

Sylvia's Choice: Innocence and Transcendence in "A White Heron" *Luke Landtroop*

Sarah Orne Jewett's story, "A White Heron," is fundamentally about a choice; specifically the choice of a young girl to retain her innocence despite the possible material and emotional benefits of giving it up. The strength of the story depends on the author's ability to portray this choice as "a positive step in her development as a person, not merely a cowering, a retreat, a regression she must ultimately transcend" (Atkinson 72). In fact, transcendence is exactly what Sylvia achieves in her quest to find the nest of the white heron, and it is this experience that makes her choice so powerful, not only for her personally, but also in its universal implications for society in general.

From the beginning, Sylvia is depicted as having an intimate and affectionate relationship with the natural world, and this characterization is repeatedly confirmed throughout the story. Though the first eight years of her life were spent "in a crowded manufacturing town," Sylvia feels "as if she never had been alive before she came to live at the farm," where her only human company is her widowed grandmother, Mrs. Tilley (Jewett 522-523). The farm where Sylvia and her grandmother live is described as a "lonely house" (Jewett 522) and a "hermitage," (Jewett 524) but Sylvia doesn't mind such isolation because, as her grandmother says, she is "'afraid of folks'" (Jewett 523). Instead, Mrs. Tilley says, "'the wild creaturs counts her one o' themselves. Squerls she'll tame to come feed right out o' her hands, and all sorts o' birds'" (Jewett 524). Sylvia is a "woods-girl" whose heart beats "fast with pleasure" at the song of thrushes (Jewett 523). The milk cow that is Sylvia's charge is also her "valued companion" and playmate, as

well as a source of nurture who gives “good milk and plenty of it” (Jewett 522). Despite her near isolation from humanity, Sylvia seems content with her simple nurturing closeness to nature.

However, this tranquility of innocence does not remain undisturbed. A few days’ hospitality granted to a young hunter by Mrs. Tilley brings the first note of uncertainty to Sylvia’s idyllic experience. From the outset he is contrasted with Sylvia’s familiar and beloved world of nature. Sylvia’s first encounter with the young hunter begins when she hears his whistle, which is emphatically “not a bird’s whistle...but a boy’s whistle, determined, and somewhat aggressive.” At first Sylvia is “horror-stricken” and “alarmed” by the encounter, and even sees the “tall young man” with his gun as an “enemy,” though he turns out to be pleasant company (Jewett 523). Like Sylvia, the young man is greatly fascinated by birds. His goal, however, is not to simply enjoy their songs, but to shoot and stuff them. He is particularly interested in adding the little white heron to his collection, and upon discovering Sylvia’s affinity for birds, tries to induce her to help him find one by mentioning that he will give ten dollars to anyone who can show him the heron’s nest. Though Sylvia is greatly impressed with this offer, she does not immediately accept it. However, “having lost her first fear of the friendly lad” she spends the next day roaming the woods with him. He is “kind and sympathetic,” and even gives her a jack-knife, which seems to her like a “treasure.” While his killing of birds continues to trouble Sylvia, as the day goes on she even begins to view the young man “with loving admiration.” Her “woman’s heart, asleep in the child,” is “vaguely thrilled by a dream of love” (Jewett 525). It seems that under the hunter’s influence Sylvia might be able to overcome her aversion to human contact and enter a wider realm

of experience. However, the act required to initiate this new relationship would be to betray the natural world that has so nurtured and comforted her. Sylvia's new experience with the hunter can be seen as an invitation for her to step into the adult world, though to do so would be to abandon the carefree innocence and independence of childhood for the uncertainty of romantic relationships. Not only could the hunter possibly be an opportunity for love, he could make Sylvia and her poor grandmother "rich with money" (Jewett 528). However, if they accept the money they will be engaging in a system that will eventually supplant their rural lifestyle. As this implies, the hunter can also be viewed as a symbol of broader social and historical significance, what critic Theodore Hovet calls the inevitable "encounter of modern social forces with provincial America" (63). As Hovet says, the hunter's "gun and the money embody the imperialistic bent of industrial America" (68). As a symbol of both approaching maturity and encroaching modernity, the hunter embodies both the promise and the risk of each.

