A New England Nun Study Guide

A New England Nun by Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

When "A New England Nun" was first published in A *New England Nun and Other Stories* (1891), Mary Wilkins Freeman was already an established author of short stories and children's literature. Her first book of short stories, *A Humble Romance and Other Stories* (1887), had received considerable critical and popular attention, and she published stories in such notable journals as *Harper's Bazaar, Harper's Monthly*, and the *New York Sunday Budget*.

Mary Wilkins Freeman is often classified as a "local color writer." This means that she attempted to capture the distinct characteristics of regional America. Other well-known local colorists were Sarah Orne Jewett (with whom Freeman was often compared) and Harriet Beecher Stowe (author of the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*). As in the work of other local color writers, a recognizable regional setting plays an important part in most of Freeman's stories. However, she differed from writers such as Jewett and Stowe in that she rarely engaged in the meticulous description of places and people that they favored. The details in her stories tend to have symbolic significance, and most critics agree that her themes are more universal than those commonly found in much local color writing of the time. She is admired for her simple, direct prose and her insight into the psychology of her characters. "A New England Nun" has a very simple, perhaps even contrived plot. Yet Freeman manages to depict skillfully the personalities involved in this small drama and the time in which they lived.

Author Biography

Born in 1852, Mary Wilkins Freeman spent the first fifty years of her life in the rural villages of New England. It was an area suffering severe economic depression. The combination of fatalities from the Civil War (1861-65), westward expansion, and industrialization in the cities had taken large numbers of young men from the countryside. What remained was a population largely female, elderly, or both, struggling to earn a living and to keep up appearances. Freeman became famous for her unsentimental and realistic portrayals of these people in her short stories. She wrote, "A young writer should follow the safe course of writing only about those subjects she knows thoroughly." This is exactly what she did, exploring the often peculiar and nearly always strong-willed New England temperament in short stories, poems, novels, and plays.,/p>

Freeman is best known for her short stories. She began writing short stories for adults in her early thirties when faced with the need to support herself and an aging aunt after the death of her parents. She had already had considerable success publishing children's stories and poems. Her first stories were published in magazines such as *Harper's Monthly* and The New York Sunday Budget in the early 1880s. She quickly made a name for herself and published her first collection of short stories, A *Humble Romance and Other Stories*, in 1887. A prolific writer, Freeman published her second collection *A New England Nun and Other Stories* only four years later.

Many of her stories concern female characters who are unmarried, spinsters or widows, often living alone and supporting themselves. It was a situation she knew well. She herself did not marry until the age of fifty, and her marriage was an unhappy one. She separated from her husband and spent the last years of her life with friends and relatives. Although Freeman found popular success writing in many different genres, including ghost stories, plays, and romance novels that appeared in serial form in magazines, it is for her short stories that she is most highly regarded by critics. Most critics concur that her first two volumes of short stories contain her best work. She was awarded the William Dean Howells Medal in 1925 and in 1926 was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. She died in 1930.

Plot Summary

"A New England Nun" opens with Louisa Ellis sewing peacefully in her sitting room. It is late afternoon and the light is waning. We see Louisa going about her daily activities calmly and meticulously; she gathers currants for her tea, prepares a meal, feeds her dog, tidies up her house carefully, and waits for Joe Dagget to visit. Joe and Louisa have been engaged for fifteen years, during fourteen of which Joe has been away seeking his fortune in Australia. Louisa has been waiting patiently for his return, never complaining but growing more and more set in her rather narrow, solitary ways as the years have passed.

During his visit, both he and Louisa are described as ill-at-ease. Joe sits "bolt-upright," fidgets with some books that are on the table, and knocks over Louisa's sewing basket when he gets up to leave. He colors when Louisa mentions Lily Dyer, a woman who is helping out Joe's mother. Louisa becomes uneasy when Joe handles her books, and when he sets them down with a different one on top she puts them back as they were before he picked them up. Once he leaves, she closely examines the carpet and sweeps up the dirt he has tracked in.

Despite their awkwardness with each other, Louisa continues to sew her wedding clothes while Joe dutifully continues his visits. One evening about a week before the wedding date, Louisa goes for a walk. As she is sitting on a wall and looking at the moon shining through a large tree, she overhears Joe and Lily talking nearby. It quickly becomes apparent that they are in love and are saying what they intend to be their final good-byes to one another. Lily has decided to quit her job and go away. After they leave, Louisa returns home in a daze but quickly determines to break off her engagement. The next evening when Joe arrives, she musters all the "meek" diplomacy she can find and tells him that while she has "no cause of complaint against him, she [has] lived so long in one way that she [shrinks] from making a change." They part tenderly. Although that night Louisa weeps, by morning she feels "like a queen who, after fearing lest her domain be wrested away from her, sees it firmly insured in her possession."

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

"A New England Nun" by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, starts with Louisa Ellis finishing her sewing, which she did all that afternoon. Louisa goes out to her garden to pick currants for her tea. She serves herself a small supper on her china and gives her dog some corn cakes. After washing dishes, she returns to sewing. When Joe Dagget, her fiancé, comes to visit shortly after, there is awkward behavior. Joe Dagget is loud and clumsy, and he appears not to fit into Louisa's dainty home environment. They are both aware of bothered by the awkwardness. Their discussion consisted of the day, work, Joe's mother, and a girl named Lily Dyer who is helping his mother at home. Joe blushes twice at the mention of Lily's name. Joe's nervousness is apparent as he fiddles with two of Louisa's books on the table. She is bothered by the way he places them, and she changes them back to their correct placement. When he wonders why she cares how the books are placed, she says that she always keeps them that way. Joe Dagget's clumsiness continues as he is leaving. He trips over a rug and hits Louisa's workbasket on the table, knocking it down. He tries to make an effort to pick the things up, but she tells him not to bother because she would do it after he leaves, which she does. She also inspects the floor for dirt. She cleans the dirt trail that he brought in. Still, he faithfully comes to see her twice a week.

The couple plans to marry the following month. A reason there is tension between Louisa and Joe is that they had not seen each other for fourteen of the fifteen years of their engagement. Joe was in Australia making his fortune for fourteen of the years. After he made his fortune, he returned to see Louisa without telling her of his arrival. Even though she was expecting him to arrive one day, she was still surprised to see him. During their time apart Louisa had changed and she became set in her own ways. She became independent. Her parents, died and she developed routines that comforted her. She never thought of marrying anyone other than Joe, though she never missed him in his absence. She felt at peace with her life. For her, marriage to Joe would be the expected thing to do. In a way, she almost hopes the marriage will not happen. Joe Dagget also changed. He saw in Louisa the same beautiful girl he left, but the love he had felt before was felt now for another. While Joe still has some admiration for Louisa, she had absolutely none for him.

Next, Louisa imagines all of her possessions in Joe's house, where they expect to live once they are married. She does not like the thought of that or her lost freedom. She assumes that Joe and his mother will think all of the things in which she takes great pleasure as foolish and senseless. Louisa loves order and cleanliness. She is upset at the thought of his masculine and dirty possessions mixing with hers. She also has scary visions of Joe letting her dog Caesar loose after fourteen years because the dog once bit and injured a neighbor. Joe thinks it is cruel to keep the dog locked up, but Louisa knows of his ferocity, though he is gentle with her. Even after having these thoughts, a week before the wedding, she continues to sew her wedding clothes.

