Look at Ambrose Bierce, 451 — or not. Bierce’s biography is intrinsically interesting. Ambrose Bierce’s dates, they might be worth learning: 1842 to 1914, question mark? You can also put 1913, question mark? 1914 is generally assumed to be the year he probably died. He wrote a woman, a friend of his in Washington — he was living in Washington, DC, that year and he was sick of life, and he wrote her, “I’m going to Mexico and hook up with Pancho Villa.” He said, “I fully expect to be stood against a wall and shot to ribbons.” And that may have been what happened. The biographers aren’t sure. But he certainly did disappear. There’s a death wish.

Born in Ohio, the last of nine children of strongly religious parents, very unhappy childhood. It was not a happy life, Ambrose Bierce’s. He earned his nickname Bitter Bierce because the themes of so many of his stories are dark and bitter, and also because of his famous devil’s dictionary — which I should have brought you some more of those. They give you a couple of examples of his definitions. But they are certainly cynical, they are certainly sardonic, they are certainly bitter.

He volunteered for the Union army at the age of 19 when war broke out. It says he was involved in several battles. Well, I would say he was. Was mustered out a lieutenant and actually he was promoted, a battlefield commission, brevet commission, to major for gallantry, for valor. He was wounded twice. He was in some of the major battles. He was at Chickamauga. I visited that battlefield a couple of years ago. It’s one of the least enjoyable Civil War battlefields you’ve ever seen. It’s like Gettysburg and then there’s just one monument after another. It’s a small piece of land, heavily forested, and there’s a river that runs through it. Chickamauga is the river. It means the
river of death. And Bierce served there. I believe he was wounded there.

He wrote a great short story about it and I think somebody’s probably ripped this off, this technique off, too. You don’t realize that the protagonists of the story -- the point of view is more or less seen through the eyes of this young boy. He’s deaf and we don’t know that until the very end. But he sees these soldiers walking through the woods, crawling through the woods, going through the creek. The water is running red with blood. But it’s — in fact, when he gets back to his own home, his mother is dead.

But one of the soldiers goes by — he’s crawling and his jaw’s been shot off. And it says, “He gave him the look of an ungainly bird with a huge beak.” Can you imagine that, that profile of what that would be like? The little boy climbs on his back and rides him like a horse. So, yeah. Bitter Bierce. Really makes you happy about things.

Thirty-four thousand casualties in that battle. I think it was a two-day battle. Thirty-four thousand casualties in Korea. That was one battle. Fifty-eight thousand dead in Vietnam. Thirty-four thousand in one battle. It was an interesting time.

I mentioned the devil’s dictionary in which he defines war as a byproduct of the arts of peace, and peace is defined as a period of cheating between two periods of fighting. My favorite definition that we have here is his definition of marriage. “The state or condition of a community consisting of a master, a mistress, and two slaves making it all two.” And, no, he didn’t have a happy married life, either. He was divorced when he was 49. And his children — one of his kids, one of his sons, was shot to death in a fight over a girl. Another one died of alcoholism during Bierce’s life. He went west — he was part of the San Francisco literary scene. Bierce went west after the war and hooked up
with and met people like Mark Twain and Brett Hart, Waukeen Miller. San Francisco was kind of a West Coast Boston in that regard and it was a center of some rioting.

But this story is one of my — one of my favorite stories by Ambrose Bierce. If you like ghost stories, In the Midst of Life has several of those. He liked to write about the supernatural. Some of his stories are a little bit too much coincidence like a sniper shoots a scout and it turns out the scout is, I believe, a close relative of his, perhaps his brother or something like that. But it’s the — he can really make your flesh crawl when he wants to.

Well, Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge. I thought you were gonna ask me about a film — I should've looked it up — a French film maker about 25, 30 years ago made a black and white film of this. You have seen that? It’s pretty good, if I recall. I don’t know how well it’s held up over time. I think we may have it. But it’s very faithful — very faithful to the story. When he sees the insects on the leaves, we have this real sharp focus zoom type lens. “A man stood upon a railroad bridge in northern Alabama, looking down into the swift water 20 feet below. The man’s hands were behind his back, the wrists bound with a cord. A rope closely encircled his neck.” This is good professional writing. This is — we say “A man stood on a bridge” and then “his hands were tied.” Uh-oh. Then we get that third detail.

