

Learning Through the Ages: An Epistemological Journey

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Abstract

This paper explores how three nineteenth-century women writers guided my thinking about education, oppression and spirituality during different decades of my twentieth-century life. In order to re-collect my epistemological journey, a process that requires analysis and reflection, the paper combines the critical lens of feminist theory with the genre of the exploratory personal narrative.

Charlotte Brontë (*Jane Eyre*) wrote about finding a voice of resistance in order to find independence, an essential thing to learn when one is 20 years old. Sarah Orne Jewett (*The Country of the Pointed Firs*) looked outward, an essential thing to realize when learning how to write and love at 30 years old. Harriet Jacobs (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*) knew of the complexity of life and truth, the greatest thing of all to learn as a parent and teacher. These women, through their writing and ideas, guided how I came to know and understand the world.

Learning through the ages

At 18 years of age, Jane Eyre leaves Lowood Institution, her home, her school, her employment, her community, her only semblance of family for the past formative eight years, to embark on a new adventure of servitude. She leaves all that she knows to travel to an unknown destination. It is a very strange sensation to inexperienced youth to feel itself quite alone in the world, cut adrift from every connection, uncertain whether the port to which it is bound can be reached, and prevented by any impediments from returning to that it has quitted. The charm of adventure sweetens that sensation, the glow of pride warms it; but then the throb of fear disturbs it; and fear with me became predominant, when half an hour elapsed and still I was alone.¹ Although Brontë's words express Jane's fear at finding herself alone, it is that sense of aloneness or separateness that begins the process of defining self.

Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë is a novel narrated in hindsight. This essay is a bit about hindsight. It is an exploration of discovering self. During different decades of my life, the words of three nineteenth-century women writers, guided that exploration. I teach writing and literature, which allows me to incorporate the most important aspect (and consequence) of becoming educated: coming to know oneself, abstractly, metaphorically, literally, practically, and

¹ Brontë, Charlotte, *Jane Eyre*, (New York: New American Library, Signet Classic, 1997), 95.

spiritually. Of course, the teaching of literature and writing involves learning a craft, but the core of it is finding your self in the literature and finding your voice in writing. Reading the three main works included in this essay: *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, *The White Heron*, by Sarah Orne Jewett, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, by Harriet Jacobs, at different phases of my life, creates a relationship with these authors that is not bound or diminished by culture or time. As I reflect on the influences in my life, the concepts of oppression, education, and spirituality seem to define me. The three nineteenth-century authors explored in this essay wrote about how these concepts affect a woman's life. Their words came to me when I needed them along my journey.

My mother was an overpowering extrovert; she would walk into a room, raise her arms high, stamp her small feet purposefully, and exclaim "Ta da!" I was raised to be an extrovert as well, and I was a good girl in that respect: student government, cheerleading, speech team (comedy monologues), and drama club. But what I liked most of all was to rise before anyone else in the house woke and read in the quiet of the early morning. Or I would carry a book to a secluded outdoor spot, and read. And even when I didn't have a book, I liked to be alone. I could spend hours in my room, creating characters that I would act out in front of the mirror (baseball players, old people, dying people, witches). I would ride around the neighborhood on my bicycle, flying, oblivious. When I left for college, I went a thousand miles away, where no one was telling me I had to play golf or go to a party. I could spend hours on the top floor of the library or under my bed covers and feed my deprived, introverted self. *Jane Eyre* would take a book and hide behind curtains in the windowsill; her retreat gave me great comfort. Leaving that it has quitted, I discovered philosophy ah! At last! The life of the mind! Plato, Michael Polanyi, Immanuel Kant, John Dewey, John Locke, Friedrich Nietzsche, Renee Descartes, Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger,—it is a long list of white male western intellectuals who taught me how to think. My brain was awake at night, thinking about ethics, epistemology, existentialism, morality, rational behavior, and when I did sleep, I would write philosophical treatises in my dreams.

It was 1970, the era of campus unrest and protests against the escalating war in Vietnam. We boycotted exams and Pepsi-Cola; we took over administrative buildings. We watched the rise of the Black Power movement. And there was the gender issue. The Feminist movement of the 70s, historically referred to as the second wave of the woman's movement, called for voices

to rise up, called for women to take back the night, and raised our consciousness about abuse and oppression, equal rights and treatment. It was a time of empowerment, calling for us to love our sisters, to understand the oppressive nature of the institution of matrimony, to keep our names and to publish our words. As a young woman, it was time to take a stand and let my supporting voice ring out. But as an introvert and a Platonist, I didn't want to be identified with any movement. I was a rational being, an individualist, an idealist. I was also, on another level, quite willing to let men rule the world. I was 20 years old. I wanted someone to take care of me. I was confused.

