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## Sarah Orne Jewett

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About this Person

**Born:** September 03, 1849 in South Berwick, Maine, United States

**Died:** June 24, 1909 in South Berwick, Maine, United States

**Nationality:** American

**Occupation:** Novelist

**Other Names:** Jewett, Theodora Sarah Orne; Eliot, A.D.; Eliot, Alice; Sweet, Sarah C.; Eliot, A.C.; Sweet, Sarah O.

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Foremost among American women writers of the late 19th century, Sarah Orne Jewett once observed that, "a dull little village is just the place to find the real drama of life." Equally comfortable in both urban and rural New England, Jewett chose its rural villages and farms, especially those of the Maine seacoast, as the wellspring of most of her fiction. Yet for more than 30 years, Jewett was at the heart of a vibrant, urban community of women writers, artists, and scholars in Boston; creating her fiction in a unique period when 19th-century middle-class feminism was firmly embedded in the mainstream culture of New England.

Jewett's work has been traditionally classified as "regional" or, more specifically, as "local color" literature in which detailed, authentic portrayals of a geographic region's scenery, people, dialect, and customs are depicted. In recent decades, the rise of feminist scholarship has led to a groundswell of interest in Jewett and subsequently, to many new interpretations of her work. Feminist or not, today most scholars and critics agree that much of Jewett's work transcends the narrow boundaries of both regional and local color literature.

Born Theodora Sarah Orne Jewett on 3 September 1849 into a prosperous middle-class family in the village of South Berwick, Maine, Jewett was plagued by frequent illnesses as a child. Her father, a country doctor and intellectual, encouraged her to be out of doors as much as possible, hoping it would improve her health. She was an average student, and much preferred curling up with a book or exploring the woods, fields, and river near her home to scholarly pursuits. As a young teenager, Jewett frequently accompanied her father throughout the countryside as he called on his patients. During this period, her father taught her the skill of close, sympathetic observation of people and nature. This training motivated her to consider medicine as a career. Although her ill health ultimately made this option impossible (Jewett suffered from severe arthritis from her teen years on), she redirected her longing for a vocation and her powers of observation toward writing.

As an older child Jewett was fond of writing occasional stories and verse. She was 18 when "Jenny Garrow's Lovers," her first story to be published in a mainstream publication appeared in *The Flag of Our Union*, a Boston weekly, in 1868. The next few years were a period of extensive experimentation as she struggled to find a niche, submitting works in many genres for adults and children. Later in life, in a letter to a friend, Jewett reflected on the early discovery of what came to be the focus of her writing. "I determined to teach the world that country people were not the awkward, ignorant set those people seemed to think. I wanted the world to know their grand, simple lives; and, so far as I had a mission, when I first began to write, I think that was it."

With the publication of the first of four *Deephaven* sketches, each published successively in the *Atlantic Monthly* between 1873-1876 and then collectively as a book in 1878, Jewett captured the praise and attention of the magazine's editor, the writer William Dean Howells, who introduced her to Boston literary society. She soon met James T. Fields, the celebrated Boston publisher, and his wife Annie Adams Fields, writer and social reformer. Jewett became a close friend of the Fieldses and, after James's death in 1881, her friendship with Annie deepened. The two women became intimate companions, Jewett living approximately half the year with Annie Fields in Boston and the rest of the year in South Berwick with her family. Although many Jewett scholars have suggested that Jewett and Fields may have had a lesbian relationship, the exact nature of their attachment is not known, though their correspondence is a testament to the deeply loving, intimate, and mutually supportive nature of their relationship.

It is in *Deephaven* that Jewett first explores the themes, form, and style that characterize much of her later work. In this series of loosely woven character and nature sketches, two young women from Boston spend a summer in a Maine coastal village. There the two city sophisticates are drawn into a world far beyond their experience, a universe of old sea captains, a fisherman, and a strong woman of wisdom, all of whom have tales to tell and a philosophy to impart. Although *Deephaven* lacks the polished lyrical style that

was to become Jewett's signature, it does artfully convey her profound reverence for the past and her affection and respect for her rural subjects. And, in the character of Mrs. Bonny, Jewett presents one of the first of many strong female characters she was to create. Mrs. Bonny lives in a cabin deep in the woods, wears men's clothes, smokes, and possesses the emotional steadiness that comes with age, wisdom, and a spiritual affinity with the natural world.

Literary scholars have criticized Jewett for what has been described as deficiencies in plot structure. While it is true that her plots do not follow traditional structure and form, feminist critics have long argued that Jewett's apparent plotlessness does not derive from a weakness or absence of plot but rather from the deliberate creation and elaboration of other structures, such as the sketch and vignette, which are better suited to conveying feminine experience.

