

American realism and naturalism in the country doctor



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Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country Doctor* (1884) is classified as a local color fiction because of the encapsulated elements of time, space, memory, romanticism, stock characters, language, and the predominant city versus country theme. Local color fiction concentrated on the ideal pastoral life of the South before upheavals and paradigm shifts change its face entirely. Modernity's threat stimulates the production of local color as preservation of daily life becomes primordial.

One of the prime features undoubtedly of local color fiction is location - temporal and spatial. The locus in time is the Reconstruction Era of the United States which spanned the 1860s to the 1880s where there was radical infrastructural evolution since the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation. The South transforms from a village in rural isolation to one open to drastic alterations. Jewett takes meticulous care in detailing the rural village of Oldfields, Boston. The very name of the novel, *A Country Doctor*, already gives the book local color character for its rural setting. Oldfields is situated in a quiet wilderness inhabited by a few residents where the characters' movements are confined to this space. The permanence of nature and the landscape gives local color fiction its regionalism where residents cherish and take pride in their humble villages. Geography is so enmeshed in the plot that it can be called the main character. Because of the natural country setting, the pastoral genre has a clear influence where the romanticism of the times and sentimentality come into play.

The whole point of local color fiction is to recapture and preserve the past; hence, accounts arouse feelings of nostalgia accompanied by an idealizing and romanticizing of the past 'golden' age for "if you live with those people,

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and get fond of them, and have a thousand things to remember, you get more pain than pleasure out of it when you go away" (Jewett 82). Because the past cannot be relived, the characters revel in the enjoyment of bygone days in which the audience cannot indulge. Dr. Ferris reminisces and could "cry for homesickness" (Jewett 82). Recollection of habits, people, and events connected to the past comprise a significant portion of the book. In the first scenes, the Jakes and the Martins are around the fireplace recounting life experiences that they have had. "A good deal of local-color writing ... achieves its end by sentimentalizing or idealizing a way of life" (Dike 85). Fondly evoking memories and perpetuating tradition are core in local color fiction. Resilient to change, the local color fiction genre stands immutable as the character rarely veers from his habit once established.

Because of the emphasis on fixed time, characters are formed based on past events and relationships. Some remain rooted to the past, while others are intent on breaking the chains of the past. Certain stock characters are classified according to their honor for tradition. Local color fiction exemplifies "the militant inflexibility of the characters with which it deals, their single-minded and patently conditioned dedication to values" (Dike 83). Anna Prince rigidly holds on to her customs and maintains her old Southern manners. Characters such as Mrs. Graham and Dr. Ferris represent the old dying age since they are steeped in the country way of life and cannot change for adaptation to the new age. On the other hand, the new age is ushered by Nan Prince. In stark contrast, iconoclastic Adeline, Nan's mother, chooses to rebel against her tradition, leaves her hometown, and returns in

infamy like the Prodigal Son persona and we obtain her biography from the lips of her neighbors.

In analyzing local color fiction, language is important and relays important messages. The colloquial Southern dialect used by the speakers at the beginning of the novel gives us proof of the veracity of the time and the residents of the space. The means of communication is a unique fingerprint which stamps the era with a specific identity for like people, language evolves and dies so capturing dialect is as important to the storytelling. The country folk speak among one another with their customary manner. In local color fiction conversation is the main action. "The repetitions of the best stories are signal events" (Jewett 13). Mrs. Meeker, the country gossip is an important character for through her eyes, since she always pries into the happenings of the small town allow us to learn what is going on. She is a welcome visitor almost everywhere she goes for her stories are enchanting and riveting. One notices in the novel that there is no climax or aggressive conflict therefore one deduces that in tandem with the local color fiction genre, the novel is light on plot.

In alignment with the pastoral concerns, the reader observes the Country versus City theme. The urban space is described in denigrating terms and the country residents find civilization in the city unbearable and sometimes do not survive its rigours. Adeline, Nan's mother, in her younger days, seeks pleasure away from the rural domain yet returns sick, dying, and "in the last stages of a decline" (Jewett 23). Her notorious adventure outside of the country environment has sapped her strength and has defamed her before the eyes of her countrymen. Likewise, Nan does not thrive when temporarily

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transplanted from her natural country environment and she begins to decrease in vivacity, “ suffering not a little from her long-continued city life” (Jewett 170). Modern medicine as practiced in the city was despised by the country folk and Dr. Ferris judges that “ it was astonishing how little some of the city doctors knew” (Jewett 150). The old country standard is placed on a higher rung and the people deluded and dissatisfied by the urbanized life, choose to settle in the country. In sum, the local color genre it shows realistic representations of local customs, dress, mannerisms, and habits of thought. Although there resides an inherent detachment in distance and in certain relationships, attachment and yearning for things to remain the same prevail in the novel. Daily routine has more appeal and the subjects of life, friendship, and love comprise the main themes. The stasis of the plot allows for more character development and we see who is most important in life - people.

Works Cited:

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