

So near, yet, oh, how far

LITTLE COMPTON · RHODE ISLAND · SCRIPT AND NOTES

A 90-second film after the essay “So Near, Yet, Oh, How Far”: Creating Little Compton as a Summer Destination,” by Steven Lubar (rev. April 26, 2025)

Script

Two voices: a narrator, and Sarah Helen Whitman speaking her own words from “Seaconnet,” *Providence Journal*, August 25, 1869. Times are start times in the finished film. Whitman’s lines are set in italics.

TIME	VOICE AND LINE	ON SCREEN
0:00	NARRATOR Little Compton was never far from anywhere. In 1793, its barley sailed to New York.	Manifest of the sloop <i>Lively</i> , 1793
0:06	NARRATOR In the 1840s, the Seaconnet House promised daily stages from Boston and Providence.	Seaconnett House ad, <i>Providence Journal</i> , 1846 Seaconnett House, Warren’s Point, about 1850
0:12	NARRATOR Then the railroad reached Tiverton, and stopped. Easier to reach than ever, the town only seemed farther away.	Tiverton station, Stone Bridge, about 1890 Old Colony and Newport Railway timetable, 1870
0:19	NARRATOR In 1869, the Providence poet Sarah Helen Whitman wrote of her summer there.	Whitman, painted by John Nelson Arnold, 1869 <i>Providence Daily Journal</i> , Aug. 25, 1869
0:24	SARAH HELEN WHITMAN <i>A friend “exclaimed, with surprise, ‘Going to Seaconnet! I thought nobody went there now.’”</i>	Clipping: “Seaconnet,” opening
0:30	SARAH HELEN WHITMAN <i>“So near, yet, oh, how far!”</i> Reference: Goethe, Faust, Part II	Whitman, daguerreotype by Joseph White, 1856
0:33	SARAH HELEN WHITMAN <i>“It was an old, old road, innocent of stages or railroad crossings ... looking like the Demon-haunted woodlands in Doré’s illustrations of the Inferno.”</i> Reference: Dante, Inferno · engravings by Gustave Doré	Clipping: “an old, old road” Doré, <i>Inferno</i> engraving Doré, <i>Inferno</i> engraving
0:41	SARAH HELEN WHITMAN <i>“That charm of remoteness ... appreciated by the dwellers in Dr. Johnson’s Happy Valley and by the Dryad of ‘Walden Pond.’”</i> Reference: Samuel Johnson, Rasselas · Thoreau, Walden	Clipping: “that charm of remoteness” Johnson, <i>Prince of Abissinia</i>

TIME	VOICE AND LINE	ON SCREEN
0:49	NARRATOR At the road's end stood the Owl's Nest, home of the poet George Shepard Burleigh.	The Owl's Nest, the Burleighs' home George Shepard Burleigh George Burleigh and family
0:54	SARAH HELEN WHITMAN <i>"I confess a weakness for windmills."</i> Reference: Cervantes, Don Quixote	Wilbur family windmill, about 1880
0:56	SARAH HELEN WHITMAN <i>"An inexpressible charm ... so free, so untrammelled, so social, so kindly, so restful!"</i>	Sarah D. Wilkinson, "Noble Bitings, off Warren's Point," 1870 Painting by George S. Burleigh
1:04	SARAH HELEN WHITMAN <i>"Seaconnet ... will, doubtless, ere long 'Suffer a sea-change' ... and the haunt of the seabirds become the haunt of city belles."</i> Reference: Shakespeare, The Tempest	Clipping: "suffer a sea-change" Sakonnet steamer at the wharf
1:12	NARRATOR Steamboats came, and a hotel, and railroads that were never built. She guarded not distance, but "the charm of remoteness."	Davis House advertising car, about 1915 Plan of the Seaconnet Railroad, 1885 "A Long Electric Road," 1891
1:20	SARAH HELEN WHITMAN <i>"The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep moans round with many voices. So good night."</i> Reference: Tennyson, "Ulysses"	Painting by Sarah Wilkinson Burleigh
1:28	END TITLE <i>So near, yet, oh, how far</i> · after an essay by Steven Lubar · image and voice credits	