Notice the tone, the end of the second paragraph in the story. It says, "Death is a dignitary who, when he comes announced, is to be received with formal manifestations of respect, even by those most familiar with him. In the code of military etiquette, silence and fixity are forms of deference. The man who is engaged in being
hanged was apparently about 35 years of age.” The man who was engaged in being hanged. “And evidently this was no vulgar assassin. The liberal military code makes provision for hanging many kinds of persons and gentlemen are not excluded.” Bierce points out in another place — with his irony of diction talks about Army chaplains and how that seems to be to him a contradiction in terms.

Did you notice the little clues that he plants early on? Like what time of day is this hanging taking place? It says the morning sun is on him, so we know — or the rising sun, so it’s a dawn execution. How far away is Peyton Farquhar’s home? Thirty miles. That ought to clue us a little bit, too, on the events that happen after he’s hanged or when he’s hanged. And the fact that his eyes are not bandaged and his face has not been covered. They do that for executions by hanging not to preserve the dignity of the hang, but to preserve the stomachs of the crowd. Because hanging produces some pretty hideous effects about the face. Well, his tongue that was parched was sticking out between his lips. He probably was quite literally doing that. “He closed his eyes in order to fix his last thoughts upon his wife and children.” Again, that prepares us for what happens as this is what’s on his mind at the moment of death.

But the first hint that something’s strange comes in paragraph five. “Striking through the thought of his dear ones was a sound which he could neither ignore nor understand. A sharp, distinct, metallic percussion like the stroke of a blacksmith’s hammer upon the anvil.” This story was written in 1890 and that is such a modern effect. The idea that his senses are so heightened that the sound of his watch is like a clanging gong. Dr. Johnson said, “When a man knows he’s to be hanged, it
concentrates his mind wonderfully.” I don’t know that Dr. Johnson was ever about to be hanged, but he did imagine that.

But Bierce today — a writer today would not have to explain this. But at the end of that first section, Bierce feels like he must. “As these thoughts which have here to be set down in words were flashed into the doomed man’s brain rather than evolve from it, the captain nodded to the sergeant, the sergeant stepped aside,” and of course without his weight the board slips and the man goes through with the noose. Would you have needed that, being trained modern readers today? Would you need that paragraph? Wouldn’t you more or less assume that ‘cause you’re so used to psychological realism? Or you should be, I would think.

You can see the editorial comments that come right through there. The first paragraph in the next section he talks about the dictum that all is fair in love and war but he characterizes it as the frankly villainous dictum. And that’s really not fair, is it, that that guy was a federal scout who enticed him to — into this act of sabotage? The thing about movies — this reminds me of something else. With him standing there on that bridge, particularly after he goes through and then things start happening, try a cultural reference on you. “For your consideration, Peyton Farquhar assumed that he was about to be hanged. Little did he know he was about to enter — doo-do-do-do-do-do.” Did you get that? It’d make a good “Twilight Zone.” Surprise! Just kidding!

“As he fell straight down into the bridge he lost consciousness and was at one already dead. From this state he was awakened ages later, it seemed to him, by the pain of a sharp pressure upon his throat, followed by a sense of suffocation. Keen,
poignant agony seemed to shoot from his neck down, went through every fiber of his body and limbs.” Well, if you were being hanged and the rope broke, wouldn’t that be perhaps the way it might feel? But then the irony of to die of hanging at the bottom of a river says the end of that paragraph, “To be hanged and drowned, he thought that’s not so bad but I do not wish to be shot. No, I will not be shot.” That’s not fair. Then when they opened fire on him.

I want to read one paragraph. When I read an entire paragraph, that’s one that you ought to keep in mind for future reference. I don’t have the number. It’s past the middle there on 456.

He was now in full possession of his physical senses. They were indeed preternaturally keen and alert.

And again I think of Dr. Johnson. And you would be, I think, very much aware of what’s going on. “Something in the awful disturbance of his organic system has so exalted and refined his senses that they made record of things never before perceived. He felt the ripples upon his face and heard their separate sounds” -- now, this is after he’s hit the surface of the water — “as they struck. He looked at the forest on the bank of the stream and saw the individual trees, the leaves” — uh-oh — “and the veining of each leaf. Saw the very insects upon them, the locusts, the brilliant bodied flies, the gray spiders stretching their webs from twig to twig.” At that point we should know something is very strange.

