

“The White Heron” - Summary and Analysis

Summary

Sylvia, a nine-year-old girl, is leading her wayward cow, Mistress Moolly, home. She lives on a farm with her grandmother, Mrs. Tilley. Mrs. Tilley took Sylvia in as her town home was too busy, and Sylvia was ‘afraid of folks.’ Sylvia has become part of the natural environment and feels at home in this ‘beautiful place’. Her grandmother acknowledges Sylvia’s kinship with the creatures around her.

Sylvia is startled by a ‘boy’s whistle’, then approached by a ‘stranger’. He is a hunter who shoots birds for his collection. He is looking for a place to stay while he tries to locate a white heron. Sylvia reluctantly takes him to her grandmother, harbouring a sense of foreboding at his presence.

The hunter is very gracious and polite. He is impressed with the modest farmhouse, referring to it as a ‘hermitage’. Having been told by Mrs. Tilley that Sylvia has an affinity with animals, he offers \$10 to be given the location of the heron.

Sylvia warms to the ‘handsome stranger’, and he gives her a jack-knife as a gift. She is unsettled by the fact that he kills what he seems to love – the birds. However, she has ‘lost her first fear of the friendly lad.’

Sylvia resolves the next morning to locate the heron’s whereabouts by climbing a giant pine tree. As she climbs the tree, she becomes at one with the birds around her, feeling ‘as if she too could go flying away among the clouds.’

The story changes narrative perspective as Sylvia sees the heron’s nesting place. Her natural instinct overcomes the appeal of the money and the hunter, and forces Sylvia to keep the birds’ secret: she cannot ‘give its life away.’

The narrator gives the opinion that Sylvia has shown herself worthy of keeping the secrets of nature, and is better off with her life as it is, rather than following her stirring womanly desires.

Analysis

The story has an ominous beginning in terms of Jewett’s use of pathetic fallacy-‘The woods were already filled with shadows’. This tone does not seem to influence Sylvia, the main character, who is naively

leading her cow home. Her youth and innocence are emphasised by her relaxed nature- 'Sylvia had all the time there was.'

We appreciate her joy at being taken from the busy town based family to be with her grandmother at a country farm. The young girl is energised and transformed by the experience: '...It seemed as if she had never been alive at all before she came to live at the farm. We see Sylvia as a pantheistic figure, gently attuned to the creatures around her –

'...she listened to the thrushes with a heart that beat fast with pleasure'. Sylvia's affinity is closest to that of the birds, which foreshadows the ending of the story where she will choose their privacy over her human desires.

An 'enemy' breaks the blissful solitude of Sylvia with her animal friends. This emotive word is used to describe the other human force present. He is carrying a gun, instantly symbolising his focus on destruction. The reader is shocked into the present tense, mirroring Sylvia's surprise and horror at the interloper to her pastoral scene, 'a boy's whistle, determined and somewhat aggressive.'

The stranger reveals he has been hunting for birds and has become lost. He tells Sylvia he is looking for a place to stay. Sylvia is struck by his alien nature and is very wary of him. She seems to be better attuned than her grandmother is at this point to appreciate the danger such a visitor could bring. He is invited to stay, and is impressed with the 'clean and comfortable little dwelling.' He is also intrigued by Sylvia, interpreting her grandmother's assertions for Sylvia's affinity with nature for his own destructive ends;

'the wild creatures counts her one o' themselves.'

'So Sylvie knows all about birds, does she?'

Mrs. Tilley's dialect is endearing and contrasts with the diction of the stranger. This lack of understanding between Mrs. Tilley and the young man is symbolic of the difference between the town and country dwellers. The stranger believes that he has a love of birds. He shows this, however, by killing and stuffing them- 'dozens and dozens of them...and I have shot or snared every one myself.' The stranger is a hunter, a collector. Sylvia is the real lover of birds, 'She would have liked him vastly better without his gun; she could not understand why he killed the very birds he seemed to like so much.'

