

GENDER NOT GEOGRAPHY: THE LOCALE OF
MARY WILKINS FREEMAN'S LOCAL COLOR

By

BETTY ANN SISSON

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Thesis Approved:

Lind Leavelle

Thesis Advisor

Susan Gregor

Eric H. Anderson

Thomas C. Collins

Dean of the Graduate College

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Introduction

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman is best-known as one of a group of New England women writers active between the end of the Civil War and the turn of the century. Freeman's best-known works--her short stories--were widely read in magazines and enjoyed for their humorous and realistic portrayal of the eccentric characters found in rural New England. Magazine editors such as William Dean Howells encouraged her exploration of the realist style and Freeman became a widely published author. Traditionally categorized as part of the local color school, Freeman's work is usually read as realistically portraying a dour and dying rural New England.

Her first paid publication was a poem in a children's magazine when she was 28 years old in 1881. By 1882 she had published many stories and poems in children's magazines and had won a prize from *the Boston Sunday Globe* for "her first adult story" (Westbrook 30). *Harper's Bazaar* accepted Freeman's story "Two Old Lovers" in 1882 and over the next few years she published three collections of children's stories and poems and had short stories printed in *Harper's New Monthly* and *Harper's Bazaar* (Westbrook 33). A significant year in Freeman's early career was 1887, the year the collection *A Humble Romance and Other Stories* was published. Not only does this mark her first major publication, it also marks the appearance of a theme which would be of great importance to Freeman's work: a mother-daughter or "similarly intense" bond between women (Donovan, *New England* 121). This theme is important in Freeman's work and to critics because it provides a basis upon which many build their arguments for reevaluating Freeman's

work from a feminist perspective, her status as a local colorist, and local color as a genre.

Prior to the rise of feminist criticism in the late 1970's and early 1980's, one of the few critics who wrote seriously about Freeman was Perry Westbrook. His biography and critical study, *Mary Wilkins Freeman*, was published in 1967 and, for a work of its time, takes her writing seriously. He praises much of it highly, saying that Freeman's work "anticipates the concreteness and straightforwardness" of Sherwood Anderson, Hemingway, and Stein (54). His conclusion, however, is not that she is consciously experimenting with style, but that she is guided by Howells, Twain, and Jewett and is strongly influenced by the Bible and the "New England conversational style" (55). Like much of Westbrook's treatment of Freeman, he praises her work highly but then attributes its strengths to sources outside the author's control.

While his admiration for her work is genuine, the style of his prose reflects the lower expectations placed upon women at that time. For example, he identifies women writers with the titles Mrs. or Miss but does not do the same for male writers. To a modern eye, conventions like this look as condescending as a pat on a head and so Westbrook's work patronizes Freeman as much as he praises her. Defining female writers by their marital status is, of course, unthinkable now, but setting women writers apart from male authors continues and it is at times a strength and at times a weakness of the more recent critical work on Freeman.

Showing how her fiction serves to value and honestly define women and their relationships is one way critics challenged the marginalized--feminized--status of the local color tradition. An important study by Josephine Donovan, *New England Local Color Literature: A Woman's*

Tradition, redefines the New England local color tradition from a feminist perspective. Donovan points out that the term “local color” traditionally described “a literary movement that was in some sense transitional between romanticism and realism” and she dates the style back to the eighteenth century (7). However, she continues, it was clear that the editors of the *Atlantic* and the writers they published in the later nineteenth century rejected romanticism in favor of realism—specifically, the realism of local color “which depicted authentic regional detail, including authentic dialect, authentic local characters, real geographic settings, authentic local customs and dress” (7).

Focusing her analysis of local color on five New England women writers active during the second half of the nineteenth century—Stowe, Cooke, Phelps, Jewett, and Freeman—Donovan posits that these writers “illustrate the changing dimensions of a coherent, feminine literary tradition” —a sort of bell-curve of positive female or matriarchal literature(3). Placing Freeman at the end of a local color tradition wherein the “preindustrial values of [a maternal] world, female-identified and ecologically holistic, are going down to defeat before the imperialism of masculine technology and patriarchal institutions,” she discusses Freeman's work as documenting the fall of “the woman-centered, matriarchal world of the Victorians” (119). She argues that this group of women writers created the first American women’s literature and that this achievement should be recognized.

Much of Donovan’s commentary on Freeman’s work echoes Westbrook’s. The biblical imagery they both see as informing Freeman’s stories, Freeman’s “modernist sensibility,” and the portrait of decline throughout the stories are all noted by both critics. But where Westbrook sees

female passivity in Freeman's characters, like when Louisa Ellis rejects marriage to Joe, Donovan sees "heroics" (132). Asserting a tradition of "women's literary realism" or "woman-identified realism" in addition to the mainstream, androcentric schools of literary endeavor, Donovan describes the "general movement toward realism in early nineteenth-century literature" as germinal in developing a woman's literature which could become more "than a negative critique of reified male-identified customs and attitudes" (3). She sees the New England group of women writers as the creators of a "counter world...that existed on the margins of patriarchal society, a world that nourished strong, free women" (3). I am not certain that all of Freeman's stories could be considered "nourishing," but I do believe that they present an accurate view of the restrictions placed upon women at this time, a sharp critique of the social institutions which fail to help women overcome these restrictions, and, in a few stories, a model for challenging them.

While many critics place Freeman within the local color school of literature, other analysts claim that her work does not fit easily within the limits of the genre. For example, many of Freeman's stories begin with only a general evocation of a time of day, a seasonal change, or a portrait of a house, all of which lack the specificity usually found in local color. "In fact, there is little emphasis at all on description beyond the sketching in of a typical New England setting," according to Westbrook (88). He goes on to say that this is a "marked divergence from the methods of the other local color writers, who described their regions with photographic realism down to the last tree or crossroads" (88). Westbrook's observation supports later assertions by feminist scholars that Freeman is more interested in carefully examining her characters' lives than in characterizing the region where they lived.

Among those scholars is Thomas Maik, who shows how Freeman's stories "transcend the local color genre and depict the dilemma of gender roles" (67). Lorne Fienberg, also, sees the women's work Freeman carefully details as a "primary metaphor for the self definition" of Freeman's characters (503). Elizabeth Meese claims a more complex sensibility for Freeman's work, saying that the "interplay of feminism and antifeminism are textually inscribed" in Freeman's work. Therefore, she maintains, any reader who attempts to ascribe a singular motivation, perspective, or interpretation to Freeman or her stories is wrong--"mis-reading"-- because Freeman depicts the sexual politics of her time "through undecidable or purposefully 'unreadable' images that both affirm and negate," representing "the problematics of gender in its complexity rather than through a reductive, controlling simplicity" (21-2).

Also challenging Freeman's categorization as a local colorist, Fetterley and Pryse identify a school they call "Regionalism" and include in their anthology, *American Women Regionalists: 1850-1910*, all the writers Donovan discusses in her book, and many more. Similar to local color realism and developing from the local color tradition, regionalism as defined by Fetterley and Pryse, however, maintains a distinctly different agenda. Local color literature is often characterized by its point of view--that of an outsider. Donovan, for example, names the outsider-narrator as "one of the most intriguing devices [the New England Local Colorists] used" to represent "a certain ambivalence toward rural life, seen especially in the later writers," among whom Freeman must be counted (8). Regionalism diverges from this local color tradition by centering its perspective within a community rather than adopting the point-of-view of a detached outsider (xvii). A narrator who is a member of or sympathetic to the community creates continuity between

the narrator or reporter and the subject, extending to that subject a credibility or seriousness which Fetterley and Pryse see local color literature as questioning rather than affirming.

Emphasizing the importance of this continuity, Fetterley and Pryse characterize the shift in perspective from the outsider-onlooker to the observer-within as female, concerned with community and belonging. They claim that the "regionalist narrator empowers the voice of regional characters, viewing them as agents of their own lives, rather than undermining them with the ironic perspective characteristic of 'local color' writing" (xvii). Placing Freeman toward the end of the regionalist chronology, they further state that because her work follows these others', she uses conventions established by the earlier works, like the minimal settings to which Westbrook called attention. She is therefore able to rely on readers' familiarity with the conventions of the genre to call up or complete the settings, for example, thus allowing her to focus more on portraying individualistic characters and stories.

Freeman's writing had not received more critical attention until feminist criticism entered the academy because it includes, and frequently turns upon, what had been seen as superficial and trivial aspects of women's experience, like mending clothes or housekeeping: aspects that seem limited in scope, i.e. 'small' concerns rather than 'big' ones. The foundation upon which a story's meaning rests is often found in these 'small' details. One story, for example, revolves around a black silk dress. However, I would argue that the stories do not emphasize the frivolous or trivial so much as they elevate the ordinary.

It is true that Freeman's stories take place within the context of women's lives, using everyday metaphors and language. But the subject

matter is not 'small.' The everyday stuff of women's lives--the clothes they wear, the visits they make, the talk they engage in, the houses they keep--had been kept small by the widespread, and too long unchallenged, value system imposed upon society by a patriarchal establishment which said that work outside the home mattered and work inside the home does not. And literature made from this everyday stuff was characterized as minor, small, weak: i.e., feminine.