Louisa decides to take a walk that night. In the midst of harvest fields, she sits down on a low stone wall feeling sad about her situation. She hears footsteps and voices nearby. She sits still hoping the people would pass on by without noticing her. Though the people actually sit don on the same stonewall as she is seated upon, they do not seem to notice her. Louisa remains very still as she hears Joe and Lily Dyer's voices. Louisa hears them talk about not being sorry that the night before they revealed their true feelings for one another. Joe says he will not turn away from Louisa because he has honor and will not hurt her. He explains that he made a promise to Louisa and he has every intention to keep it. Lily says she is leaving town and will not fret over him while he is married. Louisa is in a daze, but she is also a little bit relieved. Louisa has witnessed Joe's true feelings, giving her the courage to break their engagement the following day, knowing it will not hurt him and she will not be betraying herself.

"She felt like a queen" the next morning after regaining control of her domain and the rest of her life. The end of the story describes Louisa as perfectly satisfied and thankful. While she sits at her window doing needlework, she joyfully listens to the sounds of life outside. Louisa is compared to an uncloistered nun because she is "prayerfully numbering her days." She looks forward to the predictability of her days alone as though it were her birthright.

Analysis

A New England Nun is told in third person omniscient narration. That is, the story is told from the point of view of an outsider who seems to be privy to the thoughts and feelings of the characters. With this type, the narrator is able to know how both Joe and Louisa feel and think. The tone of the story is detached or unemotional, perhaps used to heighten the emotion in the scene with Joe and Lily. Symbolism throughout "A New England Nun" includes religious terminology, chaining of Louisa's dog Caesar, and stirring for the sake of subsidence. Some religious terminology used was St. George's dragon, righteous retribution, pearls in a rosary, and uncloistered nun. Louisa's dog Caesar was chained in her yard for fourteen years, which is the same amount of time Louisa and Joe were apart. The dog was chained because he bit a neighbor's dog once and was doomed to a life at the end of a chain. This can also be symbolic of their relationship in the beginning, which may have been sexual enough to make both of them continue to be engaged for fourteen years without seeing each other. The story says, "He was the first lover she ever had." Stirring for the sake of subsidence can be seen any time Louisa is described as loving order and cleanliness. She put her complete passion into this behavior. There is a theme of achieving order or peace of mind by being set in one's ways.

In a way, the characters have a fear of their own thoughts and strange new feelings and they try to avoid the unpleasantness through familiarity. This can be seen in the way Louisa continues to sew her wedding clothes even though she is unhappy about the upcoming event, or the way Joe Dagget continues to visit Louisa on a regular basis even though his visits are awkward, as though he is a bear in a china shop.

There are three surprises in the story's plot. The first surprise is the engagement/non-engagement for fourteen years. The second surprise is the love interest between Lily Dyer and Joe Dagget. The third surprise is that Louisa feels like a queen after breaking the engagement. The key event of the story is when Louisa overhears Joe and Lily talk about their feelings for each other. The fact that Joe would marry Louisa because of his honor relates to the theme of achieving order or peace of mind by being set in one's ways. While breaking the engagement, Louisa explained to Joe that "she had lived so long in one way that she shrank from making a change." Louisa achieves an ironic happiness at the end of the story. Her situation stays the same, but now she is looking forward to every day being the same for the rest of her life. "Louisa sat, prayerfully numbering her days, like an uncloistered nun."

Characters

Caesar

Caesar is the old yellow dog Louisa Ellis keeps chained securely to his hut in her yard. "Fat and sleepy" with "yellow rings which looked like spectacles around his dim old eyes," Caesar "seldom lift[s] up his voice in a growl or bark." The pet of Louisa's cherished dead brother, Caesar bit someone when he was a puppy and has been restrained ever since. Although he has become, over the years, just as placid as Louisa herself, his reputation as a ferocious, bloodthirsty animal has taken on a life of its own. He has become something of a village legend and everyone except Joe Dagget, Louisa's fiance, firmly believes in his ferocity.

Joe Dagget

Joe Dagget, Louisa Ellis's fiance for the past fifteen years, has spent fourteen of those years in Australia, where he went to make his fortune. He has returned and he and Louisa are planning to marry. Good-humored, honorable, and hardworking, Joe is awkward and uncomfortable in the meticulously ordered, domesticated world Louisa has built for herself over the years. He has already announced his intention to free Caesar, Louisa's old dog, who has been chained up ever since he bit someone while still a puppy. During the visit to Louisa, described in the story, Joe tracks in dirt, fidgets with the books on her table, and knocks over her sewing basket. Nonetheless, his sense of honor is so strong that even though he has fallen in love with Lily Dyer, a younger woman who has been helping his ailing mother, and although he realizes that he and Louisa are no longer suited to one another after a fourteen-year separation, he intends to go through with the marriage.

Dog

See Caesar

Lily Dyer

"A girl full of a calm rustic strength and bloom, with a masterful way which might have beseemed a princess," Lily Dyer is "good and handsome and smart," and much admired in the village. She is pretty, fair-skinned, blond, tall and full-figured. She works for Joe Dagget's mother and□as we and Louisa eventually discover□she and Joe have fallen in love when the story opens. A better match for Joe, Lily is full of life and vitality and just as goodnatured and practical as he is. She also shares his strong sense of honor, declaring she wouldn't marry him even if he broke his engagement because "honor's honor, an' right's right."

Louisa Ellis

At the beginning of the story, Louisa Ellis has been engaged for fifteen years to Joe Dagget, who has spent fourteen of those years working in Australia. He has been back for some time, and he and Louisa are to be married in a month. All this time, Louisa has been "patiently and unquestioningly waiting" for her fiance to return. On her own since her mother and brother died, she has been living a serene and peaceful life. Her daily activities include sewing quietly, raising lettuce, making perfumes using an old still, and caring for her canary and her brother's old dog. Meticulous and tidy, she does everything with care and with the precision of old habit. She has "almost the enthusiasm of an artist over the mere order and cleanliness of her solitary home."

Known for her sweet, even temperament and her "gentle acquiescence," Louisa has "never dreamed of the possibility of marrying anyone else" in all the long years Joe has been away, and has always looked forward to his return and to their marriage as the "inevitable conclusion of things." Just the same, she has, by the time the story opens, gotten so in the habit of living peacefully alone inside her "hedge of lace" that Joe's return finds her "as much surprised and taken aback as if she had never thought about" their eventual marriage at all. When Joe stops by for one of his regular visits, she becomes uneasy when he moves some books she keeps on a table, and as soon as he leaves she carefully checks the carpet and sweeps up any dirt he has tracked in. Without really noticing the change, she has become as much a hermit as her old yellow dog, Caesar.

Caesar, chained placidly to his little hut, and Louisa's canary, dozing quietly in his cage, parallel her personality. Her life is serene but also narrow, like that of an "uncloistered nun." Like the canary, who flutters wildly whenever Joe visits, Louisa fears the disruption of her peaceful life that marriage to Joe represents. After discovering that Joe is secretly in love with Lily Dyer, who has been helping to care for his ailing mother, Louisa breaks off her engagement to him with diplomacy, and rejoices that her "domain" is once again safe.

Themes

Choices and Consequences

One important theme in Mary Wilkins Freeman's "A New England Nun" is that of the consequences of choice. Louisa is faced with a choice between a solitary and somewhat sterile life of her own making and the life of a married woman. She has waited fourteen years for Joe Dagget to return from Australia. During this time she has, without realizing it, "turned into a path, smooth maybe under a calm, serene sky, but so straight and unswerving that it could only meet a check at her grave, and so narrow that there was no room for any one at her side." If she marries Joe, she will sacrifice a great deal of her personal freedom, her quiet way of life, and many of her favorite pastimes. On the other hand, if she chooses to remain single, she faces the disapproval of the community for rebelling against custom (women were expected to marry if they could); the villagers already disapprove of her use of the good china on a daily basis. She also faces the probability of growing old alone with no children to care for her. In the end, when Louisa discovers Joe is in love with Lily Dyer and breaks off the engagement, she feels more relief than regret. She sacrifices her "birthright" in favor of her independence; she chooses to remain alone, in "placid narrowness."

