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Sarah Orne Jewett's
*The Country of the Pointed Firs*: A Search for the Archetypal Female

by Jason Bennett

I personally find most Realistic literature lacking whatever mysterious element it is that evokes from me an emotional response. Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories* is a definite exception. In fact I was so emotionally challenged by the work that I was compelled to reread it almost immediately. I really had no idea why I found Jewett's story so powerful. The elements which touched me so deeply were unseen by my conscious mind, but were nonetheless felt by a deeper part of my being. My task was to identify, as clearly as possible, the exact nature of my emotional responses to the work and then to locate within the work those places that, in one way or another, linked my responses to the story. At once I began to suspect that I had encountered what Carl Jung termed an archetype. Jung points out that when archetypes are encountered they are always accompanied by an outpouring of intense emotion which initially seems to have no clearly defined source (Hall 118). An exploration of the imagery which appears to be associated with those emotions will disclose an archetype.

As I analyzed my emotions, I discovered that they were functioning at three levels. The first level was acting as a deceptive mask actually designed to keep me distanced from the archetypal source of my feelings. At this level I felt silenced, perhaps even censured. It was as though I, a male, were privileged to look upon a secret world, a world heretofore known only to females, a world I was allowed to see, but one in which I was barred from participation. I felt envious of the narrator at first; then jealous; and finally, when she left Dunnet's Landing, outraged. How dare she throw away such a golden opportunity, I thought. She was being offered the very thing that I have wished for all my life and have been denied because I am a male.

The curious thing was that I didn't really know what it was that I was wishing for. I just knew that I had felt its presence somewhere in the story and knew that the narrator was rejecting it. A second reading revealed
a pattern I had previously missed. I now saw the story as a chronicle of initiation into the deeper levels of esoteric mysteries. I then realized that my outrage at the narrator was misplaced. I wasn’t angry at her for leaving. I was angry at Jewett for telling me that the world dominated by patriarchal values could no longer host the kind of cultural values that Mrs. Todd represented. The narrator had to leave Dunnet’s Landing because it was dying and she did not have the power to bring it back to life, except as a piece of fiction in her story.

The second level of my emotional response was anger at my own helplessness, my own powerlessness, to revive these dying cultural values. I was resentful at my mere humanness. I wished I could speak, as did Christ, “Lazarus, come forth!” and it would come to pass. But either I lacked the faith, or the ability. In either case my speaking would be in vain and therefore I still was silenced.

Still clarity was absent. These cultural values that I seemed to prize so highly were shrouded. There is something intangible in the way the narrator presents, not only Mrs. Todd, but the other characters as well, that touches me deeply. These are people that I know, or rather did know. They are ghosts from my own past who now live only in my thoughts, memories, and hopes.

Captain Littlepage is my father who died when I was a boy. Like a sailor gone to sea, my father was often absent months at a time before his final voyage into the sea of timelessness. His absences left large spaces in my life. His legacy to me is the wonderful stories he would tell, stories that my own imagination has embellished over the years.

Mrs. Todd was both the mother I never had (Mother died when I was still a pre-schooler) and the wife I could never find. The few memories I have carried with me from my mother’s grave site are the nightmares that grow out of Hodgkin’s disease and distort the mind so severely that her responses to her own children became those of Medea’s. In order to escape this terrifying memory, I created a mother in my own fantasy that was very much of Mrs. Todd’s spirit. This image became a model by which all other women were measured. The problem was that the flesh and blood women I knew could not measure up to the model. It was as if they were made of the cobwebs and shadow that Captain Littlepage describes in his story of the waiting place.

A complicated series of events occurred in my life that brought me to the realization that all of the relationships I had established with women (whether young or old, Platonic or romantic) had been predicated on two specific psychic constructs—masks as they were—which prevented my interacting with women in any but the most neurotic manner. The first mask was created from the memory of a terrifying childhood relationship with my mother. It was a face I so desperately tried to avoid that
I instinctively armored myself against the slightest chance that any woman I was with might suddenly reveal herself in this hideous appearance. The second mask was that of a fantasy mother created as an antithesis to the first mask. It was an imaginative refuge from the paralyzing effects of the Medusa. I realized that, if I were ever to engage in a healthy relationship with another woman, I would have to abandon the second mask and destroy the first. Like Perseus, I had to slay the gorgon so that I might free myself from my neurosis.