As if to answer this unspoken charge of pettiness leveled at literature by women, many critics have found and written about works which could be read as idealizing or valuing women's world. Freeman, however, does not create an idealized version of the women's world she writes about and this is one reason why her stories are difficult to write about. For example, Miller points out that Freeman's work does not idealize "the feminine" and, in contrast to a local colorist like Jewett whose work paints a matriarchal extended family portrait, Freeman's stories show her "ambivalence about literary idealizations of nineteenth-century versions of femininity as well as her desire to separate women from models of indeterminacy or self-sacrifice" (Miller, 19n). Throughout her short stories, Freeman shows how women are harmed by restrictive societal standards. In many, she provides a model for overcoming this anonymous oppression while in others she shows the unfortunate consequences of remaining constricted within it. Freeman's work demands to be read within a feminist context because the stories value women's culture, but valuing Freeman's work can be difficult. Her truest stories skirt the richly positive matriarchy envisioned by writers like Jewett and avoid the easy non-resolution of a novel like *The Awakening*.

Because the New England local colorists form a convenient clutch due to the coincidence of their time and place, it seems to have been easier to

discuss them as a group working in a specific style or genre than to examine them as individual writers. However, there is no justification for continuing to define local color as a "minor" genre unless the purpose is to keep such writers marginalized. Many of these authors "produced an impressive volume of literature over a sustained period of time...[creating] works that are most certainly masterpieces, by any standard of critical judgment" (Donovan. 10). Works by authors like Jewett and Freeman can and should be read not only as part of a feminist tradition but as important contributions to American literature.

In the "Introduction" to *New England Local Color Literature*, Josephine Donovan discusses the origins of the local color movement, pointing out its inclinations toward realism. She states that it is a literary tradition which "necessarily" favored female authors for it "allowed them to describe their own bailiwicks," it "did not require heroic experiences on an epic scale," and they could "express their own concerns on a scale reflective of their own experience" (Donovan *New England* 7). Her observation that the local color tradition favored female authors explains why it became a "minor" literary category. Indeed, as Caroline Gebhard points out, with the advent of the modernist movement and its "premium on the masculine and the modern," local color by contrast "seemed timid and old-fashioned, a product of antiquated femininity" (79). Unfortunately, our changed perception of local color literature as women's literature has not adequately challenged its second-class status.

America at the turn of the century was a place and time preoccupied with power, mechanization, and unity. Architect Louis Sullivan built the first skyscraper, a (phallic) structure which embodied the new "homogenous and virile national" spirit, according to Gebhard (80). Gebhard, and others,

have cited George Santayana's 1911 lecture, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," as representative of this new spirit, and she goes on to say that it "reveals how the elevation of the masculine meant a debasement of everything associated with the feminine in American culture" (80). The point she makes is, I think, valid even though it may sound strident. For a "new" to be, there must be an "old" that it replaces, and it may be easier to see them as oppositional than as temporarily tandem. However, this is where Freeman fits--on that literary, literal tandem. Freeman's work is a segue to modernism, portraying the remnants of a society decimated by war and industrialization. Not all of Freeman's stories depict the happiness that virtue supposedly secures or even include the hope of redemption. Happiness may not be within the reach of her characters. No matter how good they are or how charitably they behave, her characters have no assurance that they shall earn an easier life or an understanding partner.

In carefully articulating the tiny cottages, gardens, and villages her characters inhabit, Freeman is not just showing us the quaint and colorful region where her characters live and work or recording reality as an objective, disinterested observer. Freeman herself acknowledged that not all of her characters or plots were true, the most infamous declaration, of course, being her renunciation of Sarah Penn in "The Revolt of 'Mother.'" Neither is she preaching a one-sided sermon promoting women's equality. Rather, she is a writer whose work values those left behind by an increasingly modern and urbanized society while at the same time criticizing the society and the social institutions which have let this happen.

Several critics also read Freeman's work as important because it values those left in the wake of industrialization and finds meaning in the "small" aspects of women's lives such as clothing, cooking, sewing, or talking. For

example, in a feminist reading of the everyday language women used, Judith Fryer points out that "What Goes on in the Ladies Room? Sarah Orne Jewett, Annie Fields, and Their Community of Women," was gossip "which is not to say that they engaged in a trivial activity" (622). This detailed, thorough, and ongoing talk among women forms "the very basis of the human community" presented in many of Freeman's stories as well as Jewett's. Fryer's conclusion, with which I agree, is that by creating literature about women's real lives and investing the currency of women's language with value, Freeman participates in valuing women.

Another critic, Sandra Zagarell, in her article "Narrative of Community: The Identification of a Genre," shows the relationship between the content and the structure of the literature she sees as comprising this genre. Her discussion focuses on novel-length works like *Country of the Pointed Firs* and outlines the structural similarities among the works included, but some of her observations on content apply to Freeman's stories as well. One characteristic which narratives of community share with Freeman's stories is that they all "present details of local life as integral parts of the semiotic systems of the community." These details have meaning and that meaning is available to anyone of that community. Members of the community, and readers, Zagarell emphasizes, "are urged to recognize local language and activities like washing and gardening as both absolutely ordinary and as expressions of community history and values" (503). Like Fryer, Zagarell concludes that by basing her stories within the feminine sphere, Freeman claims for women's everyday experience an importance it had been denied, and that is a feminist enterprise. The "local language and activities" Zagarell mentions are two important parts of this thesis which I shall examine more carefully later.

I discuss the language and the daily activities of the women Freeman writes about, much as Fryer and Zagarell do, but I also include the other aspects of local color--setting and costume--to redefine what the "local" of "local color" means. Like these critics, I also believe that Freeman's work should be read within a feminist context because the stories value women's culture; criticize the society that has created the inequities women (and others) face; provide models for entering, changing, or replacing a male-defined discourse or power relationship; and avoid easy resolutions. Unlike these critics, though, I use the conventional meaning of "local color" to redefine what Freeman accomplishes through her short stories.

In researching this essay, I have found many literary historians and critics who express concern over "the masculinization of literary history" (Hedrick 302). Here is a case that we can amend. Freeman's stories speak to an entire gender, yet the conventional, and often limiting label of "local color" applied to her work has not changed. The characters peopling Freeman's stories are not relegated to any one area of the country by the particulars of their lives. Her stories detail the region that women inhabit without placing this region in a particular location. The activities which engage her characters are not quaint, regional customs, but the real, daily activities of people eking out an often tenuous existence. Freeman lived and wrote in New England but the short stories in the two early collections, "A Humble Romance" and "A New England Nun" convey truths about and criticisms of women's place in the larger world.

Using the framework of local color literature as the organizing elements in this thesis --settings, customs, costumes, and dialects-- I hope to show that Freeman purposefully places her characters in a space defined more by gender than by geography.

Site and Setting

The settings in Freeman's stories differ largely from those of other local colorists. Freeman's stories do not chronicle life in a specific town or village in the way that, for example, Jewett's stories tell us about Dunnet's Landing. She does not use the regional or geographical settings of her stories to inform us about her characters in the way that Chopin's novel relies upon its setting--the proximity to the beach; the heavy, oppressive heat of a Louisiana summer--to help explain Edna's feelings. And these differences contribute to my estimation of Freeman's work as moving away from realism. She discards realism by unmasking what Jordan calls the "borders that define regional identity from within," as mutable and dependent upon the meaning and substance assigned to them by those who live within these self-chosen boundaries (79). Setting in Freeman's stories does not consist of describing the regional countryside because the characters she is interested in are restricted to a socially or psychologically rather than a geographically circumscribed environment.

The stories do not stray far from the private sphere bounded by gardens, kitchens, parlors and windows, a world wherein domesticity is imposed upon, or neighbors, nature. She does not often call upon the stereotypical association of woman with nature to contextualize the stories as other, more "feminist" local color writers like Jewett and Chopin often do. In *Country of the Pointed Firs*, for example, Jewett uses the cyclic rhythms of tides and seasons in her descriptions of life in Dunnet's Landing to make the point that just as nature grows, flourishes, and declines with grace, so can people. In *The Awakening*, Chopin underscores Edna's elemental nature

through the repeated and ultimate image of the freedoms found in swimming and Edna's memories of the long-ago summer field.

It is important that Freeman wrote of the real details and settings of women's everyday lives. First of all, it solidly planted her work within a context that a widespread audience could understand. Her settings honestly and accurately portrayed the space that women inhabited, the routines they followed, the schedules they kept; and "her control of detail gives these stay-at-home stories a riveting authenticity" (Warner 120). Second, by doing so, she posited value on that which was seen to have very little, economically or socially. For example, many of the homes she describes are little more than shacks, but these places are important to the women who live in them. By treating these places and the feelings of their inhabitants with accuracy and empathy, Freeman exhorted her readers to take themselves and other women seriously, to value themselves and their needs or ambitions.

The separation between the men's world and the women's reflects the prevailing social structure. Men are outside of women's sphere, physically and symbolically, and women are restricted from crossing the carefully kept boundaries between the public and the private. For example, in the story "Two Old Lovers," Maria Brewster makes bootlaces at home for the same factory where her old beau, David, works. Although they work in the same industry, Maria is expected to stay within the private, domestic space of her home while David is not.

The stories detail, over and over, how women's identity is found in the home, within domesticity. "An Honest Soul" demonstrates this with the story of Martha Patch, whose only view of outside events is through the side window of her house. Her one wish is for a front window to look out of while working on her quilts and rugs. "She and her mother had planned to

save money enough to have one someday, but they had never been able to bring it about" (*Romance* 81). Just as her name tells us about Martha's livelihood and the eked-out quality of her life, her restricted view corresponds the narrowness of her world to the narrowness of woman's lot.

