

# “The Queen’s Twin”: Sarah Orne Jewett’s Material Feminist Interpretation

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**Abstract:** Material feminism, proposed by Stacy Alaimo, is another ecological critique theory put forward by female scholars following ecofeminism. It combines feminist theory with materiality, nature, and the body. This paper analyzes the natural imagery in “The Queen’s Twin” by Sarah Orne Jewett, such as the “land,” “alders,” “the queen’s pictures,” and “Mrs. Martin’s house,” to elucidate concepts of material feminism like the agency of nature and trans-corporeality. It highlights the agency of non-human and inanimate materials. The natural materials portrayed by Jewett make us understand that nature is not merely an object to be controlled by humans; they have their own thoughts and actions, capable of influencing humans. The queen’s pictures and Mrs. Martin’s house acts freely within the “trans-corporeal space” constructed by Jewett, subtly directing Mrs. Martin’s daily life.

**Keywords:** “The Queen’s Twin”; Material Feminism; The agency of nature; Trans-corporeality

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## 1. Introduction

Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1909) was a renowned American local colorist in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Currently, researches on Jewett’s works, both at home and abroad, mainly focus on her *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) and *A Country Doctor* (1884). Scholars have primarily interpreted her works through lenses such as feminism and ecocriticism. In contrast, there has been relatively less attention given to “The Queen’s Twin” in literary criticism. At present, no research papers on “The Queen’s Twin” have been found in CNKI, and only two foreign related papers have been found. Domestic research on “The Queen’s Twin” remains insufficient, and this short story contains deeper meanings and implications, which await further discovery and interpretation by scholars.

Feminist criticism underwent a linguistic and cultural shift in the 1980s, and entering the 21st century, it saw a material turn in feminist discourse. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman compiled *Material Feminism* (2014), which elucidates “the significance and role of materiality in the formation of nature, body, and gender” (Fang, 2017), giving rise to the concept of material feminism. Introduced by Alaimo, material feminism integrates feminism with materiality, nature, and the body. Most feminist theories have transitioned “woman” from the realm of Nature to Culture. Simone de Beauvoir, for instance, explored the condition of women through biology, psychoanalysis, and existential philosophy, asserting that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces the creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine” (Beauvoir, 1956: 273). Material feminism, like ecofeminist criticism, ties women to nature; however, ecofeminism views nature as “an Other without discourse and an object to be conquered and ruled in the history of Western civilization” (Jin, 2004). In contrast, material feminism posits that “nature is an agency with material-discursive practices” (Fang, 2017). Alaimo introduces the concept of agency of nature—the idea that nature is an active subject, akin to Carolyn Merchant’s view that nature is “a free, autonomous actor,” “just as humans are free autonomous agents” (Merchant, 1996: 221). Autonomous agents implies that nature is “as a sovereign entity rather than a resource for unbridled consumption” (Alaimo, 2008: 246). Another key concept of material feminism is “trans-corporeality”: “by emphasizing the movement across bodies, trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between human corporeality and the more-than-human.” (Alaimo, 2008: 238). Alaimo terms this mode of interaction “trans-corporeality,” illustrating the inseparable and interactive relationship between human bodies and the nonhuman. This paper employs material feminism to analyze “The Queen’s Twin,” so as to reveal the embedded material feminist ideas in the work and thereby reflect the high harmony between women and nature, as well as the active role of matter on humans. “The Queen’s Twin” tells the story of “I” as a summer visitor, accompanying Mrs. Todd to visit Mrs. Abby Martin, and recording their observations and Mrs. Abby Martin’s experiences during the visit. The narrative of the natural surroundings allows readers to vividly feel the power of nature—nature is not merely a passive receiver but actively responds to and influences humans. Except describing

the natural environment, the book portrays things such as Indian paths, Mrs. Martin's house, and a picture of Queen Victoria, which lead her to develop a whimsical fascination with the Queen.

## 2. Vicissitudes of the Environment: Agency of Nature

The depiction of the environment occupies a significant part in "The Queen's Twin". The story begins with a portrayal of the rise and fall of Dunnet Landing, a seaside town in Maine. It not only serves as the natural backdrop of the town but also is an important "member" influencing the lives of its residents. During its prosperous times, "they [the sea captains] knew not only Thomaston and Castine and Portland, but London and Bristol and Bordeaux, and the strange-mannered harbors of the China Sea" (Jewett, 1994: 493). However, during its declining years, the younger generation, especially men, have left for larger cities to seek their fortunes. Those who remain are mostly women, particularly elderly widows, shouldering the pressures of life alone, facing hardships and loneliness. Similarly characterized by their agency are the undeveloped lands, alders, and farms that resist human domestication and operate on their own ways.

