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EcoGothic Disjunctions: Natural and Supernatural Liminality in Sarah Orne Jewett's Haunted Landscapes

Landscape in Ruins

Following the Civil War, northern New England communities in the nineteenth century experienced change that registered for the human inhabitants as a crisis of decline. Despite the continuance of a timber industry, traditional life was affected by deindustrialization (with loss of jobs to larger producers in the southern region and other urbanized areas) as well as a shift in agrarian practices wrought by a number of market factors, including declining wool prices and competition from larger western grain farms. The rural areas that lacked rail access were depopulating at an alarming rate, with "massive out-migration" to more industrialized areas. This "desertion," as it were, gave rise to an iconic image: "During the last quarter of the century, the specter of the 'abandoned farm' arose to haunt" the northern New England landscape (Brown 137).

It is no wonder then that writers like Sarah Orne Jewett found the gothic a fit mode of expression to capture the pastoral beauty and despair of the New England communities she depicted. The American perception of New England in decline was evidenced in popular magazines of the period: "Between 1890 and 1910, titles like 'Broken Shadows on the New England Farm' and 'Is New England Decadent?'" (Brown 150) appeared frequently to remind Americans of

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the disturbing transformation occurring in the Yankee land from which the country derived much of its mythic conception of the self-sufficient, republican American character. In reality, the change taking place was more complicated than simple decline as contemporary scholars dispute the magnitude of regional destabilization that actually occurred in relation to other rural areas (Adams 122–23, 152). For example, resilient farmers, relying on concepts of intensive farming, deliberately allowed some acreage to revert to forest “in order to maximize output from their better land” (Brown 138) in line with current theories of market and agrarian science as well as a response to the chronic labor shortage.

Nonetheless, the seemingly abandoned farms were perceived not merely as economic failure but as evidence of “moral and social decay” (Brown 138). The perception that “the abandonment of New England farms *was* exceptionally tragic because it . . . signified the loss of the type of citizen that had been nurtured on them” (Adams 153) is a sentiment that posits an inextricable connection between the character of the people and the landscape that defines them, both by tying them to their natural environment while at the same time separating them from it as land is reduced to the use value of cultivated tracts. This contradiction manifested itself in responses to the agrarian crisis that drew mixed reactions from progressive land reformers and traditionalists who complained that the traditional Yankee farmer was either overly or insufficiently committed to the land (Adams 152–60). Even so, while the belief that “new intensive farming techniques separated farmers mentally from nature . . .,” existed, “[s]till, older transcendental perspectives lingered” in the land reformers’ efforts as being essential to “the traditional moral landscape,” and reformers and traditional farmers alike, according to Richard W. Judd were united in their beliefs “that the region’s more idealistic core values must be preserved” and “that the viability of the farm depended on the viability of the surrounding natural landscape” (69–70).

Between Natural and Supernatural

This transforming ecology of landscape is fundamental to the settings into which Jewett embeds her narratives that rely on gothic convention to represent the parallel crises of continuity and change afflicting her characters. In the elaboration of his “Thirdspace” concept to discuss “spatial politics” (“Expanding” 277) and what he earlier terms “critical spatial thought” (*Thirdspace* 16), Edward Soja articulates a relationship between “historicality and spatiality . . . that gives rise to a geohistorical dialectic” (“Expanding” 262), in which geography and spatiality are no longer considered “fixed” and “immobile” (*Thirdspace*

15) but rather as a liminality where the real and imagined come together in lived experience and critical possibility.¹ In the settings of her Regionalist stories, Jewett creates a dynamic opening of liminality between “spatial complexes” (Achilles 35), in this case between the natural and supernatural worlds, to create an aperture of the *unheimlich*, which allows the gothic revelation of hidden confluences comprising prosaic realities. The notion of the haunted landscape is integral to this endeavor as is the tensive juxtaposition of the natural and civilized worlds.