This is the point at which my third level of emotional response occurred. Many of the images and characters in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* keenly mirrored those events and people in my personal life which were instrumental in my coming to terms with my neurosis. Those friends were so helpful and supportive during that difficult time that they have become symbols of a way of life that is so significant to me that I keep them safely hidden in the inner recesses of my heart. Here they form a complex of ideologies that serve as the foundation for my world view. Dunnet’s Landing seems to serve a similar function for Jewett. At least the way in which she presents the community closely parallels my own private “Dunnet’s Landing.” For this reason I found that, as I read the story, my sympathies were powerfully aligned with the narrator. This is why I reacted so strongly to Jewett’s implication that Dunnet’s Landing is a dying remnant of obsolete cultural values in which the narrator cannot fully participate. If what she is saying is true, then my own ideology is condemned to the same fate. My outrage was a defensive reaction. I had invested many years of agonizing soul searching before I came to a point in my life where I felt that I had obtained a modicum of truth about myself and my relationship with others. The central principle of that truth was an acceptance of the Adi Shakti (the prime feminine power or what Jung called the ANIMA). Those cultural values which Jewett presents as dying are those which are tethered to the central, unifying principle of Adi Shakti.

At the start of Jewett’s story I believed the face of this goddess (the Adi Shakti) would be revealed to me, but in the end all that was revealed was Jewett’s apparent belief that the goddess is either dead or dying. She has been crucified by the political and economic machine of our time. It doesn’t even matter if I want to be a “seafarin’ man.” My voyage would be in vain. I would not end up like Odysseus, who found his way to the awaiting Penelope. I would end up like Ahab—drowned and maimed by the force of my own obsession.

The place where I have been challenged by my response to Jewett’s story is the recognition that I am unwilling to accept her prognosis without a struggle. It is a question of dialectics. Is there a way that I can interact with her work so as to arrive at a synthesis or resolution of the conflict
between Jewett’s implication that my values are obsolete and my need to have them function as unifying principles in today’s fragmented world? I believe that way is to be found in the study of mythology. If I can reach resolution, perhaps it will be by approaching *The Country of the Pointed Firs* as an object of mythic analysis.

In this regard *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is of particular fascination to me because it serves as a window to the Shakti power of the goddess. Jewett tries to present a picture of the remnants of the ancient practice of witchcraft as the vehicle for this power. Her witches are not hags with warts on the end of their noses, who wear black pointed hats and crouch secretly in the light of a full moon over a bubbling black cauldron. They do not fly on broomsticks in the dead of night to rendezvous with some demon in order to practice some unspeakable sexual rite. Her witches are normal people who happen to know a lot about herbs and who happen to be the carriers of an ancient consciousness that is centered on the goddess. It may well be that they do not even know the goddess by name. In fact there is no direct evidence that they even know of the goddess’s existence. But nonetheless they manifest certain esoteric qualities that have long been associated with the Shakti power of the goddess.

Shakti is a Sanskrit word which means “energy,” but it does not refer to just any form of energy. Specifically it refers to the mysterious energy of the creative process that is exhibited in nature. The means by which a seed becomes a flower is said to be Shakti. Inseparable from this generative process is death. The seed must die that the flower can be born. Until the scientific age, this energy was always thought to be feminine. Mythically it was seen as the magical power of the primal goddess. Psychologically it was perceived as the erotic principle—not to be confused with the libido, which was masculine. The Shakti was that fundamental power which gave rise to the libido. It was a power contained by the female of all species. Among humans this power was latent because the intellect had come to dominate the species’ behavior. This subjugation of the Shakti power is reflected in the developmental history of mythology where the goddess undergoes a series of demotions, from Queen of Heaven to consort of the newly enthroned god (usually her son), to Queen of the Underworld, then consort of the Lord of the Underworld, and finally demoness. In the human world women have descended from sibyl or witch to priestess, to mother, to consort of the human husband, and finally to the objectified, depersonalized force...
of nature. Today we still refer to “Mother Nature,” but few of us remember that she was once Queen of Heaven.

There was a time when the feminine power was revered, honored and even worshipped. However, as humans have “progressed” through the patriarchal realm of warrior consciousness, priestly pontification, intellectual elitism, technological enthrallment, and economic domination, the Shakti power of the goddess has been divested of all its raiments and entombed in a sepulcher of complacency. If it is true that history repeats itself, perhaps hope can be drawn from the myth of Innana. Innana, Sumerian Queen of Heaven, was divested of her raiments and was left for dead in the underworld. Her son and consort, Thammuz, replaced her on her throne during her absence. After a time his love for her compelled him to make the ultimate sacrifice. He took her place in the underworld just as he had done in Heaven. Innana was then freed from her tomb and allowed to reassume her rightful authority.

