

## Persona Non Grata in Selected American Local Color Short Stories

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### Abstract

In short stories like Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "A Village Singer," Kate Chopin's "Desiree's Baby," and Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron," local guests are presented as peace-crashers, intruders, and individuals who play a negative, and even at times, a destructive role in the lives of the female protagonists of the stories. This paper will examine the role such guests play in the above-mentioned stories of local-color writings. Moreover, the paper will bring into light the strategies that the female protagonists use in order to deal with the intrusion of these guests. Respectively, the strategies are rebellion, departure, and affiliating with nature.

**Keywords:** Persona Non Grata; Intruders; Rebellion; Departure; Nature.

Unbidden guests

Are often welcomest when they are gone

William Shakespeare

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Nathaniel Hawthorne lamented to his publisher that "America is now wholly given to a d---d mob of scribbling women and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash." Writers like Hawthorne long tried to dismiss or ignore the achievements of American women writers. However, from the very earliest days of the United States, women have used writing as a way to declare their independence and transcend the restrictions imposed upon them, employing their pens to create female characters as voices of rebellion. One popular mode of writing among female writers in this era was local color writing. Local color, also known as regional literature, is fiction and poetry that focuses on the characters, dialect, customs, topography, and other features particular to a specific region. Local color stories tend to be concerned with the character of the district or region rather than with one individual, and the stories written by female writers, in addition to being concerned with time and place, are also concerned with the socio-cultural patriarchal codes that limit the personal freedom of the female protagonists.

Female local color writers took on the responsibility of vivifying the struggle of subdued women living in these enclosed environments, bringing to light the hardships that these women have to encounter. Previous scholarship concerned with the female protagonists in local color stories written by female

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authors focus on how the characters react when dealing with a situation that devalues their self-worth. For example, Reichardt, commenting on Freeman's characters, contends that critics have praised "the inner strength, determinism, and often spirit of revolt that informs many of her characters and directs their lives." (Reichardt 1987, 34). Skredsvig argues that Chopin's "choices of characters, subject matters, settings and styles" are used for feminine expression and to show alternatives to the surface realities of her time, thus making literature "a diagram of social terrains" (Skredsvig 2003, 99).

Guests have constantly been introduced in various local color writing texts in American fiction, because it is part of the nature of local color writing, where an outsider or an observer is usually introduced into and intrigued by the lives of a particular group of people living within a particular remote region. In Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, for example, the narrative is presented through the eyes of an unnamed narrator who is staying in that specific region for a limited period of time. The perception of the outsider is mainly descriptive, and with the departure of the outsider, the quasi-magical world and the journey that the reader has been invited to undertake ends. However, within certain texts in local-color writing, there is a different kind of guest from within the narrative itself-- not the guest that has been witnessing the events in that area. Instead, these local guests are unwanted and intrusive on the lives of the female protagonists in the stories—guests that play a negative role in the construction of the narrative and bring along discomfort, unhappiness, and even misery.

This paper focuses on the consequences of the invasion of local guests on the lives of the female protagonists. In short stories like Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "A Village Singer," Kate Chopin's "Desiree's Baby," and Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron," local guests are presented as peace-crashers, intruders, and individuals who play a negative, and even at times, a destructive role in the lives of the female protagonists of the stories. Whereas home is supposed to be a source of peace and harmony, these local guests turn home into a source of trouble and anxiety, and alienate the protagonists from their own homes, causing them to look for an alternate home to perhaps find inner peace and comfort. With a close textual analysis, and relying on feminist as well as eco-feminist approaches, the paper will bring into light the strategies that the female protagonists use in order to deal with the interference of these guests. Respectively, the strategies are rebellion, departure, and affiliating with nature.

In Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "A Village Singer," Candace Whitcomb, the ousted soprano, has worked for the church for over forty years and considers the church her own home. On Alma's first day as the new leading soprano singing for the church, Candace is meticulous in making Alma's day a failure. Each time Alma is ready to sing, Candace from a nearby house, plays the organ and sings instead: "Above the din of the wind and the birds, above Alma Way's sweetly straining tones, arose another female voice, singing another hymn to another tune" (Freeman 1991, 521). Being the responsibility of the church and its congregation not to allow this to happen, the minister of the church, Mr. Pollard, decides that "Miss Whitcomb—must be—reasoned with" (Freeman 1991, 522). As he enters Candace's house, instead of welcoming her guest, she had "a fierce curl to her thin nostrils and her lips, as if she scented an adversary" (Freeman 1991, 523). Uneasily and hesitatingly, Mr. Pollard eventually starts talking to her about her behavior, hoping to end the matter of her misconduct. Yet, instead of her feeling ashamed of