In this regard, Jewett’s stories reveal a deeply ambivalent attitude toward traditional community values that both sustain and constrain its members who exist liminally (and are sometimes trapped) between worlds of a disintegrating past and an uncertain “progressive” future, even as they struggle to maintain a dignity that seems inherently tied to the New England countryside.² Key to this conflict is the conception of home that haunts the lives of the characters, a notion itself that is of central importance to ecofeminism. As Andrew Smith and William Hughes assert,

from its origins, women’s Gothic fiction has undermined fictions of the human and the nonhuman, the natural and the unnatural by creating worlds in which the everyday is collapsed with the nightmarish. Distortion, dislocation, and disruption become the norm, and the domestic and the grotesque, the alluring and the terrible coexist. Because of its obsession with the role of place in subject formation and in the destabilization of the “home” as a foundation of myths of domesticity, the Gothic is a particularly appropriate genre(12)

here, in Jewett’s case, to explore domestic spaces as the foundation of a communal ethos that mirrors and is derived from a larger, literal New England landscape of crisis. “Place” here includes the feminized domestic spaces of Jewett’s interiors and, importantly, the objects found within those interiors that function within what Kent C. Ryden identifies as “the traditional material culture of the rural [New England] landscape” (300).³

But in addition to the pastoral landscapes that inform Jewett’s fiction, an equally important component in the narrative of regional decline is the transformation of the shipping industry, another facet of New England culture ripe for gothic treatment due not only to its decimation but also to the taint it bore from the slave and other ethically questionable trade ventures. According to Deborah Carlin, Jewett would have been very familiar with tales chronicling the crippling effect of the 1807 Embargo Act on maritime trade as well the effect of the

steam ship on the New England ship building industry (12). In Jewett's stories, the influence of foreign trade is also felt in the commodities-as-artifacts that litter the landscapes of domiciles haunted either literally or figuratively. Indeed, it is the exotic object itself, often seeming to be inhabited by an unseen presence via a mysterious provenance, that becomes central to the gothic drama and to what Bernard L. Herman refers to as "the discourse of objects" (qtd. in Ryden 301) that in this case ties together seascapes and foreign ecologies with natural resources and domestic economy as practised within the traditional New England community.

Haunted Objects

The convergence of these different elements in these stories often, through a kind of gothic feedback, provoke a disjunction, rendered at times as horrifying, grotesque, and *unheimlich*, between the natural and supernatural realms. While Jewett employs the textual strategy typical of the regionalist genre that relies on careful, respectful attention to quotidian details, she, at the same time, disrupts this homespun reality by juxtaposing supernatural elements that unsettle the pastoral and connect the stories to camouflaged national and cosmopolitan narratives. This type of revelation occurs in "The Green Bowl" (1901), a story that centers on the eponymous object that serves as the source of the gothic mystery dominating the tale, an object that looks "plain green . . . but when you hold 'em in the light you see a pattern underneath." The object is both familiar and strange; a commodity and yet a source of spiritual and communal connection; part of the homey New England farm interior and yet arrived from foreign shores under perhaps sketchy circumstances. In this regard, Jewett's narrative strategy is in line with typical "[n]egotiations of nature and civilization in short fiction" that "generate liminality primarily by condensing different identities in either characters or objects" (Achilles 41–42).

The structure of the tale, typical of Jewett's regionalism that relies on a narrator and interlocutor formula, in this case a kind of feminized club tale that relays the story to a parlor assemblage, reveals a tension between the farming community and the middle-class ladies and gentlemen that derive listening pleasure as well as material benefit from the rural community that they set themselves apart from. In a sense, the story is a parody of regionalist local color, or at least of the audience for such folkloric fiction, as it depicts the parlor company eagerly consuming for entertainment the tale that features rustic details of the countryside as well as imitations of local speech dialect so essential to the regionalist aesthetic. The "report," as the narrators refer to it, is

given by Katie Montague and Frances Kent, two New Women who tell, somewhat scandalously, of their independent excursions about the countryside in horse and wagon without benefit of chaperone or middle-class material comforts.

Another narrative structure that is parodied is that of the quest, in this case a mock quest structure that relies on a dialectic of wilderness and pastoral to create a liminal space evocative of the fairy tale. Miss Montague and Miss Kent alternately supply the details of an excursion that goes off course, leading them away from civilization and the farming countryside into wooded areas marked only by abandoned timber roads where “the bushes grew closer against the wheels” and “the signs of travel were . . . slight.” With darkness and heavy rain approaching, the women believe they are saved when they hear the “voice of poultry” that surely indicates domestic animals and an accompanying farm. But this hope of being reunited with civilization evaporates when they finally emerge from the woods to see “open country, but it was all pasture land, and . . . the cock’s crow was only a ghost of a bird Beyond the empty pastures, the road plunged into wood again.”