About the voices

Both voices are synthesized, and no recording of Whitman (1803–1878) exists, so her voice is an interpretation. It was made from a text-to-speech voice trained on LibriVox audiobook readings, then slowed, lowered slightly, softened, and set a few decibels below the narrator, to sound older and quieter.¹ Every line she speaks comes from her 1869 article; ellipses mark omissions, and the opening exclamation is a friend's remark that she reports.² The *Providence Journal* clippings appear on screen while she speaks.

Literary references

Goethe, *Faust*, Part II

"So near, yet, oh, how far" echoes Helen's words to Faust in Act III ("I feel so far away and yet so near"). Whitman had used the line as the epigraph to her poem "A Vision of the Night."³

Dante, *Inferno*, in Doré's engravings

The dark wood where Dante meets Virgil, his poet-guide, as Whitman goes on to meet the poet George Burleigh. Doré's engravings date from 1857–61.⁴

Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas* (1759)

The Happy Valley, where “the blessings of nature were collected, and its evils extracted and excluded.”⁵

Thoreau, *Walden*

“The Dryad of Walden Pond”: a retreat that felt wild while sitting a short walk from Concord.

Cervantes, *Don Quixote*

“I confess a weakness for windmills”: the town’s old mills called up “the most romantic of all romances.”

Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

Ariel’s song: “Suffer a sea-change / Into something rich and strange.” Whitman feared a great hotel near Granny Carr’s, and “the haunt of the seabirds become the haunt of city belles.”

Tennyson, “Ulysses”

Whitman closes on its lines, then trades the poem’s call to “seek a newer world” for “So good night.”⁶

Image credits

In order of appearance. Manifest of the sloop *Lively*, 1793 (gift of Alan and Susan Hooker); Seaconnett House advertisement, *Providence Journal*, 1846; the Seaconnett House, about 1850; Tiverton station, about 1890 (Collection of Matthew D. Cosgro); Old Colony and Newport Railway timetable, 1870; Whitman by John Nelson Arnold, 1869 (Brown University); *Providence Daily Journal*, August 25, 1869; Whitman daguerreotype by Joseph White, 1856 (John Hay Library, Brown University); Gustave Doré, *Inferno* engravings; Johnson, *Prince of Abissinia*; the Owl’s Nest; George Shepard Burleigh; the Burleigh family; the Wilbur windmill, about 1880; Sarah D. Wilkinson, “Noble Bitings, off Warren’s Point,” 1870 (gift of the Vernon sisters); painting by George S. Burleigh; Sakonnet steamer; Davis House advertising car, about 1915; plan of the Seaconnet Railroad, 1885; “A Long Electric Road,” 1891; painting by Sarah Wilkinson Burleigh. Unless noted, courtesy Little Compton Historical Society.

Notes

1. Voice model: “kristin” (en_US), trained on LibriVox public-domain recordings, via the open-source sherpa-onnx / Piper text-to-speech toolkit; narrator voice from the Kokoro model.
2. S.H.W., “Seaconnet,” *Providence Journal*, August 25, 1869, as quoted in Lubar, “So Near, Yet, Oh, How Far,” and in the clippings supplied with it.
3. Goethe, *Faust*, Part II, Act III, lines 9412–13, trans. A. S. Kline, Poetry in Translation, <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/German/FaustIIActIII.php>; Sarah H. Whitman, “A Vision of the Night,” *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 18 (February 1846): 116–17.
4. Aida Audeh, “The World of Dante: Gustave Doré,” http://www.worldofdante.org/gallery_dore.html.
5. Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1820), 2.
6. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “Ulysses,” Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45392/ulysses>.