The Feminist movement was challenging the very things that Jane Eyre and I both used for comfort and security—books and men. The movement demanded the women's voice be heard and published and it questioned the persuasive promise of paternal protection. Young Jane is locked in the red room as punishment not for her behavior but because of who she is. She is forced into confinement by her petty, fearful aunt and guardian, the widowed Mrs. Reed, but Jane finds strength in the idea that her uncle would treat her fairly. She challenges her aunt, saying, "What would Uncle Reed say to you, if he were alive?"² She finds the courage to stand up for herself by evoking a dead patriarchal figure. Jane seeks help from a father figure to find her voice.

A living father figure, the wolfish Mr. Brocklehurst, head of Lowood Institution, materializes a page later. This man soon silences the young Jane through intimidation and acceptance of her aunt's description of Jane's deceitful, lying nature. Mr. Brocklehurst's betrayal compels Jane to speak without (the dead Mr. Reed's) imagined paternal support. Jane challenges herself: "Speak I must: I had been trodden on severely and must turn: but how? What strength had I to dart retaliation at my antagonist? I gathered my energies and launched them."³ Brontë, through Jane's relationship to these two male characters, captured my 1970's dilemma concerning my education: Would these western, white, dead male philosophers that I was studying help me find my voice, like Uncle Reed helped Jane? Or were they silencing my voice with their intent to shape thought and civilization, like Mr. Brocklehurst did to Jane?

The beauty of Jane Eyre (and the wisdom of Brontë) lies in her ability to dwell in and learn from conflict. Throughout the novel, with every thought, action, and happening in Jane's

² *Ibid*, 27.

³ *Ibid*, 35-36.

life, opposites are thrown against each other as deliberately as the gates of Thornfield clashed together when Jane finally arrives at her new home. Rochester, disguised as the gypsy fortuneteller, says to Jane “When I examined your face, one trait contradicted another.”⁴ Her reasoning and logic are constantly combating her emotions and heart, particularly in relation to Rochester, the man she is doomed to love and marry. Jane reasons with herself. “You have nothing to do with the master of Thornfield....He is not of your order; keep to your caste.” A few pages later, she provides her own heartfelt argument: “Did I say, a few days since, that I had nothing to do with him but to receive my salary at his hands? Did I forbid myself to think of him in any other light than as a paymaster? Blasphemy against nature! Every good, true vigorous feeling I have gathers impulsively around him.”⁵ Jane is always arguing. Her verbal stance and battle with the disguised gypsy woman, an archetypal character of intuition and superstition, two attributes Jane trusts and suspects, reads as if she is talking to herself in one of her internal arguments: “Why don’t you tremble? I am not cold. Why don’t you turn pale? I am not sick. Why don’t you consult my art? I am not silly.” And when the old crone contradicts Jane’s stance, “You are cold; you are sick; and you are silly,” Jane rejoined strongly: “Prove it.”⁶ Jane’s life is framed by this desire for proof, in order to find the right path. Will reason or emotion, logic or fancy, proof or intuition guide her? And when she relies on one method, her rebellious inner voice disagrees.

Jane knows of the oppressive nature of an education that calls for mortification of pride. Yet, when she becomes the governess to the high-spirited Adele, Jane’s goal is to make her obedient and teachable. Jane’s musing on the best way to moderate and control her charge is interrupted by a reflection on her own restlessness and the need for women to act and think on their own. Jane understands the suffering caused by obedience and stagnation, with nothing to look forward to but domestic responsibilities. Jane’s awareness of the plight of women is interrupted by the lunatic laugh of Grace Poole. I loved the contradictory presentations of education and freedom in this section; I loved the juxtaposition of the mysterious lunatic laugh, as if Jane herself was laughing at herself and the absurdity of the stultifying education of Adele.⁷

Conflict and paradox surround Jane’s moral and religious life, as well. Brocklehurst,

⁴ *Ibid*, 203.

⁵ *Ibid*, 165,178.

⁶ *Ibid*, 199.

