Christian Symbolism in
Sarah Orne Jewett’s “A White Heron”

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“A White Heron” by Sarah Orne Jewett follows the journey of Sylvia, a nine-year-old girl who, for the price of ten dollars, must make a decision between betraying the whereabouts of a white heron’s nest to an ornithologist who wants to kill and stuff the bird or keeping silent, allowing the heron to remain a free creature of the forest she loves. Since the story’s publication in 1889, critics have debated the symbolism of the story’s major characters and objects. Many of these critics have settled on the argument that “A White Heron” is a sort of “fairy tale” that Jewett uses to “explore sexual conflict” (Hovet 67). Although many critics claim the ornithologist, the pine tree, and the white heron are symbolic of Sylvia’s burgeoning sexuality, they are, in fact, significant symbols of Christianity.

Many critics liken the ornithologist to a sexual predator who intrudes upon Sylvia’s privacy by “offering knowledge, money, sexuality, a vision of the world” (Zanger 1). Thus, the young man’s relationship with Sylvia is treated as a struggle between a young girl retaining her innocence and the man who would dominate her. Indeed, one critic, Elizabeth Ammons, states that ornithology itself is “a metaphor for male heterosexual predation . . . the combination of violence, voyeurism, and commercialism, contained in gun-wielding science, the goal of which is to create living death . . . (10). Another critic furthers this claim by asserting that the young man was once sexually frustrated but since “has learned to overcome frustrated desire for the feminine by sublimination by making a collection of birds . . . ever since [he] was a boy” (Church 28). Thus, with an offer of ten dollars, this supposed sexual predator convinces Sylvia to hunt for the white heron with him.

The ornithologist as a symbol of sexual violence continues with the hunt. Immediately before the ornithologist’s appearance in the story, Sylvia is walking through the woods, bringing her cow back from her pasture. As she walks, she is remembering her life in the “noisy town” from which her grandmother rescued her. The most vivid of her memories is “of the great red-faced boy who used to chase and frighten her” (Jewett 229).
The hunter makes his appearance as this memory makes Sylvia “hurry along the path to escape from the shadow of the trees” (Jewett 229). It is this memory that critics maintain is evidence of Sylvia’s fear of rape. The ornithologist’s hunting of birds increases this fear. The hunt “echoes Sylvia’s memories of being chased by the frightening red-faced boy, which in turn is an obvious symbol of rape” (Brenzo 37). According to the critics who allege that “A White Heron” is a story of sexuality, the hunt for the birds equals a hunt for Sylvia’s sexual being.

Another argument that insists the ornithologist is a symbol of sexuality maintains that he uses his charm to convince Sylvia to help him dominate a free creature. (Ammons 13). It is this choice that begins to bother Sylvia because she “could not understand why he killed the very birds he seemed to like so much” (Jewett 233). One could argue that Sylvia’s gentle nature brings about this observation. However, according to the critics who claim the ornithologist is a predator, she is bothered by apparent sexual aggression. Richard Brenzo describes Sylvia’s discomfort in this way: “the picture of the birds ‘dropping silent to the ground, their songs hushed and their pretty feathers stained and wet with blood’ presents a frightening symbol of the possible fate of the girl who succumbs to the sexual aggression of the male” (67). Ammons asserts that Sylvia is aware of this fate. She writes, “Sylvia is expected to offer her freedom, her true nature, indeed life itself to a predator, who will pierce, stuff, and then own and admire the beautiful corpse” (10). She concludes that Sylvia’s refusal of the man’s money is, “saying no to the erotic stirrings she feels for the handsome young man,” and she is resisting “the institution of heterosexuality itself” (Ammons 9).