Jewett’s witches are a product of the descension through the patriarchy and are not portrayed as anything but human females whose insular lives are encompassed by patriarchal industrialization. However, they exhibit a quality which speaks (if only in a whisper) of the ancient esoteric tradition of witchcraft and goddess worship.

Mrs. Todd, the central character in the story, is the lens through which these esoteric elements are focused. She is first and foremost an herbalist with an advanced knowledge of remedial uses of plants. In speaking of her daughter, Mrs. Blackett admits, “The time o’ sickness an’ failin’ has got to come to all. But Almiry’s got an herb that’s good for everything” (51). Mrs. Todd’s knowledge of herbs goes far beyond simple home remedies (at least in the mind of the narrator): “It seemed as if love and hate and jealousy and diverse winds at sea might also find their proper remedies among the curious wild-looking plants in Mrs. Todd’s garden” (150).

Mrs. Todd is undoubtedly the matrix of the mysterious power which permeated Jewett’s story in the same way that one of the mysterious herbs in Mrs. Todd’s garden penetrates the air with its intoxicating fragrance. She has an understanding of the primal forces of nature and speaks like an oracle (76). Like Thales she is attuned to the spirit that resides in every tree (84). Captain Littlepage believes her to be “one o’ the best o’ women” (110). She belongs “to any age, like an idyl of Theocritus,” because her wisdom is “an intimation of Truth itself” (56).

There is no doubt that she is highly thought of by the inhabitants of the area. She is constantly visited by people who are beset with one kind of ailment or another. The women of the area particularly like to visit with her because she demonstrates an understanding that connects the
present to the past. She seldom speaks anything but kind words and, upon those rare occasions when she speaks harshly of another human being, she repents afterward. (The narrator’s surprise and discomfort at seeing this side of her mentor, a side that could exhibit cruelty, reflects the two-faced nature of the goddess: her beauty as Aphrodite or Athena and her ugliness as Medusa. She is, after all, the goddess of both life and death. The Shakti may be the most compelling attraction in the universe, but it is also the most terrifying.)

Mrs. Todd has a formidable sense of duty which is suggested in the way Jewett positions her in the center of things. Early on, the narrator sees Mrs. Todd as standing “in the centre of a braided rug . . . its rings of black and gray seemed to circle about her feet in the dim light. Her height and massiveness in the low room gave her the look of a huge sibyl, while the strange fragrance of the mysterious herb blew in from the little garden” (17). This image comes after the narrator has already observed that Dunnet’s Landing is “the centre of Civilization” (13). It is as if the narrator perceives Mrs. Todd as central to Dunnet’s Landing, and, judging from the traffic that flowed through her house, this may well be a fact. The braided rug could be a symbol of Mrs. Todd’s craft, since the rug is the product of craftmanship. Her name “Todd” means “fox” and the most common association with the fox is craftiness (Lansky).

The circle appears again in connection with Mrs. Todd, but more indirectly. Green Island, which is the home of Mrs. Todd’s mother and the place where Mrs. Todd had married, represents her connection with her ancestors. While on Green Island, the narrator observes that the pointed firs form a circle around the island. At the center of this circle is a stone at the peak of the hill. From there she can see the ocean which encircled the island, “. . . and a hundred other bits of island-ground, the mainland shore and all the far horizons” (46). In this experience space and time are “liberated.” The implication is that Green Island is at the center of this culture, which is to say that it is the Blackett family, which Mrs. Todd represents, that constitutes the center of the folk life at Dunnet’s Landing. What is being suggested here is the archetypal image of the _axis mundi_—the world’s center.

This center appears in different forms around the world and throughout the ages. It may have been a great tree, as it was among the Norse and early Hebrews, or it may have been a huge mountain, as it was among the Hindus, Tibetans and Babylonians. Among the Persians and Arabs it was represented by a stone which lay at the center of the universe and around which was coiled a huge serpentine dragon. In the image that Jewett portrays, the stone is atop a steep hill (a small mountain). Around this stone are a series of concentric circles (like those on the braided rug). Universally, concentric circles have represented the _axis mundi_. Among the Rabinical writings of the diaspora, paradise was at
the center of seven concentric circles and was guarded by two dragons called Leviathan. Among the druids of Erin, Heaven was at the center of three concentric circles. During holy days, the Oglala Sioux set up their villages in seven concentric circles. In the middle of this was erected the sacred lodge which was built around a single sacred pole representing the center of the universe.

