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## SARAH ORNE JEWETT AS A PRECURSOR OF ECO-CONSCIOUS CHILDREN FICTION: “A WHITE HERON” AS AN EXAMPLE

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**ABSTRACT**

Nearly a century and a half has passed since Sarah Orne Jewett published her much anthologized short story “A White Heron” (1886), but commentators on the tale missed one of the most important points in the text. It is the story’s similarity to the traditional Euro-centric fairy tale of “Little Red Riding Hood”. As an author, writing at the end of the nineteenth century, a time that witnessed the demise of the Romantic movement in America and the beginning of the age of Realism, Jewett did not romanticize her characters, despite the idyllic landscape in which “A White Heron” is set. Her story can be analyzed as a text that aims at disseminating ecological awareness among her young readers. This study focuses on Jewett’s ecological theme through the adventure of her young heroine. It explores the author’s ecofeminist subtext in her revision of the fairy tale of “Little Red Riding Hood”.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, fairy tale, Little Red Riding Hood, Nature, patriarchal

**INTRODUCTION****Literature review**

Despite the fact that critics tend to place Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1909) within the frame of regionalism and local-color writing<sup>1</sup>, her work transcends these boundaries to focus on universal issues related to Nature, women, and gender roles<sup>2</sup>. This narrow view was established by the writer’s focus on setting her stories in South Berwick, Maine and its surrounding coastal villages, depicting the daily lives of the common folk of this place.

Eugene Hillhouse Pool (1967) believes that Jewett was remembering her

<sup>1</sup> See for instance, Cary, 1962 & Edwards & Kilcup, 1999: 5.

<sup>2</sup> For more details read Roman, 1992.

childhood through the experience of her young heroine, despite the writer’s privileged social background. Kelley Griffith, Jr. (1985) also finds the story autobiographical in the sense that the heroine has the same independent spirit of the author, who endeavored to break free from the limitations of her man-dominated world. Likewise, Richard Lingeman traces the autobiographical elements in Jewett’s writings and concludes that, as an independent woman, Jewett have “believed more in living than in writing” (Lingeman, 2006: 113). Barbara A. Johns (1984) finds in the ultimate choice of Jewett’s heroine to stay away from the male-centered urban society and traditional gender roles as a characteristic feature of Jewett’s fiction.

Jewett's story is still open to new interpretations. The current study is an eco-critical reading of the story. Set within the frame of fairy tales, namely the story of "Little Red Riding Hood," the story is undoubtedly addressed to children and aims at disseminating ecological awareness among its young readers.

### **Ecofeminism**

Though Jewett's story was written many decades before feminist critics coined the term 'ecofeminism' in Postmodern times, the story can be read as an example of ecofeminist fiction. This makes her one of the precursors of eco-conscious literature. In this feminist fictional sub-genre, women's suffering in patriarchal cultures is not much different from that of Mother Nature. While women have been controlled, exploited and abused by men, Nature is also subjected through men's industrial practices for the creation of wealth. Thus, women writers identify themselves with Nature and strive to protect it from men's "wasteful materialism, corporate greed, technology's arrogance, and pollution" (Snodgrass, 2006: 165). They denounce all forms of oppression and injustice against both humans and non-humans in their writings. They depict a world in which women live in harmony with Nature and condemn men's destruction of the environment not

only through industrialization, but also through deforestation, wars, and military experiments in destructive weapons "which culminate in a climate change and catastrophic natural disasters" (Pamela Odih *Watersheds in marxist ecofeminism* cited in Ali & Ismael, 2019: 67)

### **Little Red Riding Hood**

Deeply rooted in early European lore, the fairy tale of "Little Red Riding Hood" tells the story of a girl, the title character, who is given this name simply because of the color of her hooded cloak. The girl sets off on a journey through the woods to deliver food to her sickly grandmother and is advised by her mother to stay on the path so that she will not go astray. As she goes through the woods, a ravenous wolf stalks her behind the trees and shrubs, waiting for a chance to charge and devour her and the basket she carries for the sick old woman. When the wolf confronts the girl, he does not eat her, but enquires about her destination and the things she carries in the basket. The naïve girl informs him that she is on her way to the home of her sick grandmother, in the heart of the forest. He lures her to pick some flowers for the sick granny, which she hesitates to do at the beginning, as she remembers her mother's advice, but then succumbs to her instincts and takes some in her basket. Meanwhile, the wolf approaches the grandmother's home and finds his way in, pretending to

be Little Red Riding Hood. He devours the old woman (or confines her in the closet in some versions of the tale). Then, he disguises in her clothes and gets into her bed, waiting for the girl to arrive to be his next prey. On her arrival, Little Red Riding Hood is astonished to see how the old woman has changed. Then, come her well-known questions about how the old woman's eyes, hands, and voice sound big and different, to which the disguised wolf normally responds. With the last exclamatory comment of the girl, "What a big mouth you have!", to which the wolf responds, "The best to eat you with" (Perrault, 1969: 28), he jumps from the bed, devours his young prey, and goes back to sleep.

