Folk roots and mythic wings in Sarah Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison the cultural function of narrat

Marilyn Sanders Mobley

FOLK ROOTS and **MYTHIC WINGS** in SARAH ORNE JEWETT and TONI MORRISON

THE CULTURAL FUNCTION OF NARRATIVE

Marilyn Sanders Moble 工苏工业学院图书馆

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 To my mother, Priscilla, who gave me roots; to my father, Delbert, who gave me wings; to my husband, Michael, who gave me love; and to my sons, Rashad and Jamal, who gave me perspective.

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FOLK ROOTS and MYTHIC WINGS in SARAH ORNE JEWETT and TONI MORRISON

INTRODUCTION

THE WOMAN WRITER AS CULTURAL ARCHIVIST AND REDEMPTIVE SCRIBE

I am always saying . . . Plato's great reminder that the "best thing we can do for the people of a State is to make them acquainted with each other."

-Sarah Orne Jewett

We don't live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological, archetypal stories that we heard years ago.

—Toni Morrison

At the center of Sarah Orne Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs is the story of Mrs. Almira Todd, an herbalist and conjure woman. Her expertise with various herbs brings her in contact with village neighbors who come to her, rather than to the village doctor, for physical and spiritual healing. Not only is Mrs. Todd central to the life of her village, but the stories she shares with the narrator acquaint her with the region and transform the narrator's naive perceptions of country people and country life. Described as a "simple-hearted woman" in whom "life was very strong . . . as if some force of nature were personified in her . . . and gave her cousinship to the ancient deities," Mrs. Todd represents the female archetypal hero among Jewett's fictional characters.1 At the center of Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon and of the story of Milkman Dead's quest for identity is the story of Pilate, who as a female sage and conjure woman is Mrs. Todd's African-American counterpart. Pilate, described as a woman who came

^{1.} Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1986; rpr. Garden City, N.Y., 1956), 137. Subsequent references in the text are to this edition.

into town "like she owned it," not only is credited with making it possible for Milkman's mother to conceive him by giving her "some greenish-gray grassy-looking stuff" to put in her husband's food, but she is also the one person whose songs and stories teach Milkman how to find meaning in his life. Like Mrs. Todd, Pilate is an example of a female cultural archetype—the priestess figure—a woman equally adept in the natural and spiritual worlds, whose deeds and stories bring healing and knowledge to her community.

In speaking of her fictional characters, Morrison once said, "These are the kind of characters who never had center stage in anybody else's book Now they're there in all their glory." The characterization of Mrs. Todd and Pilate and the roles they play in their communities suggest that in their fiction Sarah Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison attempt to share cultural resources rooted in myth and folklore that would both inform and trans-

2. Toni Morrison, Song of Solomon (New York, 1977), 125. Subsequent references in the text are to this edition.

3. The priestess figure has a mythic analogue in the figure of Demeter. For a recounting of this myth, see Robert Graves, Greek Myths (New York, 1955), I. 89-96. For discussions of priestess figures as witch archetypes in women's fiction. see Annis Pratt, Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction (Bloomington, 1981), 125, 127, 176; Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope, The Female Hero in American and British Literature (New York, 1981), 285; Elizabeth Ammons, "Jewett's Witches," in Critical Essays on Sarah Orne Jewett, ed. Gwen Nagel (Boston, 1984), 165-84; Sylvia Gray Noyes, "Mrs. Almira Todd, Herbalist-Conjurer," Colby Library Quarterly, IX (1972), 643-49. Also see Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., "Recitation to the Griot: Storytelling and Learning in Morrison's Song of Solomon," in Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition, ed. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers (Bloomington, 1985), 192- 202; and Jacqueline de Weever, "Toni Morrison's Use of Fairy Tale, Folk Tale, and Myth in Song of Solomon," Southern Folklore Quarterly, XLIV (1980), 131-44. Skerrett refers to Pilate as a priestess shaman figure; de Weever refers to her as the "good witch" and as a "fairy tale creature." All these sources acknowledge women's use of this archetypal figure to suggest the positive cultural function they serve for their community as opposed to the negative image associated with independent, eccentric old women in men's literature.

4. Brian E. Albrecht, "Toni Morrison: Lorain Writer No Slave to Success," Cleveland Plain Dealer, April 14, 1981, Sec. B, p. 5.

form the consciousness of their readers. This study is concerned with how the fiction of these two women writers reveals a shared literary aesthetic and narrative intention of cultural affirmation. Both writers seek to affirm what Alice Walker calls the "accumulated collective reality"—the "dreams, imaginings, rituals and legends" that make up the "subconscious of a people." Indeed, the call for literary expression based on the folk cultural heritage is familiar in American literature, especially in the words of such writers as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Constance Rourke, and Ralph Ellison.⁵ Yet, until recently, Jewett and Morrison have traditionally been studied in ways that have invited scholars to overlook, minimize, or negate the cultural material they incorporate into their fiction. Jewett has been discussed in the context of the nineteenth-century local-color movement or regionalism, terms that often reduce the status of her fiction in the established literary canon in much the same way that the context of the black or African-American tradition precludes many white scholars from recognizing how Morrison's fiction both challenges and enriches the canon of the American literary mainstream. Because these two literary contexts are considered mutually exclusive, the cultural and aesthetic concerns that these writers share have gone largely unexplored.

