

THE RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES OF SARAH ORNE JEWETT

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ABSTRACT

Sarah Orne Jewett was not outspoken nor dogmatic in her views of theology, the church, or death and immortality. Nevertheless, a study of her published writings does reveal a continuum of religious attitudes. Except for several studies covering the function of religion in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, critics have made only isolated comments on Jewett's religion. This thesis surveys all of Jewett's published writings with the exception of her children's literature and her poetry.

Jewett's theology can be divided into four basic considerations. The first is her concept of fate or God, two terms which she uses interchangeably. Though she may occasionally suggest that fate works for man's ill, she portrays fate most often as beneficent. To further confound matters, she allows man's free will to interpose within the working of fate. Whatever destiny may bring, man must make the best of circumstances and not lose hope. Secondly, Jewett believed in an interdependence among God, man, and nature. Thus, nature is sometimes another name for God. At other times, however, Jewett describes God standing apart and controlling His creation. Her Emersonian depiction of nature is probably one of the last vestiges of transcendentalism in American literature. Since Jewett maintains a romantic view of nature and ignores its savagery, it is not surprising that she is optimistic

about man. Consequently, she has chosen to be ambiguous about evil, the third subject in this discussion of her theology. She does suggest that evil is inherited within a family, but she also implies that if a person has strong character and determination he can avoid it. At any rate, she is reluctant to judge anyone for his sin and would rather excuse it. Jewett frequently assumes that God shares her attitude toward the weaknesses of man. Of the four points in the discussion of her theology, Jewett is most sure of her ethics, which is based on love and self-forgetfulness. She was convinced that her ethical philosophy promoted a useful life, and a useful life is a holy life. She felt that her writing was a sacred duty, a means to be useful to the world. Jewett is not explicit as to how mankind in general should show love and self-forgetfulness; however, it is evident that she had no interest in social reform.

Regarding man and formal religion, her personal published writings are almost silent. However, her fiction and essays do indicate her attitude toward churchmen and the organized church. She is satirical in her portrayal of the clergy and criticizes them primarily on their personalities and their abilities to perform ministerial duties. In neither her judgment of the clergy nor of the church is doctrine a consideration. What does concern her is whether the organized church meets the needs of the congregation. According to Jewett, the church functions to provide comfort for man in his temporal existence and hope for his eternal existence.

Jewett was not morbid about death but saw it as the final step to immortality. She regarded death as natural and inevitable; therefore, funerals are common in her fiction. She argues that one should not fear death but look forward to it, since it takes him to a better life out of the cares and sorrows of this world. Indeed, the living should envy the dead because they have attained a wisdom unknown on earth. Immortality is a heavenlike state where the dead have the possibility of achieving angelhood. Jewett firmly believed that the dead watch and influence men on earth and can return to earth to communicate with them.

Admittedly, Jewett is often vague and ambiguous about her religion, but one can still ascertain a continuum of religious attitudes in her published writings.

VITA

Sarah Orne Jewett was born September 3, 1849, in South Berwick, Maine. Her family was one of sea captains, traders, and physicians. Though women are usually the major figures in her fiction, she was strongly influenced by older men, including her two grandfathers, Theodore Furber Jewett, a sea captain whose stories of seafaring life stirred her imagination; and William Perry, a religious and self-disciplined physician. However, no man had a more profound influence upon her childhood than her father, Theodore Herman Jewett, an uncommonly literate country doctor.

Because illness prevented formal schooling during most of her childhood, she spent many days making the rounds with her father, learning to observe both man and nature. In 1865 she graduated from Berwick Academy, and three years later, at the age of nineteen, she published her first story under the pseudonym A.C. Eliot. A year later another story was accepted by the Atlantic Monthly, thus beginning a long succession of appearances in that periodical. With the encouragement of the editor, William Dean Howells, Jewett gathered some of her early sketches into her first book, Deephaven (1877). In 1884 A Country Doctor, a semi-autobiographical novel concerning her father and her own aspirations to practice medicine, was published. Numerous volumes of sketches, short stories (including children's stories), and several other novels

appeared thereafter. The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896), a collection of connected stories, established her securely as a significant writer and is usually considered her finest major work.

Perhaps if it had not been for the friendship of Annie Fields, Jewett would have spent most of her life in South Berwick, but Mrs. Fields, the wife of Boston publisher James T. Fields, widened her geographical, social, and literary horizons. At the Fields's Charles Street residence, a meeting place for prominent American literary figures, Jewett came to know Whittier, Longfellow, Holmes, Harriet Prescott Spofford, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. The two women traveled to Europe on four occasions where they called upon Mark Twain, Tennyson, Kipling, and Henry James.

On her fifty-third birthday, in 1902, Jewett's literary career was virtually terminated when she was thrown from a carriage and severely injured her spine. In March 1909 she suffered a stroke, and she died June 24, 1909, in South Berwick in the house where she had been born.

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LIST OF TITLES USED

References to Sarah Orne Jewett's works in the text will be noted parenthetically with the following abbreviations.

<u>Country By-Ways</u>	<u>CB</u>
<u>A Country Doctor</u>	<u>CD</u>
<u>The Country of the Pointed Firs</u>	<u>CF</u>
<u>Deephaven</u>	<u>DH</u>
"The Foreigner"	<u>TF</u>
<u>The King of Folly Island and Other People</u>	<u>KFI</u>
<u>The Life of Nancy</u>	<u>LN</u>
<u>A Marsh Island</u>	<u>MI</u>
<u>The Mate of the Daylight and Friends Ashore</u>	<u>MD</u>
<u>A Native of Winby and Other Tales</u>	<u>NW</u>
<u>Old Friends and New</u>	<u>OF</u>
<u>The Queen's Twin and Other Stories</u>	<u>QT</u>
<u>Strangers and Wayfarers</u>	<u>SW</u>
<u>Tales of New England</u>	<u>TE</u>
<u>A White Heron and Other Stories</u>	<u>WH</u>