Martha's situation demonstrates the way in which Freeman challenges regional boundaries as defined by the term "local color." Martha's house could be any woman's house or apartment. Martha's isolation is imposed upon her by her poverty, and that is not a regional characteristic. Poverty and its concomitant restrictions can be found in the heart of a large, crowded city as easily as in a small, forgotten village. The settings Freeman maps out do not fit a specific place so much as they define a character or a human condition. And the characters with which her work is most concerned are women.

Working on two different quilts for two different customers, Martha Patch gets the pieces for one confused with the pieces for the other and, in trying to sort them out, gets them confused again. She works and reworks the quilts until she makes herself ill and is helped by a neighbor. This same neighbor arranges for Martha to get her front window in exchange for some sewing--an example of a common theme in Freeman's stories: the community of women empowering women.

Many of Freeman's characters find that they are only whole or complete in their own places. In "An Unwilling Guest," Susan Lawton, confined by illness to her rocking chair, is literally carried off by her terrifying but well-meaning friend, Mrs. Steele, for an extended visit. Susan bears it as best she can, but Mrs. Steele's comfortable home, "with its brave Brussels and its springy haircloth, what was it to her own beloved kitchen, with the bureau in the corner, the table and sofa and yellow chairs, and its voice—the clock?"

(*Romance* 343). Such specificity paradoxically opens the story to interpretation by anyone. Everyone can recall details of his or her own home and take comfort in thinking about a favorite corner, chair, or other feature just as Susan needs the reassuring voice of her own home to comfort her.

The two sisters in "A Mistaken Charity," Harriet and Charlotte, feel the same way about their home, a house so dilapidated that it "seemed as much a natural ruin as an old tree stump" (*Romance* 236). A do-gooding acquaintance arranges for the sisters to move to an old ladies home in a nearby city, a genteel establishment where the residents wear little lace caps and eat dainty foods. Wrenched from her familiar surroundings, Charlotte's blindness seems more oppressive than ever to her: "there ain't no chinks" of light, of comfort, at the Home; there is only darkness for her (224). The sisters run away, back to their overrun and tumble-down home where fields of clover, yellow butterflies, rampant pumpkin vines, and loaded currant bushes greet them. In her own place once again, Charlotte's joy lightens her darkness: "'Oh Lord, Harriet,' sobbed Charlotte, 'thar is so many chinks that they air all runnin' together'" (249).

These two sisters, like many similar characters in Freeman's stories, find a courage and self-sufficiency they did not know they possessed when they must react to a situation imposed upon them, such as when they lose control over their environment.

"A Church Mouse" revolves around the similar problem of a woman who loses her home. The story begins in a field with Hetty Fifield pitching a proposal to one of the church deacons, Caleb Gale. Until very recently Hetty had lived with and taken care of an old woman in exchange for "a frugal board" (*Nun* 415). After the old woman died, "Hetty gathered in the few household articles for which she had stipulated, and made no complaint...all

she asked was, "What are you going to do with me?" (415). The village had no poorhouse and no family wanted to take her in because "she had the reputation of always taking her own way and never heeding the voice of authority" (416). The church sexton having recently died, Hetty sees a job for her to do and a place for her to live, and she claims a corner of the church for her new home, over the protestations of the deacons. She takes care of the church, decorating and cleaning it, and rings the bell as well as an elderly woman can.

When the townsmen can no longer stand her presence, they find her a new place to live and try to move her out of the church. Hetty must literally bar the doors and windows to keep them away, until a large group of the town's women, the Reverend's wife among them, arrives at the church and demands that Hetty be allowed to stay. As will be discussed more fully in a later chapter, one reading of this is that the Christian church has no meaningful place for women within it until and unless they demand one--en masse. And a second theme underlying this story is, again, the community of women helping women.

In "The Revolt of Mother," one of Freeman's most frequently anthologized stories, the husband builds an impressive barn instead of the house his wife wants. Sarah Penn arranges for her husband to be away, without him knowing that she had arranged it, and during his absence occasions a coup d'etat "which was equal in its way to Wolfe's storming of the Heights of Abraham" (*Nun* 463). She moves her entire household into the grand new barn which her husband has obstinately built upon the plot of land where he had promised, forty years earlier, to build her a house. When he returns from the trip to discover that in his absence his wife has moved the family and household into the barn and claimed it as her house, he sits

and cries from bewilderment and from finally understanding how important this is to his wife.

"The Revolt of Mother" is an important story for Freeman in spite of her own, later protests. First, "Mother" wins a domestic victory by moving her household into the grand new barn: she gets her new house. So, on one level, the woman outwits the man and wins the battle. A second theme implicit in the story is that a man would place his pride in and the comfort of his livestock above that of his wife and family, an obvious critique of the value a male-dominated society places on women, domesticity, and family.

Freeman herself later came to regret this story, claiming in "An Autobiography" that "all fiction ought to be true, and 'The Revolt of Mother' is not in the least true...Sometimes incessant truth gets on one's nerves. It did on mine. There never was in New England a woman like Mother" (65). She goes on to say that a Mother of that time would agree with her husband in placing their means of survival ahead of the comfort of their own family (65-6). I see Freeman's point and even agree with this part of it. However, she goes too far when she says that she would rather it had never been written--that it is untrue and that fiction must always be in essence true. Some critics see her declaration as an ironic joke, but I interpret her remarks more literally. She is correct; such a woman as Sarah Penn probably would not have moved her household into the barn. But that she should have is the more imperative, essential truth. That Sarah Penn asserts herself and claims the barn for her own becomes a moral victory. This woman, Freeman's story says, has asserted her worth, affirmed her own value and this is the value in Freeman's work. There is not much subtlety operating in this story; there is Freeman's clearly-drawn command for women to value themselves and each other, because who else will?

Occasionally, Freeman's characters may be at odds with a rigid domesticity, and in these cases an association with nature does provide a context for understanding them. "Christmas Jenny" is one such character. She cared more for the "dumb"--voiceless-- creatures of nature than for the village where she sold her vegetables and evergreens, and found fulfillment in caring for injured, sick or starving creatures, including a "little deaf-and-dumb boy" she rescued from the poorhouse.

However, Jenny is not and does not become "one with Nature" or however the cliché goes. Jenny may not lead a conventional life for a woman of her time, but she does remain within the bounds of human, specifically female, society. For instance, Freeman describes Jenny as making "one think of those sylvan faces...that one can fancy looking out of the trunks of trees" (*Nun* 164). Jenny does not have a sylvan face; she makes us "think" of one. Her apartment, however, has "a curious sylvan air" with "heaps of evergreens here and there, and some small green trees leaned in one corner" (170). Lining the walls of this tree-house are cages and hutches housing the creatures Jenny cares for. We see in the description of her house a sort of domesticized nature. And even though Jenny earns her money through selling vegetables and trees in a public market, she epitomizes nurturing femininity and her home resembles nothing so much as an infirmary.

Jenny, we learn, is "love cracked" and although her disappointment in love has caused her to "git kind of twisted out of the reg'lar road of lovin', she's in another one, that's full of little dumbies an' starvin' chippies an' lame rabbits" (173). Many townsfolk, suspicious of "her possibly uncanny deviation from the ordinary ways of life," think of her as supernatural and they speculate that she mistreats the creatures she keeps. The minister and a church deacon go to Jenny's house to investigate these rumors. Jenny is not

home, but the men go in anyway. They stare at the cages lining the walls and the little boy sitting in the corner making wreaths and wearing the only clothes Jenny can afford to provide: a pinafore. As they uneasily survey the room, Jenny's friend, Betsey hurries up the hill after them and confronts them. She defends her friend as vigorously as a small guard dog defends her turf, telling the men that even though Jenny may love outside the normal ways, it is still love. She hastens to point out that the little boy is clean, well-fed, and happy in his new home, and that all the caged animals are being nursed back to health. Chastened, the men leave, convinced of Jenny's good nature. They decide not only that "there's no occasion for interference" but that they would go so far as to "send her up a little somethin' Christmas" (174).

In "Christmas Jenny" we see that even when a character is closely associated with nature, it is a tamed or domesticated nature, an addition to or extension of human society. In this way, Freeman's version of nature challenges the borders of regionalism that define such local color literature as *Country of the Pointed Firs* and *The Awakening*. Jenny could live in any small village where there is a winter and a mountain; the animals she cares for are not named beyond the most generic forms: woodpecker, blue-jay, field-mouse, rabbit. In other words, Jenny could just as easily take care of horned toads and scissortail flycatchers—the important fact is that she cares for the non-human lives around her more than anyone else does and it makes many people uncomfortable. The real story is how women find strength or empowerment through the community of other women. Both Jenny and Betsey found healing and strength through this community. Jenny never knew the service her friend had rendered, but Betsey's vigorous "affection and indignation" on her behalf went far to change the town's opinion of

Christmas Jenny (173). And Betsey Carey never knew she was capable of challenging the authority represented by the minister and deacon until she “stood before them like a ruffled and defiant bird that was frightening herself as well as them with her temerity,” defending her friend (171).

Occasionally, characters find happiness through marriage or work outside the home, yet they remain within “women’s sphere.” In “A Humble Romance” Jake, a tinware peddler, earns a living trading rags for tinware, by doing business in women’s culture. At one stop, he sees a girl doing the dishes and steps right into the house to talk with her. He is entirely comfortable doing so because he participates easily in both public and private spheres to successfully make a living. He does not stumble or knock dishes over; he negotiates the territory easily. As a man, he can participate in the women’s community without plundering it or blundering through it like Joe Daggett of “A New England Nun.”

