

Exploring Lives With a Welcome, Sympathetic Stranger

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Getting to know a new place can be an exhilarating experience. Getting to know the people who live there, their struggles, and their joys can be a transformative experience. In “The Country of the Pointy Firs,” Sarah Orne Jewett treats her readers to such an experience. She makes the experience seamless and easier to relate to through the clever use of her narrator. To introduce the reader to the fictional town of Dunnet, Maine, Jewett leverages a woman writer visiting the town. She is friendly, artistic, and, most importantly, sympathetic. Not only does Dunnet accept her, but they feel comfortable sharing stories about their families, neighbors, and themselves with her. This narrator not only provides a target for the various characters to unfold their tails to, but she is also a tool for providing context and explanation. And most importantly, the narrator can mull over and discuss what she has heard, processing and coloring the content she has gathered. She can also then take time to analyze and relate to what she has heard. And, because the character is a writer, the way she shares the stories with the reader makes sense and flows smoothly.

A typical example of a complete story told to the narrator is when she encounters Captain Littlepage. The author paints a picture of an older man, who Mrs. Todd claimed, “had upset his mind with too much reading; she had also made dark reference to his having ‘spells’ of some unexplainable nature” (V:5). When he comes to visit the narrator

in her schoolhouse after a funeral, a page or so is used to describe his appearance, and, with some quick back and forth, his age and professional history are established. Then, the author sets up the story by having Littlepage declare, "I do not mind telling you that I chanced to learn of one of the greatest discoveries that man has ever made" (V:19). The narrator reveals her empathy and encourages the aged sea captain to share his story as he meanders his way through it. Their interaction moves the story along, as when, after he has drifted off into a rant on how things are not the way they used to be, she asks, "How did you manage with the rest of that rough voyage on the Minerva?" (V:21).

When the story gets a bit complicated, the narrator can ask questions. In the middle of the tale, when it is not clear how the stranded sailors are fairing, she asks, "Weren't they all starving, and wasn't it a mirage or something of that sort?" (VI:16). This clever interjection allows Jewett to go deeper into an explanation, changing the level of detail in the narrative, in a much less awkward manner. It is also a question that most readers would ask at that point in the narrative.

Then, after the story is completed, the narrator returns to Mrs. Todd, and the two discuss Captain Littlepage's storytelling. By creating a conversation between the narrator and Mrs. Todd, Jewett can pass along commentary on the storyteller. She has Mrs. Todd comment, "'Some o' them tales hangs together toler'ble well,' she added, with a sharper look than before.' An' he's been a great reader all his seafarin' days. Some thinks he overdid, and affected his head, but for a man o' his years he's amazin' now when he's at his best. Oh, he used to be a beautiful man!" (VII:11).

With other explorations of characters on the island, the narrator is simply an observer. However, her newness to the situation, empathy, and review perform the same purpose. This usage was strongest in the encounter between William and the shepherdess, Esther Hight, in “A Dunnet Shepherdess.” Instead of a townspeople recounting a story, the narrator simply observes William’s enthusiasm around Esther and how the two work to be alone. William uses the excuse of taking the narrator fishing to expose his hidden love to the shepherdess. If the narrator was not empathetic and not a stranger to the town, the whole day’s journey would not have made sense. William is almost pathologically shy, as we learn when the narrator visits Green island.

The narrative would not have worked well if he had just shown up one morning and talked about his affection for Esther. The chapter did work by giving William the excuse of showing their visitor the local trout fishing, and on the way back and after he had built trust with her, reveal his secret.

This particular story is one where Jewett does not use much dialog. It is fitting for the first part, where William is sharing the natural beauty of the area. But when they arrive on the sheep farm, the dialog is minimal, and Jewett has her narrator makes observations. She tells the story of the two lovers by observing in prose, “I am not sure that they acknowledged even to themselves that they had always been lovers; they could not consent to anything so definite or pronounced; but they were happy in being together in the world” (XXI:67).

A closer look at the story around the journey to the Bownden family reunion

provides an encounter where the narrator is only observing. The brief encounter along the road before they arrive at the party shows how removing the unique position of the narrator also removes her as a tool for deeper engagement with local characters. In the passage, Jewett presents a portrait of local hospitality when the party stops to water their horses and have doughnuts offered by the new owners of a farm along the road to the reunion. All three women are new to the mistress of the farm, so the position of the narrator as the welcome outsider can not serve the story. Therefore, Jewett uses the narrator as an observer only and not as a catalyst for moving deeper into the life of this woman and her family. Jewett does not have the other characters explain things to the narrator, nor is there any explanation given to the narrator by Mrs. Todd. Instead, the author has the narrator directly report the actions and dialog of the women with the new people along the road. The two women and the new mistress of the farm simply talk in short, unadorned dialog. The focus of the encounter is the offering and consumption of doughnuts. They learn that the woman might be a relative but don't enquire deeper. The only judgment they pass on their new acquaintance is the comment by Mrs. Todd, "I'm willing to own a relation that has such proper ideas of doughnuts" (XVII:17). This interaction is in contrast with most encounters in the book and shows clearly how the level of narrator involvement impacts the richness of each story told.

After this encounter, the narrator is once again the guest of Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett and Jewett uses her unfamiliarity as a tool to have the two women talk about the Bowden family as they continue their journey. To inform the readers that the Bowden family used to dominate the local population, Jewett has Mrs. Blacket recall a story from

her childhood when someone interrupted a church service. “‘Mis' Bowden, Mis' Bowden!’ says she. ‘Your baby 's in a fit!’ They used to tell that the whole congregation was up on its feet in a minute and right out into the aisles” (XVII:4). Relating this story just between the two women would not have worked as well as relating it to the empathetic visitor. Again, we as readers, are back observing and pulling in information about the community.

It is difficult to imagine stringing so many small stories together in one work without a tool like Jewett’s narrator. Her acceptance by Mrs. Todd and subsequent introduction to the community turns this from a collection of short stories about a New England coastal town into a single, compelling narrative. The narrator's introduction to that community, her dialog with others, and her analysis of what she learns let the reader into the community and its stories without complexity or abrupt transitions. We know that Jewett has achieved her goal of bringing the reader into the novel when the narrator is about to depart the town for the last time. When she observes, “I glanced at my friend's face, and saw a look that touched me to the heart. I had been sorry enough before to go away” (XXIV:6), the reader sees the look, has their heart touched, and feels their own sorrow that this visit to Dunnet is over.

Works Cited.

Jewett, Sarah Orne. *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. United States, Houghton Mifflin, 1910, <https://www.bartleby.com/125/>