19th Century American Literature

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**“A White Heron.”**

**By Sarah Orne Jewett**

1. Biography.
   1. Born September 3rd, 1849. Her wealthy family had been in New England for many generations. Her father was a doctor and took her with him when he went to the homes of the area. Jewett used these experiences in her stories later.
   2. Childhood and Education. Jewett was a sick child (rheumatism) spent a lot of time walking outdoors for her health, something that led to her love of nature. Her family also had a large library and she was encouraged to read by her father.
   3. Jewett never married. She was very close to the wife of her publisher, Annie Field. After the death of Mr. Field, Annie and Sarah lived together as close friends for the rest of their lives. They travelled extensively together in America and Europe. The nature of their relationship is unknown.
   4. Literary Career. Jewett published her first story in the Atlantic Monthly at the age of 19. Her first novel, *A Country Doctor* (1884), drew material from her experiences with her father. Her second book important work was *The White Heron and other Stories* (1886). Her most important book was *The Country of Pointed Firs,* published in 1896. She was friends with many of the top writers of the day, including Oliver Wendell Holmes, John Greenleaf Whittier, Henry James, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Rudyard Kipling, and Willa Cather.
   5. In 1902 Jewett was in a carriage accident which severely injured her and ended her writing career. She died in 1909 of a brain hemorrhage after a series of strokes.
2. Themes.
   1. The Strong Woman. You could also call this character an “independent” woman. In our story, Sylvia is just discovering her own personality, and, although she is curious about the young man, she finds the inner strength to protect the white heron from him.
   2. Isolation and Community. Many of the characters in Jewett’s fiction are women who might be considered “outsiders.” They don’t “fit into” society exactly. Many of them find community with other women like themselves.
   3. Nostalgia and Escapism. Jewett’s grandfather had been a shipbuilder and sea captain but the society of New England was changing rapidly during Jewett’s life. Irish immigrants and the rise of an industrial economy likely led for a desire to remember and write about “the good old days” as a way to escape the unpleasant realities of the present.
   4. Transcendence. Along with the social, political and economic turmoil, the writers of the time are very interested in depicting the storms of the inner life. “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.” (from *The Country of the Pointed Firs.*)
3. Style.
   1. Local Color (Regionalism). This literary movement is focused around the end of the 19th Century. Writers from this period focused on the specific characteristics of a local area. In the case of Jewett, this area is New England.
   2. Realism and Romanticism. In this course we have been contrasting these two ideas but in many ways Jewett and other Regionalist writers find a way to merge the two. We can see this in the way that Jewett uses nature to illustrate the internal conflict of her characters.
   3. Narrative Voice. In “The White Heron” (and many of Jewett’s other stories) we read about young women who experience many of the things that Jewett herself would have experienced growing up. However, Jewett may depart from this personal voice to explore perspectives or views she does not share.
4. Discussion Questions
   1. The young woman Sylvia is forced to make a decision between doing something that she feels is wrong and making someone she likes happy. Have you ever been in a difficult situation like that?
   2. This story is very different from many stories about men and women from that period. Usually the women do what the men want them to do, even if it destroys them (one of many examples is the title character of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*). In this case a young girl overcomes her desire for love and money to do something beautiful. What do you think is different about this character from so many other female characters?