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**GENDER, FAIRY TALE, AND ECOLOGY
IN SARAH ORNE JEWETT'S *A WHITE HERON***

Stephen Dougherty

ORCID: 0000-0001-5653-6259

University of Agder, Kristiansand, Norway

stephen.d.dougherty@uia.no

Abstract

This essay situates Sarah Orne Jewett's short story *A White Heron* within the related contexts of children's literature, the fairy tale, and critical ecofeminism, featuring comparative analysis of Jewett's story and Angela Carter's *The Company of Wolves*. Both stories are at least partly re-imaginings of *Little Red Riding Hood*, and both stories pursue what I identify as comparable ecofeminist or proto-ecofeminist agendas. While I argue it is Jewett's shy and withdrawn protagonist Sylvia who is actually the more convincing ecofeminist warrior, and not Carter's bold and aggressive heroine, it is only after Sylvia escapes from the story of *Little Red Riding Hood* that she becomes so; it is only after this intertextual dimension of *A White Heron* disappears from Jewett's storytelling that Sylvia assumes an ecofeminist mantle, and a decisively moral status.

Keywords: fairy tale, ecofeminism, nineteenth-century American literature, children's literature, gender

Sarah Orne Jewett's classic American short story *A White Heron* [1886] is the tale of a girl's immersion in the natural world. Although the title of the story gestures toward the deep connection between the girl and a rare and threatened bird,¹ a connection supercharged through the figurative power of Jewett's prose, the narrative begins with a scene of inter-connection between the girl and a milk cow. This milk cow is not merely a part of the setting of the story. She has a name, and she has a personality too. She demonstrates preferences and makes discoveries. She is a companionable creature, and the little girl Sylvia knows from experience that the cow must be negotiated with and coaxed along if Sylvia is to get back to her grandmother's house before dark.

¹ I draw this brief list of titles from a longer list of 'Golden Age' children's literature classics compiled by Carrie Hintz and Eric L. Tribunella in *Reading Children's Literature* [2019: 101–102].

The narrative voice as focalized through the mind of the young girl clearly establishes that, for her at least, the cow possesses an intelligence capable of manifesting itself in pleasures and preferences. Such intelligence requires use, or exercise, so the milk cow also wishes to play—waiting, hiding, and trying to be silent: ‘Sylvia had to hunt for her until she found her, and call Co’! Co’! with never an answering Moo, until her childish patience was quite spent’ [Jewett 1995: 103].

The remarkable thing about the opening lines of *A White Heron* is the degree to which the narrative voice encourages the reader to imagine the cow possessing both intelligence and an inner life, not for the sake of mere whimsicality, but for a bigger purpose of promoting an ecological perspective through storytelling. The girl and the cow co-create the cow’s *soulfulness*, just as the narrative framing of their interactions also creates the artistic illusion of the little girl’s soulfulness. Their respective personalities are established through mutual engagements, and Jewett’s point, I would argue, is that the magic a writer can achieve with any two human characters in and through the convincing representation of their shared existence and their revelatory interactions can also be achieved between human and non-human characters. What is needed for the cow to come to life is literary craftsmanship, aesthetic care, and a moral conviction that an animal is more than a dumb beast, or a mere machine.

What is also required for the cow to achieve a sense of psychological depth, both for Sylvia and for readers, is time: ‘Sylvia had all the time there was, and very little use to make of it’ [Jewett 1995: 103]. Her sense of time is expansive, flexible, and fluid: she has time as well as inclination to grasp and appreciate a more than instrumental significance to the creatures of the world around her. Sylvia, a woodland creature herself, lives in a timeless manner that allows her to communicate meaningfully to the animals because she seems rarely to be in a hurry. She is a child, and she must be a child to assume easy credibility in her role as a medium, an open channel to the nonhuman animal world. It is worth keeping in mind that the period between 1865 and 1915 is frequently called the Golden Age of children’s literature. The 1880s alone saw the publication of James Otis’s *Toby Tyler, or Ten Weeks with a Circus* (1881); Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* and *A Child’s Garden of Verses* (1883, 1885); Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885); and Francis Hodgson Burnett’s *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1885)². By the later nineteenth century, the notion that the fairy tale was a specifically children’s form of literature had caught on, and it invariably inflected the subsequent development of children’s literature in important ways.