Courage and Cowardice

Another important and related theme in "A New England Nun" is the relationship between courage and cowardice. Mary Wilkins Freeman shows us that it is often difficult to make decisions. For example, it takes all the "meek" courage and diplomacy Louisa Ellis can muster to break off her engagement with Joe Dagget; and she shows more courage than he, perhaps, in being able to broach the subject. Furthermore, it is courageous for a woman of her time to choose to remain single given the social stigma of being an old maid or spinster. Yet it is her fear of marriage and the disruption it represents that prompts her to find this courage. Joe Dagget demonstrates courage, too, in his willingness to go ahead with the marriage. He knows he is in love with another woman but is willing to sacri- fice his own happiness for what he believes is the happiness of the woman who has waited fourteen years for him to return from Australia. Yet, there is something cowardly about Joe, too. He is unable to tell Louisa the truth about his feelings even when she has told him she no longer wishes to get married.

Search for Self

Louisa Ellis moves toward greater self-knowledge through the course of the story's action. In the beginning we see a person who, while sweet and serene, is the very model of passivity. She agreed to marry Joe Dagget because her mother advised her to do so. She waited patiently for him for fourteen years without once complaining or thinking of marrying someone else. And when he returns and she discovers she does

not love him and does not want to get married, she plans to go through with it anyway because she doesn't want to hurt Joe. She finally breaks off the engagement a week before the wedding; but even then she does so because she finds out Joe is in love with Lily, not because she decides to assert her own will. However, she does realize, after coming so close to sacrificing her freedom, how much she cherishes her "serenity and placid narrowness." While it is true Louisa has only returned to the passive life she has been leading all these years, she returns to it as a result of active choice□perhaps the one active choice she has made in her whole life. In making this choice, she has chosen her self and her own "vision" of life.

Duty and Responsibility

Duty and responsibility are important themes in "A New England Nun" and they were important issues for the New England society Freeman portrays. People were expected to be self-sacrificing and to put responsibility, especially to family or community, ahead of personal happiness. Freeman shows us, however, that too rigid a definition of duty can be dangerous. Both Louisa and Joe are willing to go through with a marriage neither of them really wants any longer because of a sense of duty. It is to this same notion of duty that Lily refers when she says "Honor's honor, an' right's right." Adhering to this rigid notion of duty and responsibility would make three people miserable and accomplish nothing worthwhile.

Flesh vs. Spirit

Style

Setting

This story about a woman who finds, after waiting for her betrothed for fourteen years, that she no longer wants to get married, is set in a small village in nineteenth-century New England. Critics have often remarked that the setting is particular but also oddly universal as are the themes Freeman chooses to treat. This village is populated with people we might meet nearly anywhere in rural America.

Point of View

"A New England Nun" is told in the third person, omniscient narration. That is, the narrator is not one of the characters of the story yet appears to know everything or nearly everything about the characters, including, at times, their thoughts. For example, the narrator tells us that, after leaving Louisa's house, Joe Dagget "felt much as an innocent and perfectly well-intentioned bear might after his exit from a china shop."

Symbolism

In general terms, a symbol is a literary devise used to represent, signal or evoke something else. For example, a fading red rose might be used to symbolize the fading of a romance. Like Nathaniel Hawthorne, to whom she has been compared, Freeman was adept at using symbolism in her short stories; but her touch is lighter than Hawthorne's.,/p>

There are many symbols in "A New England Nun." For example, the chained dog Caesar and the canary that Louisa keeps in a cage both represent her own hermit-like way of life, surrounded by a "hedge of lace." The alarm the canary shows whenever Joe Dagget comes to visit is further emblematic of Louisa's own fear of her impending marriage.

There is a great deal of symbolism associated with nature and plant life in this story. The evening Louisa goes for a walk and overhears Joe and Lily talking it is harvest time□symbolizing the rich fertility and vitality that Lily and Joe represent. Louisa, however, feels oppressed by the sexually suggestive "luxuriant" late summer growth, "all woven together and tangled;" and she is sad as she contemplates her impending marriage even though there is a "mysterious sweetness" in the air. The tumultuous growth of the wild plants reminds us of and contrasts with Louisa's own garden, which is tidy, orderly and carefully controlled.

Louisa sits amid all this wild growth and gazes through a "little clear space" at the moon. The moon is a symbol of chastity; Diana, the Roman goddess of the moon, was a chaste goddess. Louisa will later choose to continue her solitary and virginal, but

peaceful life rather than tolerate the disorder and turmoil she believes married life would bring. Lily, on the other hand, embraces that life; and she is described as "blooming," associating her with the fertile wild growth of summer.

Realism

Freeman's work is known for its realism□a kind of writing that attempts to represent ordinary life as it really is, rather than representing heroic, fantastic, or melodramatic events. Realism, as a literary movement, began in America following the Civil War. The disruption of the war, followed by the Reconstruction of the South and widespread urbanization and industrialization greatly changed the way America looked at itself and, in turn, altered literary models. The romantic approach of the earlier generation of writers, represented by Hawthorne, Melville and Poe, gave way to a new realism. Prominent writers of the Realist movement were Mark Twain, Henry James, and William Dean Howells. Freeman can be further classified as a local color writer along with Bret Harte, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Kate Chopin, who wrote about life in California, Maine, and Louisiana respectively.

Writing Style

Mary Wilkins Freeman has frequently been praised by critics for her economical, direct writing style. She uses short, concise sentences and wastes little time on detailed descriptions. Her characters are sketched with a few strong, simple strokes of the pen. For example, the reader never really learns what Louisa Ellis looks like, but it does not matter to the story. We know what we need to know to keep us interested and to keep the story moving. Freeman is also known for her dry, often ironic sense of humor. One critic has called it "pungent." It is the kind of subtle humor that makes us smile rather than laugh aloud. Freeman's portrait of Caesar, the sleepy and quite harmless old yellow dog that everyone thinks is terribly ferocious, is a good example of her humorous touch. Freeman tells us "St. George's dragon could hardly have surpassed in evil repute Louisa Ellis's old yellow dog." It doesn't matter that Caesar has not harmed anyone in fourteen years. The mere fact that he is chained makes people believe he is dangerous. "Caesar at large might have seemed a very ordinary dog" she writes, "chained, his reputation overshadowed him, so that he lost his own proper outlines and looked darkly vague and ominous."

Historical Context

Religion and Economics

Mary Wilkins Freeman wrote most of her bestknown short stories in the 1880s and 1890s. They provide a unique snapshot of a particular time and place in American history. The small towns of post- Civil War New England were often desolate places. The war itself, combined with urbanization, industrialization, and westward expansion, had taken most of the young able-bodied men out of the region. The remaining population was largely female and elderly. Women like Louisa Ellis, who waited many years for husbands, brothers, fathers and boyfriends to return from the West or other places they had gone to seek jobs, were not uncommon. The area was suffering from economic depression and many were forced to leave to support themselves and their families. There were many widows from the war, too, often living hand-tomouth and trying to keep up appearances. Also common were the New England spinsters or old maids□women who, because of the shortage of men or for other reasons, never married. They were numerous enough that they contributed to the making of a stereotype we all recognize today.

Freeman knew these New England villages and their inhabitants intimately, and she used them as material for her many short stories. She said she was interested in exploring the New England character and the strong, often stubborn, New England will.