In some versions of the tale, the girl is saved by a hunter or a benevolent woodcutter before being eaten by the wolf. In other examples, she is saved by the woodcutter after he cuts open the wolf's belly with his axe and helps her and her grandmother to get out of the beast's stomach. The wolf does not die instantly, but he awakes after the grandmother fills his belly with heavy stones. Unable to move, he falls and dies.

In patriarchal communities, this bedtime story aims to warn young females of the danger of deviant male ravishers and rapists, represented by the wolf, outside

the domestic sphere in which they are confined. The story preaches of the significance of any girl's obeying the rules and orders of her parents, especially her mother, and the danger of violating the social norms set by the patriarchal order for young women, which make them "responsible for the violence to which [they are] subjected" (Tatar, 1998: 6). Tess Cosslett et al (1996: 82) state that "it is easy to see these stories as reinforcing the messages of patriarchy to women: women function as passive objects and as rivals for male attention; marriage is their only goal; a good woman stays in the domestic sphere." The red color of her rope is believed to represent any girl's advancement into womanhood as she is on the threshold of sexual maturity. By coming out of the wolf's stomach, Little Red Riding Hood gains maturity as an adult woman, unlike the child who enters the woods ignorant of the evils of the world. Her newly acquired knowledge provides her with enough experience to live in a world inhabited by some male predators, who are not very much different from the humanoid wolf presented as the villain of the tale (Lieberman, 1972: 384).

## A YOUNG ECOFEMINIST: SARAH ORNE JEWETT'S LITTLE RIDING HOOD

Jewett's story deviates from the cautionary nature of the Riding Hood story, by presenting an adventurous protagonist who is not in need of a male rescuer to save her from predatory males and who has the potential and courage to save others (the white heron in the story). Jewett's interest in environmental and ecological issues were triggered by the frenzy caused by the industrial development as the US was turning from an agricultural into an industrial nation. At the end of the nineteenth century, American towns, like Sylvia's, Jewett's heroine, "crowded manufacturing town" (Jewett, 2011: 196), were polluted because of the industrial projects which reached an alarming rate (Thorp, 1966: 11-12). However, rural people maintained the same lifestyle, living on their farmsteads, isolating themselves from the chaotic atmosphere of nearby towns (McIlwraith & Muller, 2001: 19-20). Thus, as a feminist, Jewett places her nine-year-old female protagonist, in an atmosphere that offers the possibility of living an independent life, outside the traditional patriarchal structure in which other females are confined.

Sylvia's name, as Elizabeth Ammons (1986: 7) indicates, is "Latin for

'woods'". This establishes her harmony with Nature when she first appears in the story. Even "the wild creatur's" in the woods treat her as "one o' themselves" (Jewett, 2011: 198). Unlike Little Red Riding Hood, who has to cross the woods to deliver food to her grandmother, Sylvia lives in the forest with her maternal grandmother, Mrs. Tilley. However, before the latter brought Sylvia to live with her on her isolated farmstead near the woods in rural Maine, Sylvia has spent many years with her parents in a nearby manufacturing town. She remembers these early years of her life as a frightening time, and she never wants to return there. She still remembers how, in this "noisy town," a "red-faced boy...used to chase and frighten her [which] made her hurry along the path to escape from the shadow of the trees" even now as she wanders the woods (Jewett, 2011: 196). She feels that "she never had been alive at all before she came to live on the farm" (Jewett, 2011: 196).

Mrs. Tilley gives her the freedom to roam the forest as she helps her with daily chores on the farm. To Sylvia, the woods are "her greatest pleasure" (Jewett, 2011: 195). She rarely sees other people, but she develops a love for and communion with Nature and comes to regret the early years of her childhood she spent in town. She becomes part of this

natural environment as the narrator says: “as if she were a part of the gray shadows and the moving leaves” (Jewett, 2011: 196). She is so acquainted with the wilderness where she lives that she feels safe in the woods even in the dark. She knows the path home as she brings her grandmother’s cow, her “valued companion” Mistress Moolly, home late in the dark: “their feet were familiar with the path, and it was no matter whether their eyes could see or not” (Jewett, 2011: 195).

