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“Remote and Islanded”: Distancing Closeness in The Country of the Pointed Firs

Toward the end of Sarah Orne Jewett’s novella The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896), the unnamed narrator participates in an annual gathering of the Bowden kinfolk, scattered around a rural community on the coast of Maine, and expresses her gratitude for being a member of the reunion. For the modern reader, her naïve identification with the family and apparent admiration for its Norman ancestry has been an extremely disturbing point.

Perhaps it is the great national anniversaries which our country has lately kept, and the soldiers’ meetings that take place everywhere, which have made reunions of every sort the fashion. This one, at least, had been very interesting. I fancied that old feuds had been overlooked, and the old saying that blood is thicker than water had again proved itself true, though from the variety of names one argued a certain adulteration of the Bowden traits and belongings. Clannishness is an instinct of the heart,—it is more than a birthright, or a custom; and lesser rights were forgotten in the claim to a common inheritance. (87)

Since the 1990s, significant controversy has been pivoting around this reunion episode among Jewett’s critics. Some have attempted to locate Jewett’s book (and regionalist literature in general) in the historical contexts of the late nineteenth century, and expose the nationalist and imperialistic aspects of the book.¹ These
revisionist assessments were responses to the preceding set of discourses in which feminist critics tried to rehabilitate Jewett’s text by valorizing women’s power of cohesion. They emphasized each person’s power of connecting with a friendly whole through a sentimental aesthetics based on the belief in the legibility of empathetic identification. Whether taking her work affirmatively or accusingly, critiques of Jewett’s *Pointed Firs* have centered on the “concentric waves of relationality and community” that create a sense of interconnectedness both inside and outside of the story (Ammons, *Conflicting* 46). The spine of Jewett’s work constantly lies in the value of community as it defines “identity as collective, connected, and collaborative” (Fetterley and Pryse, *American* xvi). It could be said that revisionist criticism has reacted to an idealized and “sentimental” reading of Jewett, charging the very collectivity with a variety of limitations.

One crucial aspect of local-color literature in the late nineteenth century is that its supposed readers were middle-class city dwellers. William Dean Howells, who regarded local-color literature as a central mode of the American realist movement, once pronounced that the most important errand of literary realism is to instruct readers that they “are more like than unlike one another ... [to] make them know one another better, that they may be all humbled and strengthened with a sense of their fraternity” (188; emphasis added). In Howell’s definition, local-color literature provides “likeness” rather than “unlikeness” to the urban readers in order to foster a sense of national unity. The fact that *Pointed Firs* was favorably welcomed by contemporary readers might attest that it is deeply engaged in the project of creating national homogeneity, which implicitly holds a hierarchical and appropriative structure, in which the urban readership “[consumes] images of rural ‘others’ as both a nostalgic point of origin and a measure of cosmopolitan development” (Kaplan 250–51). This imagined community as a unified nation would indeed be achieved through nullifying geographical distance between the urban and the local, and through confusing the unlikeness of regions with the likeness.

It is true that the novella has a tendency toward unification of a certain group of people, including its readers. It is the focal point around which both revisionist and early feminist critics refer to in making their arguments of collectivity. What is missed or ignored in the discussion, then, is Jewett’s insistent staging of isolated characters, another aspiration of the book. If assimilatory nationalistic claims are grandiosely presented in the annual celebration of the Bowden reunion, those claims are offset by the quiet loneliness of each individual. Rather than the
imagined closeness that enables the connectedness between the characters and readers to emerge, this paper focuses on an ethical distance on which Jewett constructs her narrative of a region. In what follows, I argue for the importance of Jewett’s unsentimental narrative strategy and her notion of friendship, both of which are specifically based on an unbridgeable distance between isolated individuals.