*The Country Doctor* is considered Jewett's most feminist novel and also her most autobiographical. In this work, Nan, a young orphan, is fascinated by nature and outdoor activity but disdains all things domestic. With her foster parent Dr. Leslie as her guide and mentor (modelled on Jewett's own father), Nan realizes as she matures that she has an undeniable vocation to pursue a career in medicine. When she falls in love and is asked to marry, Nan discovers that marriage is completely incompatible with her more urgent goals. She refuses her suitor and courageously embraces her future "in an ecstasy of life and strength, and gladness."

According to Jewett's vision as portrayed in *The Country Doctor*, marriage cannot exist alongside a woman's devotion to a career. Through the voice of Dr. Leslie, Jewett states her belief that "some [women] are set apart by nature for other uses and conditions than marriage." Jewett, then, was most concerned with declaring a woman's right and duty to refuse marriage if she is not suited for it, a stance that may have derived from her need to defend her own choice to devote her life to her writing career and to relationships aside from marriage.

With the publication of the short story "A White Heron" in 1886, Jewett entered her full maturity as a writer, perfecting her control of symbols, themes, and the sketch-like structure of her fiction. Young Sylvia, a tomboy and lover of nature, decides to help a hunter and rare bird enthusiast who seeks to add a white heron to his collection of stuffed birds. At first Sylvia is happy that she is to be instrumental to the man's goals. But the experience of sighting the bird changes her and she chooses not to reveal its whereabouts. Some feminist scholars have viewed "A White Heron" as an antiromance, in which the prince seduces the heroine but is ultimately rejected by her. More important than the rejection, however, is the transformation that takes place within Sylvia when she discovers the heron. This pivotal alteration allows her to remain in harmony with the natural world as its protector, a distinctly feminine role.

From the moment *The Country of the Pointed Firs* first appeared, critics and readers agreed that its quality far surpassed Jewett's previous work. Since that time it has often been identified as her masterpiece. Like *Deephaven*, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* was first published as four separate sketches in the *Atlantic Monthly*, then published in book form in 1896. Of all Jewett's works, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* best exemplifies her recurring theme of the power of female relationships. Indeed, Jewett lavishes the most attention on portrayals of women's relationships in all her fiction, particularly friendships that are interdependent, mutually nourishing, and life-supporting connections.

Jewett invented the term "imaginative realism" to explain to a fellow writer how the realism in her fiction differed from conventional concepts of literary realism. She often noted that her work involved much more than the mere observation and recording of reality. In *Deephaven*, and in the bulk of her later work, the reality of everyday life--people, events, the natural world--is transformed through the individual and shared spiritual experiences of her characters.

In *The Country of Pointed Firs*, the middle-aged, nameless narrator is a writer who journeys to a Maine fishing village named Dunnet Landing. She rents a room from Mrs. Todd, herbalist, healer, and quintessential Jewett wise-woman. As the narrator is drawn into the lives and relationships of the villagers, there is the sense that the rural world is disappearing with the accompanying necessity to savor and celebrate its final moments. The narrator not only listens to the villagers' stories, rituals, and customs, she and the rest of the community internalize them and are transformed, thereby enriching their individual and collective experiences with new meanings and understandings.

In 1901 Bowdoin College awarded Jewett an honorary doctorate in literature, the first time the college bestowed this honor upon a woman. The following year, on her 53rd birthday, she would seriously injure her head and spine in a carriage accident. Jewett never completely recovered from her injuries and, tragically, lost the ability to write more than a few lines at a time. She spent her remaining years in Boston and in South Berwick, and died of a cerebral hemorrhage on 24 June 1909.

With the recent resurgence of interest in Sarah Orne Jewett, more and more of her previously out-of-print works have been reprinted. Modern readers now have the opportunity to discover her infectious optimism about the multi-dimensional potential of women's relationships and the richness of middle-aged and older women's experience. Portraits of vigorous, independent, rock-solid, mature women have been especially lacking in American literature, and Jewett's oeuvre can be celebrated for broadening narrow, conventional literary conceptions of the female experience.

#### PERSONAL INFORMATION:

**Nationality:** American. **Born:** South Berwick, Maine, 3 September 1849. **Education:** Studied at home and at Miss Raynes School; graduated from Berwick Academy, 1866. **Career:** Contributed short stories, sketches, and essays to periodicals, including *Atlantic Monthly*, *Century*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Flag of Our Union*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Independent*, *Our Folks*, *St. Nicholas*, *Scribner's* and *Youth's Compendium*; lost the ability to write after suffering a spinal injury in a carriage accident, 1902. **Awards:** Litt.D, Bowdoin College, 1901. **Died:** 24 June 1909.

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