This book attempts to correct this shortsightedness by recognizing myth and folklore as the critical matrix for discussing the fiction of two women who consciously draw on the cultural roots

5. Alice Walker, "From an Interview," in Walker, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens (New York, 1983), 261-62; Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet" (1843), in Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston, 1957), 222-41; Walt Whitman, "Prefaces and Democratic Vistas," in Complete Poetry and Selected Prose by Walt Whitman, ed. James E. Miller (Boston, 1959), 455-501; Constance Rourke, The Roots of American Culture and Other Essays (New York, 1942), 275-96; and Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act (New York, 1953), 23-73. For an excellent discussion of how many American views on folk expression can be traced to German philosopher and folklorist Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803), see Gene Bluestein, The Voice of the Folk: Folklore and American Literary Theory (Amherst, 1972).

or "accumulated collective reality" of their people. Such an approach is possible not only because of the critical space created by recent black and feminist literary scholarship but also because of perspectives like Alice Walker's which raise the possibility that "black and white writers often seem to be writing one immense story . . . with different parts . . . coming from a multitude of different perspectives."6 Although this study will not overlook or deny the significance of differences between the work of Jewett and that of Morrison, it will focus on the similarities between their literary aesthetics and the presence of storytelling as an activity within their fiction. And it will reveal that in much the same way that Zora Neale Hurston's fiction challenges black people to "unearth the values that could restore the balance . . . and give men and women the words to speak . . . to set their spirits free," the fiction of Jewett and Morrison challenges their readers to be transformed by reaffirming the very values and material the larger culture minimized or devalued.7

These writers share a complex response to loss and change in American culture which manifests itself in similar ways. In a sense, Morrison's lament about the loss of archetypal stories echoes the sense of loss Jewett expresses about her native region: "People do not know what they lose when they make away with

6. Alice Walker, "Saving the Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life," in Walker, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, 5. Recent scholarship in black and feminist literary theory has begun to clear a critical space for the kind of cross-cultural study I am attempting here. Noteworthy examples include Dexter Fisher, ed., Minority Language and Literature: Retrospective and Perspective (New York, 1977); Dexter Fisher and Robert B. Stepto, eds., Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction (New York, 1979); Lenore Hoffman and Deborah Rosenfelt, eds., Teaching Women's Literature from a Regional Perspective (New York, 1982); Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., Black Literature and Literary Theory (New York, 1984); and Barbara Bair, "Ties of Blood and Bonds of Fortune': The Cultural Construction of Gender in American Women's Fiction—An Interdisciplinary Analysis" (Ph.D. dissertation, Brown University, 1984).

7. Cheryl A. Wall, "Zora Neale Hurston: Changing Her Own Words," in American Novelists Revisited: Essays in Feminist Criticism, ed. Fritz Fleischmann (Boston, 1982), 391-92.

the reserve, the separateness, the sanctity of the front yard of their grandmothers. It is like . . . [taking] . . . away the fence which, slight as it may be, is a fortification round your home. More things than one may come in without being asked; we Americans had better build more fences than take away from our lives."

Both writers perceive a loss directly related to ideological, economic, and political changes in American life and culture brought on by historical transition. Jewett refers to this transition as the "destroying left hand of progress" that altered late nineteenthcentury America by shifting the focus of experience away from rural agrarian areas to the rapidly expanding urban industrial centers.9 Her reservations about the shift toward modernization echo those of Henry Adams, who questioned "whether the American people knew where they were driving" and observed that "the new American . . . had turned his back on the nineteenth century . . . and had . . . accelerated . . . the . . . brutal consequence of crushing equally the good and the bad." For Morrison, the crucial years of transition were from 1930 to 1950, the period when vast numbers of black Americans migrated from the rural South to the cities of the North. Because she began writing in the 1960s, she surely was also influenced by the turbulence and uneasiness about the loss of roots that came with the press for integration during that period. 10 In the fiction of Jewett and Morrison there is an ambivalence toward the changes the larger culture viewed as "progress."

8. Francis O. Matthiesson, Sarah Orne Jewett (Boston, 1929), 31. Also see Annie Fields, ed., The Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett (Boston, 1911), 14-15, where Jewett comments on Longfellow's death and losses in general.

9. Susan Willis, "Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison," in Black American Literature, ed. Gates, 263-83; Sarah Orne Jewett, "The River Driftwood," in Deephaven and Other Stories, ed. Richard Cary (New Haven, 1966), 175. Subsequent references in the text are to this edition.

10. Henry Adams, The Education of Henry Adams (New York, 1931), 343, 349. See Jean Strouse, "Toni Morrison's Black Magic," Newsweek, March 30, 1981, pp. 52-57, for a discussion of how events of the 1960s influenced Morrison's fiction.

