

Sarah Orne Jewett's Tolstoyan Stories

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In a letter of December 1888, the American writer Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1909) announced that a story of Tolstoy's was so exciting that she could not sleep until almost morning, for she "never felt the soul of Tolstoy's work until last night, something of it in *Katia*, but now I know what he means."¹ Startled because she was "simply feeling the same kind of motive" while writing "The Gray Man," she claimed that a half dozen of her stories, including "Lady Ferry" and "Beyond the Tailgate," gave her the feeling that she was doing "something of what Tolstoy has been doing all along" (38). Not only were the stories she indicated decidedly non-Tolstoyan, they were published between 1878 and 1886, years before she experienced Tolstoy's art in 1888. Her comments are nevertheless valuable in establishing the chronology of her reading and its impact on her subsequent work.

Katia,² published in New York as an English re-translation of a French version of *Family Happiness*, is the only work by Tolstoy which Jewett specifically named. Although her letter disqualifies this novel as the work which had the profound effect upon her, it is easy to see why she would think of it in connection with "Lady Ferry." Both stories are retrospective accounts of childhood memories. Tolstoy's experiment with a first-person, female narrator relied heavily on subjective details such as elaborate descriptions of his heroine's moods and feelings. His emphasis on reactions instead of actions and the passive, assimilative nature of his narrator work best in conveying her sexuality, differentiated from that of the male by its lack of an object. Nevertheless, it is uncertain whether Jewett was thinking of the youthful, subjective, all-encompassing world of Tolstoy's *Katia* or the authoritative tone and didactic purpose of his later, purposely simple works, when she saw a connection with her own stories.

Jewett's narrator in "Lady Ferry"³ lacks a unique voice; she is an older woman who recounts an experience of her youth in standard English. Her descriptions are somewhat tedious, a fault which is especially evident in accounts of her own dreaminess. It is likely that Jewett was striving to convey the subjective nature of the narrator's experience, effects which Tolstoy rendered more convincingly in *Katia*.. Much of the Jewett story's effectiveness stems from its frustration of the reader's expectation of a reaffirmation of New-England virtues, as though a kind-hearted grandmother answered a request for an anecdote with a chilling ghost story.

¹ *Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett*, ed. Annie Fields (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911) 38-39.

² Sarah Orne Jewett, *Katia*, tr. unknown (New York: William S. Gottsberger, 1888).

³ Sarah Orne Jewett, "Lady Ferry" first appeared in Jewett's *Old Friends and New* (Boston: Houghton, Osgood, 1879).

While the title character of "Lady Ferry" perpetually waits for death, a personified death is shunned in "The Gray Man."⁴ In a story more reminiscent of Hawthorne's work than Tolstoy's, the Gray Man's unsmiling visage alienated his peers like "The Minister's Black Veil." Perhaps Jewett was thinking of a story like *What Men Live By*⁵ when she thought of the connection with Tolstoy. Both stories describe the irrational in realistic terms, although Tolstoy removed all the ambiguity at the end of his story when the angel who came to learn from mortals announced his true identity. The unspecified "motive" which Jewett said "The Gray Man" shared with Tolstoy's stories is probably the desire to develop an awareness (and, ultimately, an acceptance) of death, as in such Tolstoy stories as *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886). If the acceptance of death is the motive behind these two Jewett stories for adults, an acceptance of life is the major theme of "Beyond the Tollgate."⁶ In an attempt to reach a young audience, Jewett chose the limited diction and greater emphasis upon plot instead of character development which marked Tolstoy's attempts to reach a peasant audience in such morality tales as *What Men Live By* (1882). The two writers probably shared many of the same motives in such work, including the moral cultivation of their targeted readers. Both felt this task so important as to warrant didactic authorial intrusions, but the moral authority of the Jewett story resides in mercantilistic notions of payment for goods received. It is no accident that Barbara Snow's father "felt like somebody when he earned a home of his own" (204). Private property is respected to the extent that a search is made for the owner of the three cents which Barbara found and used to finance her journey. The moral of the story as explicated in the final paragraph is that it costs something to pass such barriers in life, but it is worth it. By contrast, Tolstoy's didactic efforts reinforced a disregard for worldly goods in favor of an other-worldly Christianity.

In both of her stories intended for adult readers which Jewett singled out as Tolstoyan, death is treated as a benign and, at least in "Lady Ferry," even welcome part of life. Both writers depend upon minute sensory details to give the reader a lifelike experience of the events depicted in their stories. This aggregation of details amounts to a celebration of life, which Tolstoy finally saw as incompatible with the awareness of his own mortality which plagued much of his adult life and led to his renunciation of art. "The Gray Man" and "Lady Ferry" provide evidence that Jewett was able to accept death as a moment of life, and hence was not troubled by a discrepancy between her art and her beliefs.

The enthusiasm for Tolstoy's work which Jewett revealed in her letter of December, 1888, sharply contrasts with an opinion she expressed just two months earlier. On October 24, 1888, she wondered at the attractiveness of realistic sketches from foreign lands, in contrast to the American writers such as May Wilkins, whose stories "are so much better than all but the very best

⁴Sarah Orne Jewett, "The Gray Man" first appeared in *A White Heron and Other Stories* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1886).

⁵L. N. Tolstoy, *What Men Live By*, tr. Nathan Haskell Dole (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1888).

⁶Sarah Orne Jewett, "Beyond the Tollgate," in *Play Days: A Book of Stories for Children* (Boston: Houghton, Osgood, 1878).