The girl, Sally, an orphan taken in by the housewife years ago and put to work, is an appendage of another woman’s space and so cannot be whole therein. Sally is also an exceptional character in that she successfully conducts business outside the home. Left on her own when Jake leaves to take care of personal business, she does not follow the painstakingly thorough instructions Jake had left for her on selling the horse and wagon so she could live off of the profits until (and if) he returns. He is trying to take care of her, but on her own, she realizes she does not need to passively be taken care of. She decides to take over his business and keep it running. She even increases its profitability as she expands the line to carry sewing supplies and other sundries, knowing better than Jake what will commerce in the feminine sphere. She successfully sells sundries while her husband is away, but she carefully explains to suspicious tradesmen and customers that she is carrying

on the business only in trust for Jake; she has no aspirations to become independent or successful without him. Even when the women in Freeman's stories successfully make a living outside of the home, they do not enter the public sphere as equals and they do not usurp a male role.

Upon examining many of her stories, we can see that by setting so many within the home, Freeman made what had once been divisively private communally public. She introduces and "develops issues of independence and the emergence of the will as a part of self-definition" through her work (Pennell 213). Often in Freeman's stories, the setting becomes a meditation upon a character's place in the community or the larger world. And, by bringing the reader into that territory, she refocuses our vision so that we, too, can see the value of the private sphere and the women who live therein.

Customs and Ritual

In *Felicitous Space*, Judith Fryer discusses women quilting, working, talking, and writing as being "engaged not in making ornament either in their tales or in their work, though both delight the senses and the imagination, but in creating maps of their experience, in preserving and inventing design, in making history" (258). The rituals of housekeeping, the expertise in baking, the creativity of sewing—all of these feminine arts are passed down in a long and firmly entrenched tradition. If local color describes a specific group as defined by custom, then the activities described in Freeman's stories delineate the region that is woman's domain.

The activities common to almost all of Freeman's stories are the daily, commonplace pursuits of women: sewing, baking, housekeeping, and gardening. These are not quaint or colorful pastimes found only in New England; in varying aspects, these are the accepted routines of women everywhere. They become customs when we consider that they are performed by a specific group and that they are learned, traditional, meaningful ritualistic behaviors. Caring for families, homes and possessions places the woman who does so in relation to her world. Kathryn Allen Rabuzzi, in *The Sacred and the Feminine: Toward a Theology of Housework*, describes a process called "cosmization: the creation of world out of chaos" (105). One develops and defines her relation to the world, the universe, and time by what Rabuzzi calls "ritualized housekeeping" (93). These activities, ordinary as they may be, derive a greater "symbolic significance...from their normal context" precisely because they are personal, ritualized and definitive of a specific community (Zagarell 518). For Louisa Ellis, "A New England

Nun," "the everyday," as Zagarell states, "is ritualized" and, in examining Louisa's story, we shall see how she derives strength from this 'ritualized everyday' (518).

Domesticity is an art form for Louisa Ellis, so much does she love her home and its appointments. Her home and her "orderly bureau drawers, with their exquisitely folded contents redolent with lavender" (*Nun* 9-10) are a language of material possessions, "one that derives from memory, secret and collective, one that suggests ritual and gesture, movement and stillness, one in which woman figures not as object, but as subject" (Fryer 117).

The story begins in the late afternoon in that "soft diurnal commotion" which "seemed to be a gentle stir arising over everything for the mere sake of subsidence"--the time of day when the day's work is put away and the evening has yet to begin (*Nun* 1). Louisa had been "peacefully sewing at her sitting-room window all the afternoon" but now she "quilted her needle carefully into her work, which she folded precisely, and laid in a basket with her thimble and thread and scissors" (1). Her every move is "careful," "precise," or "methodical" as if how she moved were as important as what the movement was.

She ties on a green apron to go into the yard and pick currants for her tea and, tea finished, dog and chickens fed, she "took off her green gingham apron, disclosing a shorter one of pink and white print" to sit and sew (3). Hearing her suitor come up the walk, she took the pink apron off to reveal yet another—a white linen and cambric "company apron. She never wore it without her calico sewing apron over it unless she had a guest. She had barely folded the pink and white one with methodical haste and laid it in a table drawer" when Joe arrived (3). Her precision and methodicity give her

everyday actions the importance of a ritual, and Freeman emphasizes this quality throughout the story, beginning with the title.

When Louisa makes her tea, she is "slow and still in her movements" so that "it took her a long time to prepare...but when ready it was set forth with as much grace as if she had been a veritable guest to her own self" (2). Her table is in the exact center of the kitchen and is "covered with a starched linen cloth whose border pattern of flowers glistened" (2). As Freeman describes Louisa's table setting, the "cut-glass tumbler full of teaspoons," a damask napkin, "a silver cream-pitcher, a china sugar-bowl, and one pink china cup and saucer," the starched, white crispness of the cloths and the gleaming silver and glass of the service combines with the "grace" with which she sets the table to evoke the sense of an altar which she is preparing for communion. Her onion of aprons, too, down to the white linen and cambric company apron resemble the layers of robes an acolyte wears in church.

In "The Woman Who Came to Dinner," Eileen Bender discusses the traditionally female roles and rituals identified with preparing, serving, and eating food. She identifies "Woman as nurturing force,...source and provider of food" as being "one of the most pervasive of feminine images or archetypes in art, literature, and culture" (316). Food, and feeding others, is an important concern of many characters in Freeman's stories. The care and concern her characters take over eating or feeding others can be seen as resembling one of the archetypes Bender develops: an almost "religious nurturance" akin to "the ritual of Christian communion" (317). Food becomes "a rich source of metaphor...whether offered out of generosity or sacrificial self-denial" (316).

Louisa “had for her supper a glass dish full of sugared currants, a plate of little cakes, and one of light white biscuits. Also a leaf or two of lettuce, which she cut up daintily” (*Nun* 2). It is a charming, dainty meal described in sweet, diminutive terms. Her appetite is noted as being hearty, “though in a delicate, pecking way” (2). We have a picture, then, of a satisfying, feminine meal. Her next task is to feed her dog, Caesar. He is generally supposed to be “a very monster of ferocity” ever since he had as a puppy once bitten a neighbor (11). Caesar’s dinner is “an ascetic fare of corn-mush and cakes” so as not to fire his “dangerous temper with heating and sanguinary diet of flesh and bones” (12). Caesar’s feed is one way Louisa tries to keep this “dangerous” i.e., masculine, presence under control. She thinks of Caesar unleashed much in the same way as she thinks of Joe’s intrusion into her orderly and ordered life. She watches the “old dog munching his simple fare, and thought of her approaching marriage and trembled” (12).

Her pleasures come from the simple, ordinary tasks of sewing, cleaning, cooking. She “gloated gently” over the tidiness of her bureau drawers, she “dearly loved to sew a linen seam...for the simple, mild pleasure she took in it,” she polished her windows “until they shone like jewels” (9). These descriptions show the joy and value she derives from her household rituals. When Joe comes to call, however, her serene household is literally knocked over into disorder. He rearranges her books, which she must set back into order; he bumps into her sewing basket and sends spools rolling everywhere; his offer to help pick them up is so awkward and clumsy that she restrains him; and when he finally leaves, she “set the lamp on the floor, and began sharply examining the carpet” (5). Finding that he had, as she suspected, tracked in “a good deal of dust,” she “got a dust-pan and brush, and swept Joe Daggett’s track carefully” (5). She removes all traces of his visit,

undoubtedly wishing that she could remove her uneasiness over losing her everyday order and serenity to marriage as easily and as thoroughly.

Engaged to Joe Daggett fourteen years earlier, she waited while he had gone to Australia to "secure a competency before they should be married" (6). Neither of them anticipated that he would be gone so long, and in the intervening years, "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, and so narrow that there was no room for any one at her side" (7). Upon his return, the two resumed their courtship because they are both honorable and loyal people, but the future no longer holds any joyful promise for either.

Obviously, Joe is uncomfortable in this self-sufficient woman's space, a place where he is neither needed nor wanted. And for her part, Louisa wants no part of his intrusion, which she seems to see as a violation--a disruption of her wholeness. She was full and content on her own and the thought "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" troubled and saddened her (10). Reflecting upon all that she would lose— her home and the pleasures of her independence— by marrying, she goes for a walk and overhears Joe talking to a woman, Lily, who had cared for Joe's mother while he was gone. Louisa learns that they are in love. The discovery that Joe loves this other woman allows Louisa to set him free without the fear of hurting him or shirking her duty to him and thus she can free herself as well.

Louisa's everyday activities, the rituals with which she happily orders her life, give her the desire to remain independent. She viewed her impending marriage as a loss more than as a union. If she had not so valued

those "peculiar features of her happy solitary life," she would not have felt so reluctant to marry (9). After saying goodbye to Joe, she "wept a little, she hardly knew why; but the next morning...she felt like a queen who, after fearing lest her domain be wrested away from her, sees it firmly secured in her possession" (16). In describing Louisa's quiet joy, we see once again images of religious nurturance: she felt "steeped in peace," an image that recalls the tea ceremony, and the future looks to her like "a long reach of future days strung together like pearls in a rosary,...all smooth and flawless and innocent, and her heart went up in thankfulness" (16-7).