“He noted the prismatic colors and all the dewdrops upon a million blades of grass. The humming of the gnats that danced above the eddies of the stream. The
beating of the dragonflies’ wings. The strokes of the water spider’s legs like oars which had lifted their boat. All these made audible music.” And then a fine image to end it: “A fish slid along beneath his eyes and he heard the rush of its body parting the water. “ Now, that’s some good ears if you watch fish swim by and you can hear the noise it’s making in the water.

What might be another reason for his senses to seem to be so keen? Aside from the fact that we know this is a hallucination that occurred in a millisecond. Which is not a fair question at all. I always think of an essay, a student essay I got several years ago. We’d been talking about organization in papers and how a narrative essay doesn’t have to be chronological. It doesn’t have to be this happened, this happened, this happened. But you can do it the way the Greeks did it, you know, and start in the middle and then flash back.

He began his paper talking about how he — as he looked up through the water, he could see the sunlight on the top of the water. He could see the legs of the people swimming and treading water about 10 feet above him. He goes on to describe how he was on his back, halfway in up to his waist, in a hole in a dam in a lake. And he was stuck and he couldn’t get out. And, of course, he could yell and wave all he wanted to. Nobody was going to see him or hear him. I thought that was a good beginning to an essay.

Course there’s not much suspense. You know he survived because he wrote the paper. What he did, by the way, was he pushed himself on into this vent, or whatever in heck it was in that dam, and came out on the other side. It took him forever. He very
nearly drowned. The body of the paper is about how he felt and what the world looked like when he finally got to the surface, what -- the sounds of the cries of the children and the way the air felt and, you know, the sunlight and all that. Because he thought — he came so close to thinking that he would never see that again. I liked that paper. I like it when I can remember a student paper from 10 or 12 years ago. It really — really made an impression. And, no, I haven’t stolen anything from it. Not yet.

[Inaudible student response]

Are you? Go ahead. There’s that detail of where the man in the water saw the eye of the man on the bridge, gazing into his own through the sights of the rifle. He observed it was a gray eye and remembered having read that gray eyes were the keenest, and so forth. In that movie there’s a zoom lens that goes up — right up the barrel of the rifle and you see that eye. Of course, he couldn’t possibly have done that.

But some of this detail, it’s not — it’s not strange particularly. It’s just a little odd. It’s just a little unusual sometimes. After he dies when they start firing at him, look at the detail. “Farquhar dived, dived as deeply as he could. The water roared in his ears like the voice of Niagara” — realistic — “yet he heard the dull thunder of the volley and rising again toward the surface met shining bits of metal singularly flattened, oscillating slowly downward.” Bierce apparently had seen bullets hitting water at Chickamauga. “Some of them touched him on the face and hands and fell away, continuing their descent. One lies between his collar and neck. It was uncomfortably warm and he snatched it out.” And it’s a brilliant detail.

One of the pleasures of reading is recognizing an author’s sense of invention or
ability to invent. And to select that one detail there, “the lead is still hot,” is terrific invention. Then the canon starts shooting at him. “And he’s flung upon the bank, still. Physical detail that makes it seem like it is not a dream.” Somebody tells you they had a really vivid dream, what’s your first feeling? “I had the neatest dream last night.” What do you hope? That they don’t tell you about it. There’s something about dreams that are boring. “Oh, I had the neatest dream.” “Oh, yeah?” “You were in it.” “Oh. What’d I do?” Is that okay? Then you can get interested. But if we know it’s a dream, so-called dream sequence, or in the movies when they signal you to [whistling sound] this is gonna be a dream, you just want to turn it off. He keeps putting in real detail.

When he’s thrown up on the shore, the sudden arrest of his motion, the abrasion of one of his hands on the gravel restored him. Just the pain. “And he wept with delight. He dug his fingers into the sand, threw it over himself in handfuls and audibly blessed it. It looked like diamonds, rubies, emeralds. He could think of nothing beautiful which it did not resemble.” Well, then we get really strange.

He makes 30 miles in the rest of that day, if it were really happening, and that beautiful paragraph about the strange road. “It was wide and straight as a city street. No fields bordered on it, no dwelling anywhere. The bodies of the trees formed a straight wall on both sides, terminating on the horizon in a point.” Like some kind of figure of perspective in a book. Like a diagram in the lesson in perspective.