Russian and French stories."⁷ Such a profound change in the attitudes of a working artist must be reflected in her work. Shortly after the exuberant celebration of his work in her letter, Jewett wrote three stories which are Tolstoyan in their manner and matter, although they lack any direct reference to the Russian master.

The first of these, "The Town Poor,"⁸ demonstrates the unique way in which Tolstoy inspired other writers to portray his persona in their work in various guises. Widely lauded for his spiritual beliefs, which were thought to include a renunciation of his art and property, Tolstoy's personality spawned a generation of Tolstoyan sages as characters in American literature. Mrs. Trimble, the wealthy woman who comes to the aid of the town poor, criticized the man whose Tolstoyan antipathy towards the accumulation of private property seems at once unnatural ("He might have took lessons from the squirrels: even them little creatur's makes them their winter hoards";⁴⁴) and contrary to the deeply ingrained common sense and fold traditions of the region, as embodied in the elementary school copy-book epigram cited in the story, "Be just before you are generous" (44). The parallels with Tolstoy are further developed by the fact that Deacon Bray was much praised in his time despite an early life which "hadn't been up to the mark" (41), just as Tolstoy's early excesses and sensuality were often ignored by his followers.

Like *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Jewett's "The Passing of Sister Barsett"⁹ begins with an announcement of the title character's death and its effects upon her associates, then turns to an examination of her final days. The story quickly becomes a humorous deflation of Tolstoy's "Three Deaths." The rich women in both stories demand that those associated with them sacrifice themselves to alleviate their suffering, which they don't understand. The humor of the Jewett story comes from an amateur nurse's sarcastic descriptions and the incongruity of mundane concerns in the presence of death. Mercy Crane, for example, expressed more concern for the dust beneath her furniture than for her own mortality. Even the dying woman could not forget herself, but reached out to surreptitiously test the quality of fabric in her sister's dress (145). Like Tolstoy, Jewett argued for the constancy of human nature regardless of circumstances. Barsett's forgetting of her supposedly fatal illness in order to satisfy her curiosity constitutes such a forgetting of self as Tolstoy often celebrated as the best moment in a character's life.

Jewett finds such a moment ennobling, and it moves the nurse to her only unequivocal praise of Sister Barsett: "She will be missed most for her knowledge of materials" (146). That Barsett has paid too dearly for her interest in material things is suggested by the fact that everything else said about her is derogatory, from her hypochondria to her manipulation of her sisters. In *Ivan Ilyich* such a life is described as the most ordinary and therefore the most terrible, but here Jewett celebrates the importance of such knowledge in individ-

⁷Sarah Orne Jewett to Hamlin Garland, 24 October 1888. Unpublished letter in the Garland Collection at the University of Southern California.

⁸Sarah Orne Jewett, in *Strangers and Wayfarers* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1890).

⁹Sarah Orne Jewett, in *A Native of Winby and Other Tales* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1893).

ualizing a member of a community. In this story, which is at once one of Jewett's finest and most typical, much of the humor stems from the ludicrous juxtaposition of these small moments with death, which readers have been conditioned to associate with more grandiose prose. Jewett reduced the mystery of death by describing the mundane reactions which both authors agree are the typical responses to it. In the Jewett story, these responses are humorous precisely because they are undifferentiated; they merely add to the richness of her description.

A third Jewett story, "A Little Captive Maid," also bears a distinct resemblance to Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Captain Ballfour is a type of Ivan Ilyich, a once powerful man brought to a greater understanding of life and his own lack of importance by his imminent death. Both men are dignified by their eventual acceptance of their fate and their recognition that other people have their own interests. Like Ivan Ilyich, the dying Captain Ballfour discovers that only a rustic acceptance of death is a natural response. But the main focus of the Jewett story is on the character for whom Gerasim, Ivan Ilyich's servant, is the prototype. This shift from the dying man to the servant who tends him as the point-of-view character points towards the differences in the orientation of the two authors.

Nora Connelly, the maid of Jewett's title,¹⁰ only partially fills the role of Ivan's Gerasim, for the naturalness and other-centeredness of each help the dying men accept their mortality. Since she is only a maid, she is not required to serve in the same ways as Gerasim, who becomes responsible for Ivan's primary care. While he is thus associated with the declining bodily functions which signify the approach of Ivan's death, Nora continues to serve as a maid, catering to Ballfour's interests in life. Both servants inspire their masters by their acceptance of circumstances and resignation to their fates. Ivan Ilyich learns that to cherish and enjoy life even as it ends.

Studies of Jewett's precursors suggest the ways in which a professional writer expands her technique by reacting to the successes of other writers. Already established as a writer and a mature thirty-nine by 1888, Jewett's acknowledgment of Tolstoy's power demonstrates her growth from a provincial into a cosmopolitan, for it is as a female New Englander that she thought her peers greater stylists than the Russians. Jewett's experiments with Tolstoy's techniques in three of the stories she wrote shortly after her discovery enabled her to go to her next task with these techniques solidly established in her rhetorical arsenal should she need them to convey her message.

It would be misleading to overstate the case by claiming that Jewett's masterpiece, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, resulted from her reading of Tolstoy. But it is equally important to credit the Russian with at least some influence if the factors involved in the creation of the novel are to be fully understood. Tolstoy's *Katia* emphasized the importance of a community and demonstrated

¹⁰Sarah Orne Jewett, "A Little Captive Maid," in *A Native of Winby and Other Tales*. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1890).

the power of a female narrator's subjectivity, both of which encouraged Jewett to "keep at work [she had] sometimes despaired about."¹¹ These are both prominent elements of the *Country of the Pointed Firs*.

¹¹ *Letters of Sara Orne Jewett* 38.