However, Sylvi is not merely a child. If she were, then her responsiveness to other creatures might seem as if it were merely childish affectation, or a symptom of a child-like hyper-curiosity which would ‘naturally’ disappear in adolescence. This

² That commitment has a long history. Investigating Trina Schart Hyman’s popular 1982 picture book retelling of *Little Red Riding Hood*, Hintz and Tribunella write that Hyman ‘replicates’ many of the cultural meanings found in the Grimm version of the story. ‘Critics,’ they write, ‘have drawn attention to the ways in which the rescue of Little Red Riding Hood and her Grandmother in the Grimm’s tale reinforces the patriarchal idea that women need the rescue and protection of men’ [2019: 183].

interpretive outcome would have seriously undermined the development in more recent decades of a particularly influential kind of critical reading of Jewett's story: the environmental or ecological reading more broadly, and the ecofeminist reading more particularly, premised on the claim that the domination of nature and women are flip sides of the same patriarchal power structures. Josephine Donovan wrote in an influential essay in the early 1990s that '[e]cofeminism [...] critiques the ontology of domination' [Donovan 1996: 161]. If *A White Heron* did not feature scenes of sexual tension, and if it did not focus on the threat of a sexualized domination of a female by a male character, then the ecofeminist reading would not have established itself so securely in recent years: the short story's current status as an ecofeminist classic *avant la lettre* would not have been achievable. For that outcome, the girl in the story must also be a woman. The boy—there must be one of these too in a traditional fairy-tale romance—must also be a man.

There is just one girl in *A White Heron*, the remarkable Sylvia. But there are in fact two boys. At a still early point in the story, with Sylvia and her cow walking through woods in the twilight, the unpleasant memory of a 'great red-faced boy' [Jewett 1995: 104] jangles abrasively in Sylvia's mind. The reader has already been alerted that the girl 'had tried to grow for eight years in a crowded manufacturing town' [Jewett 1995: 104]. The red-faced boy, who 'used to chase and frighten her' [Jewett 1995: 104], belongs to that other place, that other, urban, scene of a fast-changing America, roiled by immigration and population growth, shifting demographics and technological development, whose trauma for the sensitive girl can barely be mentioned. Her experiences growing up in the bustling coastal town have left a mark on Sylvia. As her grandmother puts it, the girl is "[a]fraid of folks" [Jewett 1995: 104]. She is not at all the cocky protagonist of American children's literature to come. There is a world of difference between the shy Sylvia and the self-assured Dorothy of L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* [1900], for example. If Baum's *Wizard of Oz* is motivated by a social philosophy where the various characters achieve 'the best for all by serving their individual goal' [Mendlesohn, James 2012: 26], Jewett in *A White Heron* suggests a different lesson: narrowly human goals, be they individual or collective, are suspect and selfish, because human beings live enmeshed in wider networks of living things. Baum's message possessed a great deal more immediate traction, resonating as it did with American attitudes about the primacy of individualism and the power of spectacle. Jewett's story, on the other hand, is not only about a girl who is like a wallflower. It has been characterized as a sort of literary wallflower itself, quiet and unassuming, earnest, modest, 'minor,' as Louis A. Renza [1984] suggested in a critical study that identified *A White Heron* as a central work of 'minor literature.'

At first the memory of the terrible red-faced boy seems random. It seems to be Sylvia's immediate fear of the darkening woods that triggers through psychical contiguity the bad memory that unsettles her. Some other memory might have served just as well the purpose of underscoring Sylvia's sense of unease. But in fact, the red-faced boy is a kind of herald. He announces the imminent presence of the real boy to come, who is thus both expected and unexpected: 'Suddenly this little woods-girl is hor-