And then the unfamiliar constellations over his head and the unknown tongues in the woods. “His neck was in pain. Back to physical reality. His tongue was swollen with thirst or with the congestion of death and strangulation. He relieved his fever by
thrusting it forward from between his teeth into the cold air.” Of course, death by hanging is not from strangulation. It’s from breaking your neck. And so this was — again, had to be a millisecond.

Did you notice this: he shifts the verb tense in the last paragraph. “He stands at the gate of his own house. His wife, looking fresh and cool and sweet, steps down from the veranda to meet him.” We go into this present tense but then the very end, “After the stunning blow upon the back of the neck, then all is darkness and silence — is darkness and silence. Peyton Farquhar was dead. His body with a broken neck swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Al Creek Bridge. “ What a nice, memorable, visual image to end this with. No wonder they wanted to film it. Doesn’t it look like — or read like a movie?

Goes right back to the narrative past tense. I don’t know. Could this have happened? Could have — you know, could have in the way the mind works. Have you ever thought you were going to — well, let me ask you this. How many of you have thought you were gonna drown? Just one, two, three? Usually when I ask that question, half a dozen people have come close to that. Did your life flash before your eyes? Supposedly, you know, you relive everything and childhood memories come back.

I was going upside-down on a highway. The police said I went something like 150 yards upside-down before the car rolled into a ditch and my life didn’t flash before my eyes. I’m hanging upside-down, holding on to the steering wheel, trying to drive, and I’m not thinking, “Oh, I’ll never see my family again” or “I’ll never write that book I
wanted." I’m just thinking, “You idiot. You knew it was raining. You know that curve is really tight. You’ve driven this a million times. Now you’re upside-down. You’re goin’ in a ditch that’s full of water — if you’re lucky.” No, actually my whole life, no. You never do that. Well, Ambrose Bierce. I recommend if you liked that that you try to read some more of his work.

Total contrast, Sarah Owen Jewett. Sometimes people complain about modern literature and we’re pretty much gonna be mostly — in the second half and the end of the 19th century, modern literature is often, you know, kind of bleak and dark and unhappy. Well, this is the happiest story we’ll read all semester so I hope you enjoyed it. This is the sweetest one you’re gonna get. Sarah Owen Jewett was from Maine which is significant because she was a regionalist writer. Harriet Beecher Stowe also wrote a novel about Maine which she was inspired by. We don’t think of Beecher Stowe as a regionalist writer, but yet she was. The details in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is Ohio and Kentucky, for instance.

Her dad was an obstetrician and the biographies always make much of this in that he was a country doctor who made his rounds in horse and buggy and he took her with him. And so that way she met all manner of people in Maine and picked up the details of their lives, which is essential for regional writing. She was also picked up early by William Dean Howells, the editor of “The Atlantic Monthly.” Howells was a great editor, close friend of Mark Twain’s, but he could make or break careers by putting you in his magazine or not putting you in his magazine. And he was extraordinarily generous and gave a lot of people a start. He also introduced an awful lot of European
writers to American audiences.

Previous editions of this book, by the way, and included one of my favorite stories in the world, *Editha* by William Dean Howells. This new edition with this huge inclusion of practically everything and the kitchen sink including Amy Lowell cut it out. We no longer had William Dean Howells. It would be like — it would be like if in the next century there was an edition of American literature that supposedly took care of the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century that did not include a reference to Steven King. Because William Dean Howells was absolutely the most well-known, the most revered editor and writer of his day — as well known as Mark Twain. But that’s what happens. I wonder if he’s looking down on this somewhere and going, “What about my story,” you know, and “Look what I did for American literature and now I’m a footnote and a headnote on an obscure local color writer who probably won’t make the next anthology.” Just a little thing about sic transit gloria. All goes.

By the way, this definition of regional writer. “She entered the company of Mark Twain, George Washington Cable” — Cable wrote about the Creoles of Louisiana — “Harriet Beecher Stowe. Some people called Kate Chopin a local color writer” — which I don’t think is quite fair. “Other regional writers who were depicting the topographies, people’s speech patterns and modes of life of many distinctive regions of the country.” If anybody ever asks you on a praxis exam or something like that to define regional writer, that’s what they are. Regional writers use the physical location, the speech patterns, the dialect, the manners of living, and so forth, of a certain area. In that way — William Faulkner could be called a regional writer because all of his novels are set
within one county, essentially, of Mississippi.