1. The Art of Distance

*Pointed Firs* has been recognized not as a conventional novel, which has linear and chronological development of a plot, but as a series of “sketches” as the author herself called her work (Cather 89). The term “sketches” denotes a sense of unfinishedness and briefness that accounts well for the nature of the book. Comprised of twenty-one chapters, which do not have organic connections to each other, the novella gives brief accounts of a number of solitary characters. Each isolated chapter, then, symbolizes the isolated state of the characters whose accounts are loosely connected through the eyes of the first-person narrator. Interestingly, however, the novella begins with the third-person, describing the arrival of the narrator, who will narrate the rest of the book in the first-person: “One evening in June, a single passenger landed upon the steamboat wharf” (5).

By objectifying herself, that is, viewing herself from a distance, the narrator calls herself “a single” passenger. This self-objectification is a narrative gesture of aligning herself with the story’s other characters that are distinctively unaccompanied. At its start, she is declaring that she is as “single” as her characters. The emphasis on “singleness” resonates with the dominant singlehood in the world of Dunnet Landing, consisting of unmarried or widowed characters.

Throughout *Pointed Firs*, the anonymous narrator alternately attempts to broaden and shorten the distance toward the objects of her attention. While the novella follows the course of the narrator becoming acquainted with the residents, she, as an “outsider” of the town, keeps her appropriate distance to the residents so that she is not thoroughly assimilated into the community. On the one hand, she is characterized by her willingness to approach the residents, as she visits Mrs. Blackett on Green Island and makes a short trip to Shell-Heap Island to get the sense of what kind of life Poor Joanna had led. *Pointed Firs*, in which a variety of unique individuals are vividly captured, is the end-result of her constant engagement of bringing herself close to each person of the town. On the other hand,
however, she is also marked by a resistance to such closeness.

Captain Littlepage’s mythic tale at the beginning of the story allegorizes the novella’s consciousness of estrangement, a principle of holding a distance the narrator espouses throughout the book. The old captain tells the narrator a strange anecdote he heard from Gaffett, a fellow seaman, when they were shipwrecked together in the north Atlantic. He discovered a supernatural town in the Arctic that was “a kind of waiting-place between this world an’ the next”:

It appeared, as near as Gaffett could express it, like a place where there was neither living nor dead. They could see the place when they were approaching it by sea pretty near like any town, and thick with habitations; but all at once they lost sight of it altogether, and when they got close inshore they could see the shapes of folks, but they never could get near them, . . . Gaffett said that he and another man came near one o’ the fog-shaped men that was going along slow with the look of a pack on his back, among the rocks, an’ they chased him; but, Lord! he flittered away out o’ sight like a leaf the wind takes with it, or a piece of cobweb. . . . They couldn’t see the town when they were ashore. (21–22)

Some critics see a parallel between the mysterious Arctic town and Dunnet Landing, in which “the wasted old men and women . . . are between two worlds, living in a sort of waiting place” (Foote 25). Besides the parallel, this tale also illuminates the question of the subject-object relation. As Gaffet experienced, being close to one’s object blurs and hinders recognition of it. However closely a subject tries to advance towards its object to see the face of it, it evades the search. There lies a sense that it is almost impossible for a subject to reach its object. This is akin to Melville’s contemplation of how elusive and unapproachable a whale is: “when you are close enough to a whale to get a close view of his spout, he is in a prodigious commotion, the water cascading all around him” (408). Behind the seemingly heartwarming interchange the text presents, there surely is some degree of quasi-Melvillian incredulity toward an absolute sense of mutual understanding. What is foretold at the beginning of her succeeding interactions with a variety of the residents is the difficulty of getting close to others, and the improbability of the myth of perfect interpersonal recognition.