Here, as in other Jewett stories, such as “The Gray Man” (1886) and “The Queen’s Twin” (1899), is reflected “an unsettling sense of haunting absence that undermined locational security” (Downey 142), as markers of past human activity seem to disappear into and from the landscape, and the play between the tropes of pastoral and wilderness evoke the history and geography of American conquest and settlement. What spurs on the gothic treatment of the subject here is the lost frontier of the Northeast that must now reinvent itself supernaturally as a mock wilderness reclaiming the cultivated and controlled land. The promised salvation of the farm disappears into the gothic illusion of what the narrators deem “empty pastures”: “Where evidence of human activity is invisible, orientation becomes difficult, if not impossible” for some of Jewett’s characters (Downey 143). The irony here of course is that evidence of human intervention is everywhere, from the created pasture lands to the vestiges of the timber road. Yet Miss Montague and Miss Kent narrate their story by recreating the mythic relationship to the land that organized the American narrative of expansion.

With an air of enchantment, their journey continues through “the black hemlock woods” to a hospitable church that seems almost magically to have been provisioned for them to take shelter for a pleasant evening’s stay, complete with a convenient portion of hay for the horse. (The appearance of this church is reminiscent of the chapel in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (c. 1400), a work that likewise positions

itself in Western culture's tension between civilization and nature. The word "green" in the Jewett story's title strengthens the connection.) Despite the light-hearted tone of the narrative, the fairy tale structure that evokes the supernatural toys with the possibility of the sinister. It is perhaps a bit too convenient that the comforts of civilization have been provided by an unseen presence. Is the generous absent host malevolent with ulterior motives? Is this a trick? It is not until the following day that another human greets them, Mrs. Patton. Mrs. Patton is the American equivalent of the good peasant woman in a European *Märchen*, and although the narrators' instincts to trust her prove accurate, some of the same mystery hovers over her as the reader watches the two adventurous women follow Mrs. Patton to her isolated farm home. Is she the goodly farm matron she appears to be, offering succor to the lost ladies, or is something insidious occurring, the past haunting through to the present to punish the outlandishness of these progressive New Women that will serve as a cautionary tale? The slight ambiguity in the plot echoes perfectly the contradiction that often appears in Jewett's stories between the practical strength and wisdom found in the traditional farm communities and villages and the narrowed possibilities and circumscribed perspectives that haunt an ethos rooted in the past. What is more, the ambivalent perspective reflects the imperiled status of the New England farm and landscape that suggests either nostalgia for a lost wholesomeness and harmony with the environment or decline and gothic retribution as nature reasserts itself in the present.

Arguably here as in other Jewett stories, the balance is weighted toward the romantic pastoral, the countryside as "a peaceful, honest, little corner of the world" with a dose of Yankee nativism added in for good measure. Mrs. Patton's relationship to the land is such that she lives off her farm and provides the women with sound nourishment, robust American apple pie that is contrasted with its inferior, effete English counterpart, the tart: "The English tart is nothing but a pie without a soul." The kindly Mrs. Patton enlists their aid to help her with the farm work, and the three women pick beans together in preparation for market in what Miss Kent describes as "the coziest thing . . . ever" despite the "scorn" of one of the middle-class interlocutors at engaging in so menial an activity. (The casual attitude that Mrs. Patton displays toward her harvesting responsibilities suggests she is more in line with subsistence farming and less inclined toward a progressive, market intensive agrarian practice, not to mention an indication of labor shortage.) Despite their evident good will, however, it is clear up to this point that Miss Montague and Miss Kent are engaging in what amounts to rural slumming as they traverse the countryside looking

for what they term adventure in quaint rustic towns. As such, they are consumers in a developing tourist industry capitalizing on the romantic perception of the countryside in decline (Brown). This relationship changes with the introduction of the green bowl, or rather bowls, as there is actually a pair of them.