Clearly, Sylvia sees the ornithologist as an “enemy.” He is not an enemy because of any sexual threat he poses to Sylvia, however. Sylvia is a nine-year-old child, who, despite her “woman’s heart, asleep in the child . . . vaguely thrilled by a dream of love” (Jewett 233), is still only that: a nine-year-old child. Her “dream of love” is not about sex. Michael Atkinson summarizes this idea best in his article “The Necessary Extravagance of Sarah Orne Jewett: Voices of Authority in ‘A White Heron.’” He writes, “Whatever sexual implications might be suggested by a young hunter with a ready gun . . . causing Sylvia pangs of guilt are only latent and remain so throughout the story” (72). If Sylvia is dreaming of love, it is certainly not sexual love but perhaps the romantic dreams of a very young girl.
In truth, the ornithologist as “enemy” in “A White Heron” is more accurately viewed as symbolic of Satan. In fact, the term “the enemy” is a traditional term for Satan (Held 61). From his first appearance in the story, he is charming, sly, and observant of Sylvia’s weakness. He manages to intrude on Sylvia’s “Garden of Eden” using “a very cheerful and persuasive tone” (Jewett 229). Once in her grandmother’s home, he finds out that the animals of her Eden “counts her one o’ themselves. Squer’Is she’ll tame to come an’ feed right out o’ her hands, and all sorts o’ birds” (Jewett 231). The young man ignores the grandmother’s further family details that “hint of family sorrows” because of his “eager interest in something else” (Jewett 232). “So Sylvy knows all about birds, does she?” (Jewett 232). It is interesting to note that as the ornithologist is assessing Sylvia and formulating a plan to tempt her into finding the heron for him, Sylvia is watching a hop toad in the path (Jewett 232). Toads have long been representatives of the devil (Charbonneau-Lassay 171). Ironically, herons actually eat frogs and “other symbols of evil” (Tucker, “Heron”). The young man, this symbol of Satan, then offers Sylvia, now a symbol of Eve, an “apple” in the form of ten dollars. “I would give ten dollars to anybody who could show it to me” (Jewett 233). One critic, George Held, writes that the offer of ten dollars “amounts to . . . the seduction of good by evil” (60). This offer also demonstrates the young man’s ability to read Sylvia’s weakness. For her, the ten dollars symbolizes “many wished for treasures” (Jewett 233). Indeed this temptation drives Sylvia to sneak out of her house to search out the heron from a perch in the tallest pine tree in the area. However, at the end of the story, she resists the temptation even though, “He can make them rich with money; he has promised it, and they are poor now” (Jewett 239).

The second image in the story, which critics maintain is sexually symbolic, is the pine tree Sylvia climbs in order to see the heron’s nest. Predictably, these critics view the pine tree as a phallic symbol. One critic, Richard Brenzo, bases his analysis on the passage, “The tree seemed to lengthen itself out as she went up, and to reach farther and farther upward” (Jewett 236). He writes, “There is a sexual relationship indicated here between the hard, lengthening stem and the girl who grips and encircles it” (39). In addition, he refers back to the idea that Sylvia is somehow trying to overcome a fear of sexual relations. Citing the passage where Jewett indicates that at first the climb up the pine tree is difficult but then begins to support her climb (236), Brenzo argues that the tree “becomes a friend who aids her, so her subconscious fears of sex are
lessened . . .” (39). Elizabeth Ammons also insists that the pine tree is a phallic symbol. She takes her argument further, though. In addition to pointing out the passage, “The tree seemed to lengthen itself out . . .” (Jewett 236), she also writes that the “sharp dry twigs . . . scratched her like angry talons” (236), is indicative of the pain of losing one’s virginity (12-13). Ammons concludes her argument by writing that Sylvia’s ascent and the world she observes from the treetop is “a glorious glimpse of heterosexual harmony” and that the “passage into heterosexual looks marvelous” (13). Thus, Ammons and Brenzo would have readers believe that the pine tree is symbolic of Jewett’s own feelings about heterosexuality and sexual relations.

The claim that the pine tree is a phallic symbol is too obvious, too facile. One critic sees the pine tree as “the pivotal vehicle of her decision to save the heron” and compares it to the Tree of Knowledge (Renza 82). According to Richard Brenzo, critic Paul John Eakin “sees Sylvia’s scaling of the pine tree as a symbol of knowledge and experience” (39). This reading of the pine tree’s symbolism is also rather obvious. Christian legend tells the story of St. Boniface, a monk credited with bringing Christianity to the Germanic tribes. According to the legend summarized by Daniel Foley, Boniface came upon a group of Germans under a giant oak tree preparing to sacrifice their chieftain’s son to the gods. The oak tree was sacred to the god Thor. Boniface, attempting to convert the tribe, cut the oak tree down with one stroke of an axe (46). The oak then split into four pieces revealing a pine growing up its center (Tucker, “Tree”). Boniface then said to the group, “This little tree, a young child of the forest . . . is a sign of endless life, for its branches are evergreen. See how it points toward heaven” (Foley 46). Interestingly, Sylvia must use an oak tree that is growing alongside the pine to assist her climb (Jewett 235). Since the oak is also a symbol of strength (West 55), as well as a former pagan symbol, Sylvia must, in essence, step over it to find that which she seeks. St. Boniface pointed out to the German tribe that the pine tree points toward heaven. According to Suzetta Tucker, Christians have emphasized this vertical symbolism of the tree because it is “. . . a reminder to seek out heavenly rather than earthly treasures” (Tucker, “Tree”). This is exactly what Sylvia does; she turns down the ornithologist’s offer of “earthly treasures,” in favor of “this mysterious new world, and she cannot betray it for a mere ten dollars” (Griffith 27).