ror-stricken to hear a clear whistle not very far away... a boy's whistle, determined, and somewhat aggressive' [Jewett 1995: 104]. Sylvia tries to hide from him, but it's no use: 'The enemy had discovered her' [Jewett 1995: 105]. Why is the boy's enemy status cemented from the start? An easy answer is that it is anticipatory. In other words, we are meant to understand that the boy will *become* the enemy, and this early designation foreshadows a future situation. This is not wrong, but neither is it exactly right. The boy is the enemy from the start, even though he is subsequently described as also being polite, solicitous, charming, and handsome. He is the enemy *before* he is the friend, and importantly, his implicit threat is established *first* with reference to the cow, whom we already know is Sylvia's friend. Attempting to hide herself from the approaching boy, Sylvia jumps into nearby bushes and leaves the cow 'to whatever sad fate might await her' [Jewett 1995: 105]. A few short paragraphs later, the girl, the boy and the cow safely reach Sylvia's grandmother's house. The possibility of the cow meeting a 'sad fate' is not realized. Yet the juxtaposition of the whistling boy and the temporarily abandoned cow, whose fate hangs in the balance, reminds us what is at stake in Jewett's tale: it is precisely the cow's soulfulness, and the soulfulness of other non-human living things, which depends in the narrative on a human willingness to intuit it, to realize it, and to be affected by it, just as the reader's expanded consciousness of living things depends in part on such moments of heightened awareness that literature and other arts can put on offer.

The question in *A White Heron* is whether Sylvia will remain as she is, or whether she will be changed by the boy. Her openness to the non-human world is figured from the very start as part of her child-like innocence, and that connection is reinforced by the narrator's restriction to a very narrow range of descriptors for Sylvia. She is a 'girl,' a 'little maid,' a 'little girl,' a 'little woods-girl.' At the same time, however, she is more than just a girl, for in the boy's presence 'the woman's heart, asleep in the child, [is] vaguely thrilled by a dream of love' [Jewett 1995: 108]. This heart sounds like a very conventional one; it sounds like its awakening would naturally lead Sylvia to select the boy as a desired mate, as if it were in accordance with a universal biological program. Through the working of ideology, the erotic attachment to the boy would retroactively become naturalized and essentialized, an outcome whose popular appeal in Jewett's day is suggested by this quite remarkable flight of rhetoric: 'Some premonition of that great power stirred and swayed these young creatures who traversed the solemn woodlands with soft-footed silent care' [Jewett 1995: 108]. There is no trace of irony in this passage, even though it may strike the contemporary reader as overwrought. Jewett was indeed inclined to locate in the natural world transcendental powers, or spiritual powers beneficent to humankind, as did her New England literary forebears Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. She was a nineteenth-century New England writer, a *rural* writer, a regionalist, a partisan, albeit a critical one, of local customs and manners. The above passage reveals Jewett's unmistakable literary debt to a socially conservative transcendentalist heritage.

Yet, this great power moving the girl and the boy is also suspect in the pages of *A White Heron* and we know this from the arc of the storyline. If *this* woman's heart

sleeping inside Sylvia were to awaken and prevail, she would go forth and multiply. She would subordinate herself both to her future husband and children in the manner that nineteenth century social norms dictated. If the narrative machinery of Jewett's story *were* properly attuned to the soft murmurings of *Nature*, as the transcendentalists generally understood it, and as the alluring passage above might suggest that Jewett herself understood it, then Sylvia would truly fall in love with the boy, and they might live happily ever after. She would satisfy *his* most ardent desire and divulge her great secret: the location of the white heron's nest for which he seeks. Armed with this information the boy would kill the bird and add it to his precious collection of dead birds. The suspense of the narrative revolves around the question of whether Sylvia will divulge the secret location, or whether she will remain true to her alternative disposition. The question can be posed alternatively: can the child's extraordinary devotion to a non-human world become a woman's devotion too, an adult devotion?