Mrs. Patton displays in her humble home a particularly fine piece of china, although its status as a ware is also mysterious: made perhaps out of some "precious stone or dull crystal," not "any sort of pottery" to suggest an almost animate quality. According to one of the female audience members, exemplary pieces of china found their way into rustic coastal households through the maritime trade, as sailors brought home finds from foreign ports, but most such items had been predatorily removed by collectors such as herself, who did not pay fairly for their worth when purchased from their naïve owners. Mrs. Patton is spared such exploitation due to the particular history of her pair of bowls. The bowls, as we find out, transcend their existence as mere commodities through a seemingly supernatural spiritual connection with a "long history" of which we know "but a short chapter." Mrs. Patton announces to Miss Montague: "I expect there's some sort of charm about that bowl!" and proceeds to reveal their status as otherworldly objects rather than mere expensive knickknacks as implied by the collector in the audience.

The gothic effect of the narrative relies on Orientalism here and acknowledgment of a greater geopolitical reality that undergirds the historical present of the current New England. Mrs. Patton acquired the bowls through her Great Aunt's husband's sailor brother, "a wild sort of fellow that fetched 'em home from China" where he had "gone into some far province . . . and got his strange learning there," for he had planned to become a successful fortune teller before his sudden death. The great aunt then passed the bowls and their secret on to Mrs. Patton. The bowls' magical qualities rely in part on an arrangement requiring that two people keep one bowl each in sacred communion between them.

The secret of the bowls themselves hovers in the liminal space between the natural and the supernatural as well as the exotic and domestic realms. On the one hand, the bowls can be read as talismans that allow the possessor to read the future. On the other hand, as may be the case with all good fortune tellers, the necessary skill may reside in the natural gifts of empathy and observation. When the narrators ask Mrs. Patton if she can in fact read fortunes, her answer is curiously equivocal:

She seemed a little confused, and then told us that she didn't know why she shouldn't admit it, the gift had brought her more pain than pleasure, but anybody might use the good of any gift, and she had warned some folks of what was coming so that they had been thankful to her afterward. "And keeping my mind on that," she said impressively, "*has made me learn to read folks' faces easier than most people can.*" (emphasis added)

It may be that Mrs. Patton is less a supernatural seer and more an astute observer of human behavior, a gift steeped in the development of social acuity and connection as represented in the social thread that binds the "sister" objects. As Miss Montague tells us, Mrs. Patton, "sat there quite simply and used her plain country words while she revealed us, to ourselves and to each other," suggesting her ability is more about psychological insight and other cues, the skill of "reading" people, than magical divination. Mrs. Patton recognizes that Miss Montague is a member of this sisterhood when she bequeaths one of the bowls to her.

As indicated by the symbolic color green that links them to the pastoral, the bowls transcend their status as dead, commodified cultural artifacts from a colonial past and are repurposed as functioning objects of the New England material landscape that mediate culture and environment, creating cohesion between the traditionalist past and the more progressive present of the middle-class New Women. As Dara Downey says of Jewett's "Lady Ferry" (1879), "[b]eautiful things are . . . portrayed . . . as transforming the terror of decay, loss . . . into a continuous narrative linking the immemorial past to a stable future. . . . [T]he presence of a ghostly past could provide vital anchors for the present, even while producing a sense of supernatural dread, and a domestic secret could in fact render a home even more homelike, for those in possession of it . . ." (170). Jewett's narrator in this same story emphasizes the point of the object's power when she says, ". . . there is a strong influence of place; and the inanimate things which surround us indoors and out make us follow out in our lives their own silent characteristics" ("Lady Ferry").

Mrs. Patton is not merely a gothic ghost as the first part of the narrative and the middle-class audience might have her positioned, but a vital part of the present through her ongoing friendship with the younger women. She is not vanished but very much "here." And yet the story ends on an ominous note that disrupts the connection. Miss Montague sees a vision in the bowl in which two people from the present company will part by one's death (not surprising, given that they

appear to be aged). Nonetheless, the gothic fission opened in the narrative between past and present, rural and metro/cosmopolitan, is momentarily sealed through a naturalizing of the supernatural with an acknowledgment (perhaps almost glib) that life is evanescent and change inevitable.