In the story, the seaside and the land are no longer inert things, but rather active entities with agency. Barad argues that "agency is cut loose from its traditional humanist orbit. Agency is not aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity." (Barad, 2008: 144). Agency dismantles the boundaries between nature and culture, erasing the division between human and non-human, allowing non-human matters to assume subject positions. "Nature is neither a passive surface awaiting the mark of culture nor the end product of cultural performances." (Barad, 2008:145). Alaimo's material feminism draws from Barad's notion of agency, giving subject status to non-human matters, highlighting their autonomy, and challenging the stereotypes of passive nature.

In the story, natural matters possess agency, influencing the town residents. The "land" of the town has its own mode of performance: when humans attempt to cultivate and settle, it appears barren and unyielding; yet when they depart, dense forests of firs and balsams independently grow. Witnessing this spectacle, even Mrs. Todd remarks, "She'll do her own ploughin' an' harrowin' with frost an' wet, an' plant just what she wants and wait for her own crops. Man can't do nothin' with it" (500). The "land" is no longer merely an object for cultivation but an actor, directly influencing and determining human survival and departure, making humans seem weak and insignificant, and humans may have a feel of "a sudden fear of the unconquerable, immediate forces of Nature" (501). The "land" doesn't intend to dispossess humans but warns them to adapt to its own ways of action. It might appear infertile and frail, unsuitable for cultivation, or turn to a prosperous and fertile side. It must be handled according to the "land's" will rather than human desire, deciding human settlement and production.

In contrast to the "land," which acts according to its own will without causing much harm to humans, the "alders" appear somewhat unruly and difficult to approach. The narrator doesn't directly depict the untamed nature of the "alders," but rather illustrates their agency through Mrs. Todd's account of the women of Asa Bowden family in distress: "they'd strayed at last into a kind of low place amongst some alders, an' one of 'em was so overset she never got over it, an' went off in a sort o' slow decline" (501). While Mrs. Todd regards the woods as homey and safe, the "alders" aren't to be casually invaded or exploited. Like humans, they react strongly to intruders, instilling threat and deterrence. The "alders" thus become a formidable agent that profoundly influences humans.

The "land" and "alders" in the story are agents, influencing residents to continually adapt their ways of life. Human's exploration, alteration, and attempts to conquer these matters, and their resistance to such efforts, drive the story forward. From the families intending to settle in the land to Asa Bowden's women gathering berries in the alders, the story vividly depicts the agency of the "land" and "alders." The land resists cultivation while the alders entrap the women, showcasing their formidable power.

However, Jewett portrays the inscrutable "land" and the inviolable "alders" not to diminish human's understanding and control over natural matters, but rather to illustrate that non-human matters possess their own will and agency. At the same time, she underscores that human cognition and mastery of nature are not limitless, urging awareness of environmental risks and the responsibility to adhere to natural laws. From this perspective, Jewett's narratives of natural materials resonate with Alaimo's material feminism, both emphasizing the caution against reckless human imposition when transforming and utilizing natural resources. Instead, they advocate for recognizing potential environmental pollution and natural disasters.

## 3. Trans-Corporeal Connection between Queen Victoria and Mrs. Martin

In the text, Mrs. Martin and Queen Victoria share many similarities: they were born on the same day; both married men named Albert; and they both experienced the loss of a child. Melissa Solomon considers these deliberate coincidences as a "lesbian symmetry", stating, "'The Queen's Twin' is a worthy focal point for this discussion because it introduces into fiction an unlikely female pair with little circumstantial parity...proposes that the reader understand the dream of their symmetry as a result of desire, an unhingeable cause-and-effect correlation that I name, in this essay, lesbian symmetry" (Solomon, 2005). This symmetrical relation suggests that Mrs. Martin is not so much searching for

the Queen's past and present as she is seeking her own. Bill Brown argues that Mrs. Martin "not to make them hers, but to make them *her*, translating *having* into *being*, so that (to put the matter awkwardly) she can experience the experience of experience" (Brown, 2002). Mrs. Todd once said, "I expect all this business about the Queen has buoyed her over many a shoal place in life" (502-503). She studies to emulate the Queen in order to gain insight into her own life; thus, the Queen becomes an emotional projection for Mrs. Martin, who places this emotion onto pictures of the Queen—a non-human, lifeless entity.