New England was settled by the Puritans during the early years of colonization in America. Vestiges of Puritanism remained in New England culture in Freeman's day and still remain today. Freeman often said that she was interested in exploring how people of the region had been shaped by the legacy of Puritanism. This is another question she examines in many of her short stories. In "A New England Nun" we can see traces of Puritanism in the rigid moral code by which Louisa, Joe and Lily are bound. Even if it makes them unhappy, Louisa and Joe both feel obligated to go through with their marriage because of a sense of duty. Lily echoes this same sense when she says she would never marry Joe if he went back on his promise to Louisa.

Women in the nineteenthCentury

Another aspect of nineteenth-century culture□ not just in New England, but throughout the United States□that we find reflected in Mary Wilkins Freeman's short stories is that culture's attitude toward women. While contemporary readers may find Louisa's extreme passivity surprising, it was not unusual for a woman of her time. "Calm docility" and a "sweet, even temperament" were considered highly desirable traits in a woman. We can see that Louisa has learned these traits from her mother; and in fact, many parents raised their daughters to be much like Louisa.

Although things were beginning to change in larger towns and cities in America, in rural areas there were not many occupations open to women. As a result, while marriage was considered the most natural and desirable goal for women, it was often economically necessary as well. The skills a woman like Louisa acquired□cooking, sewing, gardening□ from her own mother rather than from formal education, were intended to prepare her for a role as wife and mother. For many women like Louisa, the idea of not marrying was almost too outlandish to consider. Like Louisa they had been taught to expect to marry, and there were few if any attractive alternatives available to them. To turn down a chance to marry was considered both unnatural and foolhardy.

Realism

One important artistic influence on Freeman's work was realism. The same turbulent forces that shaped much of nineteenth-century American culture□ the Civil War, the Reconstruction of the South, the industrial revolution□also affected literary tastes. Readers no longer liked the fanciful and heroic works of romanticism. Instead they wanted literature that reflected life as it truly was. William Dean Howells was one of the important novelists in this country to champion realism. Others were Henry James and Mark Twain. Howells was a friend and mentor to Mary Wilkins Freeman. However, it is possible Freeman would have been a realist even if she had not known Howells. Realism was in vogue and realistic short stories were what sold.

Critical Overview

Freeman's reputation was built upon her unsentimental and realistic portrayals of the rural nineteenth-century New England life. She was known for her ironic sense of humor and the idiosyncratic and colorful characters who populate her stories. Writing for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in September of 1887, William Dean Howells, a lifetime friend, mentor, and fan of Freeman, praised her first volume of short stories, *A Humble Romance and Other Stories*, for its "absence of literosity" and its "directness and simplicity."

An anonymous critic who reviewed *A New England Nun and Other Stories* for the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1891 noted Freeman's "short economical sentences, with no waste and no niggardliness," her "passion for brevity, her power for packing a whole story in a phrase, a word," and her "fine artistic sense." This critic found the short story "A New England Nun" particularly remarkable for its realism and praised the "novelty, yet truthfulness" of Freeman's portraiture. Later critics have tended to agree with Howells and the *Atlantic Monthly* critic, lauding Freeman's economy of prose, her realism, and her insight into her characters.

In this century, most critics have continued to deem "A New England Nun" as one of Freeman's best works, but they have valued it for new reasons. Since the 1920s, psychoanalytic criticism, based on the theories of Sigmund Freud, has become popular. With their revealing character sketches, her short stories have lent themselves well to this type of criticism. Perry Westbrook, in his book *Acres of Flint*, declared that Freeman's work reveals a "psychological insight hitherto unknown in New England literature with the exception of Hawthorne." "A New England Nun" and the character of Louisa have attracted a great deal of attention from psychoanalytic critics. Most of them tend to read Louisa as a person who has repressed her sexual side. Larzer Ziff, Jay Martin, and Perry Westbrook, for example have all read "A New England Nun" as a psychological study of a woman who has become so narrow as to be unfit for normal life.

Beginning in the 1970s, feminist critics and historians began to take an interest in Freeman's work for its depiction of the lives of women in post- Civil War New England. As a result, "A New England Nun" has been reevaluated and a debate has arisen between feminists, represented by the critic Marjorie Pryse, and more traditional critics such as Martin, Edward Foster, and Westbrook, over the interpretation of the character of Louisa. Pryse takes issue with these critics for seeing Louisa as a portrait of sterility and passivity. Pryse interprets her instead as a heroic character who dares to reject the traditional role society offers her□that of wife and mother□for a life she has defined for herself, albeit within the narrow range of choices available to a woman of her class in the nineteenth century.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Williams is an instructor in the Writing Program at Rutgers University. In the following essay, she views Louisa as a woman who has made the most of the limited opportunities open to her and has channeled her creative impulses into the everyday activities of her simple life.

A number of critics have noted that the opening paragraph of Mary Wilkins Freeman's "A New England Nun" very closely echoes the first stanza of English poet Thomas Gray's famous "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard": The curfew tolls the knell of parting day, / The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea, / The plowman homeward plods his weary way, / And leaves the world to darkness and to me. In Gray's poem, written in the eighteenth century, the speaker wonders if the rural churchyard might contain the remains of people who had great talents that became stunted or went unrealized and unrecognized because of poverty, ignorance and lack of opportunity. He muses that "some mute inglorious Milton" might be buried there—someone who possessed the talent of seventeenth-century poet John Milton, but who remains "inglorious" (or without glory) because lack of education made them mute. Freeman closes her story in the same way she opens it. Louisa Ellis is sewing peacefully at her window in the late afternoon light. Thus the opening and closing passages, with their allusions to Gray's elegy, stand as a sort of frame for the story itself, giving us a key to one possible interpretation.

As Marjorie Pryse has demonstrated in her essay "An Uncloistered 'New England Nun,'" Louisa Ellis is a woman with artistic impulses. She has "almost the enthusiasm of an artist over the mere order and cleanliness of her solitary home" and has polished her windows "until they shone like jewels." Even her lettuce is "raised to perfection" and she occupies herself in summer "distil ling the sweet and aromatic essences from roses and peppermint and spearmint" simply for the pleasure of it. Louisa might have been an artist had her society provided her with the tools and opportunity. Lacking these, she has funneled her creative impulse into the only outlet available to her. She has made her life her life's work. Lacking paints, she has made her life like a series of still-life paintings of "delicate harmony." Before the artist can begin to create, however, she needs a blank canvas or a clean sheet of paper.

As Perry Westbrook has noted, Louisa's life is symbolized by her dog, Caesar, chained to his little hut, and her canary in its cage. She has become a hermit, surrounded by a "hedge of lace." Her canary goes into a panic whenever Joe Dagget visits, representing Louisa's own fears of what marriage might bring; and Louisa trembles whenever she thinks of Joe's promise to set Caesar free. Like her dog and her bird she does not participate in the life of the community. Instead, she watches from her window. We might interpret Louisa's life, her dog's chain, and her canary's cage as emblems of imprisonment, as does Westbrook; but they are also defenses. Caesar's ominous-looking chain keeps the outside world away more than it restrains the dog since the dog has no desire to go anywhere. And the canary's cage gives it a safe place to live. Likewise Louisa has found freedom in her solitary life. Just as she finds a "little clear

space" among the tangles of wild growth that make her feel "shut in" when she goes out for her walk that fateful evening, Louisa has cleared a space for herself, through her solitary, hermit-like existence, inside which she is free to do as she wishes. The spaceclearing gesture is a prerequisite to her creativity.