### THE HUNTER AS THE WOLF

Unlike the traditional fairytale of “Little Red Riding Hood,” it is a hunter rather than a wolf who has the role of the antagonist. He threatens the virginal landscape where Sylvia lives rather than Sylvia herself. From the very beginning, he is established as the villain of the story when the narrator describes him as “the enemy” (Jewett, 2011: 196).

Sylvia’s world is a no man’s land. It is a female-centered environment where no man dares to enter. For years, she lives with her grandmother in the forest with no male relative or neighbor. When Sylvia first hears the hunter approaching, lost in the woods and asking her for directions to the road, she is horrified. She is frightened because the stranger reminds her of the red-faced boy who bullied her during her

time in the industrial town. The hunter, as Richard Brenzo points out, disturbs the peace and tranquility of the woods (1978: 37). His “determined, and somewhat aggressive” whistle is much unlike “a bird’s whistle, which would have a sort of friendliness” (Jewett, 2011: 196). As an ornithologist, he carries a gun and a “heavy game-bag” full of dead birds, “stuffed and preserved, dozens and dozens of them” (Jewett, 2011: 197-8). Instead of showing him the way out, Sylvia awkwardly leads him to her grandmother’s “clean and comfortable little dwelling” (Jewett, 2011: 197). The old woman welcomes him and offers him a bed for the night, and is, thus, unlike the frightened old woman in “Little Red Riding Hood”. She informs the hunter that Sylvia has an intimate knowledge of the woods and its animals:

‘there never was such a child for straying about out-of-doors since the world was made!...There ain’t a foot o’ ground she don’t know her way over...Squer’ls she’ll tame to come an’ feed right out o’ her hands, and all sorts o’ birds.’ (Jewett, 2011: 198)

This makes the hunter so excited about Sylvia, who later realizes that the man is looking for a white heron to add as a

specimen to his collection of “stuffed and preserved” birds (Jewett, 2011: 198).

Sylvia inwardly enjoys the company of another person for the first time. Besides, he offers her the money she and her grandmother urgently need, if she will betray the hiding place of the heron: “He can make them rich with money; he has promised it, and they are poor now” (Jewett, 2011: 202). She succumbs to this temptation and begins to dream of all the things she can buy with the hunter’s money: “No amount of thought, that night, could decide how many wished-for treasures the ten dollars [a large sum for the time], so lightly spoken of, would buy” (Jewett, 2011: 199). In return, she alone can grant him his wish, being the only one who knows the place where he can find the bird.<sup>3</sup> So, they are in need for each other.

Like the wolf in “Little Red Riding Hood,” the hunter represents the fleshly temptations of sex. Being the first man she

<sup>3</sup> The heron, too, is rare and endangered like the snowy egret Jewett had in mind when writing the story. According to George Held (1982: 60), in *Heart to heart with Nature: ways of looking at ‘a white heron’*, “around the time Jewett wrote her story the snowy egret was being extirpated to fill the need of the millinery industry. By 1900 it was almost extinct, and in 1913 it was completely protected by the federal government”.

meets, she initially feels attracted to him, as “the woman’s heart, asleep in the child, [is] vaguely thrilled by a dream of love” (Jewett, 2011: 199). Thus, Sylvia has to experience this internal conflict to choose whether or not to guide the handsome young man to the place where he can find the nest of the rare white heron he desires to hunt for his collection. However, she is so enthused that she is unable to sleep the night. She stays up all the night, thinking of plans to show the hunter the nesting place of the white heron, just to please him and to get the prize he offers. She rushes alone into the forest at sunrise and expects to return to him, claim the money, and win his love and admiration. Her relationship with the natural world is now at stake. This is obvious in her silence as she roams the forest with the stranger later on:

She only followed, and there was no such thing as speaking first. The sound of her own unquestioned voice would have terrified her-it was hard enough to answer yes or no when there was need of that. (Jewett, 2011: 199)

The hunter leads the way although he is an intruder and is in need for a guide like Sylvia. His intrusion onto this idyllic natural scene marks the first experience of

patriarchal violence Sylvia has ever seen in this place, as Robert Brault (2008: 87) observes:

The ornithologist, and the patriarchal society that created him, define culture/civilisation as superior to Nature/culture, justifying a hierarchy of domination that destroys the reciprocal relationships developed through years of living interaction.

With his dominant and bossy demeanor, he tends to desecrate this female-centered world. His dominant attitude towards Nature, as he kills and stuffs the birds, reflects the hegemonic patriarchal culture that values masculine supremacy and treats women as a subordinate gender. He is a challenge to Sylvia, who “would have liked him vastly better without his gun” (Jewett, 2011: 199).