The 'great power' whistling in the wind is the motive force for a heteronormative love plot which will be foiled. Childhood itself, or rival notions of it reflecting and reproducing the stark gender divide of the middle and late nineteenth century, will feature centrally in the failure of the love plot. What is a child? In Jewett's story the girl and the boy turn out to be different and incompatible *types* of "child." The girl and the boy live their childhood, they exist as children, in two different ways. Sylvia is identified exclusively as a child—a 'girl,' a 'little girl,' a 'little woods-girl.' Yet we cannot forget the 'woman's heart' sleeping inside Sylvia. The conventions of gender division and hierarchy put severe restrictions on how a woman might live her adulthood. Jewett knew this very well, but in her attention to Sylvia's inner life, to her own soulfulness, which includes the recognition of her potential for changing, she opens up a horizon of future possibility for Sylvia's growth and maturation. What will be the calling of the woman's heart? How will it shape the girl's destiny? Jewett did not mean for her readers to interpret the sleeping heart in an unambiguous way. The woman's heart in the child is Sylvia's singular heart, but it is riven by self-difference. Even in its singularity it is not one-and-the-same heart.

This gives her power. Even though Sylvia is presented in Jewett's short story as just a girl, she assumes more freedom and more agency to act and change than does the boy with his gun. The boy possesses a power Sylvia does not: he can be many things. He is a friend, an enemy, a 'young man,' a 'companion,' a 'stranger,' a 'way-farer,' a 'guest,' a 'sportsman,' an 'ornithologist,' a 'hunter.' The contrast between the extremely limited range of descriptors as applied to Sylvia and the abundance of them that attach to the boy is striking. It suggests the much greater range of life options available to a man, as Jewett well understood the reality of her world, and so it might signal as well that a boy has more to look forward to in life. But there is another way of reading it, and here we must start accounting for the story's fairy tale resonances. This boy is a shapeshifter, or a master of disguises—stranger, companion, sportsman, etc.—and we can think of this as part of what makes him so sexually fascinating for Sylvia. He is all surface. His boyhood is simultaneously his manhood; these two states collapse upon each other so that he is already what he will become. His nature is to

already be what he will turn out to be. This oddly *inhuman* ontology is established before we know anything else about him: the boy, we remember, will become Sylvia's enemy through the unfolding of his actions and desires; yet he is already the enemy from the start.

The unnamed boy's charm and charisma will thrill Sylvia, but first she is disarmed by it. She is also "alarmed" by it. Let us return to their first meeting, where the stunned girl '[d]oes not dare to look boldly at the tall young man' [Jewett 1995: 105] and can barely speak at all. He makes up for it. Here is the moment of the boy's impressive and imposing self-introduction:

'I have been hunting for some birds,' the stranger said kindly, 'and I have lost my way, and need a friend very much. Don't be afraid,' he added gallantly. 'Speak up and tell me what your name is, and whether you think I can spend the night at your house, and go out gunning early in the morning' [Jewett 1995: 105].

The effect of these words upon Sylvia is probably not what was intended. The very next line reads, 'Sylvia was more alarmed than ever before' [Jewett 1995: 105]. The boy's words invoke a sense of trauma that brings Sylvia's present experience together with that of the immediately recollected red-faced boy from the town. The sense of terror that fills her heart is the same; the sense of alarm is continuous with what she had already been feeling, though now it is increased. Sylvia's main concern is what her grandmother will think. 'Would not her grandmother consider her much to blame? But who could have foreseen such an accident as this' [Jewett 1995: 105].

Nevertheless, Sylvia keeps her wits about her. The enemy is now at the threshold of grandmother's house, and Sylvia's new concern is that her grandmother does not sufficiently acknowledge the danger, or 'comprehend the gravity of the situation' [Jewett 1995: 105]. Why is the situation so grave? How does the stranger's visitation constitute an accident, the kind that Sylvia might feel guilty for? In its frequent and confounding blending of limited and omniscient third person perspectives, the narrative voice makes it difficult to answer such questions. Heidi Kelchner has commented that the 'seemingly intimate attachment between character [that of Sylvia] and narrator contradicts the illusion of narrative distance suggested by other aspects of the text [...]' [1992: 88]. While Kelchner sees this disruption of the illusion of narrative distance as sign of an 'instability' [1992: 86] in the text that undermines meaning making, I would argue along different lines. Rather than functioning to 'inhibit' [Kelchner 1992: 86] or thwart meaning, the perspectival and temporal instability of the narrative (its shifting verb tenses as well as focalization) is an in-built feature that enables the interplay between the story's dominant realism and its latent fantasy. The gravity of the situation that Sylvia and her grandmother find themselves in arises from the fact that they are set up, through literary figuration and intertextuality, to be characters in *Little Red Riding Hood*.

