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0521426022 - New Essays on The Country of the Pointed Firs

Edited by June Howard

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The American Novel series provides students of American literature with introductory critical guides to the great works of American literature. Each volume begins with a substantial introduction by a distinguished authority on the text, giving details of the work's composition, publication history, and contemporary reception, as well as a survey of the major critical trends and readings from first publication to the present. This overview is followed by a group of new essays, each specially commissioned from a leading scholar in the field, which together constitute a forum of interpretative methods and prominent contemporary ideas on the text. There are also helpful guides to further reading. Specifically designed for undergraduates, the series will be a powerful resource for anyone engaged in the critical analysis of major American novels and other important texts.

Feminist literary criticism has fundamentally revised our understanding of Sarah Orne Jewett and *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. What Jewett's place in American literature will be at the end of the twentieth century remains to be seen, however, and the essays in this volume offer a radically new view of her significance. Building on feminist analyses of Jewett's role in the female literary culture of her day, the distinctive formal qualities of her fiction, and the importance of her subject matter, the essays also historicize Jewett's work in the frames of reference that have emerged as important in recent critical study. Most strikingly, they reveal how deeply racialized and nationalist are the categories through which Jewett – as a participant in the culture industry and a highly successful writer negotiating gendered institutions – constructs her local solidarities. The currently received ways of understanding Jewett – as a regionalist and as a woman writer – are unified in an account of her involvement in the process through which a national culture was constructed at the turn of the century. Less celebratory than feminist criticism of Jewett has been so far, the essays in this volume are nevertheless deeply respectful of her craft and seriousness. As a group they present the most historically informed and critically appreciative readings of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* published to date.

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★ The American Novel ★

GENERAL EDITOR

Emory Elliott
 University of California, Riverside

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June Howard

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521415743

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First published 1994

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

New essays on The country of the pointed firs / edited by June Howard.

p. cm. – (The American novel)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-521-41574-8 (hc). – ISBN 0-521-42602-2 (pb)

1. Jewett, Sarah Orne, 1849–1909. Country of the pointed firs.
2. Women and literature – United States – History – 19th century.
3. Maine – In literature. I. Howard, June. II. Series.

PS2132.C643N48 1994

813'.4 – dc20

93-33810

CIP

ISBN-13 978-0-521-41574-3 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-41574-8 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-42602-2 paperback

ISBN-10 0-521-42602-2 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2006

Cambridge University Press

0521426022 - New Essays on The Country of the Pointed Firs

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Series Editor's Preface

In literary criticism the last twenty-five years have been particularly fruitful. Since the rise of the New Criticism in the 1950s, which focused attention of critics and readers upon the text itself – apart from history, biography, and society – there has emerged a wide variety of critical methods which have brought to literary works a rich diversity of perspectives: social, historical, political, psychological, economic, ideological, and philosophical. While attention to the text itself, as taught by the New Critics, remains at the core of contemporary interpretation, the widely shared assumption that works of art generate many different kinds of interpretation has opened up possibilities for new readings and new meanings.

Before this critical revolution, many American novels had come to be taken for granted by earlier generations of readers as having an established set of recognized interpretations. There was a sense among many students that the canon was established and that the larger thematic and interpretative issues had been decided. The task of the new reader was to examine the ways in which elements such as structure, style, and imagery contributed to each novel's acknowledged purpose. But recent criticism has brought these old assumptions into question and has thereby generated a wide variety of original, and often quite surprising, interpretations of the classics, as well as of rediscovered novels such as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, which has only recently entered the canon of works that scholars and critics study and that teachers assign their students.

The aim of *The American Novel* series is to provide students of American literature and culture with introductory critical guides to

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Series Editor's Preface

American novels now widely read and studied. Each volume is devoted to a single novel and begins with an introduction by the volume editor, a distinguished authority on the text. The introduction presents details of the novel's composition, publication history, and contemporary reception, as well as a survey of the major critical trends and readings from first publication to the present. This overview is followed by four or five original essays, specifically commissioned from senior scholars of established reputation and from outstanding younger critics. Each essay presents a distinct point of view, and together they constitute a forum of interpretative methods and of the best contemporary ideas on each text.

It is our hope that these volumes will convey the vitality of current critical work in American literature, generate new insights and excitement for students of the American novel, and inspire new respect for and new perspectives upon these major literary texts.

Emory Elliott
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