Mrs. Martin regards the Queen as her own family, gathering information about her from various ways such as books and pictures. She treasures these things, adorning and filling her entire house with them, referring to the house itself as the "best room." The Queen's books and pictures subtly influence Mrs. Martin's life in her small cottage. After her husband's death and her children's marriages, Mrs. Martin lives alone in isolation, "marooned" by natural matters like "an old Indian footpath" and "the great heron swamp". In this besieged space, Mrs. Martin finds solace through the Queen's pictures and books, which have become inseparable parts of her life, continuously shaping her emotions and personality. The coexistence of human, house, pictures, and books forms a unique spatial configuration known as "trans-corporeal space," as proposed by Alaimo: it emphasizes the interconnectedness between the body and its environment, and it highlights that our bodies are not isolated entities but engage dynamically with our surroundings. From this perspective, boundaries between self and others, human and non-human entities, even living and non-living objects blur. Trans-corporeal space underscores the entanglement between bodies, challenging fixed identity concepts and fostering a relational understanding of existence. In this space where humans are not the sole agents, non-human entities like pictures autonomously act. In this space, human control over things and even over their own bodies weakens, while things inadvertently control and alter human behaviors.

In Jewett's portrayal, the Queen's pictures seem to possess their own will, influencing and controlling Mrs. Martin. Within this space, these pictures no longer exist merely as objects or Others, but as agents with free will. Under the influence of the Queen's pictures, Mrs. Martin "dream(s) about our being together out in some pretty fields, young as ever we was, and holdin' hands as we walk along" (508), and fantasizes about the Queen visiting her, eagerly bustling about in excitement: "I worked as hard an' happy as I could all day, and had as nice a supper ready as I could get" (509). In this space, where things act upon human, Mrs. Martin develops a kind of self-deceptive, almost obsession with the Queen. William Pietz views such obsession as a "fetish problem": "The fourth theme found in the idea of the fetish is, then, that of the subjection of the human body (as the material locus of action and desire) to the influence of certain material objects" (Pietz, 2022: 10-11). Mrs. Martin's obsession with the Queen's pictures reflects an emotional release from within, and a reaction to the influence of things on humans. This reaction illustrates the mutually constitutive relation between humans and things, where humans can help construct meaning for things, and things can help establish value for humans. This relation "hardly describable in the context of use or exchange, can be overwhelmingly aesthetic, deeply affective; it involves desire, pleasure, frustration, a kind of pain" (Brown, 2002b).

The obsession to things is a form of emotional release. Mrs. Martin's fascination with the Queen stems partly from the pictures' agency and also from Mrs. Martin's secluded environment — an isolated house. The monotonous and lonely life, children moving away after starting their own families, and the burden of illness lead Mrs. Martin to invest her emotions in a fictional "body"—the Queen. This seemingly pathological fetish is actually "something intensely personal whose truth is experienced as a substantial movement from 'inside' the self into the self-limited morphology of a material object situated in space 'outside'" (Pietz, 2022: 12). The space constructed by the house is not inert; Mrs. Martin, living within it, develops a particular emotional bond and memories with the things in this space, where these flowing emotions become a part of the space — shaping it on the one hand and being influenced by it on the other. According to Encarnación Juárez-Almendros, "Aged women, like the disabled, are mostly nonexistent in records and traditionally invisible in other fields such as science, philosophy and the arts" (Juárez-Almendros, 2017). The absence of aged women in scientific, philosophical, and artistic fields contrasts sharply with their presence in Jewett's literary world. Despite Mrs. Martin's old age and frailty, she does not succumb to despair or melancholy; instead, she exhibits a zest for life. She may be significantly influenced by her environment—an unspoiled, idyllic utopian land. The "trans-corporeal space" between the house and humans creates Mrs. Martin's solitary life but also enriches her emotional expression. As Mrs. Todd puts it, "Don't it show that for folks that have any fancy in 'em, such beautiful dreams is the real part o' life?" (510).

#### 4. Conclusion

In "The Queen's Twin", natural materials like the "land," "alders," daily things like the Queen's pictures and Mrs. Martin's house, all exert influence on individuals, highlighting the agency and vitality of non-human, inanimate matter. This reflects Jewett's material feminist thoughts as articulated by Alaimo. Both Jewett and Alaimo express similar ecofeminist perspectives: they both focus on the harmonious relation between humans and nature, and the capacity for mutual interaction. Jewett's portrayal of the natural environment emphasizes that nature is not merely a passive object to be exploited by humans but has its own ability to affect human production and lifestyles. This underscores the importance of respecting, adapting to, and conserving nature. Within Jewett's constructed "trans-corporeal space" the pictures of the Queen

act autonomously, subtly directing Mrs. Martin's daily life. Mrs. Martin's house isolates her from external communication, yet from this secluded space, she derives vitality and energy, which is the outcomes of agency of objects.

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