The writer Angela Carter once remarked that her famous story collection *The Bloody Chamber* [1979] was written in 'imitation [of] nineteenth-century stories' [qtd. in Simpson 1995: xiii]. The reference is actually to Isak Dinesen, and the influ-

ence that *her* experiments in imitating nineteenth-century narrative structure (in *Seven Gothic Tales*) had upon Carter's own imitation game. But it also leads one to wonder about Carter's awareness of Sarah Orne Jewett. Was she familiar with *A White Heron*? '[T]he wolves have a way of arriving at your hearthside,' Carter writes [1995: 130]. Sylvia, of course, has led the wolf straight to grandmother's door. 'Fear and flee the wolf,' Carter again, 'for, worst of all, the wolf may be more than he seems' [1995: 130]. This is the hallmark of Jewett's wolf-boy. He is the nineteenth-century avatar of the fairy-tale wolf, designed to reflect nineteenth-century transformations in childhood and gender construction. One is reminded of the historian Hugh Cunningham's discussion of Victorian youth in *The Invention of Childhood*:

[F]or boys over seven the home was thought all too likely to result in effeminacy. Female influence had to be reduced. Hence one reason for the growth of the public school and the expectation that all boys whose parents could afford it would send their boys to one. For boys had to learn how to become men. One (male) writer, Trevethan Spicer, saw it this way in 1855; there was, he felt, little difficulty for girls, 'they have their needlework, their Dolls, and are content.' But for boys it was different: 'the boy is the father to the man, and as men have to rough it in the outer world, and fight their way to the post of honour that they may select for their goal, so the sports of boys must of necessity be rough, to prepare them for their future turbulent career' [2006: 143].

From the 1830s and 1840s on, 'sharply divergent paths for boys and girls became the norm'; 'The difference between a public male world and a private female one was accentuated [Cunningham 2006: 142]. Such were the conditions of social existence that Jewett's short story takes as a general starting point, and develops for the sake of both its real-world and fairy tale resonances.

There is another way too in which *The Company of Wolves* resembles *A White Heron*. Helen Simpson writes: 'The stories in *The Bloody Chamber* are fired by the conviction that human nature is not immutable, that human beings are capable of change' [1995: xii]. This is surely a central lesson in *A White Heron*, though it establishes the point partly through counterpoint. Being already what he will become, the boy with the gun, the wolf-boy, has *no* way to grow, to change, to transform. If Sylvia is full of heart and soul, the stranger seems to possess neither. He has no name, and no history. The only hint of back story is his surprise at the cleanliness and comfort of grandmother's dwelling. He wants supper. He listens to the grandmother's talk but does not grasp it. Her quietly harrowing tale of both her dead and estranged children elicits no sign of emotion; the stranger misses any 'hint of family sorrows' [Jewett 1995: 106]. His only talking point is his bird collection, about which he is ruthlessly boastful. The boy's current prey is the white heron, and once grandmother reveals Sylvia's intimate familiarity with the birds and other living things of the forest, the wolf-boy turns upon her with keen focus. The scene is marked by a new tone of suggestiveness: "'So Sylvy knows about birds, does she?' he exclaimed, as he looked around at the little girl who sat, very demure but increasingly sleepy, in the moonlight' [Jewett 1995: 106].

Sylvia's danger at this point is objectification by the male gaze, and by the narrative itself. Will *A White Heron* end up selling the girl out by assenting to her seduction? Put another way, will it maintain a sense of ideological commitment to the fairy tale it loosely tracks—a commitment, that is, to a representation of female victimization and powerlessness?³ In Charles Perrault's late seventeenth-century version of *Little Red Riding Hood* the wolf eats the girl and the grandmother. End of story. In the early nineteenth-century Grimm version, girl and grandmother are rescued by a passing huntsman. Neither conclusion would have been feasible in Jewett's story. The Grimm brothers modified Perrault's ending partly because it was too ghastly for the children they wished to entertain; and the Grimm version is a poor fit because in Jewett's story the predator *is* the huntsman. Nevertheless, it is clear at the story's midpoint that the wolf-boy has the upper hand. Sylvia is utterly charmed, and a day spent together wandering in the forest, listening to bird song, 'speaking to each other rarely and in whispers' [Jewett 1995: 108], seems to seal the boy's power over the girl. By the lights of the literary marketplace, Sylvia's diminishment and her concession to the boy's desire would have been the safe bet, in its alignment with social expectation and popular narrative convention. But bowing to convention was not what Jewett had in mind, no more than what Carter had in mind in writing *The Company of Wolves*.