By the way, I used the wrong term awhile ago. I called them local color writers. They’re not to be called local color writers anymore. They are now regionalist writers. I don’t know what’s wrong with local color writers, but anyway. Regionalists. Well, *The White Heron*. What’d you think? Did you shed a little tear? Were you shocked that she didn’t turn in the bird? You were glad she didn’t turn in the bird? What would’ve happened if she’d turned in the bird? I mean, for a modern story, she’d turn in the bird. She’d shoot the bird and bring it to him. Or she’d negotiate. “Ten bucks? How about twenty bucks? I can tell you where the bird is.” But that would ruin it, wouldn’t it.

I guess what I’m asking you is, is this story sentimental. These people are poor. Pretty sentimental. But it’s fun. My danger word shows up in the third line: “A little girl was driving her cow.” At least it wasn’t a little cow. And that old cow — it says, “Though she wore a loud bell, she’d made the discovery that if one stood perfectly still it would not ring.” Now, is that personification? Is that giving human attributes to a non-human thing? Or could the cow figure it out that if you stand still, the bell won’t ring and they won’t be able to find her? She could figure that out. Animals figure things out. But she’s just one step from having the cow go, “Hmmm. If I stand real still, this bell won’t ring.” She comes close a couple of lines from that. “Sometimes in pleasant weather it was a consolation to look upon the cow’s pranks as an intelligent attempt to play hide ‘n seek.”

Well, her grandma, Mrs. Tilly, has taken her in, has chosen her from this large brood of her daughter’s children, to come and live with her. Supposedly she’s afraid of
people and so forth. This was not that uncommon. In fact, it occurs to this day. But it was particularly not that uncommon in the 19th century and early 20th century for large families to farm out their kids if they couldn’t quite take care of all of ‘em. Maybe you read Mansfield Park which, of course, is 100 years before that, and you remember that’s how Fanny gets to Mansfield Park. Her mother has too many children and her aunt takes her in.

We’re also told that Sylvia loves the out-of-doors. She’s kind of a little nature girl. “There ain’t a foot of ground she don’t know her way over and the wild critters counts her one of themselves.” I think it’s important to look at Jewett’s style a little bit. The first paragraph of the next section, right in the middle of that paragraph, “As she’s walking in the woods,” it says, “there was a stirring in the great boughs overhead. They were full of little birds” — little birds — “little birds and beasts that seemed to be wide awake and going about their world, or else saying good-night to each other in sleepy twitters.” I’m not just picking that out to make fun of it. I didn’t realize that “sleepy twitters” was there. I was thinking about something else about the little birds. But if this were turned in to me in a writing class and the student had written “little birds and beasts that seemed to be wide awake,” I’d let her have ‘em being wide awake. But birds and beasts — what little birds and beasts? That’s what’s called an anticipatory phrase in writing. When you say something like that, you have to amplify it. But you probably ought to amplify it in the first place. Give me the names of the birds, give me the names of the beasts. Beasts, in particular.

Well, she hears the whistle. Suddenly this little woods girl is horror stricken.
Look at that shift of tense. It puts you in the present. And she finds the bird hunter who’s kind. Sarah Owen Jewett likes to use metaphors in her prose. Near the bottom it says, “He asks Sylvia her name. It did not seem to be her fault and she hung her head as if the stem of it were broken, but managed to answer ‘Sylvie’ with much effort when her companion again asks her name.”

She hung her head as if the stem of it were broken. What’s the metaphor? What is her head and neck being compared to? A flower. So she’s this little nature girl and her little — like a stem. I kind of like that. I’ve got student papers on my mind today. This one I’d love to steal. She was describing all the celebration that they do in Carthage. There’s an enormous Vietnamese community there from — they have quite a celebration. Many, many, many people and lots of cooking and stuff like that going on. She talked about — she said, “There was three little girls standing and looking up at some large statue that they have there.” And she said, “Their heads bent back like Pez dispensers.” Isn’t that good? Oh, that’s good. I wonder how long I’ll have to wait before I can lift that. Well, she needs to use it pretty soon or it’ll be fair game. No, no, no. Not really. I would never do that.