Dark Pastoral

The uncanny *frisson* with which “The Green Bowl” ends is amplified at the finish of “In Dark New England Days” (1890), a story heavily invested in the split between the wholesome tradition of New England pastoral and darker forces looming. It, too, plays with a divide between the natural and the supernatural in assigning blame for humanity’s failures and disconnections with the gothic, functioning ultimately as a metaphor for a human nature flawed by rapacity and pettiness and at war with its more beneficent tendencies such as stewardship and conviviality. The agrarian landscape and community are not merely backdrop to the drama that unfolds but in effect enable and dictate the destinies of the characters and their communities as they live within the limitations of rural resources, both human and nonhuman alike.

Two spinster sisters live together with their father, Captain Knowles, in a secure but austere existence in an “early example of intensive farming; they were allowed to use [the farm] products in a niggardly way, but the money that was paid for wool, for hay, for wood, and for summer crops had all gone into the chest” that their father kept underneath his bed. The story reveals that such parsimony of resources was made tolerable by the hope of the inheritance that would come to the sisters upon their father’s death. The story opens with the death and funeral of the father and the long-awaited opening of the mysterious chest, the contents of which the sisters could only guess at, having never seen it open. Nonetheless, the hope—that there is a substantial fortune that will provide them a comfortable existence in their old age—is validated when they find a literal gothic treasure of old coins and other currency, “devil’s gold,” hoarded wealth from slave trading ventures, according to the voice of the community chorus.

The opening of the chest must be done in stealth at night with the implication that a day-time excavation of their treasure would expose them to the prying eyes of nosy neighbors. However, opening the chest on the night of their father’s funeral occurs in an atmosphere of gothic eeriness that proves devastating. An unseen intruder lurking in the woods stalks the sisters and their treasure like prey, despite their efforts to create a secure perimeter against invasion from their neighbors.

Whether purloined by a supernatural intruder or a more ordinary sort of thief, in any event, the treasure is gone when the sisters wake up in the morning. They immediately suspect and file charges against their father's estranged partner Enoch Holt. However, despite strong suspicion against him, there is insufficient proof, and the question of whether it was Holt or the spirit of the miserly father is a question of debate within the community. The sisters live in a kind of isolated penury after this, never really recovering from the devastation, relying on what the land and their own talents can bring them and the goodwill of neighbors, but not before Hannah levels a curse against Holt and his family that does indeed seem to come to fruition.

From the beginning of the narrative, the fraught role of the community is established. The sisters are shown to be ungracious as they refuse Mrs. Down's offer to "neighbor" with them the night of the funeral. However, it is immediately revealed that the neighbor's offer is not altruistic but has a predatory dimension as she derives entertainment from funerals and is indeed the gossiping busybody she claims she is not, hoping for vicarious enjoyment from the sisters' turn of fortune. Although harmless, Mrs. Downs is an ambiguous character in that regard, embodying the advantage and disadvantage of life in the close-knit village. Because the natural world's rational justice fails the sisters, supernatural retribution must take over. Hannah's curse of the Holt family's right hands, however, doubles back on the sisters in the mean existence they live. Hannah, in the eyes of the community, has gone too far in invoking evil, which is compared to the exotic cultural practices of pagan blacks in the West Indies. Mrs. Downs and others almost seem more aghast at Hannah's curse than Enoch Holt's treachery: "The neighbors talked about the curse with horror; in their minds a fabric of sad fate was spun from the bitter words." But it is difficult for the sympathetic reader not to see the sisters as beset in so many ways, from a prying community, an oppressive patriarch whose sins have both natural and supernatural reach, to the father's collaborator Enoch Holt, whose status as one of the "hard men" belies a community ethos of neighborliness and instead suggests a mean-spirited individualism that would seem to undergird the recipe for Gilded Age success.

