal obligation. The narrator continues, “Jefferson wasn’t much to look at, but he was pleasant and appeared boyish and young feeling. ‘I do’know’s I should do better,’ she said unconsciously and half aloud. ‘Well, yes, Jefferson, seein’ it’s you. But we’re both on us kind of old to change our situation.’ Fanny Tobin gave a gentle sigh” (Jewett, “A Winter Courtship” 54). Her sigh, in this moment, expresses more than any verbal confirmation of her feelings could ever provide. Jewett herself never fell victim to the societal pressure of marriage, and instead found solace in companionship. The aforementioned biographical document explains that, “Sarah began keeping intermittent diaries of her experiences in 1867, often lamenting her ‘chronic laziness’ and her seeming ‘unwillingness to grow up,’ which back then meant grooming oneself for a husband. She sustained her choice of spinsterhood with the companionship of friends in nearby Newport and Boston” (Tyrkus & Bronski, “Sarah Orne Jewett” 4).

Despite the fact that these two characters appear contradictory at first glance, they both highlight the submissive tendencies of the Nineteenth-Century female experience and the heavy obligation to conform to wifely diligence and servitude as the final objective. Ultimately, marriage, conformity, and the emphasis on male needs seemed to be the final goal of a “good” woman. However, Jewett expresses her discontent with these ideas through her writing. Sylvia is liberated through her rejection of societal obligation, Fanny is not. Sarah Orne Jewett creates a

perfect irony between these two stories, in that one girl is liberated from these standards through her rejection of codependency and masculine superiority in *exchange* for loneliness, and one woman's inability to reject these standards results in an exhaustingly ordinary life of servitude in an effort to *avoid* a life of loneliness.

Works Cited

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