

Surpassing the Love of Men



*Romantic Friendship and Love Between
Women from the Renaissance to the Present*

LILLIAN FADERMAN

By the author of *ODD GIRLS AND TWILIGHT LOVERS:
A HISTORY OF LESBIAN LIFE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICA*

CHAPTER 4

Boston Marriage

The term “Boston marriage” was used in late nineteenth-century New England to describe a long-term monogamous relationship between two otherwise unmarried women. The women were generally financially independent of men, either through inheritance or because of a career. They were usually feminists, New Women, often pioneers in a profession. They were also very involved in culture and in social betterment, and these female values, which they shared with each other, formed a strong basis for their life together. Their relationships were in every sense, as described by a Bostonian, Mark DeWolfe Howe, the nineteenth-century *Atlantic Monthly* editor, who had social contact with a number of these women, “a union—there is no truer word for it.”¹ Whether these unions sometimes or often included sex we will never know, but we do know that these women spent their lives primarily with other women, they gave to other women the bulk of their energy and attention, and they formed powerful emotional ties with other women. If their personalities could be projected to our times, it is probable that they would see themselves as “women-identified-women,” i.e., what we would call lesbians, regardless of the level of their sexual interests.

Henry James intended his novel *The Bostonians* (1885), which he characterized as “a very *American* tale ” (the italics are James’s), to be a study of just such a relationship—“one of those friendships between women which are so common in New England,” he wrote in his *Notebook*.² Briefly, the novel concerns Olive Chancellor, a wealthy young feminist, who discovers in Verena Tarrant an un-

tutored, charismatic personality whose oratorical abilities could advance the Women's Cause. She tutors her and forms a passionate attachment to her, which Verena, who has always been a leaf in the wind, half returns. When Olive's southern cousin, Basil Ransom, comes on the scene, Verena is also swayed by his interest in her. It is he who carries her off; but his victory is Pyrrhic, and James hints that the couple will be unhappy.

In his treatment of the relationship between Olive and Verena, James is describing a Boston marriage. From Olive's perspective we learn that Verena is "what she had been looking for so long—a friend of her own sex with whom she might have a union of soul," and she implores Verena, "her face . . . full of eagerness and tenderness . . . 'Will you be my friend, my friend of friends, beyond everyone, everything, forever and forever?'" During the happiest period of their union, one character tells us, Olive and Verena "love to be together; it seems as if one *couldn't* go out without the other." Although Verena is passive in the relationship, her reflection on leaving Olive for Basil indicates that she felt herself to be as completely involved in the union as she, who had never been capable of undivided commitment to anything, was able to be:

Olive would never get over the disappointment. It would touch her in the point where she felt everything most keenly; she would be incurably lonely and eternally humiliated. It was a very peculiar thing, their friendship; it had elements which made it probably as complete as any (between women) that had ever existed. Of course, it had been more on Olive's side than on hers, she had always known that; but that, again, didn't make any difference. It was of no use for her to tell herself that Olive had begun it entirely and she had only responded out of a kind of charmed politeness, at first, to a tremendous appeal. She had lent herself, given herself, utterly, and she ought to have known better if she didn't mean to abide by it.

Twentieth-century critics, flagrantly misreading James and his time, have no doubt that James is presenting a study of a disease.³

F. W. Dupee, for example, sees in Olive Chancellor "pretty distinctly a case of perverse sexuality,"⁴ and Louis Auchincloss notes that *The Bostonians* contains a graphic picture of "Olive Chancellor's lesbianism," which he describes as a "mental malady."⁵ Such contemporary responses to the character have created a gen-

erally accepted, clear-cut interpretation of the novel: Olive, a lesbian, has entrapped Verena, who is basically a normal woman, in an unnatural relationship. Basil Ransom, "a man, a real man," as Auchincloss calls him,⁶ comes along to "rescue Verena from an unnatural union"⁷ and restore her to a world that is "natural and unspoiled."⁸

James would have been puzzled by this neat categorization and interpretation of his complex drama. If we can read *The Bostonians* with a pre-twentieth-century perspective, it becomes clear that James intended that there be neither heroes nor heroic rescues in this ungente novel. Certainly he makes great fun of Basil's antagonist, Olive Chancellor: "The most sacred hope of her nature was that she might someday . . . be a martyr and die for something," he tells us and shows her as being humorless to the point of (as her first name suggests) drabness; he also satirizes the women who surround Olive. But Basil does no better than his chief antagonist or her army of feminists. He is frequently merely silly and smug. James observes of him, "though he thought the age too talkative . . . he liked to talk as well as anyone." Basil's view of women is laughable, even in a nineteenth-century context; and surely James was laughing when he wrote:

That was the way [Basil] liked them—not to think too much, not to feel any responsibility for the government of the world . . . if they would only be private and passive, and have no feeling but for that, and leave publicity to the sex of the tougher hide! Ransom was pleased with the vision of that remedy.