If this ambivalence seems both positive and negative, then one of the most striking characteristics of Jewett's and Morrison's fictional response to change is that though both writers clearly approve of progress in a general sense, they attempt to reclaim and affirm for fiction parts of their cultural heritage that society had begun to discard as irrelevant or marginal to the dominant national experience. Their efforts resemble a similar effort on the part of nineteenth-century New England poets who, according to Jay Martin,

helped to continue the past they could still remember into a future which, to most Americans, was as yet dim. They refused to threaten their culture with the new in literature, since Americans were, as they believed . . . too distracted by the new in life. Their values and aspirations, in a middle class American tradition, were consciously conserving, though not necessarily conservative. They were radical enough to be traditional in an age that has spattered tradition with the thin paints of wealth, technology, and science. They were conservators of culture.¹¹

Although radical is not a term customarily used to describe either Jewett or Morrison, it is appropriate in light of their commitment to affirm that significant cultural materials could be found in places where we least expect them.

Each writer might have followed the literary trends that captured the imaginations of their male contemporaries. Jewett might have written fiction that was more urbane, more cosmopolitan, in the vein of such writers as William Dean Howells and Henry James. 12 Morrison might have focused more directly on the racial

and economic oppression of the black urban experience as did such writers as James Baldwin, John A. Williams, and Imamu Baraka (LeRoi Jones). Instead, both Jewett and Morrison consciously chose to reclaim the rural and small-town experience that was being pushed aside or forgotten. As Louis Auchincloss notes in his study of Jewett and eight other American women novelists: "Our women writers . . . have struck a more affirmative note than the men. . . . They have a sharper sense of their stake in the national heritage, and they are always at work to preserve it." ¹³ In resisting change by affirming the value of cultural artifacts—the customs, manners, language, and stories of commonplace people in commonplace locales—these writers become caretakers or cultural archivists. Thus my first task in this book is to examine separately the historical and cultural contexts out of which Sarah Orne lewett and Toni Morrison wrote.

Because both perceive themselves as cultural archivists, they choose comparable materials as worthy for fiction. Though Jewett focuses on the rural villages of Maine and Morrison prefers small towns in the Midwest, both comparably depict isolated regional settings or villages and the folk who inhabit them. Of Jewett's fictional materials, Willa Cather remarks: "These stories . . . have much to do with fisher folk and seaside villages; with juniper pastures and lonely farms, neat gray country houses and delightful, well-seasoned old men and women. . . . Miss Jewett wrote of the people who grew out of the soil." Of her own fiction, Toni Morrison explains: "I write what I have recently begun to call village literature, fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe. Peasant literature for my people, which is necessary and legitimate but which also allows me to get in touch with all sorts of people."14 As these statements suggest, both writers not only select village settings but also the attendant mores, customs, beliefs,

^{11.} See Jay Martin, Harvests of Change: American Literature, 1865-1914 (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1967), 140-44, for a discussion of ambivalence toward progress and historical change in the fiction of New England regionalists. The quotation is on page 13.

^{12.} Perry D. Westbrook, Acres of Flint: Sarah Ome Jewett and Her Contemporaries (rev. ed., Metuchen, N.J., 1981), 4. In distinguishing Jewett from Howells and James, I am agreeing with Westbrook that Jewett's realism was more rural in its focus.

^{13.} Louis Auchincloss, Pioneers and Caretakers: A Study of Nine American Women Novelists (Minneapolis, 1961), 3.

^{14.} Willa Cather, preface to Country of the Pointed Firs, 8; Thomas Le Clair, "The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison," New Republic, March 2, 1981, p. 26.

and language that characterize these settings. And as I will demonstrate, central to each of their fictional projects was the desire to give voice to the unheard through their own oral traditions and narrative discourse.

Writing from an apparent moral imperative, Jewett and Morrison see themselves consciously reclaiming the folklore that their respective cultures either had lost or were about to lose in the wake of dramatic historical change. What occurs, then, is a marriage of their folk knowledge and sensibility to their artistic vision and narrative intention—a marriage that forms what I refer to as their folk aesthetic. 15 As cultural archivists, Jewett and Morrison write from a folk aesthetic that is much like the one that informs Ralph Ellison's theoretical assertion that folklore is the basis of all great literature:

For us [black Americans] the question should be, What are the specific forms of that humanity, and what in our background is worth preserving or abandoning. The clue to this can be found in folklore, which offers the first drawings of any group's character. It preserves mainly those situations which have repeated themselves again and again in the history of any given group. It describes those rites, manners, customs, and so forth, which insure the good life, or destroy it; and it describes those boundaries of feeling, thought and action which that particular group has found to be the limitation of the human condition. It projects this wisdom in symbols which express the group's will to survive. . . . These drawings may be crude but they are nonetheless profound in that they represent the group's attempt to humanize the world. It's no accident that great literature, the products of individual artists, is erected upon this humble base. 16

Although Ellison is specifically referring to the folk base of black literature, his statement captures the general essence of the folk aesthetic that determines both the substance and the structure of Jewett's and Morrison's narrative texts. Thus the second task of this study is to determine how their texts bear witness to their expressed narrative intentions and folk aesthetic.

