

The Blurring of Boundaries: Geography, Gender, and Narration in the Works of Sarah Orne Jewett

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Abstract: Sarah Orne Jewett is one of the founders of American regionalist literature and a representative writer of “New Woman” literature. Her works are mostly set in rural towns in Maine, depicting scenes from the past with meticulous observation, elegant language, and a sense of nostalgia. However, although the story is set in some certain small place, it transcends the limitations of geography, especially in *Deephaven* and *The Country of Pointed Firs*, where many boundaries are blurred, breaking through the constraints of traditional concepts and implying an emphasis on national development, gender reshaping, and the superiority of race and class.

Keywords: Sarah Orne Jewett; Boundary; Geography; Gender; Narration

Fund Project:

This paper is the research result of the 2022 university-level scientific research project of Xi'an Peihua University (approval No.: PHKT2233) “Project Name: blurred boundary: Region, gender and narrative research in the works of American female writer Jewett”.

As an important part of regionalism and women's literature, Jewett's works vividly depict the decline of port town life in Maine, expressing praise for the kind nature of women and challenging patriarchal rule through the harmonious coexistence of women and nature. Her writing is realistic and gentle, and some critics believe that she created the best fictional narration during the flourishing period of writing in New England. Many literary figures at that time once classified Jewett's works as “minor literature”. However, more and more scholars found that the local color and nostalgic themes in her works contained a profound understanding of life and the construction of America. In *Deephaven* and *Country of Pointed Firs*, the author breaks the boundaries of geography, gender, and narration, blurs them out, and expresses the emphasis on national development, gender reshaping, as well as racial and class superiority.

1. The blurring of geographical boundaries

Jewett's works are labeled as regionalist literature, but upon closer reading, one will find that the boundaries of geography are not strictly defined in her works. These relatively isolated places always maintain contact and interaction with the outside world in various ways. *Deephaven* was a prosperous place once known for its fishing industry, which had declined later on. The author seems to have intentionally portrayed it as a depressed and isolated place, but readers can still find some traces of cross-region trade, such as Captain Carew loading his old brig for the West Indies, and the farmers “selling salt-fish and lumber and potatoes” to *Deephaven*.^[1] The visit of Kate and Helen and the arrival of young tourists from Boston also suggests that tourism has become a new way of communication with the outside. Though the story sets in a seeming restricted region, the exchange of people and capital makes it full of vitality.

There is also cultural interaction between the local and the outside. In *Pointed Firs*, the author creates a world dominated by women, where people are willing to help each other and the pace of life is slow, in contrast to the outside patriarchal society driven by selfishness and profit. Cultural interaction seems obscure but actually being completely opposite itself suggests an interaction. The paradise-like world in the novel avoids all typical characteristics of the outside, which precisely indicates its profound understanding of the outside.

Blurring the geographical boundaries also implies the expansion of capital and territory. There are many characters obsessed with

navigation(a way of expansion),and the place where they live—frontier—itself is an important component of a country’s territory and even the national security line.It often symbolizes a greater possibility:crossing borders means expanding territory,while retreating from borders means territory being threatened.It can be seen that the creation of the writer is inevitably influenced by the social development at that time,proving the direction and efforts of America in that critical period of imperialist rising.

2. The blurring of gender boundaries

While American male writers were busy describing Europe,politics,and business,female writers in the second half of the 19th century focused more on personal and regional issues,and their profound discussions on gender issues were particularly noteworthy. They are passionate about reflecting on the obstacles and challenges faced by women in the late 19th century,yearning and calling for the establishment of equal gender relations,and also committed to creating a literary world where women can behave more freely. Jewett is one of the writers fascinated by the reproduction of gender relationships.One important technique she uses to reshape gender relationships is to blur gender boundaries.In her view,the widely accepted gender boundary is actually the root of the restriction on women.Margaret Roman once stated that“gender dichotomies were concretized into man as superior and woman as inferior.”^[2]To break down stereotypes about women and liberate the constraints on women,it is necessary to eliminate fixed understandings of men and women.In her works,Jewett attempts to break up things such as physical conditions and social responsibility of both men and women,fundamentally correcting prejudice against women.This is mainly reflected in her portrayal of the feminized men and masculinized women.