Nor does James suggest that by winning Verena, Basil is rescuing her from a terrible fate; instead a much better argument could be made that in leaving with Basil, who has little respect for the woman he loves, Verena embraces a terrible fate. James explains that Basil's method of bringing Verena closer is "to drag her former standards in the dust." He makes her endure humiliation not for her ultimate happiness but for his use; when she laments, "It's a remarkable system that has no place for us," Basil confesses, "No place in public. My plan is to keep you at home and have a better time with you there than ever." The reader will be reminded of Torvald's attitude in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*,⁹ or perhaps of James's own earlier male chauvinist, Gilbert Osmond, in *Portrait of a Lady*

—a selfish, manipulative man who tried to force a woman into the role of obedient wife.

James tells us that Basil feels toward Verena a “merciless devotion,” but his behavior indicates he is more merciless than devoted. Basil is like a beast toying with its prey, recognizing “that however she might turn and twist in his grasp he held her fast. The emotion she had expressed . . . was only one of her instinctive contortions; he had taken due note of that—said to himself that a good many more would probably occur before she would be quiet.” He finally conquers Verena by pulling her out of the auditorium just as she is about to make the most important speech of her career.⁹ James uses violent imagery to describe Basil’s state of mind in this scene:

There were two or three moments during which he felt as he could imagine a young man to feel who, waiting in a public place, had made up his mind, for reasons of his own, to discharge a pistol at the king or the president.

It is Verena as the embodiment of the women’s cause that he is waiting to assassinate. Or, if he will not symbolically kill her, he will subdue her by muscle, figuratively and literally:

. . . he saw that he could do what he wanted, that she begged him, with all her being, to spare her, but that so long as he should protest she was submissive, helpless. What he wanted, in this light, flamed before him and challenged his manhood . . .

“Olive, Olive!” Verena suddenly shrieked; and her piercing cry might have reached the front. But Ransom had already, by muscular force, wrenched her away, and was hurrying her out.

A usual critical interpretation of Basil’s victory is that he rescues Verena “from an unnatural union with Olive, brings back, one might almost say, the vernal recognition of her place in the rhythms of nature.”¹⁰ But if James meant us to believe that Verena is going off to vernal bliss, his conclusion is very puzzling. He tells us that Verena is in tears, and he finishes the novel:

It is to be feared that with the union, so far from brilliant, into which she was about to enter, these were not the last she was destined to shed.

David Howard has astutely pointed out that Verena's relationship with Basil is "limiting and destructive (far more so than the relationship with Olive). And what it limits or destroys is what James's lyrical tone in presenting her so often manifests . . . her 'gift,' what is responsive and vivifying in her nature,"¹¹ and without which Verena is little more than a stick of sugar candy. It is Olive who encourages her to use her natural "gift" and expand it by involving herself in a cause that she will ultimately understand not merely intuitively but intellectually.

While Olive is as obsessive and as manipulative as Basil in her relationship with Verena, James shows us that Verena blooms when she is in Olive's company: She is happy and, even better, feels herself to be wonderfully productive under Olive's tutelage. Verena and Olive are depicted working together with "an effort as religious as never to be wanting in ecstasy." During this period, James suggests, Verena changes from a submissive girl to a woman who is radiant with her sense of accomplishment:

Verena was thoroughly interested in their great undertaking; she saw it in the light of an active, enthusiastic faith. . . . She expanded, developed, on the most liberal scale. Olive saw the difference, and you may imagine how she rejoiced in it; she had never known a greater pleasure. Verena's former attitude had been girlish submission, grateful, curious sympathy. She had given herself, in her young, amused surprise, because Olive's stronger will and the incisive proceedings with which she painted her purpose drew her on. Besides, she was held by hospitality, the vision of new social horizons, the sense of novelty, and the love of change. But now the girl was disinterestedly attached to the previous things they were to do together; she cared about them for themselves, believed in them ardently, had them constantly in her mind. Her share in the union of the two young women was no longer passive, purely appreciative; it was passionate, too, and it put forth a beautiful energy.