what she has done, she immediately barrages him with one argument after the other about his as well as the church's misconduct towards her. She also brings into question the entire process in which she has been released from the church's services. She presents her point of view in a way that leaves him speechless: "Mr. Pollard, the minister, sat staring" (Freeman 1991, 525). Her accumulated anger bursts up, and the minister concludes that Candace has lost her reason and "made a few expostulations, which increased Candace's vehemence; he expressed his regret over the whole affair, and suggested that they should kneel and ask the guidance of the Lord in the matter, that she might be led to see it all in a different light" (Freeman 1991, 526).

Despite the fact that Candace "had had an inborn reverence for clergymen" (Freeman 1991, 526), and a special kind of reverence for Mr. Pollard, she seems to have prepared herself well for this expected visit. "Candace has deferred to men and revered ministers out of a sense of her own personal humility. She has treated them as if they merited more human dignity than herself. Significantly, however, in light of his blatant failure to understand and sympathize with her, she becomes defiant"(Pryse 1983, 71-72). This is evident in how she releases her thoughts and emotions in such an aggressive attitude. Because Candace is acting from the perspective of that of the victim she is, in her own way, releasing her anger not only by singing against Alma, but also by mistreating her visitor.

Susan Allen Toth has expressed complete sympathy for Candace Whitcomb, arguing that Freeman has transformed "a homely, even repellent old woman into a fiery and admirable figure," and describing Candace's brief afternoon's personal rebellion as "a challenge to selfish justice" (Toth 1973, 86). Candace, as a powerless/powerful female figure, rebels against custom and against society's clichés inflicted on her. As such, one crucial aim of Freeman's story is to propose an alternative image of a woman who defies society and, in her own simple way, wages a war against its oppressive rules in a patriarchal society. In the story, Candace points out the double standards used in this society where William Emmons, who has served the church as much as she has, has not been dismissed mainly because of his superiority as a male. In this respect, men and women are seen as different "in personality traits, in physical characteristics, in interests, in occupational roles and in many other ways" (Turner and Turner 1994, 95). In this way, women are not innately inferior, but society, with its dividing rules, imposed such inferiority. In this context, Simone De Beauvoir writes:

One is not born a woman but rather becomes, a woman. No biological or economical fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature... only the intervention of someone else can establish an individual as an other.... (De Beauvoir 1972, 267)

For this reason, Candace chooses to fight the decision of her dismissal. She opts for confrontation instead of submission. And although the story ends with her death, Candace did in fact leave a clear message to the world that she is leaving—silence was not her option.

On the other hand, in Kate Chopin's "Desiree's Baby," Desiree chooses to leave. Desiree's entire life is completely shattered when her husband, Armand Aubigny, starts to doubt her origins with the arrival of their baby. Desiree lives peacefully and happily for a short period of time until unbidden guests

start arriving at her house which results in “a strange, an awful change in her husband’s manner” (Chopin 1991, 534).

Unlike Candace, who somehow expected and prepared herself for the visit of one of the church members about her conduct, Desiree is hit hard with the arrival of these unexpected guests. The guests in this story, although mentioned only marginally, and who paid "unexpected visits from far-off neighbors" and "who could hardly account for their coming" (Chopin 1991, 534) play a critical role in Desiree’s misery. The influence they have on Armand is profound and results in Armand’s asking Desiree to leave. Their confirmation of the fact that the baby is a quadroon made “Desiree... miserable enough to die” (Chopin, 1991, 534). After her confrontation with Armand, with a meek voice informing Armand "It is a lie; it is not true, I am white!" (Chopin 1991, 534), Desiree does not fight back against Armand and the society, rather she makes the decision to leave.