Although conditions were changing slowly, women in the nineteenth century did not have many vocational options available to them. Many of them received only a grade school education and then learned the rest of what was deemed necessary for them to know from practical experience in the home. Louisa, like her mother before her, learned to sew, cook, and garden in preparation for what was supposed to be her vocation as wife and mother. She was not taught to be a painter or musician. Hence, she channels her creative impulses into these other activities instead.

Critics have made much of the "narrowness" of Louisa's life. Some see it as the very emblem of sterility and barrenness; yet these interpretations surely overlook the fact that the community itself is narrow. Here is a town that disapproves of even so much individuality as Louisa's use of her good china. A rigid code of ethics is in operation here one that dictates that Caesar must be chained for life because of one reckless act. Lily and Joe, for all their vitality and vigor, show themselves to be bound by this same narrowness. Joe determines to go through with a marriage to a woman he no longer loves because he is bound by a rigid sense of duty. Lily vows that she will not marry Joe even if he breaks off his engagement to Louisa because "honor's honor, an' right's right." Without Louisa's intervention three people would be made miserable for the rest of their lives all for the sake of duty. Louisa is the one who proves herself capable of stepping outside the narrow code. She alone is able to improvise an ending other than the "inevitable conclusion" the others see and a life for herself other than the one prescribed by her community. Her artistic sensibility allows her to provide a subjective, personal answer to what the rigid Puritan code of behavior sees as an objective question of right and wrong.

Furthermore, narrowness is not the same thing as sterility or it need not be. Critics who have seen Louisa's life as sterile are perhaps making the sexist mistake of assuming that the only kind of fertility a woman can have is the sexual kind. Because Louisa chooses not to marry and reproduce, she is then deemed "barren." These critics have overlooked the richness inherent in Louisa's deliberate life. She meditates as a nun might. She distills "essences," which, as Pryse has noted, implies extracting the most significant part of life. Louisa "would have been loathe to confess how often she had ripped a seam for the mere delight of sewing it together again." When she sets her table for tea, it takes her a long time because she does it "with as much grace as if she had been a veritable guest to her own self." She uses the good china, not out of ostentation (there's no one to impress, anyway), but out of a desire to get the most out of what she has. She has learned to value the process of living just as highly as the product. All her movements are "slow and still" and careful and deliberate and she savors every moment "prayerfully."

Critics have also made much of Louisa's passivity. We need to be careful about using twentiethcentury values to judge a nineteenth-century heroine. In the nineteenth

century, passivity, "calm docility," and a "sweet even temperament" were considered highly desirable traits in a woman. Parents raised their daughters to be this way; and we can see that Louisa has learned these traits from her mother (who "talked wisely to her daughter") just as she has learned to sew and cook. Louisa is passive because that is what her society has made her. She is not, however, completely without volition. She does choose not to marry, even if only to continue her placid and passive life. The choice is an act that, as Marjorie Pryse rightly points out, sets her at odds with her community and requires some bravery on her part. Louisa would surely have been aware of the social stigma associated with being an old maid.

While we can not know Mary Wilkins Freeman's intentions in writing "A New England Nun," we do know she understood what it meant to be a single woman and an artist in nineteenth-century New England. She herself did not marry until the age of fifty. And while we can not know how Freeman really felt about Louisa's placid and narrow life, we can note the tone of the story itself. Louisa's life is narrow, partly by her own choice and partly because her culture leaves her few options. Yet she has managed to craft a rich inner life within this tightly circumscribed space. Like Thomas Gray's "mute, inglorious Milton," Louisa's artistic gifts are somewhat stunted by her lack of education and largely unrecognized by her community; but they are not entirely unrealized.

Source: Deborah M. Williams, "Overview of 'A New England Nun,'" for *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Pryse offers a feminist reading of "A New England Nun," interpreting Louisa Ellis's rejection of marriage a conventional, expected role for a woman of her era as a positive, self-affirming choice to make for herself a way of life that ensures her the greatest personal happiness and freedom.

In his biography of Mary Wilkins Freeman [*Mary E. Wilkins Freeman*, 1956], Edward Foster writes that "'A New England Nun' . . . has been considered Miss Wilkins' definitive study of the New England spinster." Yet because the spinster has traditionally carried such negative connotations, critics and historians have either phrased their praise of Freeman as apologies for her "local" or "narrow" subject matter, or deemed her depiction of Louisa Ellis in "A New England Nun" as ironic. Jay Martin views her as "an affectionately pathetic but heroic symbol of the rage for passivity." He judges that protagonists like her "have no purpose worthy of commitment. . . . Lack ing a heroic society, Mary Wilkins' heroes are debased; noble in being, they are foolish in action" [*Harvests of Change: American Literature, 1865-1914*, 1967]. Foster concludes that "it is precisely the absence of desire and striving which is the story's grimly ironic point." Pathetic, passive, debased, foolish, lacking in desire or ambition: such a portrait, they imply, invites the reader to shun Louisa Ellis. Definitive study though she may be, we are not to admire or emulate her.

When Louisa Ellis reconsiders marriage to Joe Dagget, she aligns herself against the values he represents. Her resulting unconventionality makes it understandably difficult for historians, themselves the intellectual and emotional products of a society which has long enshrined these values, to view her either perceptively or sympathetically. For Louisa Ellis rejects the concept of manifest destiny and her own mission within it; she establishes her own home as the limits of her world, embracing rather than fleeing domesticity, discovering in the process that she can retain her autonomy; and she expands her vision by preserving her virginity, an action which can only appear if not "foolish" at least threatening to her biographers and critics, most of whom have been men.

In analyzing "A New England Nun" without bias against solitary women, the reader discovers that within the world Louisa inhabits, she becomes heroic, active, wise, ambitious, and even transcendent, hardly the woman Freeman's critics and biographers have depicted. In choosing solitude, Louisa creates an alternative pattern of living for a woman who possesses, like her, "the enthusiasm of an artist." If she must sacrifice heterosexual fulfil ment (a concept current in our own century rather than in hers) she does so with full recognition that she joins what William Taylor and Christopher Lasch have termed "a sisterhood of sensibility" ["Two 'Kindred Spirits': Sorority and Family in New England, 1839-1846," *New England Quarterly*, 36, 1963]. For all of her apparent sexual repression, her "sublimated fears of defloration" [David H. Hirsch, "Subdued Meaning in 'A New England Nun,' " Studies in Short Fiction, 2, 1965], she discovers that in a world in which sexuality and sensibility mutually exclude each other for women, becoming a hermit like her dog Caesar is the price she must pay for vision. "A New

England Nun" dramatizes change in Louisa Ellis. A situation she has long accepted now becomes one she rejects. The story focuses on what she stands to lose, and on what she gains by her rejection.

Although Louisa's emotion when Joe Dagget comes home is "consternation," she does not at first admit it to herself. "Fifteen years ago she had been in love with him□at least she considered herself to be. Just at that time, gently acquiescing with and falling into the natural drift of girlhood, she had seen marriage ahead as a reasonable feature and a probable desirability of life. She had listened with calm docility to her mother's views upon the subject . . . She talked wisely to her daughter when Joe Dagget presented himself, and Louisa accepted him with no hesitation." Wilkins implies in this passage that the "natural drift of girlhood" involving eventual marriage does require gentle acquiescence as well as wise talk from her mother, and that in taking Joe Dagget as her lover, Louisa has demonstrated "calm docility"□as if she has agreed to accept a condition beyond her control. When Joe Dagget announces his determination to seek his fortune in Australia before returning to marry Louisa, she assents "with the sweet serenity which never failed her"; and during the fourteen years of his absence, "she had never dreamed of the possibility of marrying any one else." Even though "she had never felt discontented nor impatient over her lover's absence, still she had always looked forward to his return and their marriage as the inevitable conclusion of things." Conventional in her expectations as in her acquiescence to inevitability, however, she has yet placed eventual marriage "so far in the future that it was almost equal to placing it over the boundaries of another life." Therefore when Joe Dagget returns unexpectedly, she is "as much surprised and taken aback as if she had never thought of it."