The contents of the trunk are a reminder that, in contrast to the pastoral vision of rural existence, the competitive world of commerce is and always has been part of the quaint village, and the items bequeathed to the sisters serve to further extend the feminized metaphors used to depict community relations. Among the items discovered in the trunk are some fine Indian muslin and other textiles from exotic locations. The finery that might have once been a source of pleasure in their youth is now a mockery of their spinsterhood and a reminder of

the idea that objects that comprise the domestic environment are powerful sources of both pleasure and entrapment. Likewise the village community itself is both a source of genuine human connection that defies Gilded Age corruption as well as a trough of petty greed and misanthropy.

This irresolvable conflict resonates in the final scene when the bucolic landscape is marred by the appearance of the cursed Enoch Holt. Years later, the companion widows Mrs. Downs and Mrs. Forder, while out for a constitutional,

look at the wide landscape, bewildered by the marvelous beauty and the sudden flood of golden sunset light that poured out of the western sky. They could not remember that they had ever observed the wide view before; it was like a revelation or an outlook towards the celestial country, the sight of their own green farms and the countryside that bounded them. It was a pleasant country indeed, their own New England

It is perhaps only now in their old age that they have the leisure to observe their land in this aestheticized way, for as Greg Garrard tells us, in contradistinction to the British pastoral tradition, “American writing about the countryside emphasizes a working rather than an aesthetic relationship with the land” (49). But the idyll here is disrupted by the shadowy presence of the crippled Enoch Holt, crossing the landscape as anthropomorphized “malicious black insect.” He suggests both perpetrator *and* victim of injustice in the claustrophobic community that is both paradoxically insular and cursedly connected to larger global schemes and injustices. The gothic rift in the community is rendered through specifically ecological terms and calls into question the pastoral’s root “idea of nature as a stable, enduring counterpoint to the disruptive energy and change of human societies” (Garrard 56). The very real Enoch Holt haunts the land, perhaps not only as a representative of past injustice but also as an ill omen of things to come for New England and its inhabitants.

The End of the Age of Craftsmanship

In contrast to “In Dark New England Days” and “The Green Bowl,” in which commodities/objects can act as a bridge between the natural and supernatural realms, in Jewett’s male-centered stories, such as “The Failure of David Berry” (1893) and “A Business Man” (1886), objects function to evoke nostalgic remembrance of a bygone era when craftsmanship, Christian charity, and brotherhood connected to

natural rhythms and “homespun” trade. In the eponymous “The Failure of David Berry,” the title character “kept his shop in a small wooden building in his own yard,” where he soled and heeled boots. This humble setting that “belonged wholly to men” mirrors the woman’s domestic abode in its quaintness; such

little shops were only large enough for the shoe benches, with shiny leather seats and trays of small tools, sprinkled with steel and wooden shoe pegs and snarled with waxed ends; for their whetstones and lapstones and lasts, and the rusty, raging little stoves, with a broken chair or two, where idlers or customers could make themselves permanently comfortable.

This *Gemuetlichkeit* associated with domestic interiors is transferred here to the masculine workshop and in its stark, simple sovereignty is allied to a pristine landscape: the “abode . . . had a rudeness akin to savagery.” Yet it is a communal place where customers munch apples “and throw the cord down among the chips of leather.” Natural to his domain, David Berry, who is “his own man,” is the “pleasantest and wisest and least prejudiced of shoemakers,” graciously sharing his “rural wisdom.”

Ultimately, Berry’s charitable streak, as evidenced in his humble generosity toward philanthropic causes, will undermine his small lot of happiness when his wife and neighbor urge him to expand and modernize his shoemaking enterprise. Here, as in Jewett’s “The Gray Mills of Farley” (1898), the manufacturing business realm impinges upon the pastoral and spells the end of the age of craftsmanship. While Jewett treats Mrs. Patton of “The Green Bowl” as a vital living fossil able to coexist with New Women, Berry by contrast is a member of an endangered species that will inevitably be eliminated by a changing environment. Just as farms vanish in the ruined countryside, so people fall prey to the vicissitudes of outside forces: “It came into Mr. David Berry’s thoughts . . . how many men and women had kept him company for a time and then disappeared. There had been six ministers of the parish to which he and his wife belonged, and they had all gone away or died.” Unable to adapt, Berry, too, will disappear.