The 'enemy' becomes 'the handsome stranger' as the day passes. We see the allusions to fairy tale construction as the stranger offers ten dollars to locate a heron he would like for his collection,'... he

turned again to look at Sylvia with the hope of discovering that the rare bird was one of her acquaintances.

But Sylvia was watching a hop-toad in the narrow footpath.'

Sylvia still has more regard for her animal companions than this new person.

The 'young sportsman' bewitches Sylvia and presents her with a jack-knife as a gift, 'which she thought as great a treasure as if she were a desert-islander.' The knife is symbolic of him attempting to get her to understand and accept his destructive ways.

We witness the first stirrings of attraction in Sylvia as she is drawn to the young man-

'...the woman's heart, asleep in the child, was vaguely thrilled by a dream of love.' Sylvia wanders the woods with the stranger, in a way strangely reminiscent of her namesake from Shakespeare's *Two Gentleman of Verona* (1594). In Shakespeare's play, Sylvia is in love with Valentine and follows him relentlessly. In 'A White Heron', Sylvia has been asked to guide the stranger to the heron, yet, she remains under his control-

'...she did not lead the guest, she only followed.'

In Part II of the story, Sylvia is excited at the prospect of revealing the whereabouts of the heron to the stranger. She tries to climb the great old pine, which will give her an unparalleled view of the forest. Sylvia becomes bird like climbing the great pine, as indicated by the following simile-'with her bare feet and fingers that inched and held like bird's claws to the monstrous ladder.'

As Sylvia continues to climb the tree, it also adopts birdlike qualities. It appears that the tree becomes a bird of prey, restraining Sylvia from reaching the top of the tree; 'the sharp, dry twigs caught and held her and scratched her like angry talons.' The anthropomorphism used here unites Sylvia with her surroundings, creating parallels to the Romantic writings of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in their *Lyrical Ballads*. Sylvia is at one with her environment, and though the tree challenges her, it supports her too; 'More than all the hawks, and bats, and moths, and even the sweet-voiced thrushes, was the brave, healing heart of the solitary gray-eyed child.' Gray as a colour is symbolic of Sylvia's blurring between the world of innocence – white, and the world of experience – black. The gray eyes of Sylvia also closely identify her to the birds with 'their gray feathers as soft as moths' and further

bind her to the natural world. She sees the hawks flying around the tree, and has an instant connection with them, 'Sylvia felt as if she too could go flying away among the clouds.'

The exuberance of Sylvia is made immediate here as the narrative again shifts in to the present tense. The audience is addressed as if we are Sylvia, making the emotions immediate and intense, 'Now look down again, Sylvia, where...you saw the white heron once.' We see a contrast with how Sylvia is gracefully integrated in to her natural environment and how the young man now sees her. His perspective, though still expressed through the third person, shows us the inner contempt he has for Sylvia, and makes it clear to us the reader that he is only motivated by his desire for the heron, not Sylvia. She is seen as, 'paler than ever, and her worn old frock is torn and tattered, and smeared with pine pitch.' It is likely that Sylvia sees that she is not of his world any more, as she has left the town without regret. She contemplates the attractions of his world; 'He can make them rich with money; he has promised it, and they are poor now.' It is worth noting that Jewett qualifies the word 'rich' by adding the words 'with money'. This implies that there is richness, that of quality of life, which Sylvia already has.

Although part of her wishes to make the young man happy, she chooses to protect the bird instead. This indicates to the reader that she is, on reflection, content with her life amongst the animals, and the young man is unable to tempt her away. There is a cynical tone to Jewett's narrative here as Sylvia contemplates what she has lost in not helping the young man; noting that she could 'have served and followed him and loved him as a dog does.' The use of the 'dog' simile indicates unconditional obedience rather than a balanced relationship. The animal simile may have been appropriate in Sylvia's imagination, but the idea of a dog also suggests domesticity, which does not fit with the wild natural spirit we see in Sylvia.

Jewett invites us to contemplate whether Sylvia made the right decision; 'Were the birds better friends than their hunter might have been, - who can tell?' The implication is that Sylvia is indeed better off without the hunter seeking his prey, which she could all too easily have become.