The nature of these two stories' respective *unconventionality* is both similar and different. Both attempt to break through readers' cultural complacencies, about male dominance, female submissiveness, the separation between nature and culture, and the role of popular fiction in policing, or contesting, such norms. Both turn to the world of fairy-tale fantasy, or romance, in the effort to achieve this. Carter zeroes in on sex and desire, modifying *Little Red Riding Hood* to claim agency for the presumed girl victim. *The Company of Wolves* remains faithful to the fairy tale for the most part, though Carter's vibrant narrative style dramatically enlivens and enriches it. The girl is launched by her mother on her errand to get to grandmother's house, laden with food and wine. It is Christmas Eve: 'The malign door of the solstice still swings upon its hinges but she has been too much loved to feel scared' [Carter 1995: 133]. Thus, the young girl is unprepared. In the woods she meets a wolf-boy just like Jewett's, 'a very handsome young one, in the green coat and wideawake hat of a hunter, laden with the carcasses of game birds [...] Soon they were laughing and joking like old friends' [Carter 1995: 134]. He tricks her into a game to see who can get to grandmother's house first. By the time the girl arrives, the wolf-boy has already devoured her grandmother, and she is trapped. Naïve though she may have been on the path through the woods, the girl now proves herself a survivor, and a match for her adversary. As the narrator wryly observes, 'she knew she was nobody's meat' [Carter 1995: 138]. Carter's *Little Red Riding Hood* slowly strips naked and leads the carnivore to grandmother's bed. We find the girl in the last line of the story sleeping through the early hours of Christmas day. She rests peacefully 'between the paws of the tender wolf' [Carter 1995: 139].

³ 'Most simply,' Valerie Padilla Carroll writes, 'ecofeminism is a combination of ecology or environmentalism and feminism' [2017: 1].

Readers and critics have long been divided as to the effects of Carter's erotic fairy-tale revisionism, just as they have been divided as to the legitimacy, as feminist critique, of popular eroticized fairy tales broadly speaking. This genre is deemed by some observers 'essential to the feminist project of dismantling patriarchal understandings of women's sexuality' [Lau 2008: 80]. A very recent critic suggests that 'Carter's Little Red Riding Hood has acknowledged the beast within herself, a vital component of self-knowledge and a powerful statement for feminism [...]' [Mambrol 2022: n.p.]. On this account the girl survives her fairy tale doom by casting off her Christian veil of holy virginity and embracing her biological-sexual nature, thus putting herself squarely on the same footing as the wolf-boy. An 'aggressive, power-oriented [female] sexuality' is thus envisioned [Sheets 1991: 641], and a kind of sexual equality of predation is thus achieved. Yet the question remains, as Kimberly J. Lau writes, 'whether such erotic re-imaginings of classic fairy tales exceed patriarchal definitions of the erotic or whether these women [fairy-tale revisionists like Carter] are producing a sexual agency that exists alongside, and perhaps operates with and through, a dominant erotic' [Lau 2008: 80]. Lau argues in her essay 'Erotic Infidelities: Angela Carter's Wolf Trilogy' that overall, eroticized fairy tales by women do not represent much of a victory for women. They may 'seek to recast the dominant erotic in a feminine voice', but as Lau argues about Carter, 'her stories undermine, complicate, and defy this feminist longing even as they approach the pleasures of an other erotic' [2008: 79].