⁷ *Ibid*, 110-112.

who hates her, and the handsome St. John, who rescues her from death, use almost the same words to explain moral duty: “I have a master to serve whose kingdom is not of this world. My mission is to mortify...the lusts of the flesh.”⁸ As a young girl, Jane witnesses the death of Helen Burns, her beloved friend at Lowood, who dies in the service of her Christian, moral beliefs. I understood Jane’s desire to fulfill her religious duty and follow a moral man’s urging and her conflict on recognizing the destructive capabilities of the same. Søren Kierkegaard, the Christian theologian and existentialist, who kept me awake at night in college through his passionate language, wrote of the profound strength needed to take the leap required of faith and belief. At the time, understanding the clarity and righteousness of the moral life was my goal. His words were compellingly scary for me, who was not brought up in any religion. In her preface to the 1847 edition of *Jane Eyre*, (signed by Currier Bell), Brontë writes “Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion.”⁹ Brontë, through her characterization of Brocklehurst and St. John, and through her own words, put Kierkegaard in a clarifying, identifiable place.

Being sent away to school as a punishment gives Jane her freedom. After becoming an educated, calm young woman, Jane becomes restless. After leaving the man she loves for strong, ethical reasons, and establishing an independent life, she returns to him and becomes domesticated. I’m not certain that I intellectually understood what Brontë was doing when I read *Jane Eyre* in my 20s. But I felt it. I felt the struggle of finding a voice. I felt the undeniable drive to find and speak the truth. The force and juxtaposition of opposing ideas, the power of rebellion within me and the culture, and the tension of paradox mounted. I dropped out of college.

My mother was not pleased. In my senior year with a grade point average of 4.0, I was withdrawing. She couldn’t understand that I was not willing to graduate with a voice that was not mine. I had spent three years cultivating the ideas and language of others and I didn’t feel educated. During my year off, I worked with juvenile delinquent teenagers as well as with the elderly. I did return to school, graduating with a degree in Experiential Psychology. As a college graduate, I worked in a publishing house and then for an advertising agency. I began to think about taking myself seriously as a writer. Note the deliberate hesitancy of that sentence. I wrote short stories, which were critiqued harshly and lovingly in writing workshops. I stuffed them in

⁸ *Ibid*, 64.

⁹ *Ibid*, 3.

my desk drawer. I secured a job as a Feature Writer for a weekly newspaper in Kittery, Maine. It was an advertising venue and I was the only writer. I wrote five feature stories a week, about people and their occupations on the coast of Maine and New Hampshire: lighthouse keepers, bridge workers, ex-boxers, UFO abductees, artists, visionary teachers, librarians, local butchers and town government. I pounded out the who, what, where, when, and why (or how come) of the area with enthusiasm. These journalistic exercises were cleaning my writing of the philosophical jargon of those not-so-distant undergraduate years. I discovered Sarah Orne Jewett.

Sarah Orne Jewett's narrator in *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories* returns to Dunnet, a village on the coast of Maine, to write. She stays with a Mrs. Almira Todd and rents an abandoned school house, where, "from its door there was a most beautiful view of sea and shore," she writes "quite undisturbed, with the sea-breeze blowing through the small, high windows."¹⁰ From my office window in a small red house next to the Piscataqua River, I looked out on the Kittery nuclear submarine station, but I felt a connection between Jewett and her stories and my life and feature articles. I went to visit Jewett's home in South Berwick, Maine and walked the grounds and the town. I read about her life and wrote an article about her.

Jewett observes the common folk in her writings, relating their lives to a larger context. Her observations connect her characters with history and the natural world. Mrs. Todd's herb garden is "a rustic pharmacopoeia, [with] great treasures and rarities among the commoner herbs. There were some strange and pungent odors that roused a dim sense and remembrance of something in the forgotten past. Some of these might once have belonged to sacred and mystic rites, and have had some occult knowledge handed with them down the centuries." Mrs. Todd's herbs were medicinal and used for physical and emotional ailments by neighbors "who usually came at night as if by stealth, bringing their ancient-looking vials to be filled."¹¹ While lots of old women grow herbs—I grow them now in my garden -, Mrs. Almira Todd was not just an old lady with a herb garden; in Jewett's characterization, she was the incarnate of a medieval monk, chemist, and spiritual guide. Jewett uses nature to understand human behavior: "Being scuffed down all the spring made it [pennyroyal] grow so much the better, like some folks that had it hard in their youth, were bound to make the most of themselves before they died." She personifies nature, as in her description of Captain Littlepage: "He wore a narrow, long-tailed