Verena herself characterizes her time with Olive as "happy, active, fruitful," and their efforts together as "splendid"; James also shows us through Basil's candid statements regarding male-female relationships that Verena will have to deny that gift which, as she developed it, permitted her to experience "a beautiful energy"—she will be

someone who is "submissive, helpless" under Basil and with whom *he* will have "a better time."

Twentieth-century critics have overlooked such an apparent reading of this novel because in our label-prone post-Freudian society, "lesbian" is "sick," and if Olive can be called a "lesbian," then her love for Verena is certainly "perverse." "Heterosexuality," on the other hand, is "mature" and "natural" and brings "fulfillment"; and even if we are told that a young woman is destined to shed many tears in a particular heterosexual relationship, since that relationship is "normal" it is certainly preferable to Olive's "mental malady." James, however, believed that a romantic relationship between two women was not of itself sick. It had the potential to be constructive and fulfilling, and could permit the self-actualization of the women. Of course, those possibilities might be negated by the limitations and complexities of the individuals involved, but James shows that is certainly also true of a heterosexual relationship.

James had no prejudices against same-sex love.¹² In 1885, before the popularization of the sexologists, he would have had no reason for viewing love between women as a "mental malady" and an abnormality. He considered it (as he says himself) as a very common, "American" phenomenon.

James had observed it at close range in Boston and in his own family. The one positive relationship in his sister Alice's life was with Katharine Loring. Alice, raised in a household with the formidable Henry James, Sr., as well as Henry the novelist and William, had as a young woman been plagued by psychosomatic illnesses and was a recluse. In 1878, when she was thirty, she suffered a nervous breakdown, as had her two older brothers some years before. A year or two later Alice met Katharine, who was active in Boston charities and betterment organizations, and whose energy and health, in startling contrast to Alice's own condition, immediately attracted Alice. She described Katharine in a letter to a friend as having "all the mere brute superiority which distinguishes man from woman, combined with all the distinctively feminine virtues. There is nothing she cannot do from hewing wood and drawing water to driving runaway horses and educating all the women in North America."¹³ Henry James observed the difference Katharine Loring made in his sister, who had shown no desire to have serious human contact with any individual before. He wrote

his mother that Katharine “appears to unite the wisdom of the serpent with the gentleness of the dove,” and that she was “the most perfect companion” that Alice could have found. To Alice he expressed delight in Katharine’s “noble qualities.”¹⁴ Between 1881 and 1884, as he got to know Katharine well, James became more and more grateful for her relationship with Alice. He was certainly not one who could have seen a Boston marriage as a “mental malady” in his 1885 work. Not long after the publication of *The Bostonians*, James wrote to his aunt regarding Katharine’s love for Alice that “a devotion so perfect and generous [was] a gift of providence so rare and so little-to-be-looked-for in this hard world that to brush it aside would be almost an act of impiety.”¹⁵

Katharine and Alice did not have a proper Boston marriage since Katharine kept house for her father in Beverly, Massachusetts, and spent much time caring for a sickly sister, Louisa. When in 1884 Katharine decided to take her sister to England for medical reasons, Alice was determined to go along. She and Katharine remained there until Alice’s death in 1892.

For much of the time Katharine lived with her sister in Bourne-mouth and Alice lived near Henry in London, until Louisa’s eventual recovery freed Katharine to be with Alice more. Alice, perhaps in unconscious competition with Louisa for Katharine’s attention, was often sick, although it was not until 1891, some months after the doctors diagnosed Alice’s illness as cancer, that Katharine came to live with her and to nurse her. Alice ironically noted in her diary for March 22, 1891, “Through complete physical bankruptcy, I have attained my ‘ideal’ as nurse calls it, and we are established since March 12th in a little house on Campden Hill.” But she added with content, “We decided a little while ago that I could not go out of town, or become the prey of the landlady, so that a house to ourselves was a necessity, and a possibility with Katharine at hand, who had only to wave her magic wand, and in three weeks from our decision we found ourselves delightfully settled, she, after her usual manner, having levelled all the rough places and let sunlight into the dark corners of suggestion.”¹⁶ Although Alice was aware of her impending death, she said of 1891, which she spent almost entirely with Katharine, “This year has been the happiest I have ever known.”¹⁷ Gay Wilson Allen in *William James: A Biography* claims that William’s wife saw the relationship between Katharine and Alice as being “suspiciously Lesbian.”¹⁸ Whether she did or not, it is certain that the James

family was thankful to Katharine for giving Alice her only happiness, and that Alice regarded Katharine as her one piece of good fortune in this life.