This woman has found fulfillment and the strength to make her unorthodox decision through the ritualized nature of her everyday life. Another woman who took an artist's pride in her needlework was Hetty Fifiel. Her "wool flowers were much talked of," and in "A Church Mouse," she hangs her needlework creations all over the meeting house as she makes it her home (*Nun* 416). Left homeless, she has moved into a corner of the church, curtained it off with a "gay sunflower quilt" and set up housekeeping as the new sexton (413). If Louisa Ellis' life suggests a nun's quiet devotion, Hattie's needleworks and boiled cabbages constitute a full frontal assault on a patriarchal stronghold.

Hetty Fifiel is an elderly woman who has worked for other people in exchange for room and board. When her last employer dies, and Hetty herself is too old to work for anyone else, she must find a place to live. The village sexton has recently died and Hetty conceives of the plan to take his place and ring the bells and care for the church in exchange for living there.

She presents her idea to one of the deacons, Caleb Gale. Gale would rather ignore her as he tries to rake in his hay, but Hetty stands in his way, "her brown cotton gown [clinging] about her like a wilting leaf, outlining her

harsh little form" and will not be ignored (408). She tries to persuade this deacon that she could do the work effectively and that she should be allowed to take this job, even though she is a woman.

He grudgingly assents to let her spend the night in the church but warns her not to take any stove or bed in with her: "don't think you can move that cookin'-stove an' that bed into the meetin'-house—I ain't goin' to stop to hear such talk" (409). He does not want a woman to live in his church and with reason. Once in place, this small, elderly woman will transform the sternly paternal formality of the church through the seemingly most innocuous if not absolutely invisible of actions: a woman's housekeeping.

She first challenges the selectmen's authority by ignoring Caleb's command and moving her stove and bed into "the chimney-corner of the church gallery" (*Nun* 413). This "gaudy tent pitched in the house of the Lord" upsets many people and the minister and deacons confront her over it:

Caleb Gale went up to the sunflower quilt, slipped it aside, and looked in. He turned to Hetty with a frown... "Did you bring that stove an' bedstead here?"

Hetty nodded... "What was I goin' to do if I didn't? How's a woman as old as me goin' to sleep in a pew, an' go without a cup of tea?"

The men looked at each other. They withdrew to another corner of the gallery and conferred in low tones; then they went downstairs and out of the church. (414-5)

They have no answer to her questions, but they are uneasy at this invasion.

Hetty begins housekeeping, sweeping and dusting the little meeting-house. She placed "a worsted motto" on the pulpit and set "her chiefest treasure of art" upon it, a "white wax cross with an ivy vine trailing over it,

all covered with silver frost-work" (417). She hung her worsted-works all over, decorating the church with "wreaths and clusters of red and blue and yellow wool roses and lilies hung as acceptably between the meeting-house windows as pictures of saints in a cathedral" (417). But these are not pictures of saints—these are a woman's needle-work bouquets, a visible reminder of the changes sweeping through the old order. And unknown to Hetty as she hung her pictures, dusted and polished the meeting-house, and cooked her small meals on her stove, "all that time a storm brewed" (413).

Baking bread, making tea, and cooking dinner can all be read as "signs of feminine experience, simultaneously promising power and awakening uneasy dreams" according to Bender (319). Her analysis does not specifically mention boiled cabbage, but the lingering odor of Hetty's Saturday night boiled dinner precipitated the crisis which caused the men to try and evict her from the church.

The determining incident begins on the Sunday after Hetty has cooked a "boiled dish" the night before. The "homely week-day odors of kitchen vegetables," the smell "of turnip and cabbage...superseding [sic] the legitimate savor of the sanctuary, the fragrance of peppermint lozenges and wintergreen, the breath of Sunday clothes" proved to be "too much for the sensibilities of the people" (417). A whiff of "homely...kitchen vegetables" becomes a symbol of a woman's unacceptable trespass into the public sphere of religion. Hetty has not remained invisible. Her woman's work vies for attention with the patriarchal religiosity of a church. The assault on their vision constituted by Hetty's redecorating was tolerable. The assault on their ears made by her wild bell-ringing could have also been tolerated. But when "homely week-day odors" intrude upon a sacred institution, a woman has intruded too far

into the public realm. And so, after the service, the deacons met and decided that Hetty needed to leave.

They tried to convince her that they had found a good home for her, but she was implacable. Caleb Gale went to fetch his wife, hoping she could reason with Hetty. By the time he returned, Hetty had barricaded herself within the church and a crowd had gathered outside. Hetty tried to bargain for being allowed to stay, offering to make more wool flower pictures and to keep the meeting house even cleaner. The women in the crowd, Mrs. Gale leading them all, shouted up to Hetty that she needn't worry: "You can stay jest where you are; you've kept the meetin'-house enough sight cleaner than I've ever seen it. Don't you worry another mite, Hetty" (424). And she did not need to. Although the men were threatened by what they saw as an inappropriate invasion by a feminine presence, the women supported little Hetty Fifield's bid for a home in the church and they all benefited by it.

The bell-ringing, especially, was considered to be a man's job, and Hetty may have made "a wild, irregular jangle at first," but she rang with vigor and over time improved. The Sunday of the boiled cabbage and turnips confrontation was December 23rd. Freeman describes Hetty's "flood-tide of peace and prosperity" on Christmas Eve, when secure in her meeting-house home surrounded by the gifts of newly-supportive friends, "her new joys came out like stars" and she drifted off to sleep (425). The next morning, she woke early and, "prompted by pure artless enthusiasm and grateful happiness," she "pulled on the rope with a will [and] the bell sounded peal after peal" (426) "Never before had a Christmas bell been rung in this village...Hetty had awakened the whole village to Christmas Day" (426).

This elderly woman may have awakened the village to more than a single morning; by bringing her small, everyday rituals into the public realm

she refused to let herself remain invisible. Perhaps she introduced this village to a more inclusive Christianity and a sense of women's importance as well.

Costume and Clothing

The language of clothing is an important communicative medium understood by women and, occasionally, men. Interestingly, the meaningfulness of this 'fabricated' language is neither an invention of nor restricted to literature. In *New England Local Color Literature*, Donovan quotes from newspaper accounts of Oliver Wendell Holmes' birthday breakfast, an event of "particular significance because for the first time women writers were invited to an affair of this type." The newspapers "typically spent much time on the outfits worn by the women" and, just as typically, did not comment once on what the men who attended wore. The account which Donovan cites states "that Rose Terry Cooke wore a 'Worth dress' which 'was, perhaps, a shock to one's sensibilities,'" most likely because of the expense or the perceived ostentation conveyed by wearing such a famous designer's dress.¹ And we learn that Harriet Beecher Stowe's "elegant black brocade with rare lace was pleasing" (1-2).

The excerpts Donovan cites explicitly state that how these women dressed is important because it proves that even though they are working writers, they remain "feminine": a personal quality communicated clearly

¹ A "Worth" dress might have been shocking for several reasons: it may have been too revealing; it might have been considered too expensive for an upper-middle-class person; or it might have been the European aura. Worth was the first man to design women's dresses. This was highly improper in mid-nineteenth-century France, where he began creating his gowns. His gowns were considered too revealing because of their form-fitting simplicity, and that a man should have such an intimate knowledge of a woman's body without being married to her was certainly inappropriate. However, by the time of the birthday breakfast, the House of Worth had been in business for approximately thirty years and its gowns would have been

and publicly through the language of clothing (2). Linguist Deborah Tannen makes the point that women are always “marked” because the “unmarked” standard is male; therefore the men’s clothing is not noteworthy; only the women’s clothing is because their appearance--their gender, actually--deviates from the ‘norm’ (9 to 5 112)².

The excerpt from Donovan's "Introduction" demonstrates two points. The most obvious one is that, because they were women, what Stowe and Cooke wore was deemed more worthy of attention than who they were or what they said. Secondly, and this is the point pertinent to our reading of Freeman's stories, the excerpt serves to show that the way one dresses communicates certain messages to those able to decipher the code. Descriptions of characters’ dress function as a language familiar to Freeman's target audience (mainly magazine-reading women), and this is how Freeman uses her descriptions of clothing, not as examples of local costumes in keeping with the definition of local color literature.

When the elderly women of “Sister Liddy” reminisce about their pasts, it is not surprising that they remember the clothes they wore:

“I had a white muslin dress with a flounce on it, once, an’ a black silk spencer cape.”

“I had a fitch tippet an’ muff that cost twenty-five dollars,” retorted the stout old woman, emphatically, “an’ a cashmire [sic] shawl.”

well known in the United States. He designed clothing for royalty, for the theater, and for the very wealthy. A Worth dress was undoubtedly noteworthy, and especially so on an American writer.

² Linguistically, “marked” “refers to the way language alters the base meaning of a word by adding something—a little linguistic addition that has no meaning on its own” such as changing a present-tense verb (the unmarked form) by adding “ed” and thus marking the verb as past-tense (9-5 108-9).

“I had two cashmire shawls, and *my* tippet cost fifty dollars,” retorted the dark old woman, with dignity.

The point I want to make here is that the clothes they remember are not ethnic costumes with a regional flair. Nor are they characteristic of an occupation common to the region the way a Macintosh characterizes a Maine lobsterman or chaps conjure up images of cowboys. These women do remember and discuss uniforms of a sort, however: clothes appropriate to and expressive of the morality, station, or personality of the woman wearing them.