Yet an examination of the texts themselves shows that these writers are more than mere archivists. They do more than simply collect what the larger culture has attempted to discard, negate. or marginalize. Indeed, they move beyond what Hazel Carby calls a "romantic evocation of the folk" to engage in a vigorous critique of the relationship between "the folk" and American culture. 17 By so doing, they implicitly and explicitly propose a revision of received notions of gender and class and, in Morrison's case, race as well. Jewett's fiction and Morrison's novels reveal that they both seek to challenge the culture's assumptions inscribed in the binary oppositions of rural versus urban people, of old versus young, of the values and traditions of the past versus those of the present, and of male versus female roles and experience. It becomes clear that the goal of their art is not to deny the importance of progress altogether but to challenge those who, in its name, would negate the values embodied in their folk aesthetic. That is, the goal of their art is to redeem or transform their cultures through narrative fiction. This constitutes the second important feature of their complex response to loss and historical change—i.e., they each assume another role, that of "redemptive scribe," a term Richard Cary coined to describe Jewett's determination "to correct the misimpression that native Mainers conformed in type to the caricatured Yankee of fiction." Jewett's conscious assumption of the role of redemptive scribe is apparent in her own formulation of her literary creed: "When I was, perhaps, fifteen, the first city boarders began to make their appearance near Berwick; and the

^{15.} Elmer Pry, "Folk-Literary Aesthetics in The Country of the Pointed Firs," Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin, XLIV (1978), 9-12. Pry's discussion of Jewett's folk literary aesthetics helped inspire my use of the term. I disagree with him that Pointed Firs is about the death of a community, but I do agree with his analysis of how folklore functions in the novel.

^{16.} Ellison, Shadow and Act, 172.

^{17.} Hazel Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist (New York, 1987), 175.

way they misconstrued the country people and made game of their peculiarities fired me with indignation. I determined to teach the world that country people were not the awkward, ignorant set those persons seemed to think. I wanted the world to know their grand, simple lives; and so far as I had a mission, when I first began to write, I think that was it." Inherent in Jewett's literary mission is her awareness of narrative's potential to instruct and inform.¹⁸

Morrison is also a redemptive scribe, for she too takes on a mission to correct a cultural misimpression. As she explains: "Critics generally don't associate black people with ideas. They see marginal people; they just see another story about black folks. They regard the whole thing as sociologically interesting perhaps but very parochial. There's a notion out in the land that there are human beings one writes about, and then there are black people or Indians or some other marginal group. If you write about the world from that point of view, somehow it is considered lesser. It's racist of course. . . . We are people, not aliens. We live, we love and we die." ¹⁹ Inherent in Morrison's statement is a desire not only to instruct and inform but to perform a kind of advocacy role, to defend the cultural integrity of her people from those who would perceive narratives about them as marginal and insignificant.

But the label redemptive scribe refers to more than the didactic intention of these writers' narrative fiction. It also refers to their desire to bring about cultural transformation. They object to or resist the presumption that the past cannot coexist with the present, that cultural disjunction or discontinuity is a given, that the past must be discarded in the name of progress. Sarah Orne Jewett

and Toni Morrison seek to transform the way their readers perceive the cultural difference of particular people and places as well as the way they interpret the relationship between the past and the present. Instead of emphasizing difference solely, they seek to affirm the value of both difference and resemblance. Instead of discontinuity and opposition between the past and the present, they seek to affirm synthesis, dialogue, and the continuation and survival of the past into the present.²⁰

Jewett and Morrison attempt to achieve cultural transformation in three significant ways that connect their roles as cultural archivists and redemptive scribes. First, they attempt to fill the cultural void that they perceive exists in the wake of historical transition. For Jewett, the void was in the lives of those Americans who did not appreciate the cultural wealth to be found in her native New England. For Morrison, the void is in the lives of those black Americans who seem to have lost the oral tradition of storytelling that once sustained a sense of community and enriched their lives. Hence the folk aesthetic in their fiction is a form of cultural intervention. Second, they attempt to endow commonplace people, places, and stories with the mythic grandeur and significance of archetypal narrative and ritual to redeem or rescue neglected literary material and the cultural values on which it is based. I refer to this dimension of their fiction as the mythic impulse. The

20. Rebecca Wall Nail, "Where Every Prospect Pleases: Sarah Orne Jewett, South Berwick, and the Importance of Place," in Critical Essays, ed. Nagel, 189. Nail points out that the country/city theme in Jewett's fiction becomes not a matter of opposition or a celebration or rejection, but rather one of dialogue. It seems to me that the same is true for the relationship between the past and the present in her work. Also see Josephine Donovan, Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions of American Feminism (New York, 1985), 132-33, for a brief discussion of how French feminists expand on theories of Jacques Derrida to object to such binary oppositions as past/present and country/city. There is a need to deconstruct such oppositions because they actually are a form of "hierarchization which assures the unique valorization of the 'positive' pole." I have chosen a deconstructionist approach to emphasize the dialogue and ambivalence that is inherent in the oppositions in Jewett and Morrison's fiction.