Given the nature of Joe Dagget's departure, and that of other men of the region after the Civil War who went West or moved to the cities, individually enacting the male population's sense of manifest destiny, Louisa Ellis chose a positive course of action in making her solitude a source of happiness. For Joe Dagget would have stayed in Australia until he made his fortune. "He would have stayed fifty years if it had taken so long, and come home feeble and tottering, or never come home at all, to marry Louisa." Her place in such an engagement, in which "they had seldom exchanged letters," was to wait and to change as little as possible. Joe Dagget might return or he might not; and either way, Louisa must not regret the passing of years. Within such a narrow prescription for socially acceptable behavior, "much had happened" even though Joe Dagget, when he returns, finds Louisa "changed but little." "Greatest happening of all□a subtle happening which both were too simple to understand□Louisa's feet had turned into a path, smooth maybe under a calm, serene sky, but so straight and unswerving that it could only meet a check at her grave, so narrow that there was no room for any one at her side." In appearing to accept her long wait, she has actually made a turn away from the "old winds of romance" which had "never more than murmured" for her anyway. Now, when she sews wedding clothes, she listens with "half-wistful attention" to the stillness which she must soon leave behind.

For she has no doubt that she will lose, not gain, in marrying Joe Dagget. She knows, first, that she must lose her own house. "Joe could not desert his mother, who refused

to leave her old home. . . . Every morning, rising and going about among her neat maidenly possessions, she felt as one looking her last upon the faces of dear friends. It was true that in a measure she could take them with her, but, robbed of their old environments, they would appear in such new guises that they would almost cease to be themselves." Marriage will force her to relinquish "some peculiar features of her happy solitary life." She knows that "there would be a large house to care for; there would be company to entertain; there would be Joe's rigorous and feeble old mother to wait upon." Forced to leave her house, she will symbolically have to yield her world as well as her ability to exert control within it.

She will also lose the freedom to express herself in her own art. She possesses a still with which she extracts "the sweet and aromatic essences from roses and peppermint and spearmint. By-and-by her still must be laid away." In Perry Westbrook's view, this still symbolizes "what her passivity has done to her." In distilling essences "for no foreseeable use," she "has done no less than permit herself to become unfitted for life" [*Mary Wilkins Freeman*, 1967]. Such an interpretation misses the artistic value, for Louisa, of her achievement in managing to extract the very "essences" from life itself□ not unlike her fellow regionalist's apple-picker ("Essence of winter sleep is on the night/ The scent of apples . . . "). Her art expresses itself in various ways. "Louisa dearly loved to sew a linen seam, not always for use, but for the simple, mild pleasure which she took in it." Even in her table-setting, she achieves artistic perfection. Unlike her neighbors, Louisa uses her best china instead of "common crockery" every day□not as a mark of ostentation, but as an action which enables her to live "with as much grace as if she had been a veritable guest to her own self." Yet she knows that Joe's mother and Joe himself will "laugh and frown down all these pretty but senseless old maiden ways."

She seems to fear that the loss of her art will make her dangerous, just as she retains "great faith" in the ferocity of her dog Caesar, who has "lived at the end of a chain, all alone in a little hut, for fourteen years" because he once bit a neighbor. Louisa keeps him chained because "she pictured to herself Caesar on the rampage . . . she saw innocent children bleeding in his path. . . ." In spite of the fact that he looks docile, and Joe Dagget claims "'There ain't a better-natured dog in town,'" Louisa believes in his "youthful spirits," just as she continues to believe in her own. Louisa fears that Joe Dagget will unchain Caesar□"'Some day I'm going to take him out,'" he asserts. Should he do so, Louisa fears losing her vision rather than her virginity. Caesar, to Louisa, is a dog with a vision which, as long as he is chained, he retains, at least in his reputation: "Caesar at large might have seemed a very ordinary dog, and excited no comment whatsoever; chained, his reputation overshadowed him, so that he lost his own proper outlines and looked darkly vague and enormous." Only Louisa senses that setting the dog free would turn him into a "very ordinary dog," just as emerging from her own "hut" after fourteen years and marrying Joe Dagget would transform her, as well, into a "very ordinary" woman□yet a woman whose inner life would be in danger. Louisa "looked at the old dog munching his simple fare, and thought of her approaching marriage and trembled."

In addition, because the name Caesar evokes an historical period in which men dominated women, in keeping Caesar chained Louisa exerts her own control over

masculine forces which threaten her autonomy. David Hirsch reads "A New England Nun" as Louisa's "suppression of the Dionysian" in herself, a Jungian conflict between order and disorder, sterility and fertility. He concludes that Caesar's continuing imprisonment "can be viewed as a symbolic castration," apparently of Louisa herself. To a point, the story appears to justify Hirsch's assertions, for Caesar's first entrance in the story visually evokes phallic power: "There was a little rush, and the clank of a chain, and a large yellow-and-white dog appeared at the door of his tiny hut, which was half hidden among the tall grasses and flowers." Yet Caesar emerges from his hut because Louisa has brought him food. If the image involves castration, it portrays Louisa intact and only masculine dominance in jeopardy.

Ambiguous images of sexuality abound in this story, sedate as Louisa's life appears to be. When she finishes feeding Caesar and returns inside her house, she removes a "green gingham apron, disclosing a shorter one of pink and white print." Shortly she hears Joe Dagget on the front walk, removes the pink and white apron, and "under that was still another□white linen with a little cambric edging on the bottom." She wears not one but three aprons, each one suggesting symbolic if not actual defense of her own virginity. When Dagget visits, "he felt as if surrounded by a hedge of lace. He was afraid to stir lest he should put a clumsy foot or hand through the fairy web, and he had always the consciousness that Louisa was watching fearfully lest he should." The visual image of clumsy hand breaking the "fairy web" of lace like the cambric edging on Louisa's company apron suggests once again that Louisa's real fear is Joe's dominance rather than her own sexuality. Joe, when he leaves, "felt much as an innocent and perfectly well-intentioned bear might after his exit from a china shop." Louisa "felt much as the kind-hearted, long-suffering owner of the china shop might have done after the exit of the bear." In Joe's absence she replaces the additional two aprons, as if to protect herself from his disturbing presence, and sweeps up the dust he has tracked in. When she imagines marrying Joe, she has visions of "coarse masculine belongings strewn about in endless litter; of dust and disorder arising necessarily from a coarse masculine presence in the midst of all this delicate harmony."

Taylor and Lasch discuss the nineteenth-century myth of the purity of women in a way which explains some of Louisa's rejection of Joe Dagget and marriage itself.

The myth itself was yet another product of social disintegration, of the disintegration of the family in particular. It represented a desperate effort to find in the sanctity of women, the sanctity of motherhood and the Home, the principle which would hold not only the family but society together.

When Louisa waits patiently during fourteen years for a man who may or may not ever return, she is outwardly acceding to the principle by which women in New England provided their society with a semblance of integration. However, as Taylor and Lasch continue,

the cult of women and the Home contained contradictions that tended to undermine the very things they were supposed to safeguard. Implicit in the myth was a repudiation not only of heterosexuality but of domesticity itself. It was her purity, contrasted with the

coarseness of men, that made woman the head of the Home (although not of the family) and the guardian of public morality. But that same purity made intercourse between men and women at last almost literally impossible and drove women to retreat almost exclusively into the society of their own sex, to abandon the very Home which it was their appointed mission to preserve.