In her article "Borrowed Plumage," Amy Levin discusses clothing in literature as being "the language in which a woman communicates overtly and covertly with the world" (298). In her book, *Dress Codes: Meanings and Messages in American Culture*, Ruth P. Rubinstein takes this idea further, distinguishing several arenas of meaning from which clothing conveys messages. While her book is concerned with contemporary society, her definition of a "clothing symbol" is useful to my discussion of Freeman's work. Rubinstein defines clothing symbols as reflecting the "achievement of certain cultural values [and] ideas about what is valued in a society at a particular time" (11). A black silk dress, for example, is an important "clothing symbol" in several Freeman stories. In Freeman's writing, clothing symbols provide psychological insights into characters, frequently indicating how closely characters conform to community values.

Through his study, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, Fred Davis attempts to clarify the difference between fashion and "the consensually established clothing code...operative in a society at a particular time" (14). While Davis' primary intent is to dissect and describe the ephemeral phenomenon of fashion, he also discusses how clothing functions as a language, saying that

“what it communicates has mostly to do with the self, chiefly our social identity as this is framed by cultural values bearing on gender, sexuality, social status, age, etc” (191). He explains what it communicates as social identity:

By social identity, I mean ... any aspect of self about which individuals can through symbolic means communicate with others, in the instance of dress through predominantly nondiscursive visual, tactile, and olfactory symbols, however imprecise and elusive these may be. In any case, the concept of social identity points to the configuration of attributes and attitudes persons seek to and actually do communicate about themselves (obviously, the two are not always the same). (16)

In Davis' account of the history of fashion, he mentions a “trickle-down” theory of fashion presented by Simmel in 1904:

New fashions pass from the upper classes to the lower. In the course of their descent through the status hierarchy they are watered down and ‘vulgarized.’ As a result they lose their ability to register appropriate status distinctions and soon come to be regarded by the upper classes as unfashionable and ‘in bad taste.’ (59)

Another message that clothing very clearly communicates--to everyone old enough to grasp the concept--is where the gender lines are drawn. The time at which Freeman was writing dictated what we might now view as unfair and even unhealthy conventions for women's dress. Tightly corseted bodices helped women achieve a wasp-waisted ideal, layers of hot, cumbersome, floor-length skirts were heavy to move in and impractical for doing the physically demanding work of housekeeping or farming.

Conforming to these standards helped assure acceptance within the community, while flouting the standards carried varied penalties, all of them harsh.

A story that clearly criticizes this restrictive code is "A Modern Dragon," the story of widowed Mrs. King who, without a husband, a son, or enough money to hire a hand, must farm her own land in order to provide for Almira, her only child. To work the farm herself, she hikes up her skirt and wears a hat. The conflict in this story begins because she is seen in this unfeminine garb and, within the small community where she and her daughter live, conforming to conventional standards of dress or behavior assures acceptance in the community.

A young man of the community, David Ayres, is captivated by the doll-like vision of Almira King attending church "dressed in a pink silk gown, bewilderingly draped and pleated" (*Romance* 60). Almira's "bewilderingly draped and pleated," i.e., overly fussy, dress caused a "titter and a whisper" to spread through the female church-goers, which he did not understand at all (60). After church, he asked his cousin what all the girls were laughing about.

"Why, David Ayres, that dress was perfectly ridiculous for a girl to wear to meeting. Don't you know it was? I don't wonder folks laughed....But it's no use arguing with you about it, David: men don't look at such things like women." (62)

Unversed in the code, he fails to grasp the nuances of appropriate fashion and sees only Almira's "charming round childish face" and her "shapely pink shoulders" (63). He is unable to see how Almira's fashions mark her as vulgar or as having bad taste. However, even he can discern the unfeminine unconventionality of Mrs. King's work clothes after seeing her working on her farm:

She was an odd figure, short and stout, with a masculine width of shoulders. Her calico dress cleared her thick ankles, her black hair was cut short, and she wore a man's straw hat.

"Pity such a pretty girl as Almira King has got such a mother!" David thought, after his swift glance at her." (63)

We know that Mrs. King is widowed and that Almira is her only child. And we know that Mrs. King works as hard as she does to provide her daughter with the nicest things she could want. But Almira has not had any suitors because they "were kept aloof by the peculiarities of her mother" (67). Although her latest suitor is not sufficiently bothered by her mother's appearance to stop calling on her, his mother is extremely bothered.

David's mother, Mrs. Ayres, dismayed upon learning that her son is thinking of marrying into such a family, does everything in her power to dissuade him. Finally, one Sunday after returning from church, Mrs. Ayres "changed her best black silk" (and, apparently, her Christian demeanor) and told her son to choose between her and Almira (67). David capitulates; word reaches Mrs. King as to why he no longer visits Almira, and she attempts to salvage the match by conforming to a conventionally feminine appearance.

She purchases a "switch" of hair so that she can disguise the shortness of her own. She attends church in "a decent long black dress and a bonnet," and when she works her farm, she watches for David in order to hide so that "he should never see her again in the costume which had weaned him from Almira" (74). None of her strategies are effective, however. As Almira pines for her lost love, Mrs. King literally works herself to death. On her deathbed, she exacts David's promise that he will marry Almira tomorrow.

Of all Freeman's stories, this one most overtly criticizes the standards by which clothing forms what Amy Levin calls "part of an oppressive

convention of womanhood" (298). Mrs. King doted upon her daughter, labored to provide for her, and ultimately died in the effort. Because she apparently flouted community standards of decorous dress and behavior, she impeded her daughter's happiness and this impediment was removed by her death, not by forgiveness or tolerance of her non-conformity—an unfair fate for a woman whose only desire is to see her child happy.

A happier meaning can be attached to a red ribbon. In "A Taste of Honey," the ribbon symbolizes a change in Inez Morse's life. Working hard in a most unladylike fashion to help her widowed mother pay the mortgage on the farm, Inez fights to conceal that "a vain desire had crept into her heart for a bright ribbon bow to wear at the throat" (*Romance* 95). No sooner does she voice her desire for such frivolousness than a young man begins to court her. Her mother makes the unwitting pun "you've got a beau, Inez, as sure as preachin' and the red ribbon's beautiful" (95). The fashionable little ribbon signifies Inez's conventional femininity and the awakening of her "girlish instincts" (97). Perhaps unwilling or unable to write directly of sexuality, however innocent and natural, Freeman uses the metaphor of the ribbon to show that Inez is developing into a healthy woman.

Clothing operates as a symbol of status and gentility in "A Gala Dress." Emily and Elizabeth Babcock are elderly sisters who live next door to Matilda Jennings. The sisters "had always delicately and unobtrusively felt themselves above her. There had been in their lives a faint savor of gentility and aristocracy. Their father had been college-educated and a doctor" (*Nun* 43). However, they were not financially well off and "starved daintily and patiently on their little income" while mending "their old muslins and Thibets, and wore one dress between them for best, taking turns in going out" (44). Because their genteel dignity will not allow them to appear in public

dressed in anything less than black silk, each sister trims the dress differently to disguise the fact that they only own the one dress.

In fact, it was a common practice at this time to re-fashion clothes because quality fabrics and trimming were very costly. According to an article by researchers Jane Farrell-Beck and Joyce Starr Johnson, women's magazines described current fashions in such detail that women could remodel their current clothes in the latest styles (Farrell-Beck 37). Farrell-Beck and Johnson point out that "the body of advice about revamping garments makes a powerful point about the value of cloth and clothing...and the prevailing definitions of socially acceptable dress" (37).³

The black silk dress is important to the sisters because its "meaning" is clear to everyone in their community: a black silk dress is the only appropriate attire for a lady to wear in public. The dress also represents a visible and recognizable "form of material good" that their community will interpret in the same fashion. The dress is indeed correctly "read" by their neighbors as a status symbol, socio-psychologist Susan Kaiser would say, because in this small, poor community, a silk dress is both desirable and scarce (372). Their neighbor Matilda envies the sisters' "faint savor of gentility and aristocracy," and suspects the truth about the dress (*Nun* 43). At the Fourth of July community picnic, fueled by her jealousy, Matilda fails to warn Elizabeth about some small firecrackers sizzling in the dirt by the path and so the dress is slightly, but visibly, burned. Back at home, the sisters try to calmly accept that only Elizabeth can go out now that the dress is damaged. They can no longer take turns wearing the dress and going out, because everyone will know that they have been sharing it.

³ In their article, Farrell-Beck and Johnson point out some statistical findings to support this. For instance, between 1870 and 1933, "229 references to remodeling" garments appeared in periodicals (39). And, interestingly enough, the magazines and columnists "paid the most attention to remodeling in the 1890's," the period when many of Freeman's stories were written and published (39).

Fate intervenes and the sisters inherit a trunkful of clothes, including two black silk dresses. For the first time, they go out together, confounding Matilda and prompting a confession from her. When she reveals her suspicions to the sisters, she also reveals some of the inadequacy she has felt over the years: "I never had a black silk myself, nor any of my folks that I ever heard of. I ain't got nothin' decent to wear anyway" (*Nun* 52). The black silk dress means more than being appropriately costumed; it speaks of pride and position, self-worth and self-definition. And when Emily and Elizabeth give their shared dress to Matilda, it speaks of forgiveness and sisterhood in the community of women.

