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## Analysis of Sylvia's Virtue as Illustrated in Sarah Orne Jewett's Book, *A White Heron*

In the song "Save Yourself" by the Michael Schenker Group, they sing, "So young and innocent, too naïve to understand". In "A White Heron," by Sarah Jewett, the 9-year-old's innocence leads to her inability to understand the truths that are obvious to the reader. Sylvia's confused actions stem from a deeper misunderstanding of the truth occurring around her because of her young age and innocence, this oblivion of reality is demonstrated by Jewett through hidden symbols, bold imagery, and a vague ending that Sylvia does not comprehend.

Furthermore, symbols may be implied in different manners, but it takes a certain amount of maturity to comprehend it all. When the hunter enters Sylvia's life, he demonstrates human companionship. On the other hand, Sylvia is a nature-lover and her match is symbolized through the white heron. She is too innocent to see that the human companionship is overpowering her nature companionship. "The world of innocence in which Sylvia lives is a frail one, lacking strength" (Atkinsons 72). Jewett uses the hunter and heron to demonstrate these two different companionships to allow the reader to see the division that Sylvia approaches. The reader is able to see that the nature-lover, Sylvia lets go of her naturalness when the hunter appears and will do anything to her true values to make him happy. Jewett is trying to show the readers how easily the innocent can be blind to their prior life when a distraction, specifically an older human, comes in the picture. "[The hunter] is interested in the young girl only for exploitative reasons: he wants to use her knowledge of the woods to find the bird in order to kill it and stuff it for his collection; his intent is to colonize nature and ultimately the female sanctuary where Sylvia flourishes" (44). Sylvia is being taken advantage of without her realizing because of her innocence. The author also shows how love can make people do things they wouldn't normally take part in. It isn't until Sylvia reconnects with her nature relationship, the heron, when she realizes what is truly important to her. Jewett shows that although people are unable to see the truth in front of them, if you dig deep enough there is a way to recollect your true self no matter what age.

Another symbol used by Jewett is the gun held by the hunter. This symbolizes maturity in Sylvia and her sexual comfort around the hunter. At first, it shows that the gun makes Sylvia nervous, but as her crush begins to develop, she becomes more comfortable with it. "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" (Freivogel 136). Although Jewett does not mention sexuality, she is suggesting to the reader how the gun is taking away Sylvia's innocence as she grows into a teenager. The hunter and his gun both represent the first inducement of Sylvia from the natural world into human relationships. "[The hunter] watched Sylvia's pale face and shining gray eyes with ever growing enthusiasm" (Jewett 415). In her well know nature world she had never come across something like what this gun and hunter symbolize. This is important to the overall work because Jewett is showing the world how innocence can be left behind when you fall into temptation. Sylvia would most likely have seen the reality sooner if she were older.

In continuation, a third symbol that is overlooked is the oak and pine trees. These trees may not seem of such a large importance, but this is the one symbol that both Sylvia and the reader see

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the importance of them. When Sylvia climbs the tall oak tree, she later branches on to a taller pine tree. Jewett is trying to show her journey back to her nature relationship is long and hard, but is possible if you put in work. In Hovet's scholarly article, he shares how Sylvia is portrayed as a hero. "The first type of this function consists of the hero withstanding the test. Sylvia makes the dangerous pass and climbs through the lower branches of the old pine" (Hovet 66). Sylvia takes note of the feelings rushing through her as she climbs up the tree, representing a grasp of what is left of her innocence to pull her back. The hunter has lured her away from her nature relationship, and she was too blind to see what was happening because she was too young and had never experienced this sort of human relationship prior. This symbol is important to the overall work because Jewett demonstrates how by reconnecting to your true relationships, it can open up windows to the truth. This aided Sylvia because, without this reconnection, she would've drowned away her innocence because of her inability to see the reality of what was occurring.