Of course, the central and most intimate relationship in the text is that of Mrs.
Todd and the narrator. Their intimacy culminates when the narrator feels they are living in “a double shell, in whose simple convolutions Mrs. Todd and I had secreted ourselves” (45). At this point, the reader would expect the beginning of a kind of love story between these two lovers. Against such readerly expectation, however, the novella never leads to a happy union of the intimate women. In the final chapter, when she is about to leave the town of Dunnet Landing, the narrator stares at Mrs. Todd from a distance:

Presently, as I looked at the pastures beyond, I caught a last glimpse of Mrs. Todd herself, walking slowly in the footpath that led along, following the shore toward the Port. At such a distance one can feel the large, positive qualities that control a character. Close at hand, Mrs. Todd seemed able and warm-hearted and quite absorbed in her bustling industries, but her distant figure looked mateless and appealing, with something about it that was strangely self-possessed and mysterious. (101)

First and foremost, this scene of farewell to Mrs. Todd, with whom the narrator has the most intimate relationship in the story, is narrated quietly in an objective fashion. She observes the figure of Mrs. Todd from a certain distance, from which she portrays the mistress’s daily work. While a romantic or sentimental narration would fill such a moment of parting with moving words, passionate embraces, and warm tears, this passage of farewell does not disclose the subject’s feelings or emotions, thus carefully dodging sentimentality. This passage attests to Jewett’s decisive intention of avoiding use of sentimental tropes and romanticizing her work by means of holding a distance toward the objects. What is also intimated here is that one needs to have an appropriate distance to appreciate another person. It is not closeness but remoteness that enables the subject to feel “positive qualities” of the other.

What the narrator sees in the distant figure of Mrs. Todd is that she looks “mateless and appealing.” Here, she touches upon the novella’s important theme: loneliness. Whereas the text highlights the close and strong ties of kinship and community of Dunnet Landing, what is counterposed to this vision of solidarity is an image of the fundamental isolation of a human being. The most notable figure that embodies isolation, as we will discuss later, is Poor Joanna who withdraws herself in a lonesome island. Interestingly enough, however, the narrator perceives
the lonely and “mateless” nature of Mrs. Todd, who is a conspicuous member of
the sprawling Bowden family and who as an herbalist has numerous interactions
with the townspeople. Mrs. Todd, with whom the narrator has felt the deepest
intimacy, becomes “mysterious” at the end. Even though the narrator has nurtured
a deep affection with the mistress throughout the text, she nonetheless declares
that even she herself fails to be a mate for the “mateless” Mrs. Todd. By registering
the emotional opacity in her intimate friend in the end, the narrator suggests that
at the heart of the recognition that a human being is ultimately a solitary, there is a
sense of the impenetrability of each individual.

The narrator’s resistance against annihilating distance should have a political
import. Regarding Pointed Firs as an example of literary tourism, Richard
Brodhead argues that the narrator appropriates the rural village, turning it into an
exploitable resource for urban dwellers, who read “quality” magazines such as the
Atlantic Monthly and Harper’s and took regular vacations in scenic areas of
America. In his view, Jewett’s fictional Dunnet Landing is “a world realized in a
vacationer’s mental image,” and it functions as a place of rest and restoration for
the narrator and her readers, a temporary break from her own “world of stressful
modernity and its social arrangements” (145). As I have argued above, however,
the narrator refuses to see or present the mistress of the town as a sentimental
object that can be easily appropriated and assimilated by curious eyes. Likewise,
we should note that the narrator is far from being qualified as a representative of
urban readership. It is difficult to see her as a kind of tourist who would return to
the urban world to which she belongs after enjoying temporary ease and
amusement in rural areas, because she expresses her fear of being a stranger even
in the world she comes from: “return to the world in which I feared to find myself
a foreigner” (99). Her self-identification as a stranger or foreigner anywhere in the
world can imply her renunciation of the privileged position of an urban traveler,
and the inappropriateness of regarding her as a neutral mediator between the urban
and the local.

2. Friends in Separation

The narrative emphasis on keeping an appropriate distance leads to a notion of
friendship, one of the keywords of Pointed Firs. Since Jewett never married, “her
friendships occupied perhaps the first place in her life” (Cather 85). As June
Howard writes, “her fiction provides a rich resource for recapturing the depth of
meaning with which themes of hospitality and friendship can be imbued” (8). Indeed, in the opening chapter, the narrator suggests the superiority of friendship to love: “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” (5). As many critics have pointed out, the central relations in *Pointed Firs* are those of women who create a strong homosocial network. Heterosexual love is scarcely depicted, and marriage is something that brings a person acute pain and loneliness eventually. Then, in *Pointed Firs*, what makes friendship more long-lasting than love? And what constitutes “true” friendship?