Several of Freeman's stories mention a convention of the time which dictated that a bride must begin her marriage owning at least two silk dresses, an indication that she has some material wealth to bring to the newly formed household. In "Robins and Hammers," Lois Arms postpones her wedding because she was told that her future mother-in-law looked down upon Lois for not having at least two silk dresses or any furnishings for the house which her fiancé was providing. Lois is not well-off; she and her father live in a little rented house which they had to take after her mother's death. In order to earn money to furnish the house and buy her dresses, Lois takes a teaching job and saves the money she needed, doing well until her father breaks his arm and is no longer able to work and earn their rent. The wedding is postponed and Lois works harder and saves more stringently until she has saved enough to buy "a beautiful black-silk dress and a blue one and lots of other things" (*Romance* 133). Two years later, and without ever revealing that his mother had been the one to make her feel too inadequate to get married without a trousseau, Lois reconciles with her fiancé and work begins again on the house for the young couple.

In "A Souvenir," Paulina, an "out of town lady" was visiting a distant cousin, Charlotte, for a few days. Charlotte "was very proud to take her about, she was so airy and well dressed" in her "fine black silk dress and lace bonnet" (*Romance* 350). Charlotte "had on nothing better than a plain black-and-white checked gingham...but she had realized keenly her reflected grandeur as she had walked up the street with her well-dressed guest" (350). The status conveyed by the clothing symbol of the black silk dress is so universally recognized that even "reflected grandeur" is prized.

In the story "Amanda and Love," we learn about two sisters' characters through the descriptions of their respective wardrobes. For example, Love wears "little beribboned gowns and flower-wreathed hats" and her sister, Amanda, a "sober shawl and staid bonnet" (*Nun* 292). As the older sister, Amanda bore the responsibility of rearing Love after their parents died. She diligently takes care of her sister and maintains their household, but at the price of her own femininity and freedom. When she walks out of a room, "even her dress skirt did not swing, but hung rigidly" (289). And, after dinner, when Love starts to go change her dress, the action signifies more than a simple desire for a different costume. Amanda demands to know "who's goin' to come that that brown dress you've got on ain't good enough for?" and chastises her sister for her unseemingly forwardness:

"If you've got any pride, an' any sense of what's proper, you won't go to dressin' up in that blue dress with all that velvet trimmin' on it, if you think anybody's comin'. If you really want to show anybody you like them before you know whether he likes you or not, you can go an' dress up for them." (293-4)

Amanda knows that Love is expecting a suitor, and discourages her sister from indicating a reciprocal interest in the young man by changing her

costume. The weaker, younger sister bows to her sister's will and does not change her clothes.

Love's young man comes to visit "in his Sunday suit and light necktie, with his shiny shoes and curly hair dampened and brushed as smoothly as possible," but the visit does not go well (296). The references to his "Sunday suit," his tie and his "shiny shoes," i.e., marked attire, show that this young man is courting the girl; he is enacting his part of a ritual that calls for a parallel response from her. Upon his arrival, he interprets the situation as a rejection: his "humble masculine furbishings" not matched by any efforts by Love. He sees that Love has not changed her plain attire and considers himself snubbed by what he reads as a lack of welcome, affection, and even hospitality. He stops visiting Love and she pines until Amanda finally understands that she should not impose the same lack of freedom and romance from which she suffers on her little sister. To make amends, Amanda goes to the young man and explains that he is indeed welcome to court Love and then she hurries home to tell Love to put on her good blue dress because "someone" might come calling.

Just as the language of clothing is not relegated to a specific area of the country, neither is it the sole property of women, although they generally interpret this language with more subtlety and on a more regular basis than do men. Love's young man correctly read Love's everyday attire as a rejection of his courtship. He cannot know, however, that he is being rejected not by Love but by the elder sister, Amanda. Amanda is so afraid of being left behind or alone that she prohibits Love from, well, love. Her prohibition is expressed in this story by the control she exerts over a seemingly simple question of whether or not her sister should change into a different dress. Amanda's control over her sister's action almost costs Love a husband.

Another male character, Jake in "A Humble Romance," is also fluent in this language. In this story, Jake, a peddler making a routine stop, is waiting by the back door for the housewife to gather her rags for trade. As Jake watches the hired girl, Sally, working in the kitchen he senses how confined her life is and how hard. He learns that she has no family, and the desire to take care of her leads him to propose that they elope to the nearby town of Derby, which they do.

Before they head out, however, Sally must run and get her bonnet because, mindful of the proprieties involved but not perhaps the pun, she refuses to "ride into Derby bare-headed" and Jake agrees (*Romance* 9). He wants her, however, to replace her old bonnet much as he wants her to start a new life with him. "He looked down at her curiously. Her bonnet the severe taste of Mrs King had regulated...He eyed it disapprovingly. 'I'll git you a white bunnit sech as brides wear in Derby'" (12). His dialect reveals his lower-class status, but we know that his morality is top-drawer because the white bonnet he wants to buy Sally shows that his intentions are honest.

Many of the stories convey such subtle insights as these into a character's motivation, emotional state, or perceived social standing through the clothing symbols Freeman uses. These symbols were (and still are) easily interpreted by her readers because they derived from a language of clothing conventions common to the majority of women everywhere. Understanding the meaning of the language and the symbols clothing conveys is not a skill confined to New England; it is accessible to anyone interested in fashion. And that is an interest of women (and some men) everywhere.

Dialect and Discourse

As Donovan states, local color literature traditionally emphasizes the dialect or vocabulary that serves to place a character or story in a specific locale. For example, a character from New England might use a phrase like “nor’easter” to describe windy conditions. Or a Southerner might say something quaint like “fixin’to” do this or go there. However, in this thesis, the “local” of “local color” refers not to a geographically delineated region but to one of general social significance—that is to say, not New England, but woman’s domain. I am not concerned with the colloquialisms that may identify a character’s geographic origin because a straight vernacular transcription was not Freeman’s goal. In her characters’ speech, as in the other elements of local color realism under discussion throughout this thesis, I maintain that Freeman portrays women’s place in the larger social region that was America in the late 1800’s.

The title of this chapter points up the distinction that needs to be made between a written transcription of vernacular speech habits and an important function of language. “Dialect” as I use it in this chapter, refers to a writer’s attempt to recreate the sound of a regional accent. If, for example, I were to try and recreate the archetypal, friendly Oklahoman “Thank you,” I might try spelling it as it sounds to me: “Thigh-inkew,” or “Thynk-cue.” In his book, *Dialects and American English*, Walt Wolfram discusses ways authors represent dialects in writing. In “eye dialect,” a “set of spelling errors that bear no resemblance to the phonological differences of real dialects” is used to “convey dialect to the eye of the reader” (262). He notes that for many authors these “literary representations of dialects were actually

quite...conventionalized" and, therefore, understanding the writer's goal in representing dialect must be discussed. Does the writer wish to truly recreate the sound of a speech peculiarity? Or is the author trying to convey a social message by depicting a general class or educational level?

In examining how Freeman develops her characters through their speech, it becomes clear that the quirky spellings and ubiquitous apostrophes in the dialogue bear little relation to a recognizably regional accent. Every character in every story uses some standard contractions as opposed to the more formal, separate forms. This is not a habit confined to New England; it is a pattern found all across the country. Her characters' speech points to their class, education, or upbringing rather than to the region where they live. Most of Freeman's characters are poor, part of the "economic and cultural bankruptcy of the New England village" in this transitional period of American history (Westbrook 96). They are farmers, factory workers, seamstresses, or elderly women subsisting on small annuities. Culture and education are beyond the scope of the hard lives many of them lead and the "ain'ts", "gits", "dunnos", and "nohows" in their speech reflect this kind of impoverishment. Distinguishing between genteel or educated characters and rural, uneducated ones through "eye dialect" does not constitute a regional identification but a class distinction or power disparity.

The women in Freeman's stories are often disillusioned with or disenfranchised by the milieu surrounding them: their religion, or, at least, the practice of that religion, often excludes their voices; the community of which they are members may ignore them; and the characters often struggle within themselves against the value systems they have internalized. These forces acting upon the characters engage them in different kinds of discourse.

Language, then, has two functions that I wish to discuss: vocabulary and discourse. First, vocabulary describes and defines a subject, often encompassing very specific and exact descriptive terms. A specialized vocabulary, as will be discussed later, shows commonality with others who use the same terminology, marking whether the speaker belongs to a clearly defined group. Second, discourse is language as a power-exchange, but not necessarily a verbal one. Clothing, as shown in the previous chapter, can operate as a language and convey meaning, for example. These two functions of language, vocabulary and discourse, were suggested to me by two separate articles on Freeman by the same critic, Martha Cutter. Her earlier study, "Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's Two New England Nuns," analyzes "the language and imagery surrounding the central female" characters of two stories to demonstrate that the language and imagery reveals Freeman's own ambivalence toward marriage. In the later study, "Frontiers of Language: Engendering Discourse in 'The Revolt of 'Mother,'" Cutter moves from analyzing how Freeman's vocabulary reveals information about Freeman, to examining how language and discourse operate as a form of power for the characters in Freeman's short story. In this article Cutter shows that there are many forms of discourse operating in that story and, I would extrapolate, in most of Freeman's stories.

Cutter claims that in "The Revolt of 'Mother'" Sarah Penn "has wrested control of language from her husband and placed it in her own hands"; she "resignifies, reinscribes in order to create a new discourse in which she can be a speaking subject" (290). Since "adopting a male discourse pattern," i.e., arguing with her husband, "ultimately renders her silent" because he won't listen to her, she uses a material language to speak for her: she moves her possessions into the barn (285). Cutter's position, with which I

concur, is that “Sarah must redefine language itself” so that her ‘voice’ can be heard, and she succeeds not just in controlling the language, but in controlling the discourse wherein power lies (290).