¹⁰ Jewett, Sarah Orne, *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories*, (New York: Doubleday, originally published, Houghton Mifflin, 1925), 18.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 14-15.

coat and walked with a stick, and had the same cant to leeward' as the wind-bent trees on the height above. He looked like an aged grasshopper, of some strange human variety." On her persona of birds, she writes: "The song sparrows sang and sang, as if with joyous knowledge of immortality, and contempt for those who could so pettily concern themselves with death." She speaks to insects: "I rapped to call the bees to order as if they were unruly scholars."¹² Jewett's style, her insights into human thought and behavior, her detailed and delightful descriptions, and the stories of the common folk, eased me into my next decade of life.

At 30 years old, I wouldn't say I had discovered my voice or who I wanted to be, but Jewett's presentations and insights into the stories of the people of her community resonated deeply within me. *Poor Joanna* is a tale of a woman betrayed by love who chooses to live like a recluse on an isolated island because she gave herself to a man who did not marry her. Jewett listens to this classic tragic tale and reflects "upon a state of society which admitted such personal freedom and a voluntary hermitage," providing a different context to a tale of unrequited love. Instead of focusing on the gossip about a tragic victim, Jewett writes about the community's acceptance of an individual's choice. When a minister is brought to Joanna's island to save her from herself, Jewett presents clear ideas on what defines the spiritual life. As Mrs. Todd narrates it, she puts the authoritative minister and all he represents (Christianity) in his place: "He did offer prayer, but it was all about hearin' the voice of God out o' the whirlwind; and I thought while he was goin' on that anybody that had spent the long cold winter all alone out of Shell-heap Island knew a good deal more about those things than he did." Jewett listens to the unveiling of Joanna's life and writes a final reflection: "In the life of each of us, I said to myself, there is a place remote and islanded, and given to endless regret or secret happiness; we are each the unaccompanied hermit and recluse of an hour or a day; we understand our fellows of the cell to whatever age of history they may belong."¹³ I read that sentence and put Jewett's book down. I looked out my dark window onto the lights of the city image created by the nuclear submarine station. I reread the sentence. I was far from being an island-recluse but I no longer had to feel guilty about my secret longing to be an unaccompanied hermit, as Jewett placed my desire for solitude in the lives we all lead.

Jewett's powers of observation and ability to demonstrate the profoundness of

¹² *Ibid*, 19-21.

¹³ *Ibid*, 54-57

simplicity comes together in her short story, *The White Heron*, a story about the power of silence. Initially, young Sylvia does not speak because she is shy and intimidated. With animals and nature, she is at ease: she plays hide and seek with her cow; and she'd rather watch a toad find its way home than succumb to talking and dreaming about material wealth. When the handsome hunter-ornithologist enters Sylvia's life, he charms Sylvia and her grandmother. Because the young man expected "dreary squalor" from "that level of society" which allows hens as household companions, he is pleased and surprised to find "so clean and comfortable a little dwelling in the New England wilderness." This stranger settles down with his new friends, listens "eagerly to the old woman's quaint talk" and watches Sylvia's pale face and shining gray eyes with ever growing enthusiasm." His kindness, although seemingly genuine, is predicated on something he wants and he determines that Sylvia is the girl who can get it for him. He is in search of a rare bird, the little white heron, in order to kill it, stuff it, and study it. He thinks he knows how to tempt Sylvia into revealing its location: he bribes her with money. Sylvia's motivation is to help her new friend and please this handsome man. Sylvia steals out of the house in the early morning to find the heron's nest.

In order to find the heron, Sylvia becomes like a bird, climbing the tree with "bare feet and fingers that pinched and held like bird's claws." She is "almost lost" in the leaves of the white oak tree as she climbs to where she can pass across to the old pine-tree that looks out over the horizon and the sea. As Sylvia climbs this old pine-tree that "loved his new dependent," Jewett mingles the imagery; the natural world is Sylvia's guardian. When she reaches the top of the pine-tree and feels "as if she too could go flying away among the clouds," and the birds sing louder and louder, Sylvia's identification with the natural world is complete.¹⁴ Sylvia, a "lonely little country girl," knows she lives in "a vast and awesome world" that could be silenced by the handsome man. She doesn't give into temptation but holds onto her clear understanding of what connects her to the world. Sylvia doesn't reveal the white heron's secret; she does not tell. She is silent.