Three things can be mentioned here that help to clarify Jewett’s possible intent. The first is that Mrs. Todd lived in a matriarchal society. The second is that, almost universally, the axis mundi is presented, within patriarchal societies, as a vertical pole, tree or mountain. As already noted, one exception to this is that the Persians and Arabs viewed it as a solid cube (not unlike Plato’s notion of the elemental form of the earth). The third is that among the tantric religions of India and Tibet there is a secret passageway at the center of the mountain. This corridor is the path which the goddess takes as she ascends and descends between Heaven and Hell. It is significant that the tantric religion of India is outwardly patriarchal in structure but inwardly matriarchal. This is because it is the remnant of the pre-Aryan culture. Tantrism adopted the pantheon of its conquerors who were patriarchal but has retained as secret, esoteric doctrine the old religion which held the goddess as supreme. In allegorical form this passage is the secret cave which symbolizes the womb of the earth goddess. According to Arnold Crowther in The Secrets of Ancient Witchcraft, the initiations held for new members occurred in a secret cave which symbolized the womb of Persephone. In areas where caves were not available, the same rite was performed in a clearing in the woods. It is, therefore, likely that Jewett is suggesting that this sacred spot represents the feminine counterpart to the axis mundi—the eternal womb of the goddess. Mrs. Todd, like the witches of old, is the anointed of this goddess.

One male walks upon this sacred ground--Brother William. William, however, is not the average male, even for Dunnet’s Landing. He is initiated into the mysteries of the goddess. As he stands upon this sacred ground he observes, ‘‘There ain’t no such view in the world’’ (46). This, of course, refers not only to the landscape as seen from Green Island, but to life itself as seen from the heights of one who has been initiated into the mysteries of the matriarchy.

Brother William assists Almira and her mother, who Mrs. Todd identifies as the queen (89). Not only does he make his living from the sea (symbol of the goddess), he is a naturalist who has a keen ecological sense. He reveres the sea and protects her. He is one who understands the feminine and sings of it by lending his voice to his mother’s. In this role William is a bard, similar to the bards of druidic religion—one of whom was Merlin, whose association with the Fisher King Arthur is well known and who worshipped the dragon, ancient symbol of the goddess. (Merlin’s
name meant "King of the Dragons."). The ridge along which the narrator and William walk reminds the narrator of the spine of a huge beast (a dragon perhaps?). In ancient Mesopotamian religions it was the dragon's spine which formed the circle of life around the sacred mountain. Through his incantations, William preserves the knowledge that is in the women's power to enact. In fact, this is the only time that he demonstrates any power. He is extremely shy and seems almost incapable of interacting with people, yet he has the most beautiful voice in all the islands. It is a voice which he dedicated to the virtues of home and love as demonstrated by the two songs he sings. One of the songs, "Cupid and the Bee," contains both the symbol of love and the symbol of the matriarchy. The bee is an ancient symbol of the matriarchy. Bee colonies revolve around a queen, just as Green Island is centered on Mrs. Blackett who "is always the queen." This suggests a curiosity in that the narrator's first encounter with a bee is one in which the bee takes her as an enemy. This was prior to her going to Green Island and making peace with the Queen.

The attack of the bee occurs while the narrator is watching a funeral procession. This procession has a dual effect. First it makes the narrator realize that she is an outsider. Second, it reinforces the cave imagery. The entire procession on the "... lower road disappeared from the great landscape as if it had gone into a cave" (21). The lower road represents the lower aspect of the goddess in her function as crone, or goddess of death. Here the womb becomes tomb. Another cave image is that of Mrs. Blackett's house. The bedroom, the place of sleep (death), is the heart of the house (52). The Sufis often speak metaphorically of the heart-cave wherein the spirit sleeps. The idea of a sleeping spirit, or latent power in humans, is described in great detail by the tantric practice of Kundalini yoga, in which the goddess sleeps at the base of the great mountain. When she awakens, she rises like a serpent up the secret channel toward her wedding chamber. Mrs. Todd's wedding chamber is in the same house as Mrs. Blackett's sleeping chamber. This distinction suggests that Mrs. Blackett, Mrs. Todd, and the narrator represent the three-fold aspect of the goddess as crone, nymph, and maid. The maid signifies the premenstrual aspect of the feminine cycle and is equated with spring. The nymph represents the menstruating aspect of the feminine cycle, the most creative period, which is equated to the summer. The crone is the postmenopause aspect and is equated with winter and death or dormancy. At first glance, this tripartition might not seem applicable, since both Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett are past the age of menopause and the younger narrator is seemingly past her teen years, but if the story is viewed as a rite of passage for all three women, the three stages can be seen as positions of knowledge and power rather than biological function. Mrs.
Blackett is soon to die. Though in good health, she has come to the end of her years. She is about to pass into the new moon stage of non-being. Mrs. Todd has been functioning productively for the entire community, but is ready to assume the role that her mother will be vacating. This leaves Mrs. Todd without a successor. The narrator comes to Dunnet’s Landing as a tabula rasa, a blank slate, an ignorant, uninitiated female. Mrs. Todd takes it upon herself to teach the younger woman the mysteries which she has guarded for many years in hopes that the narrator will take her place.