Finally, critics tout the white heron itself as a symbol of sexuality. Elizabeth Ammons and Joseph Church provide two arguments that, ulti-
mately, lead to the same conclusion; the white heron is symbolic of Sylvia's sexuality. Ammons' argument is that the heron is symbolic of Sylvia's body that she must offer up as “prey” to the ornithologist in exchange for “money, social approval, and affection” (10). Joseph Church offers a more sexually charged symbolism of the white heron. He believes that the heron “actually stands for a part of the girl's own body, her clitoris” (31). Church bases his assertion on Paula Bennett's theory that 19th century female writers developed “clitoral imagery as a means of gaining 'independent female sexual and textual power’” (32). Because Bennett suggests whiteness and birds are clitoral images, Church deduces that the “little white heron” is sexually symbolic. He further claims that Sylvia discovered it (the clitoris in the form of the heron) in an “open place” (32). In the story, the narrator tells us that Sylvia saw the heron in a spot “where the sunshine always seemed strangely yellow and hot. . . ” and where it is possible to “sink in the soft black mud underneath and never be heard of more” (Jewett 232). Church asserts this place is, “the vagina, the bird, the clitoris” and that Sylvia “has gained some knowledge of the latter” (32). Church also writes that Sylvia's initial reaction is to subordinate herself to the young man (32). “[t]hey pressed forward eagerly, parting the branches, – speaking to each other rarely and in whispers; the young man going first and Sylvia following, fascinated, a few steps behind. . . ” (Jewett 233-34). Church then writes that Sylvia discovers “that if she attains a higher standpoint, she can guiltlessly enjoy the body's pleasure” and to do this, she “mounts the phallic pine and finds that the (clitoral) bird 'grows larger, and rises’” (32). Church concludes his analysis by writing that Sylvia chooses not to reveal her “secret,” i.e., the heron's whereabouts to the young man (33).

Of the three symbols, the idea of the heron as a sexual symbol seems the most far-fetched. The heron is a bird strongly associated with early Christian beliefs. Wading birds are symbolic of Christ and of Christian values. Herons, specifically, are “images of the eternal struggle of good and evil and of Christ's battle against the devil” (Tucker, “Heron”). It is these Christian values that Sylvia emulates not only in her search for the heron but also in her decision to keep the location of his nest secret. Herons prefer “solitary places” which make them symbols of silence (Charbonneau-Lassay 270). This silence is “precious because it leads the human being from reflection to wisdom” (Charbonneau-Lassay 270). Sylvia's ascent of the pine tree in search of the heron's nest is a “solitary place.” Once she is in this solitary place, she must maintain silence to gain
wisdom, the location of the bird’s nest. “And wait! wait! do not move a foot or a finger, little girl, do not send an arrow of light and consciousness from your two eager eyes, for the heron has perched on a pine bough not far beyond yours…” (Jewett 238). Therefore, because Sylvia chooses to keep the heron’s nest a secret, she is practicing the Christian value of wisdom gained through silent reflection.

Another characteristic of herons that applies to Sylvia is their patience. “Herons wait patiently for food to come within reach of their sharp beaks. They are content and do not chase their prey” (Tucker, “Heron”). Similarly, Sylvia shows patience as she waits throughout the morning for a glimpse of the heron’s nest. When Sylvia returns to her grandmother’s house with the location of the nest, she once again emulates the symbolic heron. Herons are “symbols of the righteous who avoided the storms of this world by placing their hopes and treasures in heaven” (Tucker, “Heron”). Sylvia’s refusal of the ten dollars is tantamount to winning the battle against evil by placing her “hopes in heaven.”

Much of the criticism of Sarah Orne Jewett’s “A White Heron” focuses on the sexual overtones of the major symbols in the story. However, the ornithologist, with his offer of ten dollars, the pine tree Sylvia climbs, and the white heron she chooses to save are symbolic neither of Sylvia’s sexuality nor her fear of it. Instead, it is a story filled with symbols that are common to Christian beliefs. Nine-year-old Sylvia recognizes the temptation of “the enemy,” and in climbing the pine tree, ascends toward heaven to seek beyond “earthly treasures,” and ultimately, like the heron, wins the struggle of good versus evil.

Works Cited


