ABSTRACT

LUCAS REED NOSSAMAN. “Agriculture and Biblical Tradition in Jewett’s ‘A Dunnet Shepherdess.’” (Under the direction of Professor Allen F. Stein.)

Written late in her career, “A Dunnet Shepherdess” is kin to the well-known The Country of the Pointed Firs, but Sarah Orne Jewett uses the former to explore Dunnet Landing’s economy and some of its characters who labor on the land, rather than the characters in Pointed Firs, most notably Mrs. Todd, who affectionately connect the narrator to nature’s serenity. In “A Dunnet Shepherdess,” initially the narrator wonders “afresh why people did not raise more sheep when that seemed the only possible use” for the rocky country of coastal Maine (222). However, through Esther Hight, a shepherdess, she comes to realize that a right use of land involves hardship, toil, and sacrifice, but also that the land will not produce simply by the farmer’s virtuous attitude, for one must also know both the marketplace and the land’s carrying capacities. Jewett shapes her story around these agricultural insights. The narrator scarcely describes Esther at work with her sheep, but her connection with this one shepherdess allows Jewett to invoke the various experiences of nineteenth-century Maine farmers, along with their literary counterparts in the Bible and Virgil’s Georgics.

Other than Sarah Sherman, no critic has studied this story in detail, and no critic has suggested that “A Dunnet Shepherdess” clarifies the portrayal of agriculture, economics, and religion in The Country of the Pointed Firs. Consequently, this essay examines Pointed Firs and the liberal approach to the Bible in both stories, an approach that encourages an ethical use of land and animals similar to that in Virgil’s Georgics.