I had just come out of a decade of "Speak up! Let your voice be heard!" I had learned that being silenced is the worst form of oppression. Sylvia's story is about the power of listening and silence, not intimidation. Can you imagine if Sylvia had decided to confront this scientist and demand that he stop shooting birds? He would have gently laughed at the misguided,

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 164-167.

backward girl. Sarah Orne Jewett was teaching me how to listen with compassion, humor, and empathy.

I married. We bought some land and built a house. Down on my hands and knees, I started my first vegetable garden, lining up each row with a string to produce the perfect symmetry and parallel lines I thought essential. That first garden year, Northeastern New York had one of its earliest frosts and in mid-August, when fruition was at its peak, all the plants died. I was more devastated than I thought my common sense self capable. After all, it was just a garden. But hadn't I learned from Sarah Orne Jewett that gardens were spiritual places where one finds a "renewal of some historic soul" and that gardens filled "the sorrows and remoteness of daily life"?¹⁵ Through the premature death of my first garden, I felt a spiritual connection to the earth and to all the Mrs. Todds in this world. When I went outside to the garden that summer morning, the first person I thought of was Mrs. Todd. How would she have guided me?

I opened a bookstore in our small town. I filled the shelves with fine literature, held author parties and poetry readings, and stayed in business, struggling financially, for six years. The bookstore was a comfortable place to be; the community came in and enjoyed the environs, even if they didn't buy a lot of books. We placed soft chairs around the shelves for our customers long before Barnes and Noble thought of the idea. Our chairs, however, were made of Salvation Army upholstery, not corporate leather. I delighted in my quirky, talky and reticent customers as if they were characters in one of Jewett's sketches. An independent bookstore owner is more of a listener, confidante, and matchmaker of books to people than a profit-maker. During the years of being in the book business, I listened to stories of shared lives, chance meetings, and significant moments. Jewett had shown me, through her writing and characters, that living, like writing, demands observation and listening. My bookstore years gave me a community that honored my introverted self. When I closed the bookstore, I felt that I, too, was one of Jewett's characters, ready to move on.

I was working in educational administration and being very efficient but not feeling a sense of simple completeness that gardening or mothering or reading and writing offers. My background in philosophy, my study of history, my major in psychology, and my love of writing and language served me well as I returned to graduate school. I figured out that literature was an interdisciplinary study and I craved those interconnections. I was 40 years old and pregnant with

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 49.

my second child. In graduate seminars, we were discussing, with postmodern abstraction, creativity and time and seduction and desire. The connections and patterns and analyses were making cohesive sense. Then I met Harriet Jacobs.

For two years, Jacobs's narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* sat on my desk and I often stared at her portrait on the cover. I felt Jacobs urging me, but I wasn't certain what she was urging me on to do. In her preface, Jean Fagan Yellin, editor of the 1987 Harvard University Press edition, writes in her preface, that Harriet Jacobs's portrait sits on her desk, smiling, and "urging" her "onward" as Jacobs represents an empowering model in struggle for freedom.¹⁶ Yellin writes about the suppression of the Jacobs's slave narrative based on the claims that it couldn't be true and that she, an uneducated slave, couldn't have written it. Yellin's research proved the book's veracity and brought this slave narrative, and all its implications, into the classroom 130 years after it was written. Yellin's research reveals yet another moment in literary history when a woman's voice is dismissed or forgotten. I was surprised at the ease with which scholars of history and literature had dismissed the narrative as fiction. In my scholarly naïveté, I didn't really care if it was invented or fact. I knew it contained truths that made me think differently. I couldn't let her or her story go. I wanted to tell the world or at least my community—about Harriet Jacobs and, somehow, bring her story out of the classroom. After two years of looking at Harriet Jacobs's gentle, gazing face, I adapted her narrative into a play, which I titled "Still in Prison," from her thirteenth chapter. For six months, an artist grant allowed me to take a Chamber production of this adaptation into churches, theatres, museums, and schools in rural, racially-not-diverse upstate New York, presenting Jacobs's story and talking about her life.