Berry fatally gives away his workshop (which is repurposed by his neighbor as a chicken coop) and moves to “a store down town” in response to market trends. Berry and his wife

suddenly became aware that the growth of the town was leaving them at one side. The tide of business had swept away from the old shoe shop. Sometimes

Mr. Berry did not have a customer all day The idlers had disappeared: some had gone to another world and the rest evidently had followed the track of business; they were off at the square looking at men who drove new horses by, and tried to look unconscious; at mercantile strangers who came from Boston; at the great brick walls of the new mills which were going to bring so much money to the town Business had gone to another part of the town, and it was the plainest sort of good sense to follow it.

Mrs. Berry's disparaging view of the old, self-contained shelter is analogous to the settler's view of the frontier wilderness: she "had no sentimental ties to the old shop, which she had always complained of as a dirty place and a temptation to the loafers of that neighborhood" who congregated there with Berry. The shop's value can only be monetized for her when they receive a good sum for it. But Berry, when severed from his natural environment, feels "old and bewildered in his new quarters. The light was not nearly so good." The work space is strangely detached from nature: "There was only a north light in the new shop, and this seemed strange to a man who had been browned like a piece of the leather he worked upon because, small as the old shoe shop was, there were five windows in it, facing east and west and north, besides the upper half of the door, which was glazed, and faced to the southward." He is a man now residing in artificial darkness haunted by ghost-like companions: an old sailor "with a wooden leg," and a mysterious "poor little child," whose sole needed patching, becomes Berry's steadfast companion. "She had come every day for a while, to sit beside the bench, to run errands, to love the kind old man and look at him eagerly." Nothing much is known about the phantom-like girl: "into what crevice of the town she disappeared when she went out of the shop door, he never knew." Although his customer stream is steady, the new surroundings are alienating and the rent on the store economically crippling.

The change in the shoemaker's locales is a microcosm of a perceived larger shift in traditional New England overrun by mechanization and a concomitant moral decline that disrupt indigeneity. In order to increase profits, Berry reluctantly accedes to the advice of his uncharitable and braggadocious neighbor and accepts an ill-advised loan from him in order to stock inferior mass-produced shoes in the store. He is in part motivated by Mrs. Berry's desire for material success, who celebrates their "upgrade" with a communal tea, where Berry is badgered into putting on his Sunday best and partaking of extravagant fare: his wife's "best tea-cakes, the kind that takes six eggs" (perhaps laid by the

neighbor's hens residing now in Berry's appropriated work shed). Mrs. Berry gleefully squanders the outmoded old stays of the shoemaker's craft to stoke the fire, but Berry possessively rescues them as "a treasure from the very jaws of the devouring stove," exclaiming, "[t]hat one ain't to be burnt; it's a very particular last with me. I won't have ye take any o' those in the barrel." The stays are at one and the same time a precious historical resource worthy of conservation and a fetishized link to his receding independence as a grounded craftsman with autonomy.

In this story, Jewett makes visible for us the absent presence that gothically inhabits the commodity, according to Marxist critique. This is also a tale of selling one's soul (and it is hard to ignore the pun), despite the sympathy engendered for Berry. This ambiguity is reinforced in the New Testament message left to hover over the narrative paradoxically as a jeremiadic injunction: "Owe no man anything but to love one another." Berry, from the grave, has the last word when the predatory neighbor Sam Wescott finds this cryptic and ghoulish message etched on the wall of the old workshop. Wescott, who betrayed traditional neighborly values of charity to usury in making the unnecessary loan to Berry, will be haunted by Berry's final statement despite his attempts to eradicate its existence. But the ambiguous words are also a testament to Berry's mistake of aspiration that produced "the failure." The didacticism of this morality tale, however, is undercut by a sense of progressive inevitability as the kind and charitable Berry is done in by his wife's unexpected illness and, needlessly (the narrative implies), by his creditors, for he owes the entire group less than a hundred dollars, including the mere sixteen dollars owed to Wescott. By the standards of the biblical edict, Berry enjoys a kind of triumph, as "he had paid all his debts before he died, with interest," even though "the world could think of him only as a man that had failed in business." He, like the ghost-like girl whose type will proliferate in an urbanized and alienated future landscape, is lost, a kind of spectral presence in a modernized world. But for Jewett, the Armageddon of the future is connected to the triumph of principle embodied in those individuals most connected to a traditional New England landscape and who resist individual profit for the sake of human empathy and companionship. If the charitable Berry enjoys some small victory of decency in his demise, so does the ghost girl who in deprivation maintains the capacity for compassion.