One of the characteristics, one of the identifying marks of regional writing, is using dialect. And there, a third of the way down on the next page, she’s talking to — the old grandma is talking to the young hunter or the bird, the ornithologist, says, “You can sleep” — I can’t do Maine dialect, but I’ll try. “You can sleep on husk the feathers,” she proffered graciously. “I raised them all myself. There’s good pasture for geese just below here, towards the marsh — m-a-a-a-r-s-h.” Back east I — I once heard a
production of Eugene O'Neill's — I've forgotten the play — but it's set in Maine. It's a retelling of the Orestes legend. This was a college production in South Carolina and these kids kept saying, “Ar. Ar.” I finally figured out they were trying to go for “Ayeh.”

I'm sure back East dialect is just really common here and you're very accustomed to it, and you can do a better job than I can. Like she says — in another place she talks about “potridges — potridges.” You just gotta get rid of the R, more or less. Anybody from Maine? Can anybody do this? Potridges. I'm gettin' more Boston. I'm soundin' more like Kennedy than Maine.

He says he's collecting birds and the old lady asks him if he cages 'em up. And he says, no, they're stuffed and preserved, dozens and dozens of them. The top of the next page it says, “She could not understand why he killed the very birds he seemed to like so much.” If you looked at the prints of the — the engravings made by John James Audubon, those wonderful, wonderful pictures, every one of those birds is dead, you know. Audubon had to shoot 'em first. They wouldn't stand still for him to examine 'em and draw 'em and measure 'em. He didn't have a camera, so he shot 'em. No tellin' how many wood ducks he had to go through sometimes to get one of those pictures. But we'll try not to think of it that way. But that's why they're called — they're really still lives more than anything else.

But he wants to know about that white heron and he says he'd give ten bucks for it. I don't know what ten dollars would've been worth back then, but it would've been considerable. And certainly — probably almost like a — half an angle income. And for people with no monetary income whatsoever, just really living a subsistence existence
out in the woods, that would’ve been an enormous help to her grandmother and to herself. But she knew where the bird was. She had an idea ‘cause she’d heard it and she’d seen it. “She’d never seen anybody so charming and delightful. The woman’s heart asleep in the child was vaguely thrilled by a dream of love.” Did that strike a false note with you? The rest of this going on? I don’t know. I can’t remember when I was nine if I had crushes or not. Or whether Julid is dreaming here. But the little girl — I guess she could have a crush on this handsome young man who shows up and is kind to her.

Well, this gets us to the pine tree and my favorite part of the book, of the story. This is the way she thinks she'll be able to see the bird is if she gets a high vantage point. Look in the middle of page 602. “As she climbs this tree” — now, this is an extraordinary passage. When I say things like “This is an extraordinary passage,” this is a passage that you know you need to save for future reference.

“The tree seemed to lengthen itself out as she went up and to reach farther and farther upward.” That’s good observation, isn’t it? You ever notice that, if you’re climbing a ladder, a tree, or something like that, you’re halfway up and you think, “Oh, I didn’t think it was this tall. I didn’t think it was this far.” “It was like a great main mast to the voyaging earth.” Wonderful simile. This tall, straight, huge tree. Like a mast. “It must truly have been amazed that morning through all its ponderous frame.” What’s the “it” refer to? The tree. Uh-oh.

“As it felt this determined spark of human spirit winding its way from higher branch to branch, who knows how steadily the least twigs held themselves to advantage
to help this light, weak creature on her way.” It’s not just the tree is aware of her, but
the twigs — “I’ll help her” — are helping her go. This is an example of the pathetic
fallacy. Pathetic fallacy. And it doesn’t mean, “PA-THE-TIC fallacy,” right? Pathos,
feeling. It means fallacious feeling, fallacy of feeling. John Ruskin gave us the term.

I used to be — I used to feel really strongly about this and I don’t feel that
strongly about it anymore. I think Ruskin might have prejudiced me too much. For one
thing, he attacked a poem by Robert Browning that’s really quite a good poem, “Meeting
at Night,” but he talks about this boat that’s going through the waves. It’s about to
beach this boat. And there was a little half moon large and low, a yellow half moon, and
he talks about the “fiery little waves that leap” — no — “the little waves that leap in fiery
ringlets from their sleep as I gain the cove with push and prow.”