The things I had learned from Brontë and Jewett about self and community, about isolation and connection, about freedom and oppression, about religion and spirituality, about silence and voice, all so integral to identity, are turned up-side-down in a slave holding community. Jacobs lived in a neighborhood that included: her grandmother, a free, highly respected black woman, who owned her own business; her father, a slave and skilled carpenter who hired himself out and earned his own money; a white master, her sexual predator and a respected doctor; his wife, Jacobs's mistress and owner; Jacobs's white lover, a single white man about to enter politics; Jacobs's first love, a black free man, who her master will not allow her to

¹⁶ Jacobs, Harriet, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987), viii.

marry. These are just some of the main characters in this narrative who live within a five-block radius of each other. I ask my students to imagine walking down the street in Edenton, North Carolina with an alien from outer space who is visiting our world for the first time and to explain the social and political reasoning behind these relationships. It is a mind-numbing task.

Slavery is part of America's national identity. In grade school and high school, we learn repeatedly and in expanding depth about the slave trade, plantation life, the freeing of the slaves and the Civil War. Jacobs's narrative broadens the depth of degradation of slavery, because she blames the institution, the system, and the business of slavery as a force that twists humanity. She reveals that this most oppressive of patriarchal institutions affects everyone: "I can testify, from my own experience and observation, that slavery is a curse to the whites as well as the blacks. It makes the white fathers cruel and sensual; the sons violent and licentious; it contaminates the daughters, and makes the wives wretched."¹⁷

Under sanctified and institutionalized sexual and racial oppression, cultural expectations, which contribute to identity, are exposed. For example, it was a curse for the female slave to be attractive: "That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens degradation of the female slave,"¹⁸ as she will be blamed as the exotic seductress for her master's attentions. When an act of rebellion could result in death, the strength to challenge one's ridiculing guardian requires more than desire. For Harriet Jacobs, love involves a moral dilemma that is resolved by logic rather than listening to one's heart. By law, she can't marry the black man she loves, and she chooses to become the lover of an unmarried white man who is not her master in order to maintain some sense of her virtue and pride. Not afraid to speak her mind, Jacobs stands up to her oppressor, Dr. Flint, though her final act to save her children's lives is complete isolation and silence. Her decision to hide in her grandmother's garret, facing fear, isolation, and horrendous physical conditions, is powerful, controlled, and purposeful.

Jacobs wrote her story to tell the world, and particularly white women, about the plight of the black female slave. It is impossible (and wrong) to discuss the relationship of Jacobs's narrative to my understanding of self without addressing race. As a privileged white woman, do I dare use her story to help me understand my own? I listen deeply to Jacobs's narrative as she says to me: let me tell you about my life as a black female slave as a way to help you understand

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 52.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 28.

the complexity of expressing self in a world that doesn't belong to you, doesn't allow you to define yourself, or tell your story.

“The slaveholders came to the conclusion that it would be well to give the slaves enough of religious instruction to keep them from murdering their masters,” writes Jacobs about the role of the church in slavery. The slaves are forced to listen to Episcopal sermons that tell them God wants them to obey their master and to give up their traditions: “Instead of being engaged in worshipping him, you are hidden away somewhere, feasting on your master’s substance; tossing coffee-grounds with some wicked fortuneteller, or cutting cards with another old hag...you are quarrelling, and tying up little bags of roots to bury under the door-steps to poison each other with...If you disobey your earthly master, you offend your heavenly Master.”¹⁹ Jacobs reports that the slaves come away from this sermon “highly amused” at the gospel teaching. There is subtle irony and perhaps an intentional double meaning to the idea of being amused. Were they entertained by his serious message or laughing at his comedic interpretation of the Bible? Through their own reading of the Bible (which he doesn’t think they can read) they know he is not speaking the truth. When Dr. Flint urges Linda (Jacobs) to join the church, she responds that if she were allowed to live like a Christian, she would. His retort: “If you are faithful to me, you will be as virtuous as my wife.” Jacobs responds that the Bible disagrees.²⁰ Throughout her slave narrative, Jacobs uses words and images from the Bible to support her moral stance, the same source that is used to oppress her. Jacobs wonders if “doctors of divinity [are] blind, or are they hypocrites?” when they claim that slavery is a beautiful patriarch institution’; that the slaves don’t want their freedom; that they have hallelujah meetings and other religious privileges.”²¹ Jacobs’s uncle, in chains, tells his grandmother, “When a man is hunted like a wild beast he forgets there is a God, a heaven.”²²

Jacobs’s spirituality is framed by the Bible, but as she defines it, not by “Satan’s church,” as the Negro song calls the white man’s church. Charlotte Brontë embodies the teachings of the church in Brocklehurst, the hypocrite, and St. John, the moralist. Jane Eyre learns to trust her intuition and heart for moral guidance. Sarah Orne Jewett’s character Mrs. Todd refers as stupid the Christian minister who doesn’t understand human behavior. Jewett

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 68-69.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 75.