The main point I want to emphasize is that Carter's critical intervention in sexual politics goes through heterosexuality rather than around it. It takes it on and tries to beat it at its own game. This means that whatever sort of ecofeminist purchase a story like *The Company of Wolves* might possess, it is informed and inflected by this strategy, and it might arguably be undermined by it too. A similarly motivated critical reading of Carter's fiction may similarly be undermined in a kind of knock-on effect. Little Red Riding Hood's acknowledgement of her own inner beast might *not* be enough to celebrate from a feminist perspective. Of course, Sylvia's refusal to divulge the secret of the white heron's nest might not be either, especially given the notable silence of her refusal. Still, I would argue that the refusal stands as a surer sign of *conviction*, and of Sylvia's change in the short story to becoming a person capable of having one.

One might therefore be tempted to perceive Sylvia as the more ecofeminist-friendly version of Little Red Riding Hood. She challenges the wolf-boy and drives him away. If we think of an ecofeminist as someone whose feminist and environmentalist commitments coincide and reinforce each other, paraphrasing Valerie Padilla Carrol in *Ecofeminism in Dialogue*, then Sylvia makes a convincing ecofeminist, or proto-ecofeminist, warrior, albeit in a quiet way.⁴ However, that is, in fact, only insofar

⁴ The phrase is Hélène Cixous's. See Donovan's essay *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Reading the Orange*, where Donovan further quotes Cixous on the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector: "one has to listen to what is said between the lines, to the silences, the breathing [...] to the living reality of the text [...]. A text has to be treated like a person." Donovan comments: "Cixous

as she stops being Little Red Riding Hood. It is only after Sylvia *escapes* from the story of 'Little Red Riding Hood' that she changes; it is only after this intertextual dimension of *A White Heron* disappears from Jewett's storytelling that Sylvia assumes a decisively moral status. Her famous epiphany, after all, occurs at the top of a great tree, off the ground, far above the fairy-tale forest setting where she first encounters the boy, and is first threatened, and then beguiled, by him. Jewett writes the fairy tale both in and out of the story to highlight its power to bewitch and beguile the reader into persisting in uncritically anthropocentric habits of mind ultimately questioned by the trajectory of the narrative. In the end, *A White Heron* is an anti-fairy tale, which is a fairy tale no less. In this sense Jewett's negotiation with the world of the fairy tale turns out to be both similar and different from Carter's, who writes a distinctly different kind of anti-fairy tale.

The second part of *A White Heron* starts 'at the farther edge of the woods, where the land was highest [...]' [Jewett 1995: 108]. Before Sylvia even gets to the old pine tree she thus begins an ascent, the action which dominates the remainder of the story. Sylvia will start her climb to the top of the tree before daybreak, with the intent of enabling her to pinpoint the white heron's location. If she can get high enough she can discover in which nearby tree the bird is nesting. Then she can give the boy what he desires. It seems like a good plan for both Sylvia and for the narrative. If the story was still popular fairy-tale romance it would be the right formula, with keen attention paid to the psychology of romance, or the manner in which the image of the luminous boy in the young girl's mind eclipses the rest of the world. However, what the reader experiences instead in Part II is a marked turn, or re-turn, to the narrative focus on description of, and Sylvia's affective response to, the natural world:

There was the huge tree asleep yet in the paling moonlight, and small and silly Sylvia began with utmost bravery to mount to the top of it, with tingling, eager blood coursing the channels of her whole frame, with her bare feet and fingers, that pinched and held like bird's claws to the monstrous ladder reaching up, up, almost to the sky itself. First she must mount the white oak tree that grew alongside, where she was almost lost among the dark branches and the green leaves heavy and wet with dew [...] [Jewett 1995: 109].

When she finally reaches the top of the pine tree, her face 'like a pale star,' Sylvia sees 'the sea with the dawning sun making a golden dazzle over it [...]' [Jewett 1995: 110]. She sees more than she has ever seen, farther, broader, and more intensely. Given the cultural and intellectual context within which Jewett was partly working, it makes sense to refer to her aesthetic aim in this critical scene of ascension as transcendentalist. Thus Gayle L. Smith refers to Jewett's 'truly transcendental vision uniting man not only with green nature but with animal life as well, the past with the present, and one human sensibility with another' [1983: 37]. As she perches high in the pine tree, Sylvia sees the heron too, and though we still have the opportunity to suspect a continued

sees Lisperctor as a writer who attempted to remain faithful to the literal by capturing immediate, unmediated, and sacramental encounters with the world—'moments of being'" [1996: 169].

allegiance to the boy, the sheer refulgence of Jewett's prose signals a change inside the mind of the perceiver, or more precisely, a heightened awareness, a momentous consolidation of an already prevailing attitude.