The fact that Desiree does not want to fight is clear from the outset of the story, as Desiree wanted to be one of the “truly feminine wom[e]n,” who “do not want careers, higher education, and political rights” (Friedan 1979, 16), but want to be perfect wives and good mothers. In her book, *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan describes the situation of women at the time Chopin was writing and stresses the fact that men and society, at large, idealize and worship the image of women's femininity; what she calls the “Feminine Mystique.” According to Friedan, women have been "promoted" to detain themselves to the narrow function of housewives and mothers:

Their only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers; their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, their only fight to get and keep their husbands. They had no thought for the unfeminine problems of the world outside the home; they wanted the men to make the major decisions. They glorified in their role as women, and wrote proudly on the census blank: occupation: housewife. (Friedan 1979, 18)

With this mindset, and with the glorified title being taken away from her, Desiree chooses to leave: “ultimately, it is Desiree’s position as a woman in a male-dominated society which destroys her, for as a “true woman” she is both legally and personally powerless” (Palumbo and De Simone 2002, 131). Hence, Desiree is never heard of again as she "disappeared among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou; and she did not come back again" (Chopin 1991, 535). And although it may seem that Desiree's departure is a sign of weakness, it should also be read as a victory "in the sense that Desiree herself chooses her destination and her destiny" (Skredsvig 2003, 98).

Like Desiree’s “unexpected visits,” Sylvia in Sarah Orne Jewett’s “A White Heron” has to learn to deal with another unexpected guest—the ornithologist. However, Sylvia’s approach in dealing with this guest is different from that of both Candace and Desiree. Sylvia neither fights back nor simply departs, but rather finds a different channel to deal with the persona non grata—nature. Sylvia not only finds refuge in nature but also asserts her individuality through identification with the natural world.

Set in rural New England in the late 19th century, the narrative shows that Sylvia had recently moved to live with her grandmother in the countryside: "Everybody said that it was a good change for a

little maid who had tried to grow for eight years in a crowded manufacturing town, but, as for Sylvia herself, it seemed as if she had never been alive at all before she came to live in the farm" (Jewett 1991, 507). Sylvia, who is nine years old, meets a young hunter in the forest as she is driving her cow back home. Afraid and suspicious, she eventually agrees to take this guest to her grandmother. The hunter skillfully uses his charm with the young girl, explaining that he has "been hunting for some birds,... and [he] has lost [his] way, and need[s] a friend very much" (Jewett 1991, 508). Being taken to their house, the stranger explains to them that he is looking for a very rare and precious bird, so that they can be "stuffed and preserved, dozens and dozens of them" (Jewett 1991, 509). He asserts that he "can't think of anything [he] should like so much as to find that heron's nest" and that he "would give ten dollars to anybody who could show it to [him]" (Jewett 1991, 510).

The next day, Sylvia and the hunter walk through the woods in search of the bird. The young girl gradually feels safer and she is even attracted to the man. During the following night, she decides all by herself to climb a huge pine tree from the top of which she thinks she can see the white heron's nest. Her climb is very painful and dangerous, but once at the top, she catches sight of the nest: "The child gives a long sigh a minute later when a company of shouting catbirds comes also to the tree,... She knows his secret now, the wild, light, slender bird that floats and wavers, and goes back like an arrow presently to his home in the green world beneath" (Jewett 1991, 512).

When Sylvia returns home, the hunter asks her if she found the white heron's nest, but Sylvia refuses to reveal her secret. In the process of growing up, having left her family behind, Sylvia resorts to nature for comfort, guidance, and consolation. In fact, nature provides her with happiness to be able to overcome her loneliness, and supplement to be able to overcome her lack. Sylvia's entire life revolves around and in nature. Nature provides her with the sense of security and stability she has not been able to find with her family in the city. In other words, nature is her family. Gradually, the white heron becomes symbolic of Sylvia herself as she connects herself with the white heron as a bird that is free and can fly.

In relation to gender politics, Helene Cixous argues that society is organized around a central male-female hierarchy. This hierarchy, in her understanding, always favors the powerful male over the weak female and, therefore, the male overcomes. Cixous perceives that the binarism that characterizes Western thought is at the heart of women's oppression. She writes:

Thought has always worked through opposition, through dual, hierarchical oppositions. Everywhere ordering intervenes, where law organizes what is thinkable by oppositions... Organization by hierarchy makes all conceptual organizations subject to man. Male privilege, shown in the opposition between activity and passivity which he uses to sustain himself. (Cixous 1994, 38)

In view of this oppositional relationship between men and women, Greta Gaard and Patrick Murphy argue that ecofeminism is concerned with the study of these dualities and propose to reverse them; they suggest that ecofeminism:

... is deeply involved in the criticism of the dualisms of white Western patriarchal culture, such as self/other, culture/nature, man/woman, and white/non-white, which

construct male human identity as separate from and superior to the identities of women, animals, and the natural world. (Gaard and Murphy 1998, 9)

Ecofeminism is a field that takes into consideration the interplay between nature and feminism. It looks into the ways in which both nature and women are equally oppressed. It is “the philosophy born from the union of feminist and ecological thinking and the belief that the social mentality that leads to the domination and oppression of women is directly connected to the social mentality that leads to the abuse of the natural environment” (Gautan and Sinha 2012, 1).