²¹ *Ibid*, 72-73.

²² *Ibid*, 22.

places her moral trust in the relationship between people and the natural world. My own relationship to God and spirituality has gone through many changes over the decades. I am certain that it is an area of my life that will never resolve itself and as such is part of my identity. I have often wondered how someone holds onto faith when facing evil, particularly when it is church sanctioned. There is consensus among these three nineteenth-century women writers that the institutions of Christianity do not serve women. Finding our spiritual voice requires looking inward.

The power in Jacobs's story is not only found in her strength of character and determination. Her family and her community make it possible for her to live and hide in the stifling, infested space of her grandmother's house for seven years. Without their moral and physical support, Jacobs would probably have died as a result of her decision to run away from Dr. Flint. In a small town, the quiet force created by the bonds of Jacobs's community and family is powerful enough to outwit an established national system. This fact, this understanding, speaks to a complexity about life that delighted my awareness in my fourth decade: *Nothing is ever only what it seems*. There is such freedom to finally come to see that. I know I encountered the idea before my 40s, and I'm sure I nodded my head in agreement but I'm equally certain that the most important thing was how I saw the world. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* demanded that I see another side to a story I thought I knew well. Jacobs's narrative re-taught me the importance of finding stories outside of the accepted ones in order to begin to understand the complex nature of truth. It is with this solid knowledge that I turned to teaching, because I realized I had something I wanted to teach.

This paper presents an approach to the writings of women who wrote more than 100 years ago that ignores cultural and historical particularities in a search for identity. It explores what I have learned during different stages of my life through reading. Brontë's, Jewett's, and Jacobs's conviction and authority of the first person narrator invites a reflection of self: What would I do? How would I respond? What have I learned? What do I believe? Brontë taught me to trust the strength of my rebellious inner voice when I was 20. Jewett showed me that observing and listening are acts of connection when I was 30. Jacobs taught me that truth is about complexity when I was 40. These are key ideas in my exploration of self and the words and ideas of these nineteenth-century women helped me, who came of age in the twentieth century. It is through reflection and analysis, also known as hindsight, that I see how these writers really came

to me at developmental stages of my life. I continue to read and teach the works of these women and I find their insights as relevant to me now. I will always need to be reminded, and need to remind my students, of the importance of rebellion, the illusion of simplicity, and power of complexity. These writers share another connection that is important to the development of self. All three women write of older women who are role models and protectors. Sarah Orne Jewett once told Willa Cather that she knew she had a story when an old woman and an old house “came together in her brain with a click.”²³ Miss Temple pulled *Jane Eyre* up from being a victim; Harriet Jacobs ends her narrative by remembering and honoring her grandmother. We learn who we want to be and how we want to be from the women who come before us. Charlotte Brontë, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Harriet Jacobs will always be my older women.

The study of knowledge—what it is and how one obtains it—is a never-ending, mirrored conversation that reflects back on itself: one needs to use knowledge to study knowledge. The idea that learning is a process, an accumulative process, provides common ground for all the different types and ways of knowing. This essay, as it is involved in the study of literary works, and in the act of reading and re-reading, involves two processes integral to interpretation: The science of critical, focused analysis coupled with the art of reflection about how the literature influences one’s identity. The underlying theory of this paper involves the important relationship of re-reading to analysis. When the subsequent readings of literature happen during different times in one’s life, a more comprehensive analysis and deeper understanding emerges.

All great literary works have to be—on some level—about learning. Certainly one of the issues addressed in the writing of Brontë, Jewett, and Jacobs is the importance of being educated, set in the context of the cultural obstacles presented to their formal education because their gender, class, and race. The idea that their experiences, and the knowledge they gleaned from their experiences, are part of my formal education and my knowing and interpreting the world gives credence to their writing and ideas and purpose to their struggles and visions. This paper and its premise that these nineteenth-century women writers were my teachers represents the beginning of understanding an epistemological journey, an accumulation and a re-collection of analysis and reflection, inspired by the title of a conference: *The Idea of Education in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Writing*.

²³ Jewett, Sarah Orne, *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories*, (New York: Doubleday, originally published, Houghton Mifflin, 1925), Preface.

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