Louisa Ellis certainly repudiates masculine coarseness along with domesticity□for while within her own home she maintains order with the "enthusiasm of an artist," in Joe Dagget's house, supervised by a mother-in-law, she would find "sterner tasks" than her own "graceful but halfneedless ones." In rejecting Joe Dagget, then, in the phrasing of Taylor and Lasch, she abandons her appointed mission.

Freeman goes farther than Taylor and Lasch, however, in demonstrating that Louisa Ellis also has a tangible sense of personal loss in anticipating her marriage. One evening about a week before her wedding, Louisa takes a walk under the full moon and sits down on a wall. "Tall shrubs of blueberry vines and meadow-sweet, all woven together and tangled with blackberry vines and horsebriers, shut her in on either side. She had a little clear space between them. Opposite her, on the other side of the road, was a spreading tree; the moon shone between its boughs, and the leaves twinkled like silver. The road was bespread with a beautiful shifting dapple of silver and shadow; the air was full of mysterious sweetness." As she sits on the wall "shut in" by the tangle of sweet shrubs mixed with vines and briers, with her own "little clear space between them," she herself becomes an image of inviolate female sexuality. However, what she looks at "with mildly sorrowful reflectiveness" is not physical but imaginative mystery. Within the protection of the woven briers, Louisa's ability to transform perception into vision remains intact. What might be described as embattled virginity from a masculine point of view becomes Louisa's expression of her autonomous sensibility.

Therefore when she overhears Joe Dagget talking with Lily Dyer, "a girl full of a calm rustic strength and bloom, with a masterful way which might have beseemed a princess," and realizes that they are infatuated with each other, she feels free at last to break off her engagement, "like a queen who, after fearing lest her domain be wrested away from her, sees it firmly insured in her possession." Freeman writes, "If Louisa Ellis had sold her birthright she did not know it, the taste of the pottage was so delicious, and had been her sole satisfaction for so long." In rejecting marriage to Joe Dagget, Louisa feels "fairly steeped in peace." She gains a transcendent selfhood, an identity which earns her membership in a "sisterhood of sensibility."

In the story's final moment, she sees "a long reach of future days strung together like pearls in a rosary, . . . and her heart went up in thankfulness." Like Caesar on his chain, she remains on her own, as the rosary's "long reach" becomes an apotheosis of the dog's leash. Outside her window, the summer air is "filled with the sounds of the busy harvest of men and birds and bees" from which she has apparently cut herself off; yet inside, "Louisa sat, prayfully numbering her days, like an uncloistered nun." Freeman's choice of concluding image□ that Louisa is both nun-like in her solitude yet "uncloistered" by her decision not to marry Joe Dagget□documents the author's perception that in marriage Louisa would have sacrificed more than she would have

gained. If the ending of "A New England Nun" is ironic, it is only so in the sense that Louisa, in choosing to keep herself chained to her hut, has thrown off society's fetters. The enthusiasm with which Louisa has transformed "graceful" if "half-needless" activity into vision and with which she now "numbers" her days□with an aural pun on poetic meter by which Freeman metaphorically expands Louisa's art□would have been proscribed for her after her marriage. Such vision is more than compensatory for Louisa's celibacy. Louisa's choice of solitude, her new "long reach," leaves her ironically "uncloistered"□and imaginatively freer, in her society, than she would otherwise have been.

In looking exclusively to masculine themes like manifest destiny or the flight from domesticity of our literature's Rip Van Winkle, Natty Bumppo, and Huckleberry Finn, literary critics and historians have overlooked alternative paradigms for American experience. The very chaos which the challenge of the frontier for American men brought to the lives of American women also paradoxically led these women, in nineteenth-century New England, to make their own worlds and to find them in many ways, as Louisa Ellis does, better than the one the men had left. The world Louisa found herself inhabiting, after the departure of Joe Dagget for Australia, allowed her to develop a vision stripped of its masculine point of view which goes unnoticed□ both in her own world, where Joe returns to find her "little changed," and in literary history, which too quickly terms her and her contemporaries sterile spinsters. Yet Louisa Ellis achieves the visionary stature of a "New England nun," a woman who defends her power to ward off chaos just as strongly as nineteenth-century men defended their own desires to "light out for the territories." The "New England nun," together with her counterpart in another Freeman story, "The Revolt of 'Mother,'" establishes a paradigm for American experience which makes the lives of nineteenth-century women finally just as manifest as those of the men whose conquests fill the pages of our literary history.

Source: Marjorie Pryse, "An Uncloistered 'New England Nun,'" in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 20, No. 4, Fall, 1983, pp. 289-95.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Martin discusses prominent symbols in "A New England Nun" and asserts that the character of Louisa Ellis is meant to be a symbol of quiescent passivity.

In her best stories Mary Wilkins has an admirable control of her art. . . . Her best story is undoubtedly "A New England Nun." Louisa Ellis, the "New England Nun" who has been waiting fourteen years for her lover, Joe Dagget, to return from making his fortune in Australia, is shocked by his masculine presence□which now seems crude to her□when he finally comes back to claim her hand. For, in the intervening years, she has "turned into a path . . . so straight and unswerving that it could only meet a check at her grave": unwittingly she has become another in the tradition of New England solitaries. Her path is described by the adverbs modifying her unconscious modes of action□"peacefully sewing," "folded precisely," "cut up daintily.". . . Into this delicately ordered world, Joe comes bumbling and shuffling, bringing dust into Louisa's house and consternation into her heart. Whenever he enters her house, Louisa's canary□the symbol of her delicacy as well as of her imprisonment□ awakes and flutters wildly against the bars of his cage. Joe's masculine vigor is symbolized by a great yellow dog named Caesar, which Louisa has chained in her back yard for fourteen years, and fed corn mush and cakes. Joe threatens to turn him loose, which suggests to Louisa a picture of "Caesar on the rampage through the quiet and unguarded village." At last, accidentally overhearing Joe and Lily Dyer confess their love for each other□while yet Joe sadly but sternly remains true to Louisa□ she gently rejoices that she can release him, and herself, from his vows. In contrast to the wild, luxuriant fertility□the fields ready for harvest, wild cherries, enormous clumps of bushes□surrounding the scene between Joe and Lily stands the gently passive sterility of Louisa's life, who looks forward to "a long reach of future days strung together like pearls in a rosary." In contrast to the fervid summer pulsating with fish, flesh, and fowl, is Louisa's prayerful numbering of days in her twilight cloister.

Beginning with the comic stereotype in New England literature of the aging solitary . . . Mary Wilkins transmutes Louisa into an affectionately pathetic but heroic symbol of the rage for passivity. . . .

Source: Jay Martin, "Paradise Lost: Mary E. Wilkins," in *Harvests of Change: American Literature 1865-1914*, Prentice- Hall, Inc., 1967, pp. 148-52.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, Hamblen comments on the naturalistic detail of Freeman's first two books of short stories and explores her place in American local color fiction of the New England region.

A Humble Romance and Other Stories and *A New England Nun and Other Stories* do much to establish her place in American literature. For these early collections are actually source material for anyone interested in early nineteenth century American life and thought, giving concrete and vivid details of a way of life that, presumably dead, still has noticeable repercussions.