In *Deephaven* and *Pointed Firs*, male characters are always old,lonely,and melancholic.In the prosperous fishing era,they were captains,fishermen,and glorious heroes.However,with the decline of the fishing industry,young men went to the outside world,leaving only a group of male elderly people with physical disabilities.They significantly weakened the masculinity of the entire community. For a long time,a strong body has been synonymous with a male image,while softness and fragility have been used to describe women. In gender relations,physical characteristics are no longer just a biological concept,but have become a symbol of male superiority over women.This view has gradually become an integral part of social and cultural relations,hindering women’s possession of equal rights. In Jewett’s works,men lose their robust physique,becoming fragile and incomplete,which greatly weakens their masculinity and to some extent makes them feminized.As the author refutes the superiority of male bodies,the physiological differences between men and women are reduced and the boundaries between genders blurred.

At the same time,Jewett has been committed to creating an ideal world where women can play new roles:women with masculine qualities.Mrs.Todd in *Pointed Firs* is a typical example.She is tall,strong,and capable.Though already 67 years old,she can still sail confidently and bravely.Mrs. Todd’s masculinity is also reflected in her social responsibility,which can be seen from her obsession with herbs.The author states that Mrs.Todd cures not only diseases but also“love and hate and jealousy.”^[3]Here,women’s work is no longer limited to household labor such as farming and weaving.They care about things outside of the family,take on social responsibilities,and play an important role in community history and cultural construction,replacing men as the spiritual center of the community.

The root cause of women’s unfair treatment is gender dichotomy.Feminized men and masculinized women jointly deconstructed the traditional gender law.Jewett,as Roman said,is rewriting the gender binary system.^[2]

3. The blurring of narrative boundaries

Jewett’s narrative skills have been widely praised,but the identity of the narrator in her works is not always fully recognized.The community she created may seem“inclusive and restrictive”but full of“racial attitudes,nativism,and exclusionary impulses.”^[4]The narrator’s identity hovers between the boundaries of race and class.On the one hand,she allows people of other races to appear in her ideal world and interact peacefully with the main characters.On the other hand,she places these people in an unimportant position and makes the protagonist inherit so-called“good bloodline”of Anglo Norman,occasionally revealing some prejudices and exclusionary views against the Other.As for the narrator’s class identity,it also shifts between the urban middle-class elite and the rural lower class.

Gleason mentions that some of Jewett’s children books celebrates“Nordic qualities of adventure,intelligence,vitality,conquest,and ambition”.^[5]Similarly,Zagarell notes that Jewett herself was partly of French blood,so she“cherished”the Normans of France,and in her eyes,“the best of America was Anglo-Norman.”^[4]Coincidentally,Mrs.Blackett in *Pointed Firs* has French ancestry and was an adventurer in Europe in the early days.Jewett brings this racial pride to the core character,successfully instilling the concept of racial hierarchy in readers.As the climax of the story,the reunion of the Bowden family is compared to the sacred Greek celebration,and the narrator here also seems to find their racial origin in some outstanding Europeans.

In addition,Jewett’s understanding and handling of class relations have also received many criticisms.Her works are often considered to have been written for upper-class magazines,catering to the taste and interests of the urban middle class,and providing

a stage for expressing class pride. In both novels, the narrators are middle-class tourists from big cities, documenting their leisure time in the countryside. Although they have established close and friendly relationships with the locals, they always maintain a sense of superiority and distance from them. For example, in *Pointed Firs*, the narrator moves to a school when she first arrives in the town of Dunnett, and the author describes her as a “great authority” sitting at a teaching desk.^[3] After experiencing the peaceful rural life, both narrators return to the big cities, which further proves their unchanged class identity.

The narrators of both novels have a dual identity of race and class. They are both seekers of harmonious relationships and self-proclaimed superior race, both insiders who integrate into local life and outsiders from the urban middle class. These conflicting identities blur the boundaries of the narration, reflecting the author’s hidden sense of pride as well as mainstream values in the American society.

4. Conclusion

Jewett’s works are delicate and exquisite, often bringing peace and comfort to readers. Although mainly depicting life in Maine, her story transcends regional limitations, blurring the boundaries of geography, gender, and narration, giving it a broader meaning. The author suggests the path of America’s outward development through the interaction between the small world and the outside, creates many feminized men and masculinized women to break the traditional gender dichotomy. In addition, the conflicting racial and class identity of the narrator becomes a reflection of American culture value. Jewett makes great efforts in regionalism and women’s literature with her delicate techniques and profound thoughts, while also contributing literary and cultural strength to the construction of the country to a certain extent.

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