Even though the narrator appears to be a sociable person, moving freely and seeing a variety of residents, she in fact seems to have a little fear of interacting with people. From the very beginning, after helping Mrs. Todd’s business for a short time, she asks her friend to permit her to withdraw: “I frankly told her that I could no longer enjoy the pleasure of what we called ‘seein’ folks’” (8). Bothered by “seein’ folks,” she moves to a schoolhouse that offers her a solitary environment. Though she eventually renounces her writing project and begins seeing the residents, we have to be cautious that almost none of the interactions are started by her. Indeed, her solitary abode is first trespassed by Captain Littlepage and she “could not help wondering what errand had brought him out in search of me” (14). She is not an ardent investigator of the people around her. In other words, she gets entangled in the community, or is “framed rather than framing” (Foote 24). Even though Mrs. Blackett told the narrator to come again to Green Island, she does not pay a visit again or she omits it from the narrative. In the scenes of conversations with a series of residents, she is always a passive listener of what they recount, and she occasionally feels the “dullness” of their stories. Furthermore, her scarce comments on their talks are frequently accompanied by the verb “venture,” which suggests her emotional trembling in the course of relating herself to others. In her desire to make friends with the residents, she intimates the difficulty of interrelation.

By recounting the passivity and aloofness of the narrator, I am not contending that she is an unfriendly person. Rather, she seems to have her own way of making friends with others. In “Outgrown Friends,” an unfinished essay unpublished until 1996, Jewett elaborates on her views of the notion.
I do not speak of the persons who can go from friendship to friendship as a butterfly from one flower to another; without a pang of regret, to whom one crony is as good as another provided they can amuse or aid or admire to the satisfactory extent, as the flowers sought by the bee must all yield him honey. (463)

Jewett despises a friendship that is parasitically and self-centeredly constituted. Those who make friends with others in order to utilize them for the fulfillment of self-satisfaction are outside of the friendship she means to describe here. “These outside friendships and mere society friends are apart from the subject,” she continues, “but there are sincere true loving friendships also, from some of which we drift away sooner or later, deploving oftentimes that the boats which went for a time side by side over the sea, have been forced to part company” (463). Noteworthy here is that the ideal friendship is articulated through the language of estrangement. Even though (or perhaps specifically because) the friendship is “true” or “loving,” the friends are destined to part. Friends are to be separated, and what constitutes the authenticity of friendship is the ability to endure the separation and keep caring for one’s friend. As Heather Love suggests, “[t]he testing of friendship through prolonged absence is one of the central themes in Jewett’s work” (“Gyn/Apology” 316). As a result, then, friends in Jewett’s work never merge as one unity but are always kept parted. Distance, loss, and separation are the conditions for friendship to emerge.

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay, “Friendship,” helps clarify the nature of friendship in Pointed Firs. He calls a friend a “paradox in nature” (179):

Friendship requires that rare mean betwixt likeness and unlikeness, that piques each with the presence of power and of consent in the other party. Let me be alone to the end of the world, rather than that my friend should overstep, by a word or a look, his real sympathy. I am equally balked by antagonism and by compliance. Let him not cease an instant to be himself. The only joy I have in his being mine, is that the not mine is mine. . . . There must be very two, before there can be very one. (181; emphasis in original)

Just as is the case with Jewett’s notion of friendship in “Outgrown Friendship,” for Emerson, friendship never culminates in “one” but remains “two.” This view of
friendship is based upon difference or unlikeness between friends. The coalition
of the two through sameness or likeness brings mere “compliance” of one friend to
the other, thus reducing the quality of the friend. Emerson continues, “[I]et him be
to thee forever a sort of beautiful enemy, untamable, devoutly revered, and not a
trivial conveniency to be soon outgrown and cast aside” (182; emphasis added).
One cannot see the beauty of one’s friend when he or she is one and the same with
you. The ideal relationship between friends is more like a rivalry, in which two
persons maintain their own identities through preserving a distance to each other.⁵
It is not her likeness to but her difference from the residents of Dunnet Landing
that enables them to open themselves up to the narrator. The reason why a set of
solitary residents lays bare their feelings and experiences to the narrator is that
they detect that she is another peculiar and lone individual who would never
violate their individuality.

