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“Sarah Orne Jewett’s The Country of the Pointed Firs.”

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Twain's LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI

In *Life on the Mississippi*, river water takes its lumps like a myriad of other subjects in the book. In chapter 22, one of Twain's traveling companions laments about the mulatto complexion of St. Louis's water. Twain whimsically comments that if you let the dirt settle to the bottom "you will find them both good. The land is very nourishing, the water is thoroughly wholesome. The one appeases hunger; the other, thirst" (113). His most memorable comment about Mississippi water, however, is in the raftsmen's passage in chapter 3, in which The Child of Calamity shares a tall-tale about the supposed value of the water:

[H]e said there was nutritiousness in the mud, and a man that drunk Mississippi water could grow corn in his stomach if he wanted to. He says: "You look at the graveyards; that tells the tale. Trees won't grow worth shucks in a Cincinnati graveyard, but in a Scent Louis graveyard they will grow upwards of eight hundred feet high. It's all on account of the water the people drunk before they laid up. A Cincinnati corpse don't richen a soil any." (15)

Twain is doubtlessly satirizing the many claims of earlier writers about the supposed medicinal value of Mississippi River water. Typical of the claims is the one found in Zadok Crammer's *The Navigator*; an early nineteenth-century work containing instructions for navigating the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. Crammer argues:

The waters of the Mississippi are said to contain medicinal qualities, having performed cures for most cutaneous diseases, operating on some as a

powerful cathartick, and as a purifier of the blood. It is upon the whole, after filtration, and being kept cool in large jars sunk in the ground or shaded, the most agreeable water I ever drank, and I am led to believe the whole-somest. I have frequently drove off a slight stomach fever after eating, occasioning a headache and a quickened pulse, by drinking two, three, or four tumblers of this delightful water. And I have known those distressed with a sudden attack of violent intermittent fever, whose pulse was very quick, and skin dry and hot, to get relief in a few minutes after drinking freely of this water; two or three tumblers full throwing the person into a fine and free perspiration. (150)

As one who has been subjected to this concoction for a significant part of his life, Twain has an obvious point he wants to make. If there is any value in this water, it is strictly for the trees (they tell the tale) in the cemeteries that benefit from the pockets of fresh topsoil the new corpses (hurried along to their final resting place by this terrible water) provide.

—MAX LOGES, *Lamar University*

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Jewett's THE COUNTRY OF THE POINTED FIRS

In Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, three chapters of anticipation and preparation pass before the scattered Bowden clan actually gathers for its annual reunion. In this private drama of a family gathering, the ritualized process of preparation comes to fruition as a public "altar to patriotism, to friendship, to the ties of kindred" (Jewett 86). As a narrative of community usually does,¹ the reunion and its preliminary preparations re-establish long-standing bonds of kinship, explore the relationship of the individual and the community, navigate the zones between the public and the private, give voice to the outsiders, and use domestic and private rituals to bolster the sense of community.

Enactments and dramas such as these have "transfiguring powers, and easily [make] friends of those who have been cold-hearted, and gives to those who are dumb their chance to speak" (86). Both the procession to and the activities at the reunion are fundamentally important within a narrative of community. These acts speak of the community's characteristic dynamic—

visits, conversations, storytelling, rituals—and reaffirm ongoing collective life in a more formal way. Finally, the fundamental dynamic of each narrative also gives shape to physical movement through the community (strolls, excursions) or narrative movement that radiates out from and back to the community's center (Zagarell 272).

To clarify the communal breadth of Bowden kinship, Mrs. Todd asserts that their ties are widespread: "[W]hen you call upon the Bowdens you may expect most families to rise up between the Landing and the far end of the Back Cove. Those that aren't kin by blood are kin by marriage" (87). When one looks at Mrs. Blackett or Mrs. Todd, one must acknowledge the singularity of the woman, but bear in mind that she is part and parcel of a bigger picture. Each woman must be seen in relation to her function within the social order and community: Mrs. Blackett is always associated with her widespread social and spiritual ties, her "community-creating effect"; Mrs. Todd is always connected to nature and the community that she keeps whole and hale—that is, her "activity that maintains the common life spiritually and physically" of Dunnet (Zagarell 270).

After the drama and the rituals of the marching and storytelling, the communal feast is shared. This scene is the most socially inclusive act in the entire narrative, albeit presented in terms of apple pie and tarts. The unnamed narrator becomes adopted into the ever-expanding scope of the Bowden clan. Despite the seemingly trivial discussion regarding the superiority of American pies over formal English tarts, a deeper metonymic meaning persists. We are reminded that this "feast was a noble feast," and, therefore, even the desserts are not to be assumed as banal (Jewett 96). The apple pies preserve and offer "communitarian values" and function as, what Zagarell calls, "bearer[s] of a culture of community" (264).

These pies, far from being simply sweet desserts, are the domestic productions of the Bowden women's hands and hearths. The women put their spirits into the creation and presentation of these pies and assert their importance by the multitude of inscriptions and decorative writings on their crusts. The narrator offers, "the decorations went beyond all my former experience; dates and names were wrought in lines of pastry and frosting on the tops. There was even more elaborate reading matter on an excellent early-apple pie which we began to share and eat, precept upon precept" (96).

In the same way that ancient Jews inscribed their family trees on walking sticks and Christians recorded their family trees in the pages of their Bibles, these pies are history made present. Jewett describes the registers on these crusts as "precepts" or laws, representing these deceptively simple pies in terms of law and rite. Perhaps even more significant, these edible histories are to be ingested in a literal communion service—one that breaks bread for multitudes, nourishes crowds, and unifies Jewett's "strayaways" into the

community. When the narrator is served, Mrs. Todd sees to it that she receives an appropriate slice: "Mrs. Todd helped me generously to the whole word Bowden and consumed Reunion herself, save an undecipherable fragment" (96). With the ingestion of the Bowden name, the narrator partakes in a communion with Mrs. Todd and her entire family. She receives the name of the family, accepts it willingly, and allows it to nourish her in physical, emotional, and spiritual ways. Afterward, the narrator offers, in a voice and syntax that come as near to Mrs. Todd's speech pattern as in any segment of the text: "I came near to feeling like a true Bowden, and parted from certain new friends as if they were old friends; we were rich with the treasure of a new remembrance" (98). Not only has the narrator been accepted into the clan, she has become one of them in word and spirit, and assumes their name.

With her own ingestion of the word, "Reunion," Mrs. Todd reaffirms her connection to the family and the community at large. By eating that slice of pie, inscribed with precepts, she accepts reunion, renews community, and reaffirms her status as healer. Mrs. Todd ends the evening's festivities and the whole of the journey home with forays into the shrubbery to secure "some boughs of a rare shrub which she valued for its bark" (99). After the nourishment of the family reunion, Mrs. Todd is ever-aware of her calling and is now edified to serve it with renewed vigor.

—LAURA NICOSIA, *Clifton, New Jersey*

NOTE

1. Sandra Zagarell first uses the term "narrative of community" to identify a subgenre of literature that had yet to be recognized as unique.

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Conrad's HEART OF DARKNESS and Dante's INFERNO

I descended the hill, obliquely, towards the trees. [...] I avoided a vast artificial hole [...] the purpose of which I found it impossible to divine. [...] I discovered that a lot of imported drainage-pipes for the settlement had been tumbled there. There wasn't one that was not broken. [...] At last I