Little waves don’t have ringlets. They don’t have hair. Fiery ringlets are from the
reflection of the yellow moon, but little waves leaping? Sleeping from their sleep? Little
waves don’t sleep, either. Does that bother you? Well, it’s poetic. It certainly is. It’s a
poetic device, I suppose. But to give — well, that definition of pathetic fallacy is to
assign impossible feelings to things that aren’t sentient, that don’t feel. “The sky is
crying” is a metaphor because it looks like it’s crying. But if you say “The willow wept its
branches to the ground,” it’s almost the pathetic fallacy. If he said “the sad willow” —
and in this place we have a tree that’s aware of what’s climbing it. It says, “The old pine
must’ve loved his new dependent.” That takes it way too far for me.

Some more stylistic notes. “Sylvia’s face was like a pale star.” I don’t like that.
Her face was like a pale star. “If one had seen it from the ground.” This is a weird thing
you get into when you reading fiction. Tolstoy’s describing the Battle of Borodino in another class for me right now. Well, he wasn’t there. He had seen combat, he had seen military action. He’d seen the puff of smoke from the canon and the seconds that passed before you heart the report. All of that is very realistically told. But, at the same time, he’s telling you what everybody’s thinking on that battlefield. How can he know that? But we don’t worry about it. We just read it and enjoy it and get into it. But there’s a strange thing about reading. Who in the world is watching this little girl climb this tree? “Sylvia’s face was like a pale star if one had seen it from the ground.” John Fals makes fun of that convention in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. There’s a scene in which his heroine walks to a window and looks out, and he says, “She could be seen, though by whom I don’t know unless a passing owl, standing by the window.” We just get so used to that.

I’m just pickin’ on this story. Did I just pick it out so I could pick on it? I don’t mean to, but I kinda resented reading it today. “Yes, there was the sea with a daunting sun, making a golden dazzle over it. And toward that glorious east flew two hawks with slow moving pinions.” Well, she can’t help it. It is 1888. So pinions — you know, an ancient word for wings. And then the heron is crying to its mate on the nest. There’s another little bit of sentimentality. It’s not just the heron. He’s married, you know. There are little herons. Probably some little herons in a little nest in a little tree, and the little Sylvia on top of the big tree. Doesn’t want to break her little heart by hurting the little herons. That’s terrible.

“She knows his secret now, the wild, light, slender bird that floats and wavers and
goes back like an arrow presently to his home on the green world beneath.” That’s good writing. That is good writing. I don’t mean to be so cynical about it. And I’m not even being sarcastic about it. It just doesn’t age very well. I don’t think it really does. One of these days you need to go back and watch one of your favorite movies that you really like this year. Watch it 10 years from now and you’ll go, “My goodness.” ‘Cause it just doesn’t age. Things just often don’t.

Well, how about the ending. She comes back and — truly, surely, no one was surprised that she won’t turn in the bird. “Gimmee the ten bucks,” you know. That didn’t happen. “It made him rich but she doesn’t do it. But she remembers how the white heron came flying through the golden air and how they watched the sea and morning together. Sylvia cannot speak, she cannot tell the heron’s secret and give its life away.”

I would be much more content had Sarah Owen Jewett ended her story there. But instead she appends a prayer at the end about dear loyalty that the little girl had shown. And in the very last line — it’s kind of a prayer to nature — “What other treasures were lost to her” — through money — “woodlands in summertime remember. Bring your gifts and graces and tell your secrets to this lonely country child.” You mentioned poetry. That’s almost poetic exactly in the line. Look at the rhythm. “Bring your gifts and graces — alliteration — “and tell your secrets to this lonely country child.” It winds up absolutely iambic.

Well, again, I hope you really enjoyed that because that’s the sweetest thing we’re going to get to the end. Look at the date. Published 1886, two years after the
publication of *Huckleberry Finn*. I think that’s interesting if you put that in a historical context that Twain is writing this realistic — in many ways VERY realistic novel with language that is even controversial to this day and was certainly regionalist detail, contrasted to something like this with its sentimentality and sweetness and almost a mawkish, maudlin type tone before you’re done with it. But that’s what was going on.

Okay. Enjoy Kate Chopin although we do Perkins Gilman next, I believe.