^{18.} Richard Cary, introduction to Deephaven and Other Stories, 10; Cary, ed., Sarah Orne Jewett Letters (Waterville, Maine, 1956), 19-20; also see Cary, Sarah Orne Jewett (New York, 1962), 12.

^{19.} Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," in Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation, ed. Marie Evans (New York, 1984), 121.

mythic impulse encompasses but is not limited to allusions to classical myth, fairy tale, and the supernatural. It incorporates myth as the "shifting reality" that Claude Lévi-Strauss and J. J. Bachofen remind us it is, but it nevertheless seems to converge around the concept of myth as a collection of stories or beliefs that orient audiences between their "natural" world and the "preternatural" world of possibility 21 Third, these writers attempt to

natural" world of possibility.²¹ Third, these writers attempt to make narrative a dynamic vehicle for preserving, transmitting, and reshaping the culture in affirmative ways that celebrate the past, that give continuity with the present, and that offer faith in human potential. This third form of transformation involves both writers' use of mythopoesis, the process that Toni Morrison de-

scribes as "dusting off the myth" for narrative use. But rather than mere mythical allusion, it involves accommodating mythic archetypes to modern realities and using myth as a "fully accredited mode of ordering human experience." ²²

Both writers seem to confirm Morrison's assertion that "narrative remains the best way to learn anything." ²³ This brings us to the third and most important task of this study, which is to show how lewett's and Morrison's folk aesthetic and the mythic

21. The definition of myth that I use here is derived from my readings in myth criticism and archetypal criticism. On myth, see Claude Lévi-Strauss, The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology, trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman (New York, 1969), 3; Johann Bachofen, Myth, Religion, and Mother Right: Selected Writings of J. J. Bachofen, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, 1967), 76; Richard Chase, The Quest for Myth (Baton Rouge, 1949), 97; Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces (Princeton, 1949), 382; Sir James Frazer, The Golden Bough (New York, 1951), 824-26; and Mircea Eliade, Myth and Reality (New York, 1963). On archetypal criticism see C. G. Jung, "The Psychological Function of Archetypes" and "The Principal Archetypes," in The Modern Tradition, ed. Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson, Jr. (New Haven, 1964), 648-59; and Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton, 1957), 131-239.

22. Both Jewett's and Morrison's mythic method (the term is Eliot's) approximates Chase's qualification of the term. See T. S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," Dial, LXXV (November, 1923), 480-83; Chase, Quest for Myth, 131, 107; Morrison quoted in Le Clair, "Language Must Not Sweat," 26-27.

23. Le Clair, "Language Must Not Sweat," 26.

impulse operate through narrative to reclaim and affirm cultural difference, to challenge cultural and literary norms, and to demonstrate the dynamic process by which their readers and respective cultures might be transformed. ²⁴ In other words, my thesis is that the fusion of the folk aesthetic and the mythic impulse reveals that narrative in the fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison serves a cultural function meant to validate people and places that have been devalued and to offer cultural affirmation of these people and places as a prescription for healing and transforming American culture. Toni Morrison's assertion that the "novel is an art form designed to tell people something they didn't know" suggests that narrative also reminds us of our essential need for a way to make meaning of our individual and collective lives. ²⁵

Although a concept so basic to human experience as narrative might not ordinarily need definition, the ongoing debate within various disciplines on the "problem of narrative" requires some definition.²⁶ Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg define narrative as a literary work distinguished by the presence of a story and a storyteller. It is at the same time a complex process involving four

^{24.} Peter Brooks, Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative (New York, 1984), xii-xiii.

^{25.} Morrison, "Rootedness," 340. Also see Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in On Narrative, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago, 1980), 1; and Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales (New York, 1977), 3-19.

^{26.} On Narrative, ed. Mitchell, vii. My view of narrative is somewhat eclectic because I feel that narrative study has benefited from the plethora of interdisciplinary scholarship, which has enabled us to see connections between narrative, history, folklore, myth, fairy tale, and psychoanalysis. My understanding of these interconnections colors my interpretation of how these writers use narrative. Useful sources on narrative theory include Barbara H. Smith, "Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories," in On Narrative, ed. Mitchell, 209-32; Roy Schafer, "Narrative in the Psychoanalytic Dialogue," ibid., 25-49; Robert A. Georges, "Toward an Understanding of Storytelling Events," Journal of American Folklore, XXVIII (1969), 313-28; Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics (New York, 1983); Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, The Nature of Narrative (New York, 1966); and Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory (Minneapolis, 1983).