Alice's romantic friendship was beset with frustrations until the year before her death, but there were happier, quite perfect Boston marriages in the nineteenth century. A model Boston marriage existed between the novelist Sarah Orne Jewett and Annie Fields, which lasted for almost three decades. For many years during that time the two women lived together a part of each year, separated for another part of the year so that they could devote complete attention to their work, traveled together frequently, shared interests in books and people, and provided each other with love and stability.

In 1854, when Annie Fields was nineteen, she married a middle-aged widower, James T. Fields, the American publisher of Dickens and an editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*. James Fields died in 1881. According to Mark DeWolfe Howe, Annie Fields's friend and biographer, James Fields, just before his death, saw Sarah Orne Jewett as the ideal friend to fill the impending gap in Annie's life and encouraged the relationship between the two women.¹⁹ It is impossible to know whether Howe, writing in 1922 at the height of Freudian awareness, was being truthful or whether he was attempting in this way to stave off accusations of "perversity" against his friend. It is noteworthy that when Annie Fields wanted to bring out a volume of Sarah Jewett's letters after Sarah's death, Howe, according to his daughter Helen, "laid a restraining editorial hand across her enthusiasm." He suggested that Annie omit four-fifths of the indications of affection between them "for the mere sake of the impression we want the book to make on readers who have no personal association with Miss Jewett. . . . I doubt . . . whether you will like to have all sorts of people reading them wrong." Helen Howe says that her father was probably "distressed to have to recognize the sentimentality in Sarah."²⁰ What probably distressed him, however, was what the two women's romantic friendship laid bare for the world to see: Such a love was common and appropriate behavior in the century in which the two women had spent most of their lives (and he saw it himself as common and appropriate at that time);²¹ but it suddenly became "abnormal" in a twentieth-century context, although nothing about the nature of the relationship had changed.

Jewett's most assiduous biographers have been unable to find a trace in her life of even the slightest interest in a heterosexual love

affair or marriage. Francis Matthiessen reports that one day John Greenleaf Whittier asked her, referring of course to heterosexuality, “‘Sarah, was thee ever in love?’ She answered, with a rush of color, ‘No! Whatever made you think that?’ and Mr. Whittier said, ‘No, I thought not,’ and again she laughingly explained that she had more need of a wife than a husband.”²² In her clever story about role reversal, “Tom’s Husband,”²³ Jewett showed heterosexual marriage to be destructive to women because they merge their identities in their husbands, lose interest in things outside the house, feel themselves growing rusty and behind the times, suspect their spouses can get along pretty well without them, regret having missed much of life, and generally believe they are failures. Jewett would have none of that in her own life.

She was a conscious, articulate feminist as early as the 1880’s, when she argued that marriage was not good or possible for all women. Since there are a majority of women in any civilization, she wrote, some must be “set apart by nature for other uses and conditions than marriage.” As society “becomes more intelligent,” she continued, it will recognize the fitness of some persons and the unfitness of others for matrimony, and it will let women who choose to remain single follow the life and pursuits which they see as being most valuable for themselves.²⁴ For herself, Jewett required another individual who could give her intense devotion without holding the reins too tightly, someone who would let her work when she needed to work and give her affection and diversion when she needed those—but also someone who led a separate life as important as Jewett’s was to her, so that Jewett would not feel that she had placed another person into the position of Tom in “Tom’s Husband.” It was not likely that there were many nineteenth-century men who could have filled her requirements.

Like most women of her era, Jewett had several romantic friendships when she was young, which she recorded in the diary she kept from the time she was twenty-two until she was thirty. In an unpublished, undated essay, “Outgrown Friends,” she speaks of the development of affection between friends to the point where it becomes indistinguishable from love.²⁵ Her diary entries suggest that the high state of excitement usually attributed to romantic love characterized her friendships with other young women. In an 1871 entry about Kate Birckhead, for example, Jewett wrote, “When I heard her voice on the stairs . . . it gave me the queerest feeling. I have longed to

see her, to be with her, for so many months that I could not believe it was real. My dear dear darling Kate!" and she declared, "I love her so perfectly."²⁶ Many of her friendship poems, which seem to be addressed entirely to women, are similarly indistinguishable from love poems. In an 1880 poem, originally entitled "Love and Friendship," Jewett refers to the previous year, at the end of a happy summer which the two women spent by the sea, "When we gave ourselves to each other/Before you went away." She laments:

*How little we knew my Darling,
All that the year would bring!
Did I think of the wretched mornings
When I should kiss my ring
And long with all my heart to see
The girl who gave the ring to me?*²⁷

Until Annie Fields was free to establish a Boston marriage with her, most of Jewett's love poems talked about renunciation of the beloved woman, as do the love poems that her contemporary, Emily Dickinson, wrote to other women.²⁸ She assumed that in the course of time the other woman, who often did not have the stimulus of a career such as Jewett had projected for herself early in life, would marry. The poet would have to content herself with memories and with love at long distance. Her gentle, pathetic poem, "Together," which appeared in the May 1875 *Atlantic Monthly*, is concerned with such frustrations, of which Jewett sentimentally tries to make the best:

*I wonder if you really send
Those dreams of you that come and go!
I like to say, "She thought of me,
And I have known it." Is it so?*

*Though other friends walk by your side,
Yet sometimes it must surely be,
They wonder where your thoughts have gone,
Because I have you here with me.*

*And when the busy day is done
And work is ended, voices cease,
When every one has said good night,
In fading firelight, then in peace*

*I idly rest: you come to me,—
 Your dear love holds me close to you.
 If I could see you face to face
 It would not be more sweet and true;*

*I do not hear the words you speak,
 Nor touch your hands, nor see your eyes:
 Yet, far away the flowers may grow
 From whence to me the fragrance flies;*

*And so, across the empty miles
 Light from my star shines. Is it, dear,
 Your love has never gone away?
 I said farewell and—kept you here.*

Many nineteenth-century romantic friends, like those a hundred years earlier, had to be content with no more. Jewett was ultimately luckier.

In her 1877 novel, *Deephaven*, she depicts an idyllic romantic friendship between two young women in a New England coastal village called Deephaven. At the end of the summer one of the women suggests “we should copy the Ladies of Llangollen” and settle in Deephaven permanently, away from the distractions of Boston. But the two women agree that sweet as such a life would be, they would miss the luncheon parties, and symphony concerts, and visits, and fairs, and reading club, and the Children’s Hospital of Boston. Sarah managed to win for herself the best of both worlds.

In 1882, the year after James Fields died, Sarah and Annie went to Europe, a trip which they repeated a number of times during their life together. Upon their return in the autumn of 1882, Sarah began the schedule she was generally to adhere to for years to come. Several months of each year she spent alone in South Berwick, Maine, where she had been born. She returned there to write full time. The rest of the year she spent with Annie in Boston or Manchester. During Sarah’s absence, Annie, too, was occupied with authorship and with her social interests, but she wrote Sarah almost daily—sometimes letters, sometimes only affectionate little notes.

Jewett’s letters to Annie show how perfectly the relationship worked for them. In her 1911 edition of the correspondence, Annie comments in Victorian language, but with no less a ring of truth, that the letters show “the portrait of a friend and the power that lies

in friendship to sustain the giver as well as the receiver.”²⁹ If the letters reflect a true picture of their relationship, Sarah was able to bring so much energy and concentration to her writing because she had the assurance of Annie’s love behind her, and she knew that when she emerged from her self-imposed prison in South Berwick that Annie would welcome her. The correspondence does not indicate a flaming passion, but a wise, steady, fruitful Victorian romance:

Here I am at the desk again, all as natural as can be and writing a first letter to you with so much love, and remembering that this is the first morning in more than seven months that I haven’t waked up to hear your dear voice and see your dear face. I do miss it very much, but I look forward to no long separation, which is a comfort.³⁰

I shall be with you tomorrow, your dear birthday. How I am looking forward to Thursday evening. I don’t care whether there is a starlight or a fog. Yes, dear, I will bring the last sketch and give it its last touches if you think I had better spend any more time on it. I want now to paint things, and drive things, and *kiss* things [italics are Jewett’s]. . . . Good night, and God bless you, dear love.³¹

The letters also indicate that the two women had a support group of other couples who were engaged in “Boston marriages,” both in Boston and elsewhere: Elizabeth McCracken, author of *The Women of America*, and her friend; two women with whom they went to Europe in 1892; the novelist Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) and Kit Anstruther-Thomson; Willa Cather and the woman with whom she lived for forty years, Edith Lewis.