This Emersonian view of friendship resonates with the unsentimental narration
in Pointed Firs. It is necessary to have an appropriate distance for friendship and a
sincere appreciation of one’s friend. When the narrator restrains herself from
describing the interiority of Mrs. Todd, it is a moment of her attempt not to let
Mrs. Todd cease to be Mrs. Todd. It is also a moment when the two friends truly
become friends. That a distance creates intimacy is a pervasive logic of relational-
ity throughout the novella: Elijah Tilley comes to understand his wife’s feelings
only when he cannot see her for good; Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett nurture
mutual care in spite of their physical remoteness; and the narrator’s reticence
encourages others to approach her. Even the intimate relationship between Mrs.
Todd and the narrator is enriched by the narrator’s separating herself from Mrs.
Todd, which does not lessen the strength of their affinity, “on the contrary, a
deeper intimacy seemed to begin” (8).

3. Each of Us

The tension between distance and intimacy is most vividly presented in the
episode of Poor Joanna, the starkest example of isolated characters. The narrator
learns from Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Fosdick about the late Joanna Todd, a cousin of
Mrs. Todd’s late husband. After being abandoned by her fiancé, devastated Joanna
moved to the remote Shell-Heap Island and became a hermit, refusing any kind of
sociality. On her visit to the remnants of the hermit’s residence at the lonely island,
the narrator, pondering over the life of Joanna, experiences both connection with
and estrangement from Joanna:

I drank at the spring, and thought that now and then some one would follow me from the busy, hard-worked, and simple-thoughted countryside of the mainland, which lay dim and dreamlike in the August haze, as Joanna must have watched it many a day. There was the world, and here was she with eternity well begun. In the life of each of us, I said to myself, there is a place remote and islanded, and given to endless regret or secret happiness; we are each the uncompanioned hermit and recluse of an hour or a day; we understand our fellows of the cell to whatever age of history they may belong.

But as I stood alone on the island, in the sea-breeze, suddenly there came a sound of distant voices; gay voices and laughter from a pleasure-boat that was going seaward full of boys and girls. I knew, as if she had told me, that poor Joanna must have heard the like on many and many a summer afternoon, and must have welcomed the good cheer in spite of hopelessness and winter weather, and all the sorrow and disappointment in the world. (65)

In this passage, the narrator’s mind shuttles back and forth between distance and proximity, pleasure and despair, and community and isolation. Across the infinite distance, the narrator attempts to create a bond with the recluse. Even though Joanna is absent now, the visitor attempts to bridge the temporal gap by spatially approaching her, only to find such a bridging is not enough to reach the understanding of the dead. In contrast to the previous set of criticisms whose focus is dominantly the discourse of community, Heather Love sees Pointed Firs as an account of “the feelings of loss, disappointment, and longing that are internal to female worlds of love and ritual” (“Gyn/Aplogy” 313). Against interpretations that synthesize the devastating loneliness into a celebration of community, Love argues forcefully that “[i]n her enfolding of community and isolation, and of eternity and loss, Jewett offers an image of the impossibility of resolving such contradictions” (Feeling 96). For Love, negative affects, such as loneliness, loss, and disappointment engraved in the figure of Poor Joanna, are too grave and inconsolable to be sublimated into larger frameworks such as a local community or a nation. Indeed, Mrs. Todd denies Mrs. Fosdick’s opinion that Joanna could have been saved if she left the town for the West to seek a new life: “there’s no kind of glasses to remedy the mind. No, Joanna was Joanna, and there she lays on her island where she lived
and did her penance” (62). If there is a sense of communality on the lonely island, it could be perceived only through “all the sorrow and disappointment in the world,” shared by two women at a distance.