Jewett provides imagery throughout the story to help aid in describing what Sylvia sees and hears in the nature of the forest. When Sylvia reconnects with nature, the imagery in the story comes to life as she connects, not just with animals, but even the sun and the breeze. This is a feeling Sylvia familiarized with, unlike the hunter and his gun. Although Sylvia could see the hunter and was tempted by him, the power of nature swooped in and grabbed onto Sylvia to bring her back to the nature side. There is nothing said between the heron and Sylvia, but Jewett uses imagery of silence and a description of the view of nature to allow the reader to capture Sylvia's transformation back to her relationship with nature.

Later on, when Sylvia climbs the pine tree and relinks with nature, Jewett is using imagery of Sylvia's rebirth. It is also implied that the rebirth of being in a womb for 9 months is shown through her age, nine. This imagery is important to the story because it demonstrates how Sylvia is still developing and needs to hold onto her roots of nature until she is truly ready to face the world, just as if it were her mother. It is also in this moment when Sylvia realizes how man and nature have a difficult time existing side-by-side. Sylvia may have been too young to realize this when bumping paths with the hunter, but now, at age nine and rebirthed, she is able to see the truth around her by recombining herself with nature. "Sylvia's face was like a pale star, if one had seen it from the ground, when the last thorny bough was past, and she stood trembling and tired but wholly triumphant, high in the tree-top" (Jewett 418). Jewett uses imagery of Sylvia as a star to show her innocence and the thorny bough as her difficult journey of finding the truth. At first, Sylvia is ecstatic about finding the heron, but on her trip back to the farm her feelings begin to alter. "Jewett permits the reader to share Sylvia's thoughts all through the long climb to the top of the pine, the subsequent discovery of the heron's nest, and the dangerous descent" (Zanger 348).

Jewett brings the story to an end with an unambiguous ending of whether or not Sylvia feels as if she made the right decision. Although she was offered money to bring back the white heron, it is mainly her crush on the hunter that is driving her to help him more than anything. She is tied between her infatuation with the hunter, and her love for nature. "He is so well worth making happy... No, she must keep silence!" (Jewett 419). She is also pushed to pursue this human relationship to please her grandmother, but has such a strong bond with nature and has a hard time letting go once she is reminded how meaningful it is. When Sylvia sees the heron she is confused by the mixed emotions she feels. "Our most immediate desire is that Sylvia remain in her innocent world, inviolate. But we also are made to want strength for her innocence that it might fend for itself- not a further retirement, but a compelling vision, an experience beside

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which anything promised by the thrill of infatuation for the hunter would pale” (Atkinson 72). Jewett is showing how Sylvia has never felt these torn feelings before because of her young age and innocence.

In addition, Sylvia also lacks confidence to stand up for what she believes in. She has a desire to make the hunter happy, but also to defend the heron because of her values of nature. “Sylvia’s heart gave a wild beat; she knew that strange white bird, and had once stolen softly near where it stood in some bright green swap grass, away over at the other side of the woods” (Jewett 416). She is torn between whom to make happy, so she believes that by not telling the hunter she knows where the heron is, she is able to satisfy both sides. This is important to the work of the story because Jewett is demonstrating to the reader that Sylvia is too young and innocent to stand up for what she truly believes in. Sylvia is such a caring character that it hurts for her not to be able to make everyone happy. It might appear that Sylvia is satisfied with her choices, but she is truly not quite sure if she made the correct decision. If she were to bring the heron to the hunter, her life could possibly have led to a different path. Although Sylvia ponders what could’ve been and “whatever treasures were lost to her,” but she does not live with regret, Jewett is just trying to show readers how even at a young age, important decisions will need to be made and cannot be taken back. (Jewett 419).

Sylvia’s innocence was shown to have played an important role in her decision making, as represented through symbols, imagery, and an open-ended conclusion. As children progress out of childhood and into adulthood, decisions need to be made, but based on the level of innocence and age it can be difficult to see the reality. Temptations can blind an individual from reality, but it is up to the person’s decision making to determine their ending.