interconnected elements: the story or what is narrated, the storyteller or narrator, the audience (whether it be listener or reader), and the act of storytelling or narrating. Hayden White reminds us that narrative, narration, and to narrate all derive from the same Latin and Sanskrit roots that mean knowing, to tell, knowable, and known. This etymological perspective is extremely suggestive of how I use the term narrative here, for I mean two different things at once. First, narrative is a story of complex structure consisting of cultural signs—a network of meanings, events, people, places, and things. Second, it is a dynamic process of storytelling as interaction and communication among the interconnected elements of tale, teller, and audience. None of these elements is passive or independent of the others. Instead, as Gerard Genette argues, they are interrelated in narrative discourse. Storytelling as an active process connects the tale with the teller, the teller with the audience, and even the tale with the audience. Like Yeats's dance and dancer, it is difficult to isolate one from the other because together they form an aesthetic whole. Keeping this aesthetic whole in mind, I will primarily use narrative synonymously with storytelling and story. Related to this definition is the special function narrative serves in the fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison. For both writers narrative is a means of affirming the identity of those whose stories have been untold or unheard; it provides information to those seeking knowledge; and it provides healing, transformation, and coherence for the self and the community. Perhaps more important, their fiction helps us see narrative "holistically," as recent poststructuralist critics recommend: as an event in which neither the narrator/teller, nor the story/text, nor the audience/listener is a static entity.27 Instead, all are subject to various transformations during the storytelling event.

My understanding of these transformations has been greatly helped by recent theoretical perspectives on what Freudian psychoanalysis can teach us about narrative. We traditionally think of narrative as a storytelling event in which a narrator simply recounts a set of happenings. Peter Brooks reminds us that narrative as storytelling is "remembering, repeating and working through." But Roy Schafer's essay on the psychoanalytic dialogue informs us that what is recounted is not a static record but the "present version of the past" in which clarification comes "through the circular and coordinated study of past and present." Thus the narrative as story is in a sense always being transformed. Implicit in this exchange, however, according to Schafer, is the transformation of the narrator, who, in psychoanalytic terms, is "moving forward into new modes of constructing experience." And as recent reader-response criticism reveals, the audience as reader or listener is also transformed in the storytelling event. Wolfgang Iser explains that the reader's "active participation" in the text results in discovery of a "new reality through a fiction which, at least in part, is different from the world he or she . . . is used to; and [of] the deficiencies inherent in prevalent norms and in his or her own restricted behavior." 28 Thus the listener or reader of a narrative is "moving forward in a new mode of constructing experience" and is also thereby transformed.

A network of transformations thus occurs in any given storytelling event. My reading of Jewett and Morrison suggests that these writers were keenly aware of the power of narrative discourse to work these transformations. As cultural archivists, they seem consciously to present situations in which the oral tradition of telling stories is central to the well-being and survival of the

^{27.} Scholes and Kellogg, Nature of Narrative, 4; White, "Value of Narrativity," 1; Gerard Genette, Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, 1980), 25-32; Chase, Quest for Myth, 106-107; Georges, "Storytelling Events," 327.

^{28.} Brooks, Reading for the Plot, 111; Schafer, "Psychoanalytic Dialogue," 32-33; Wolfgang Iser, The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett (Baltimore, 1974), xii-xiii. See also Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman, eds., The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation (Princeton, 1980); and Jane P. Thompkins, Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism (Baltimore, 1980).

self and of the community. As redemptive scribes, they also seem to suggest that through their narrative texts they could ultimately transform American culture. Indeed, Walter Benjamin's lament about the apparent lack of interest in the oral tradition seems to reflect Jewett's and Morrison's concerns: "The art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. . . . It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences." Essentially, both writers remind us of the significant role oral narrative once played in the human story, and they offer their sketches, short stories, and novels as means of filling the void and of perpetuating the "continua of human communication." 29

In their concern with reclaiming the oral tradition and with using narrative fiction for cultural affirmation and transformation, Jewett and Morrison create American counterparts to the African griots—those village storytellers whom author Alex Haley says "symbolize how all human ancestry goes back to some place, some time where there was no writing. Then, the memories and the mouths of ancient elders was the only way that early history of mankind got passed along." Thus Mrs. Todd in Pointed Firs and Pilate in Song of Solomon are not just mythic priestesses; as bearers of folk culture, they are also griot figures. In Jewett's Deephaven (1877), as the narrator and her friend walk through the village burying ground, the narrator reflects, "We often used to notice names and learn history from the old people whom we knew and in this way we heard many stories which we never shall forget." The link that Jewett makes between the old people of the village and learning the history of a place is similar to the link Morrison makes between the presence of an elder and that figure's "conscious historical connection" with the village or community. Morrison contends that one of the distinctive elements of AfroAmerican writing is that "there is always an elder there. And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the character are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom." She goes on to assert that the presence or absence of that figure determined the success or happiness of the character. 30