The narrator’s use of the first person plural “we” appears to indicate her thorough identification with the recluse. Nevertheless, the first person plural goes with the pronoun “each” that preserves distance and that offsets the complete amalgamation of the two. What is intimated in the passage, then, is that the narrator, far from a transparent and neutral observer, is a person who is peculiarly “remote and islanded” and possesses “endless regret and secret happiness.” Through partially identifying herself with the hermit, she hints that she is similar to Joanna in that they both have a hidden interiority and past, but ultimately different because things hidden are “secret” for each other. The women connected through temporal distance are unable (and unnecessary) to reach each other’s hidden interiority. In other words, she succeeds in narrowing the gap but fails to close it.

So the moment of proximity is at the same time the moment of estrangement. Just before the narrator leaves the town, Mrs. Todd gives her a coral pin that commemorates friendship between Poor Joanna and Mrs. Todd. Now that the narrator receives the memento, it comes to represent the history of friendship among the three women. But the token of friendship also inscribes the inevitable separation of friends: Joanna gives the pin to her friend “as if to say good-bye,” and that was the last moment the hermit and Mrs. Todd saw each other (61). Thus the coral pin circulates in the story as a badge of lonely friends, or of the separation that friends need to endure. Because of the great divide, Joanna and the narrator are friends whose union is always already unachievable.

No less than the secret of Joanna, the secret of the narrator is also mystifying. Implying that she also possesses secret interiority, Jewett’s narrator ultimately estranges herself from the reader. By not disclosing her own information either to other characters or to the reader, she keeps her private realm intact throughout the story. Just as Mrs. Todd is “mysterious” to her, the narrator submits her own mysterious self to the reading public. While she is engaged in connecting her characters and readers in her intimate narration, she makes her own image unreadable. *Pointed Firs* oscillates endlessly between cohesion and separation, never residing in one pole.
4. To the Least Sympathetic Reader

Empathy has been understood as a major relational mode in *Pointed Firs*. Marcia Folsom argues that Jewett’s narrator employs what she calls “empathetic style” that “creates the atmosphere of trust, familiarity, and coherence in this book” (67). Folsom finds a key to the style in a passage when the narrator visits Mrs. Blackett: “Tact is after all a kind of mindreading, and my hostess held the golden gift. Sympathy is of the mind as well as the heart, and Mrs. Blackett’s world and mine were one from the moment we met. . . . Besides, she had that final, that highest gift of heaven, a perfect self-forgetfulness” (38). Folsom valorizes the ability of “self-forgetfulness” that “allows the narrator freedom to enter other lives” (67). It is true that this romantic, if not sentimental, notion of relationality, in which two individuals can immediately coalesce into “one,” seems an ideal for the narrator. Based on the power of mindreading, the novella spreads a web of affection that creates a world of sympathetic interrelation. Yet, the novella also registers the failure of reading the mind of others as we saw in the narrator’s distant observation of the residents and her inability of complete identification with Poor Joanna.

To emphasize the great ability of mindreading could invite totalitarian claims that revisionist critics have submitted, that the novella concerns ethnographic, touristic, and imperialistic appropriation. In a sense, empathetic power holds a great belief in one’s own potentiality of transcending a distance between persons and in seeing others as manageable. As Ann Jurecic succinctly sums up, empathy could be “an unexamined emotional response to the experience of others, a form of false identification and flawed knowledge that disregards distance and difference” (17). The sweet sense of self-expansion that empathic power provides is analogous to the logic of US imperialism in the late nineteenth-century that seeks a ceaseless expansion by means of imagining itself as a friend of regional and racial others. On the contrary, the novella presents the unfriendly friendship that does not ignore a distance or difference in the course of relating oneself to others. The text requires the reader not to empathize with its characters easily but to keep them as “beautiful enemies.” In “William’s Wedding,” another Dunnet Landing story, Jewett’s narrator expresses her wish of being read by “the least sympathetic reader”: “I felt something take possession of me which ought to communicate itself to the least sympathetic reader of this cold page. It is written for those who have a Dunnet Landing of their own: who either kindly share this with the writer,
or possess another” (250). Jewett’s text does not necessarily ask sympathy or empathy from the reader. It is meant to communicate not only with those who can identify with her affection for the town, but also with those who have their distinct objects of affection. Thus, Jewett’s empathy should not be based on an identifier-
tory model but on a model in which “one person makes a connection with another while remaining separate” (Fetterley and Pryse, Writing 344).