During her wandering in the woods, Sylvia sees herself as violated as the White Heron— subject to being "shot" at any time by the dominating patriarchal society. Sylvia sees the birds on the tree as a reflection of herself, subject to becoming victimized the moment the hunter decides to pull the trigger. Sylvia observes and understands the perils to which nature is exposed and relates this to herself, with the realization that she does not want to be a downtrodden subject. Like the victimized nature, women are constantly mistreated and humiliated by patriarchy and society in many different ways. Therefore, instead of submitting to the will of the hunter, Sylvia eventually chooses to liberate herself as she saves the White herons from the grip of the hunter. The moment she climbs the tree is ecstatic:

No, she must keep silence! What is it that suddenly forbids her and makes her dumb? Has she been nine years growing, and now, when the great world for the first time puts out a hand to her, must she thrust it aside for a bird's sake? The murmur of the pine's green branches in her ears, she remembers how the white heron came flying through the golden air and how they watched the sea and the morning together, and Sylvia cannot speak; she cannot tell the heron's secret and give its life away. (Jewett 1991, 513)

In this respect, “For Sylvia, nature is the extension of her mental and emotional states as well as her spiritual tradition; nature is the realm that is not only working for her but also with her as nature imbues Sylvia with energy that she then perpetuates outward. Nature cultivates creativity, support, and inner peace. Nature keeps the mystic grounded and a grounded person, such as Sylvia, mystical” (Capozzoli 2020, 23). Sylvia finds refuge in nature as she associates herself with the White Heron.

In a gender-biased based society, Freeman, Chopin, and Jewett attempt to voice their needs and concerns to show that despite limitations and interference within their own homes, there is an alternate path. All three protagonists in the short stories of local color writing have different battles to deal with, triggered by the persona non grata. Candace is not only dealing with old age, but she is also dealing with getting older in a society that favors the services of men over women. Desiree's fight is not age-related, but rather race-related; Armand assures Desiree that "it means,...., that the child is not white; it means that you are not white" (Chopin 1991, 534). Sylvia favors independence over the material world. Instead of surrendering to the restricted rules of the patriarchal society, these women espouse empowerment to find their way out. After the intrusion of the persona non grata in their lives, the female protagonists have, at least, the will to make their own choices. Candace rebels in her own special way, Desiree chooses to leave, and Sylvia simply finds her freedom by associating herself with the white herons, leaving an open

question: "Were the birds better friends than their hunter might have been—who can tell?" (Jewett 1991, 513).

## الضيوف غير المرحب بهم في كتابات محلية أمريكية مختارة

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### الملخص

تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى الكشف عن دور الضيوف المحليين في عدد من القصص القصيرة مثل Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "A Village Singer," Kate Chopin's "Desiree's Baby" Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron" ففي هذه القصص تنحو الكاتبات الى تصوير هؤلاء الضيوف على أنهم معكرون للصفو والسلم الداخلي، ويقومون بأدوار سلبية في حياة الشخصيات النسائية لهذه القصص. لذا فإن هذه الدراسة تبين دور كل ضيف من ضيوف هذه القصص في الكتابات المحلية التي غالباً ما تركز على السلوك الذي يقوم به هؤلاء الأشخاص، وطبيعة الأحاديث التي يتحدثون بها، وسمات المناطق التي يعيشون فيها في فترة زمنية معينة. إضافة إلى ذلك، فإن هذه الدراسة تسلط الضوء على الاستراتيجيات التي تسعى من خلالها الشخصيات النسائية في هذه القصص إلى التعامل مع هؤلاء "الضيوف" المتدخلين والفضوليين. وخلصت الدراسة إلى استنتاج هذه الاستراتيجيات التي تتمثل بالتمرد أو المغادرة أو العودة الى الطبيعة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** شخصية غير مرغوب فيها، دخلاء، التمرد، المغادرة، الطبيعة.

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