The griot, then, mediates between the self and the community. Perhaps the words of one of the other Dunnet Landing elders in Pointed Firs, Mrs. Fosdick, best summarizes the value of the griot figure and the oral narratives she shares: "It does seem so pleasant to talk with an old acquaintance that knows what you know. I see so many of these new folks nowadays, that seem to have neither past nor future. Conversation's got to have some root in the past, or else you've got to explain every remark you make, an' it wears a person out" (58). Mrs. Fosdick's comment suggests that there may be no meaningful future for new folks who have no roots in the past. The griot, however, does not mindlessly recount the past. Instead, the griot has a similar role to that Morrison claims for her novels: to "clarify the roles that have been obscured . . . to identify those things in the past that are useful and those . . . that are not; and . . . to give nourishment."31

In sum, this study will focus on narrative as both story and storytelling that operates in the texts of Sarah Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison as a sign of their conscious fictional choices, many of which challenge accepted ideas about women, literature, and commonplace people and places; as a series of storytelling events that recover and reconstruct the past; and ultimately, as a vehicle that can best enable the various audiences within the text, the reader, and the culture at large to be transformed.³² Moreover, it

^{29.} Benjamin quoted in José Limon, "Western Marxism and Folklore: A Critical Introduction," Journal of American Folklore, XCVI (1983), 34-52; Georges, "Storytelling Events," 327.

^{30.} Alex Haley, acknowledgments to Roots: The Sage of an American Family (Garden City, N.Y., 1976), viii; Jewett, Deephaven, 66; Morrison, "Rootedness," 343.

^{31.} Le Clair, "Language Must Not Sweat," 26.

^{32.} See Brooks, Reading for the Plot, 321, for the use of narrative in psychoanalysis to recover and reconstruct the past.

will show that this use of narrative is achieved through a folk aesthetic and mythic impulse that informs the fiction of both writers. As an index to their artistic vision and narrative intention, the folk aesthetic will be discussed in terms of how it reconstructs the folk community through vernacular language and expressions; how it represents the oral traditions of storytelling and gossip; how it focuses on the value of female experience; and how it affirms commonplace rather than middle-class values.33 As an index to the desire of both Jewett and Morrison to endow everyday people, places, and things with a larger-than-life quality, the mythic impulse appears in allusions to classical myth (and in Morrison's case, African-American and classical myth); in modern reconstructions of myths to express desire, transcendence, wish-fulfillment and freedom; in mythic patterns of questing, ceremony, and ritual; and in poetic dramatizations of the intersection of the real and the supernatural.

Although others have acknowledged some elements of myth and folklore in the fiction of these two writers, little attention has been given to how the folk aesthetic and mythic impulse fuse in their works or to what this fusion achieves for their fiction.³⁴

I will attempt to pull these elements together for each writer separately and to suggest that Jewett's and Morrison's fiction reveals similar narrative intentions and aesthetic visions. Such an approach, based on a close reading of selected texts, can offer a new wav of connecting separate strands of American culture and literary expression. In her familiar but often undervalued study The Roots of American Culture, Constance Rourke calls attention to the need for writers and critics alike to bring new approaches to the American landscape. As she puts it: "A prodigious amount of work is still to be done in the way of unearthing, defining, and synthesizing our traditions, and finally in making them known through simple and natural means. Beneath this purpose must probably lie fresh constructions of our notion as to what constitutes a culture, with a removal of ancient snobberies and with new inclusions."35 Even after four decades, her words are still prophetic, though recent scholarship, especially in feminist and black literary criticism, has begun the unearthing and synthesis she calls for. The connections and reconstructions that I present in this cross-cultural study make a possible new paradigm for opening the canon of literary criticism to include other studies of how black and white women writers use folklore, myth, and narrative in their fiction.

Although I argue that myth and folklore constitute an important critical matrix in Sarah Orne Jewett's and Toni Morrison's use of narrative, I also recognize that neither writer is independent of other literary contexts. Rather, for both of them realism is the other important critical matrix.³⁶ Ironically, this generic identifi-

^{33.} See Pry, "Folk-Literary Aesthetics," 8, for his list of ways folklore functions in *Pointed Firs*.

^{34.} On the use of myth and folklore in Jewett, see Pry, "Folk-Literary Aesthetics"; Ammons, "Jewett's Witches"; Theodore R. Hovet, "Once Upon a Time: Sarah Orne Jewett's 'A White Heron' as a Fairy Tale," Studies in Short Fiction, XV (1978), 63-68; and Sarah Sherman, "Victorians and the Matriarchal Mythology: A Source for Mrs. Todd," Colby Library Quarterly, XXII (1986), 63-74. Sherman's more recent study, Sarah Orne Jewett: An American Persephone (Hanover, 1989), offers an excellent comprehensive analysis of Jewett's use of myth and traces Jewett's interest in the Demeter-Persephone myth to Walter Pater and her mentor and friend Annie Fields. For Morrison, see Cynthia A. Davis, "Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction," Contemporary Literature, XXIII (1982), 333-42; Grace Ann Hovet and Barbara Lounsberry, "Flying as Symbol and Legend in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, Sula, and Song of Solomon," CLA Journal, XXVII (December, 1983), 119-40; de Weever, "Toni Morrison's Use of Fairy Tale"; Leslie A. Harris, "Myth as Structure in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon," MELUS, VII (1980), 69-82; and Morrison, "Rootedness." 339-45.