Indeed, Pointed Firs registers an opposing view in the middle of a sympathetic moment. Even though the narrator sometimes tends toward immediate identification with others, as she identifies herself with the Bowden clan, the novella does not forget to insert irony in her naïveté. Here we see a profile of the author, Jewett, who tactically manages an emotional balance between sympathetic identification and ironical estrangement. At the end of “Along the Shore,” right after the sympathetic meeting with Elijah, who discloses his acute longing for his dead wife, the narrator goes to see Mrs. Todd to give a message from the widower. Rather than joining the caring circle, in which the narrator feels a deep sympathy to Elijah, the mistress debases the affection: “For me, I don’t want to go there no more. 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. She was always right there; yes, you knew just where to find her like a plain flower. ‘Lijah’s worthy enough; I do esteem ‘Lijah, but he’s a ploddin’ man” (98). The chapter ends with this bluff comment. Here, we see equivocality rather than equivalence. When the narrative inclines to impress a warm interrelation, Jewett does not allow the reader to steep in the affectionate feeling it has been describing. Jewett seems to be saying that the narrator is merely another character, who is by no means omnipotent and unpreju-
diced in her viewing the world.

Because the readerly understanding of the local characters is possible only through the eyes of the first-person narrator, her presence as a unique individual becomes an obstacle to transparent communication. It is true the novella fosters closeness to the text in the reader. As a result of the narrator’s report of intimate relationship with the residents, the reader could get “a glimpse” of private lives of local people. But it is also true that, due to its sketchy style, which does not dwell on each character long enough, and the mediation of the first-person narrator whose perspective is distinct and limited, our sense of understanding of each character is left imperfect. Unlike previous sentimental genre that unreservedly registers characters’ psychological development and the narrators’ moralizing dis-
course, Jewett’s narrator neither probes into the depth of others’ private realms nor expounds her own interpretation or opinion for what she shows. As Love notes, “its [community in Pointed Firs] beauty and singularity are linked with its fragility—and it can fail. In this sense, we might see the circuit that includes Jewett, her characters, and her readers as incomplete” (315). The sense of incompleteness results from narrative manipulation that leaves its characters ultimately “mysterious” and untouchable. Far from the view of local-color literature that creates solidarity through fostering sameness, Pointed Firs both thematically and stylistically avoids perfect communication between the characters and the reader.

Thus, the narrator has to leave her beloved town. In the final chapter, just as she arrived, she leaves the town as “a single person,” with no one accompanying her. On a steamboat, she glances backward, and the novella ends with the image of the town merging into oneness: “The little town, with the tall masts of its disabled schooners in the inner bay, stood high above the flat sea for a few minutes then it sank back into the uniformity of the coast, and became indistinguishable from the other towns” (101). In the final distancing of herself from the world of her object, the town is melting with the other towns “into...uniformity.” Whereas, as I have been discussing, immense proximity might lead to a disregard for alterity, keeping too much distance in turn merely brings about a fantasy of uniformity that does not acknowledge difference or the specificity of others. That is why Jewett constructs her work in a circular structure, beginning with the chapter named “The Return.” It beckons us to return to, revisit, reread the text. Jewett’s sketches of solitary individuals in a local community demand the reader to participate in finding the ethics of interrelation, putting us in a perpetual suspension between collectivity and loneliness.