Commentators on the story view the stuffed birds as symbols of silenced women, whose potentials and creativity have been paralyzed by the authority of males. Theodore R. Hovet, for instance, states: “there seems little doubt that a symbolic connection exists between the birds killed, stuffed, and mounted on the [hunter’s] wall and the fate of the woman

possessed by the modern American male and placed on the domestic pedestal” (1978: 67). This view is supported by Sylvia’s silence as she sees the hunter shooting the birds, bringing them “silent[ly] to the ground, their songs hushed and their pretty feathers stained and wet with blood” (Jewett, 2011: 202).

### **EPIPHANY: A SEMI-BILDUNGSROMAN JOURNEY**

The woods where Sylvia lives is a second-growth forest. Everything in the forest seems normal until Sylvia begins to climb an old pine tree, from which she thinks she can see the nest of the white heron near the sea. This tree, an old-growth great pine—“the last of its generation” (Jewett, 2011: 199), resembles the white heron which is also at the brink of extinction because of its precious feathers. This shows the harm Man had done to Nature: “Whether it [the tree] was left for a boundary mark, or for what reason, no one could say; the woodchoppers who had felled its mates were dead and gone long ago” (Jewett, 2011: 199).

The tree is personified as a living creature: “it must truly have been amazed that morning” (Jewett, 2011: 200). This anthropomorphism reveals the author’s intention to present Nature as a main character in the story. As she climbs the

tree, Sylvia is compared to a bird, a thing that shows her oneness with nature: her fingers “held like bird’s claws” (Jewett, 2011: 200). Jewett portrays this climb as a kind of a heroic journey: “What a spirit of adventure, what wild ambition! What fancied triumph and delight and glory” (Jewett, 2011: 200). But the tree initially resists Sylvia’s attempt to climb it as if she were aware of the girl’s intentions to find the heron:

The tree seemed to lengthen itself out as she went up farther and farther upward. It was like a great mainmast to the voyaging earth...as it felt this determined spark of human spirit creeping and climbing from higher branch to branch. Who knows how steadily the least twigs held themselves to advantage this light, weak creature on her way! (Jewett, 2011: 200-201)

She has “jarred in passing” (Jewett, 2011: 200) a bird’s nest, and is even scolded by a squirrel. The tree’s twigs and thorns “held her and scratched her like angry talon” (Jewett, 2011: 200) as if trying to impede her way up. Nevertheless, she is able to reach the top despite all the obstacles. Her “face was like a pale star, if one had seen it from the ground...and she stood trembling

and tired and wholly triumphant” (Jewett, 2011: 201).

On reaching the top of the old pine, she sees the ocean and “the white sails of ships out at sea,” and realizes that she belongs to this “vast and awesome world” (Jewett, 2011: 201). She finds that she does not belong to the hunter’s urban world. Ultimately, her journey up the tree becomes, as Richard Brenzo opines, a “symbol of knowledge and experience” (1978: 39). At the end, she attains the wisdom that “strengthens her will and reinforces her solidarity with Nature and her peaceful sanctuary” (Donovan, 1981: 70).

#### **CONCLUSION: ‘AND SHE LIVES HAPPILY EVER AFTER’: NEW ECOFEMINIST AWARENESS**

Jewett’s ecofeminist revision of the bedtime tale of “Little Red Riding Hood” makes her a precursor of eco-conscious children literature that aims at educating young readers about the value of preserving Nature. In “A White Heron,” she depicts a utopian place in which the heroine lives with her grandmother in harmony with Nature until an intruder threatens this ideal world with his patriarchal beliefs of dominance, violence, and materialism. The hunter’s materialistic

attitude towards Nature is juxtaposed with Sylvia's eco-friendly lifestyle.

The hunter leaves, disappointed, at the end. Sylvia "could have served and followed him and loved him as a dog loves" (Jewett, 2011: 202), but her oneness with Nature has been attained by her refusal to divulge the nesting place of the white heron, though she finds its hiding place near the sea from her perch on the tree. Elizabeth Ammons views Sylvia's choice at the end as a sign of maturity because she "chooses the world of her grandmother, a place defined as free, healthy and 'natural' in this story, over the world of heterosexual favor and violence represented by the hunter" (1986: 10). The narrator finally asks Nature, as if it were a living being, to bless Sylvia for her sacrifice of money and company: "Whatever treasures were lost to her...Bring your gifts and graces and tell your secrets to this lonely country child!" (Jewett, 2011: 202).

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