It is true that a good many writers have concentrated on rural New England: Sarah Orne Jewett, Rose Terry Cooke, Margaret Deland, Alice Brown are only the most nearly typical of these, and perhaps the best known. They had their vogue for a time, Miss Jewett's delicate art earning special (and lasting) respect. And yet Mary Wilkins achieved something more. Granville Hicks explains: "Neither [Rose Terry Cooke nor Sarah Orne Jewett]," he says, "made any effective recognition of whatever was ignoble or sordid or otherwise unpleasant in the life of New England. . . . Mary Wilk ins Freeman . . . at least saw that the small town had sometimes warped its inhabitants . . . she had an eye for varieties of character and types of experience her contemporaries ignored, and her stories made the record of New England more nearly complete"

[The Great Tradition: An Interpretation of American Literature Since the Civil War, rev. ed., 1935].

Source: Abigail Ann Hamblen, in *The New England Art of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman*, The Green Knight Press, 1966, 70 p.

Adaptations

"A New England Nun" is available on audio tape from Audio Book Contractors (1991), ISBN: 1556851812.

"A New England Nun" is also available on microfilm from Research Publications (1970-78), Woodbridge, CT. Wright American Fiction; v. 3.

Topics for Further Study

A Humble Romance and Other Stories and A New England Nun and Other Stories in order to get a more complete picture of rural life.

Most historians consider the major forces that shaped the nineteenth century in America to have been the Civil War and Reconstruction, urbanization and industrialization, European immigration, and the expansion westward, including the building of the intercontinental railroad and the gold rushes of 1849 through 1899. Pick one of these factors and research its impact on American life. Can you find evidence of this impact reflected in "A New England Nun" or other stories by Mary Wilkins Freeman? Are we still feeling the impact of this factor today?

Mary Wilkins Freeman claimed that one of the things she was interested in exploring in her short stories was the legacy of Puritanism in New England. Do some research on Puritanism, perhaps on the impact of the Great Awakening, the Puritan revival that swept New England in 1740- 42. You may read one or two Puritan sermons, such as the famous Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, by Jonathan Edwards. What traces of Puritanism can you find in "A New England Nun," other stories by Mary Wilkins Freeman, or works by other New England writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne or Emily Dickinson? If you are familiar with New England culture today, what traces of Puritanism still remain?

Since the 1970s, feminist historians have been interested in Mary Wilkins Freeman's short stories for their portrayal of women's lives in rural post-Civil War New England. Do some research to find out what kind of lives women led in New England and in other parts of the United States, such as the South and the West, in the latter part of the nineteenth century. What kinds of attitudes about women prevailed? What regional differences do you find? What differences between urban life and rural? How much have women's lives or attitudes about women changed today?

Compare and Contrast

1890s: Women are faced with limited political, legal, and social options.

1990s: Women are an important part of the political process. Candidates struggle to attract the female vote, and women's issues are central to many political platforms.

1890s: Realism is a popular literary style, re- flecting changing American concerns in the twentieth century. Short stories gain popularity as a literary genre.

1990s: Short stories remain popular, and American literature is rich with fine examples of the short fiction genre. With the advent of the twenty- first century, realism also remains a viable literary form.

1890s: Since in many areas of the United States women outnumbered men, spinsterhood was not uncommon. The declining male population can be attributed to the Civil War, other armed conflicts, and westward expansion. To remain single was a serious social stigma for women, as it was believed that a woman's primary duty was to marry and have children.

1990s: Although marriage remains a goal of most young American men and women, many females in the late twentieth century often choose not to marry. A myriad of social and financial opportunities have lessened the stigma of remaining single. Divorce rates have skyrocketed in the past few decades, making marriage a less desirable option for many men and women.

What Do I Read Next?

Other short stories of note by Mary Wilkins Freeman include "Sister Liddy," a story about women living in the poorhouse, "A Conflict Ended," in which a stubborn parishioner refuses to enter the church, sitting on the steps instead, because he disagrees with the hiring of the new minister.

Kate Chopin's short novel *The Awakening* (1899) chronicles the story of a young mother in Louisiana who leaves her husband and children in search of her own identity and later commits suicide. Like Freeman, Chopin has caught the attention of feminist critics and historians for her depiction of women's lives at the end of the last century.

Carolyn Chute's novel *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* (1985) is an example of a recent work that continues the local color realist tradition. It tells of the poor and eccentric inhabitants of a small rural town in north-central Maine.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's social analysis, Women and Economics (1898), contends that the sexual and maternal roles of nineteenth-century women were overemphasized and their true potential neglected.

Thomas Gray's 1751 poem "An Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard" meditates on the unrealized potential of the rural people buried in a cemetery. Many, he suggests, may have possessed artistic talent or other gifts stunted by ignorance or lack of opportunity. Critics have noted that the opening to "A New England Nun" seems to echo the opening to this poem.

Sarah Orne Jewett's collection of short stories The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896) is regarded by most critics as her finest work. A local colorist and a contemporary of Mary Wilkins Freeman, Jewett wrote about aging Maine natives trying to preserve the values of the past in a dying small town. Critics often compare Freeman and Jewett.

Critics who have seen Louisa's life as sterile are perhaps making the sexist mistake of assuming that the only kind of fertility a woman can have is the sexual kind."

Further Study

"New England in the Short Story," in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 67, No. 6, June, 1891, pp. 845-50.

Anonymous review of Freeman's second collection of short stories which praises their realism and her "economical" writing style.

Donovan, Josephine. "Mary Wilkins Freeman," in her *New England Local Color Literature: A Woman's Tradition*, Frederick Ungar, 1983, pp. 119-38.

A feminist/psychoanalytic interpretation of some of Freeman's short stories. Of particular note is Donovan's theory that the death of a mother figure is a major recurring theme in Freeman's works.

Foster, Edward. *Mary E. Wilkins Freeman*, Hendricks House, 1956.

A meticulously researched and fairly straightforward biography, considered an important work by Freeman scholars.

Hicks, Granville. "A Banjo on My Knee," in his *The Great Tradition: An Interpretation of American Literature since the Civil War*, Macmillan Publishing Co., 1935, pp. 32-67.

Marxian-influenced commentary upon Freeman's place in the local color tradition.

Hirsch, David. "Subdued Meaning in 'A New England Nun,'" in *Studies in Short Fiction* Vol. 2, 1965, p. 131.

A psychoanalytic appraisal that views Louisa as an example of sexual repression and sublimation.

Howells, William Dean. "Editor's Study," in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 75, No. 448, September, 1887, pp. 638-42.

Praises Freeman's first collection of short stories for their "directness and simplicity."

Westbrook, Perry. "The Anatomy of the Will: Mary Wilkins Freeman," in his *Acres of Flint: Sarah Orne Jewett and Her Contemporaries*, Scarecrow Press, 1981, pp. 86-104.

Discussion of Freeman's "psychological insight" by a noted Freeman scholar.

—. *Mary Wilkins Freeman*, Twayne Publishers, 1988.

A biographical and critical study in which Westbrook argues that Louisa's narrow lifestyle has made her unfit to live in normal society.

Ziff, Larzer. "An Abyss of Inequality: Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Kate Chopin," in his *American 1890s: Life and Times of a Lost Generation*, Viking Press, 1966, pp. 275-305.

Offers a psychoanalytical reading of "A New England Nun," arguing that Louisa is an example of "sexual sublimation."

Bibliography

"New England in the Short Story," in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 67, No. 6, June, 1891, pp. 845-50.

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Martin, Jay. "Paradise Lost: Mary E. Wilkins," in *Harvests of Change: American Literature 1865-1914*, Printice-Hall, Inc., 1967.

Pryse, Marjorie. "An Uncloistered 'New England Nun,'" in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 20, No. 4, Fall, 1983, pp. 289-95.

Westbrook, Perry. "The Anatomy of the Will: Mary Wilkins Freeman," in his *Acres of Flint: Sarah Orne Jewett and Her Contemporaries*, Scarecrow Press, 1981, pp. 86-104.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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