Sylvia's mind is steadfastly attuned to her ecological surround. We are made aware of the collapse between limited and omniscient third-person perspectives, between, that is, the variable descriptive capacities of these differing perspectives, through the qualities of Jewett's prose, where the young girl's fingers are described as bird's claws'; where 'the least twigs [hold] themselves to advantage this light weak creature on her way!' [Jewett 1995: 110]. As Smith writes, Sylvia 'perching on her bough [becomes] a kind of mirror image of the endangered heron' [1983: 42]. But for other critics it is more than that: the relation goes beyond mirroring, just as it goes beyond personification and other forms of symbolization.

We might think of Smith's romantic-transcendental mirroring as illustrating a weak version of relation, enabled through symbolization but deeply constrained by it too. Ecofeminist interpretations, on the other hand, seek to promote a stronger variety of human-nonhuman relation, as well as a more intimate connectivity between sex, gender, and ecology. Thus, Josephine Donovan writes that 'Jewett espouses a theory of nature as a subject, a thou, which must not be distorted through personification, allegorization, or other exploitative figuration' [1996: 168]. For Donovan, women writers such as Jewett, Dorothy Wordsworth, Virginia Woolf and Clarice Lispector prove it is possible 'to capture reality before it is transformed into an object by signifying texts' [1996: 167]. From deconstructionist lights this may sound like an impossible trick. Still, Donovan valorizes the literary efforts of these women writers for their painstaking attentiveness, and for what she clearly sees as a sense of love revealed in and through their revelatory natural description. In its power to communicate the vital complexity of the world, the text itself as constructed by such sensitive and talented female writers becomes "a living reality."⁵

Paolo Loreto much more recently writes that Sylvia's becoming bird 'testifies to the shift in the interest [...] of her representation: instead of being symbolized by the heron, this hybrid, natural creature [Sylvia] is portrayed as perceiving herself to be the material co-extension of a non-human living being that is performing her same instincts of independence, agency, subjectivity and withdrawal' [2021: 57]. This style of interpretation is clearly not about mirroring. Loreto's intention, like Donovan's, is *not* to think strictly figuratively about the relation between the bird and the girl, but to render the relation in material terms, in a materialist fashion that both draws upon and revises Cixous's notion of 'the living reality of the text' [qtd. in Donovan 1996: 169]. For Loreto the girl and the bird *partake* of each other. They are both alive, they share similar instincts, pleasures, and vulnerabilities; and they are similarly endangered by

⁵ George Held observes that the white heron 'was never more than a casual visitor as far north as southern Maine. It is usually known as the snowy egret, but also as the little white egret and the snowy heron, among several other names. 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 by 1913 it was completely protected by the federal government' [1982: 60].

the same antagonist. The narrator of Jewett's story sees the bird (and the cow) the same way Sylvia does, as participating in a shared, co-extensive vitality, as being a part of the girl, and a part of all living things.

What is most striking about *A White Heron* is how it turns that revelation into a drama. A quiet one, to be sure, but the point of the story is that Sylvia's perspective, her distinctively non-dominative way of being in the world, is countered by the boy's way, which has every competitive advantage going for it. It comes with the imprimatur of science, and it comes with a gun. Furthermore, it comes with all the words in the world to confidently justify it. The boy acts with a sure sense that justification is not needed, and it was not expected by Jewett's first readers. Yet this narrative drama about our connection to nonhuman beings quietly legitimated doubts about accepted things, such as the righteousness of patriarchy, the unique sacrosanctity of humankind, the innocence of fairy tales, and the role of popular fiction in affirming and consolidating established truths. *A White Heron* opens up a space for quiet meditation, for something like a child's rumination to hold sway without ever seeming merely childish.

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