^{35.} Rourke, Roots of American Culture, 295.

^{36.} Critical Essays, ed. Nagel, 1. Useful sources on American literary realism and local color include Edwin H. Cady, The Road to Realism: The Early Years (1837–1885) of William Dean Howells (Syracuse, 1956); Josephine Donovan, New England Local Color Literature: A Woman's Tradition (New York, 1983); Ann Douglas Wood, "The Literature of Impoverishment: The Women Local Colorists in America, 1865–1914," Women's Studies, I (1972), 3–46; Gwen L. Nagel, ed., Sarah Orne Jewett: A Reference Guide (Boston, 1978); and Warner Berthoff, The Ferment of Realism: American Literature, 1884–1919 (New York, 1965).

cation is qualified in similar ways for both. Jewett's term imaginative realism is very similar to the magical realism so often applied to Morrison.³⁷ Although the inclusion of folk materials may initially signal a reductive mimetic realism to some readers, both of these qualifications of the genre suggest how the fiction of each writer surpassed the limitations of realism as a literary convention. Josephine Donovan's assertion that for Jewett the term "suggests a dimension beyond the real" echoes William Dean Howells' early praise for her ability to imbue her sketches "with a true feeling for the ideal within the real." In one of her letters, Jewett comments on the meaning of the term imaginative realism: "You bring something to the reading of a story that the story would go very lame without; but it is those unwritable things that the story holds in its heart; if it has any, that make the true soul of it, and these must be understood, and yet how many a story goes lame for the lack of understanding." The term is also implied in an entry in her diary in 1871 that expresses what was to become one of the most important tenets of her literary credo: "Father said this one day, 'A story should be managed so that it should suggest interesting things to the reader instead of the author's doing all the thinking for him, and setting it before him in black and white. The best compliment is for the reader to say "why didn't he put in 'this' or 'that.'"' 38

Morrison expresses a related concern for the reader when she explains that she seeks to "provide the places and spaces so that

the reader can participate." But in another statement Morrison more precisely describes her form of realism: "I . . . blend the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other. It is indicative of the cosmology, the way in which Black people look at the world. We are very practical people, very down-to-earth, even shrewd people. But within that practicality we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things." On one hand, Morrison's blend of African-American cosmology and epistemology calls traditional definitions of realism into question and reveals how her use of the convention differs from lewett's. On the other hand, Morrison's words remind us that all definitions of realism are shaped by complex ideological, historical, and cultural contingencies of value that blur commonplace distinctions between what is real and what is not. 39

Yet lewett's blend of the "ideal within the real" and Morrison's suffusion of magic over a "rootedness in the real world" are representative of how the use of realism connects these two writers. In fact, the very nature of these two forms of realism makes possible the fusion of the folk aesthetic and mythic impulse. They also remind us of the two maxims of Gustave Flaubert that inspired Jewett's literary creed, which instruct the writer "to write everyday life as one writes history" and "not to make one laugh, but to act the way nature does—that is, to make one dream." Ironically, as Louis Renza points out, because of the conditions that determined women's cultural production at the end of the nineteenth century Jewett had to mediate her desire to write "life as one writes history" against a complex set of historical relations and literary conventions that worked against the literary ambitions of women writers. Hence the "unwritable things" of her fiction are as significant to this study as those that are explicitly inscribed in her texts. 40

^{37.} Fields, ed., Letters of Jewett, 112, and Cary, ed., Jewett Letters, 69. Also see Jean Boggia-Sola, "The Poetic Realism of Sarah Orne Jewett," Colby Library Quarterly, VII (1965), 74-81. In R. Z. Sheppard's review of the book Conversations with American Writers by Charles Ruas, "Quiet Please, Writers Talking," is a reference to Morrison's attempt "to evoke black history with the techniques of magic realism" (Time, December 24, 1984, pp. 68-69). Also see Skerrett, "Recitation to the Griot," 192, and Dorothy H. Lee, "Song of Solomon: To Ride the Air," Black American Literature Forum, XVI (1982), 64-70. Morrison herself, however, has never used this term to describe her fiction.

^{38.} W. D. Howells, "Review of Deephaven," in Critical Essays, ed. Nagel, 25-26 (also see Josephine Donovan, Sarah Orne Jewett [New York, 1980], 134-35); Fields, ed., Letters of Jewett, 112; Caty, ed., Jewett Letters, 60.

^{39.} Quoted in Donovan, Jewett, 4; Morrison, "Rootedness," 341-42.

^{40.} Fields, ed., Letters of Jewett, 165; Martin, Harvests of Change, 147-48. Louis A. Renza, "A White Heron" and the Question of Minor Literature (Madison, 1984),