Though there are conceivable benefits from embracing the hunter and the world he represents, as Michael Atkinson states, the nature of the story ensures that "our most immediate desire is that Sylvia remain in her innocent world, inviolate." However, Atkinson continues, "we are also made (by the impingement of threats from without) to want strength for her innocence that it might fend for itself -- not a further retirement, but a compelling vision, an experience beside which anything promised by the thrill of infatuation for the hunter would pale" (72). Because change, both personal and social, is inevitable, we realize that for Sylvia to fail to help the hunter merely because she is frightened of "the sound of her own unquestioned voice" would be nothing more than a futile postponement that does little to prepare Sylvia for the future (Jewett 526). Sylvia

must have the full capability and opportunity to choose between the hunter and the heron in order for her choice to be something more than an insignificant lack of action.

Sylvia's chance to achieve this necessary "transcendent way of seeing" (Atkinson 2) comes in the form of a great old pine tree that stands high above the rest of the forest and makes "a landmark for sea and shore miles and miles away" and whose top branches are always stirred by the wind, "no matter how hot and still the air might be below" (Jewett 526). These descriptions convey a sense of the wider scope held and higher levels reached by the pine; in other words, it goes beyond Sylvia's usual experience with nature. Sylvia has "always believed that whoever climbed to the top of it could see the ocean" (Jewett 526). Along with the pine, the ocean also works as a symbol of transcendence. As we are told earlier in the story, Sylvia dreams about the sea she has never seen, though she hears its "great voice...above the noise of the woods on stormy nights" (Jewett 525). So while Sylvia ostensibly decides to scale the old pine in order to see the heron's nest, intending to disclose its location to the hunter, it seems that there is also an unconscious urge at work within her that is seeking an empowering vision, a new and different experience that can counterbalance that of the hunter's intrusion.

As Sylvia begins her climb, starting with the oak tree adjacent to the great pine, it quickly becomes apparent that she is going beyond her previous experience with nature. For the first time in the story Sylvia lacks perfect harmony with nature. Instead of coming tamely to her hand, a disturbed bird flutters off its nest and a squirrel scolds the "harmless housebreaker" (Jewett 527). However, though the transition from the oak to the pine causes limbs to scratch her "like angry talons," the narrator surmises that the old pine "must have loved his new dependent" since "the least twigs held themselves to

advantage this light, weak creature” who nevertheless bears a “determined spark of human spirit” (Jewett 527). When at last Sylvia reaches the summit of the pine, “trembling and tired but wholly triumphant,” the descriptive diction becomes extravagantly transcendent in a flood of light and color. Sylvia sees the ocean “with the dawning sun making a golden dazzle over it.” She sees a pair of gray-feathered hawks flying in the “glorious east,” and feels as if she could join them, “flying away among clouds” that are “purple and rose-colored and yellow.” She can see the countryside for “miles and miles into the distance;” her vision of the world has expanded dramatically, and she finds it truly “vast and awesome” (Jewett 527). At last the white heron appears, “and rises, and comes close at last, and goes by the landmark pine with steady sweep of wing and outstretched slender neck and crested head.” The heron lands on a nearby bough, revealing the location of its nest, and “plumes his feathers for the new day” (Jewett 527). Sylvia shares an enchanted minute with the heron before it leaves again, and then “well satisfied,” she returns to the farm, imagining what will happen when she reveals the heron’s secret to the hunter. Yet when the time comes, she “does not speak after all” (Jewett 528). Despite all the advantages of simply telling what she knows, when “she remembers how the white heron came flying through the golden air and how they watched the sea and the morning together,” she cannot bring herself to “tell the heron’s secret and give its life away” (Jewett 528) Though Sylvia is not able to express it herself, it seems that the unwitting part the heron played in her transcendent vision has made him sacred to her expanded consciousness.

The results of Sylvia’s choice remain ambiguous. When the hunter leaves, Sylvia continues to be haunted by “the echo of his whistle.” The narrator refuses to answer the

question of whether the birds were “better friends than the hunter might have been” (Jewett 528). The important thing is that Sylvia came to a place where she could have easily betrayed the heron, in some ways to her own advantage, and yet did not. Theodore Hovet puts the matter in these terms: “Once upon a time, the author tells us in her story, there yet existed a world in which a small girl could choose the nurturing power of nature rather than the materialistic exploitation of industrial America” (68). In a broader sense, this story serves to illustrate the value of choices informed by a transcendent vision, whether for an individual or a society. Whenever we face a choice between innocence and love, tradition and innovation, or any other dilemma, rather than trying to pretend the dilemma doesn’t exist or assuming that we must succumb to external forces, we should cherish the ability to see beyond our immediate surroundings and make the right choice. In this way we can decide what are the things that we cannot afford to sacrifice for immediate advantage or material benefit. In this way we can choose our own white herons.

Works Cited

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