It probably would have astonished Jewett that Mark Howe saw anything to censor in her letters to Annie Fields. In the context of her time, her love for Annie was very fine. But Willa Cather, who was almost twenty-five years her junior and came of age in a different environment, knew that what Jewett’s generation would have seen as admirable, hers would consider abnormal. There is absolutely no suggestion of same-sex love in Cather’s fiction. Perhaps she felt the need to be more reticent about love between women than even some of her patently heterosexual contemporaries because she bore a burden of guilt for what came to be labeled perversion. The Cather characters that are suspiciously autobiographical, such as the narrator in *My Antonia*, appear as male whenever they show love interest

in females. Jewett, whose own writing Cather greatly admired, noted the falsity of this characterization, even in the younger woman's early fiction, and warned her against it. For example, after reading Cather's "On the Gull's Road," which appeared in *McClure's* in 1908, she wrote the younger writer, "The lover is as well done as he could be when a woman writes in the man's character,—it must always, I believe, be something of a masquerade . . . and you could almost have done it as yourself—a woman could love her in the same protecting way—a woman could even care enough to wish to take her away from such a life, by some means or other."³² The letter must have made Cather blush—but Jewett probably would not have known what she was blushing about.

In her own writing Jewett did not feel the need to use the word "man" when she meant "woman." Her story "Martha's Lady," which first appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in October 1897, could never have been written by Cather—not because Cather did not wholeheartedly believe in its basic premise about the redemptive power of love, but because the two principals were female. Jewett treats this fact entirely without self-consciousness. Her own Boston marriage confirmed her belief that love—perhaps any kind of love, but especially between women—had the power to foster the most praiseworthy ambition and to bestow the energy to carry that ambition out. The love described in "Martha's Lady" demands renunciation, but Martha anyway reaps those benefits of love which Jewett seems to have valued most in her "marriage."

At the beginning of the story, Helena Vernon, a lovely young Boston woman, comes to visit her spinster cousin, Miss Harriet. Miss Harriet's new maid, Martha, is unskilled, graceless, dull, and indifferent to everyone until the arrival of her mistress's new guest, who is just Martha's age. A responsive chord is immediately struck in each young woman. When Helena wishes for some cherries, Martha climbs the cherry tree "like a boy" to procure them for her. She later overhears Helena praising her to Miss Harriet, and Jewett tells us, "From that moment, she not only knew what love was like, but she knew love's clear ambitions," and she begins to look "almost pretty." Helena soon leaves to marry, but Martha hears news of her from time to time, and, like the speaker in Jewett's poem "Together," lives with her close by every day even though she is a great distance away. Martha's entire personality changes through her love for Helena. She becomes eager to learn and to be competent, then spiritual and strong and a comforter of the troubled and sick. The story ends

forty years later, when the widowed Helena returns to her cousin's home and is reunited with Martha.

Jewett's focus is on love—what would be called lesbian love in our times—and how it can better a person. When Martha first learns of Helena's marriage, she feels a "sense of loss and pain," and "her idol seemed to be less her own since she had become the idol of a stranger." But "love at last prevailed," and Martha is content that Helena seems happy. Martha's love makes her "unconsciously beautiful, like a saint," and a model of goodness and gentleness. Jewett compares her to a picturesque, lonely tree which gives shelter to unnumbered lives while standing quietly in its place; "there was such a rustic homeliness and constancy belonging to her," she writes, "such beautiful powers of apprehension, such reticence."

Both women are sixty when Helena returns, but Jewett's conclusion is appropriate to a love story. Martha, upon hearing that Helena will come back, "wondered that she could speak as usual, there was such a ringing in her ears." When she sees the beloved woman she is startled, because in her mind's eye Helena had always been twenty as she was when she left: Helena "is an old woman like me!" Martha cries; Jewett says, "She had never dreamed it would be like this; this was the one thing she could not bear." But looking at Helena's unchanged eyes, Martha is enthralled again. The story ends as Helena suddenly has a moving insight into Martha's passionate love for her through the years and begs the other woman, "Oh, my dear Martha! Won't you kiss me goodnight!"

As romantic as the conclusion is, Martha's great reward for her faithfulness is not her reunion with Helena and the kiss, but the metamorphosis of her awkward, unreflective character into something sensitive and fine through her ability to love. Late nineteenth-century America, and even (or rather, especially) proper Boston, believed that there was such potential in love between women. Perhaps because it was assumed (at least by those outside the relationship) that love between women was asexual, unsullied by the evils of carnality, a sex-hating society could view it as ideal and admire, and even envy, it as the British had admired and envied the Ladies of Llangollen a hundred years earlier.