Notes

1 Among others, Amy Kaplan argues that the narrator’s view of the Bowden reunion as a celebration of patriotism and shared blood denotes that regionalism had a role in “solidifying national centrality by reimagining a distended industrial nation as an extended clan sharing a ‘common inheritance’ in its imagined rural origins” (250–51). In the same vein, Elizabeth Ammons, who corrects her prior view of the work, goes so far to see the Bowden reunion as a celebration of “the triumphant colonization of Indian land by white people of British and Norman ancestry” (92). Pointing out the militaristic discourse in the chapter of the reunion, she contends that Jewett’s book affirms the white
people’s “racial purity, global dominance, and white ethnic superiority and solidarity” (97). For a response to the revisionist assessments, see Fetterley and Pryse (*Writing Out of Place* 214–47).

2 Karen Kilcup and Thomas Edwards sum up the discourse of early feminist critics that “[i]n their emphasis on women’s power and women’s communities, Jewett’s early feminist critics were responding in affirmative fashion to the resonant emotional content of her work that Berthoff had called “sentimental” but that they themselves would call evocative or intimate” (8).

3 Contemporary reviews demonstrate how the readers of the period “relished” the book through identifying themselves with the transparent eyes of the traveler-narrator. Those reviews are filled with favorable adjectives such as “enjoyable,” “satisfactory,” “pleasurable,” or “delicious.” One of the reviewers notes the book is a “rest cure.” This anonymous reviewer goes on to note, “after living with her among the old fashioned, easy-going fisher-folk of a little Maine village through two hundred pages, one is ready to go back to the bustle of the city thankful for even so short a vacation” (*Overland monthly* and *Out West Magazine* 106). Alice Brown writes that the Bowden Reunion “stirs in us the dormant clan-spirit; we understand ancestor-worship, the continuity of being” (*The Book Buyer* 249–50). These contemporary accounts bear witness that the book provided the readers with a pleasurable sense of belonging to the nation.

4 Arguing the centrality of friendship in *Pointed Firs*, Laurie Shannon points out the continuation of Emersonian view of the concept in Jewett’s “transfiguring friendship” (237).

5 In her short story “Carlyle in America,” which had been unpublished until 1982, Jewett highlights the association between friendship and distance in the figure of Emerson himself. In the middle of the story, the narrator inserts an “imperfect verse” in which he describes his “first and only sight of Emerson.”

Right here, where noisiest, narrowest is the street,
Where flaunting shops bedeck the crowded way;
Where idle newsboys in vindictive play
Dart to and fro with venturesome bare feet;
Here, where the bulletins from fort and fleet
Tell gaping readers what’s amiss today,
Where sin bedizens, folly makes too gay
And all are victims of their own conceit;
With these ephemeral insects of an hour
That fret and flutter, as they downward float
In some pale sunbeam that the spring has brought,
Where this vain world is revelling in power
I met great Emerson; serene, remote,
Like one adventuring on seas of thought. (108)

The poem begins with an immediacy of presence, “Right here.” However, what the narrator feels when he saw Emerson is nothing but “remoteness” that distinguishes the poet from the surrounding hullabaloo. Although the narrator surely meets him “right here” in some street in Boston, his physical proximity to Emerson only brings the sense of distance (“serene” and “remote”) from him. Yet, paradoxically, this aloofness of Emerson, rather than giving an impression of unapproachableness to the narrator, enables him to feel a great affinity to him to the extent that he feels “like his [Emerson’s] personal friend and neighbor” (108). Considering her figuration of Emerson in this story, along with the similarity between two essays on friendship, I assume Emerson had a great influence on Jewett to develop the concept of friendship which is constructed through distance.

Concerning this same scene, Laurie Shannon argues that the associative power persists even in this “shrine of solitude.” Paying attention to the “gay voices and laughter” heard at the lonely island, she writes, “[t]he spectacular choice of Joanna sola and the experience her memory briefly triggers of standing alone, of being ‘islanded,’ emerge as objects of contemplation in what seems an inevitable ‘progress’ towards friendship and redemption” (250).

Works Cited