The dramatic action of the story can be plotted from the points where Mrs. Todd shows the narrator something new. These points represent the stages of initiation from one circle to the next. Each time this happens the narrator "awakens to new thoughts." The narrator never reaches the final circle. Her last initiation occurs at the Bowden reunion. After this she decides to return home.

This would be in keeping with the return part of Joseph Campbell’s monomyth, but it leaves Mrs. Todd without a successor. Jewett is implying that the days of the goddess are coming to an end and she must now become integrated into a patriarchal society. This would be represented by the narrator’s return to the "outside world," the industrialized city. She takes with her much wisdom, but it is wisdom that will have to be applied differently than the way in which Mrs. Todd applied it because it is a different society to which she goes. The knowledge gained by the narrator represents a movement from the small circle of the self to the larger circle of timeless traditions and collective consciousness. It is at the last initiation that she observes:

We might have been a company of Ancient Greeks going to celebrate a victory or to worship the god of the harvest in the grove above. . . . the sky, the sea, have watched poor humanity at its rites so long, we were no longer 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 we were only the latest of our line. We possessed the instincts of a far, forgotten childhood; I found myself thinking that we ought to be carrying green branches and singing as we went. So we came to the thick shaded grove still silent, and were set in our places by the straight trees that swayed together and let sunshine through here and there like a single golden leaf that flickered down, vanished in the cool shade. (90-91)

There are no concrete conclusions that can be drawn in regard to the author’s intention from these comparative mythological images. All that
can be said is that they evoke one reader’s response to the work. These analogies may only be in the work because I was looking for them. But it is significant that I did not begin looking for them until after I had read the story. This suggests that there is something inherent in Jewett’s story that evoked from me a need to resolve some personal internal conflict. There must also be something within the story that suggests to me that the resolution of that conflict is contained within the images that have been brought into question. In other words, it doesn’t seem likely that the question would have even come up if I had not reacted to the story with the emotional intensity that I did. And I doubt that those emotions would have been evoked if there were not images within the story to evoke them. Those images, I have tried to demonstrate, were not of my own creation. They were transmitted by Jewett herself.

She could not have predicted how I would react, but that in no way dismisses the fact that she put them there for me to see. And having looked at them, I am able to say the following about *The Country of the Pointed Firs*: This is a story about women in a particular place and a particular time. Regardless of whatever else Jewett wanted to say about them, there is one thing that was conveyed to me. There is a way to look at life that does not require a linear, progressive expectation, such as the one which is destroying Dunnet’s Landing. It can be perceived according to its cycles and rhythms like the circles in the rug and at Green Island. Instead of being concerned with what profit can be extracted from the world, we can be concerned with how effectively our presence in the world has contributed to life itself. We can choose to attempt to reshape life into something of our own making that will in someway insulate us from the existential anxiety that arises when we realize that we are born to die, or we can choose to live out that cycle with grace.

Among the Sikhs, women are called “the grace of God.” This is a title not meant to suggest that all women are the paragon of grace. It is meant, rather, in the sense that it is grace which enables us to enter into a harmonious communion with the natural cycles of life, that grace that removes the sting of death and the victory of the grave. Since it is the only power that really counts from this point of view, it is thought to be a gift from the eternal. And since the gift is thought to be feminine it follows that it must be the power of the goddess, the power called Shakti.

Mrs. Todd, Mrs. Blackett, and many of the other persons who live in or near Dunnet’s Landing exhibit this kind of grace. They possess Shakti power. Women of such power have always been labeled as witches or oracles by the patriarchy. Such a revealing look is bound to have its disturbing, if not disruptive, effects, unless we can stand alongside Brother William on top of the sacred mount and proclaim from the depths of an awestruck soul, “There ain’t no such view in the world.”
To be able to make such a claim is to adhere to a cultural value of great significance. I refuse to believe that it is dead or dying. I hope rather it is merely sleeping and look forward to its awakening.

Works Cited