Fallen Nature, Fallen Houses

In the liminal spaces between town and country, past and present, Jewett locates several of her ghost stories that present an ongoing

dilemma of assessing the natural or supernatural object with vacillating feelings of love or contempt, such as in "The Landscape Chamber" (1888). As with the travelers in "The Green Bowl," the first-person narrator is an adventuress "tired of ordinary journeys" who finds herself in the remote countryside in a dwelling that seems to toggle in her estimation between haunted neglect and cultivated care, suggestive of the difficulty in determining decline of seemingly abandoned farms. A kind of wild nature encroaches upon the house, except for a "rough patch near the house, which had been dug and planted that year" and some "dark" blooming roses. Refugees of the past, the house inhabitants seem strange and menacing and the house itself a contrast between former opulence and current penury: dinner is served on an old patched-up tablecloth, but there are several "pieces of superb old English silver and delicate chine." The "landscape chamber" itself, the room given the narrator as accommodation, contains a painting of the house as it was in former times: "Servants held capering steeds for gay gentlemen to mount, and ladies walked together in fine attire down the garden alleys of the picture." The narrator notes the difference between the "luxurious life" that once was and the "decayed and withering household." Here, as in other Jewett stories, the sentient objects of a deteriorating household are related to an outdoor landscape that is disorderly or in decline. This liminal space is repeated in the allegorical "The Gray Man" (1886), one of Jewett's most sinister stories, which explores the interstices between life and death and the comingling of natural and supernatural horrors. The title character appears as the personification of Death and a creative/destructive force of Nature, and, in the vein of the goddess Ananke, as an inevitable force of reckoning.

Reclaiming Nature, Uncovering the Past

This essay has examined the emerging darkness of Jewett's stories steeped in a disturbing view of a wounded or haunting natural environment, a concern reflected in Jewett's correspondence with Annie Fields. In an 1884 letter, Jewett comments extensively on the life and death of trees, distraught at the decline of "beloved" specimens, as well as other elements of the natural world (*Letters* 24; 57–58). In her sketches, "The White Rose Road" (1890) and "A Winter Drive" (1881), Jewett laments the fate of nature subject to human intervention—that is, deforestation for home construction. In the latter, she invidiously compares the trees, home to "little wild creatures," with civilization's dubious achievement in turning the living organism into commodified natural resource that becomes "a pile of boards." As an early

environmentalist, she remarks, "It is a very short-sighted person who looks at the wholesale slaughter of the American forests without dismay especially in the Eastern states" ("A Winter Drive") and compares the devastation to a "battle."

Her companion in the piece makes an apt analogy between the war against nature and the Civil War, a concept that finds its way into the plot of "The Gray Man," which seems to be inspired by "A Winter Drive"'s reference to an abandoned farm and its obscure former owner. Jewett expresses fascination with abandoned farms and the mystery of previous tenants: "There is something very strange about such hidden-away lives." This strangeness coupled with the unknown becomes the basis of her ecoGothic, in which she contemplates the unfathomable through meditations on fallen nature, crumbling houses, and lost or indecipherable objects. Jewett's ghost stories seek to reconfigure nature and then to repopulate houses with the memories of the dead, as inscribed in possessions they mean to hand down or hide: "Nature brings out so many treasures for us to look at in summer, and adorns the world with such lavishness, that after the frost comes, it is like an empty house, in which one misses all the pictures and drapery and the familiar voices" ("A Winter Drive"). To Jewett, this liminal state between life and death serves as a reminder of ghostly markings in natural and civilized life, outside and in the home.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of Soja's *Thirdspace* as a form of liminality, see Achilles 36; Achilles and Bergmann 6–7.
2. For other essays examining the disjunction between the natural and communal or cultural realms, especially as played out in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, see Kelly Richardson and Marcia Littenberg.
3. Kent C. Ryden discusses this concept in the context of Robert Frost's poetry.

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