Another critic, Joseph Church, approaches the same story and similarly examines the power structures within it. He concludes that Sarah Penn can only “achieve her aims” by literally displacing her husband (197). She removes herself from a marginal position physically and literally “by usurping his structure and leaving him outside” (197). Church’s reading of the story fits into our definition of discourse as an exchange of control or power rather than a strictly verbal exchange. In Church’s reading, Sarah’s dilemma and its resolution is again an example of discourse as a power struggle over territory or space and can only be resolved outside the boundaries of words: by appropriating the place over which Sarah and her husband struggle—the barn. And, Church contends, Freeman redefines who is finally marginalized in this power struggle by putting Adoniram literally “outside wanting in” just as Sarah had been left out earlier by her husband’s refusal to discuss the house and barn situation (197).

Freeman’s marginalized and excluded characters engage the normative discourses of religion and society through the strength of their emotions and find ways of undermining or even subverting the powers that actively exclude or passively ignore them. When we acknowledge that discourse is a form of power, then analyzing how characters control discourse illustrates that the difference between dialect and discourse is the difference between Freeman as a local colorist and Freeman as a feminist writer.

In Freeman's stories, her characters’ speech is less indicative of geographical origin than of social standing as affected by education, power, or gender. One marker researchers identify as showing commonality within a

finite or limited group is that of using a specialized vocabulary unique to that group.

In many of Freeman's stories we read vocabulary that encompasses exact shades of color, sewing terms, cooking terms—a descriptive jargon that precisely delineates the contours of a woman's world. These details form the basis for a vocabulary unique to women, not to New England. Women understand fine cotton cloth, cashmere and silk, alpaca and velvet because they handle it; they cut and sew it. They match the colors of tablecloths to tea sets and decorative figurines to carpets. To understand and order the world in which they live, they discuss and describe it. The specialized vocabulary they employ for doing so functions as an expression of commonality within an identifiable group.

Freeman applies this specialized language in "Sister Liddy," when the "old women sat together and bore witness to their past glories" (*Nun* 92). They describe gilt vases, "a chiny figger," and "elegant blue cashmere cloak, all worked with silk," fitch tippetts and muffs, lace caps with "bows of pink ribbon, an' long streamers, an' some artificial roses," clothes made of "real fine cotton cloth, all tucks an' laid work," "a new brown alpaca with velvet buttons," a "tea set, real chiny, with a green sprig on't," and more dresses and carpets and clocks (*Nun* 89-95).

Before the feminist impact on academics was widely felt, it was just this kind of vocabulary that led to much critical dismissal of Freeman's work as minor, "immersed in the details of unimportant, indeterminate subjects" (Miller, "Jewett's" 4). However, the details of color, fabric, style, and material are not unimportant to those able to interpret their meaning. Not only do they enrich the descriptions of these treasures in the story, but, more importantly, the details prove the expense and worth of the women's

possessions and this, in turn, becomes a measure of the value these women perceive their lives as having had.

Kathryn Allen Rabuzzi, in *The Sacred and the Feminine: Toward a Theology of Housework*, discusses how we (usually women) create a shrine of the home through the rituals of housekeeping and the possessions we choose to value. These rituals and objects become symbols of our spirituality because through them we demonstrate what we value. Although Rabuzzi is discussing the modern woman's life and spirituality, we can see the same process Rabuzzi describes in "Sister Liddy," when the women in the almshouse sit and describe dresses, furniture, and bric-a-brac they used to own. It seems like a curious sort of boasting until we realize that for each of the women, the dresses and china figurines she remembers "are her icons: to lose one is to lose touch with the past that helps sacralize her existence by telling her who she is" (Rabuzzi 107). Recounting their past glories, their possessions, then, is more than boasting—it is a way of affirming the place they once held in a world they no longer fit.

When the women in the almshouse describe what they used to own, they are seeking to escape the lack of control they feel by being displaced from their homes. This talk, gossip, chat, is important to the women in the stories because "through the exchange of the details of talk...the women are able to interpret the world, thus weaving the parts into a coherent whole" (Fryer 623). When they list memories of possessions, they recapture a personal history that belongs to them, since

at one time or another they had had something over which to plume themselves and feel that precious pride of possession...In their pasts alone they took real comfort, and they kept, as it were,

feeling of them to see if they were not still warm with life. (*Nun* 92)

A desire for this history is why 'Sister Liddy' was invented. Polly Moss had no easy or fine life to recall; as a poor and crippled woman she held no status in the outside world and even in the almshouse, where no one owned anything and where all the women were equally destitute, some still called Polly ugly. To compensate for her own inadequacies, Polly built a fictitious history—one where she had a claim to status and respect through an invented, wealthy and beautiful sister.

The talk among the women, then, shows us examples of specialized vocabulary as the descriptions create a conceptual structure which the women (and readers) can interpret. The details call up their context, an inevitable context according to Mansell—"a finite stock of attributes or characteristics"—telling of the lives they each led and what they valued from the unique compilation and shared sets of that stock, i.e., their descriptions and memories of what they once owned.

For example, a plain pottery or metal teapot or kettle will make tea as well as a "real chiny" tea set, decorated with a green vine, but it will say something very different about the tea-maker's social status. A "new brown alpaca with velvet buttons" is a costly coat, stylish and impractical as well. This is not a coat worn just to keep warm: it is a measure of status. Metal buttons, horn buttons, ivory or wooden buttons—none of these state preciousness as well as velvet. Velvet will not wear as well as ivory or wood; it cannot be maintained as easily as metal or horn. It is less practical; therefore, it is more precious and thus implies that a woman who wore a coat with velvet buttons led a luxurious life.

Words, a vocabulary, participate in making meaning when they can be manipulated and combined to call up just this kind of context—when listing possessions becomes a language for talking about a life. The women participate in this code; they control this language even when they can no longer control their circumstance. This specialized vocabulary, then, can be seen as expressing commonality within an identifiable group and as an empowering discourse.

Freeman takes a particularly intense look at her characters' dialogue with the churches and ministers that play an important part in the spiritual life in late nineteenth-century small towns. Many of Freeman's female characters look to religion and the leaders in the churches for guidance, validation, or wisdom. Not many, however, find that their voices are welcomed in their church or that the voices of their church, speaking through the ministers, selectmen, or deacons, are capable of or interested in engaging them as equals. Freeman often characterizes ministers as weak, ineffectual, or incapable of understanding anything outside the narrow confines of the patriarchal limits of organized, conventional Christianity, and she criticizes those whose piety is displayed then put away as if it were no more than a set of Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes.

When in "Christmas Jenny" one of the deacons and the minister go to Jenny's house to investigate complaints that Jenny maltreats the creatures she has taken in, a friend of Jenny's, Mrs. Carey, hurries after them to stand up for Jenny "like a ruffled and defiant bird that was frightening herself as well as them with her temerity" (*Nun* 171). She tells the men how Jenny nurses the injured creatures out of love and defends her friend's actions with such "affection and indignation" that she "almost spoke in poetry" (173). Her lucid and "vociferous" defense of Jenny overwhelmed the two men: "When the

minister did speak it was apologetically. He was a gentle old man, and the deacon was his mouthpiece in matters of parish discipline. If he failed him he betrayed how feeble and kindly a pipe was his own" (173). A friend's intervention, not any theologic "do unto others" kindness, saved Christmas Jenny's reputation from slander.

"An Independent Thinker" is one of my favorite stories because the female protagonist successfully manipulates the social dialogue; she controls the spiritual dialogue; and her internal dialogue is neither a struggle nor painful. She controls the discourse through her actions and her words.

Esther Gay refuses to go to church because as she grew older, she became too deaf to hear the church service. Instead, she stayed home on Sundays and knitted to earn money, because she thought, rather logically, that it was meaningless "for an old woman that's stone deaf, an' can't hear a word of the preachin' to go to meetin' an set there, doin' nothin' two hours, instead of stayin' to home an' knittin', to airn a leetle money to give to the Lord" (*Romance* 305). She has no qualms about the course of action she pursues because she knows it is morally right. The money she earns knitting supports her and her granddaughter, pays her pride in the form of elevated property taxes (she insists that they be made higher than they need to be because she is proud of her poor little house), and goes anonymously to her neighbors, a very old woman and her elderly daughter who have been left widowed and unable to keep up with the mortgage due on their little property.

This old woman's actions engage the materialistic trappings of spirituality espoused by organized religion in a discourse. Her deafness 'naturally' keeps her from hearing the discourse of the ineffectual preaching going on inside the town's church. I say 'naturally' with reason: Esther's

spirituality is a part of her daily life; it is not set aside to be conducted on one day of the week in a specific building. Her spirituality is part of her nature as we see through her generosity and her admirable ethical sense. I call the preaching ineffectual because the townspeople show Esther Gay no “Christian” charity or forgiveness out of their good nature; it is not until circumstances compel them to do so that Esther is more or less forgiven and accepted, as we shall see. Her deafness, then, is not just to the spoken sermon and the services in the church—she is deaf also to the unChristian uncharitableness that informs the congregation’s attitude towards her.

No one in town knows about Esther’s anonymous gifts to her neighbors, and consequently her refusal to go to church ostracizes her from the community and causes her granddaughter’s fiancé to break off their engagement because, according to her granddaughter’s potential mother-in-law, “any girl whose folks didn’t keep Sunday, an’ stayed away from meetin’ an’ worked, wouldn’t amount to much” (304). Esther’s strength is admirable. When her granddaughter loses her young man because his mother disapproves of Esther’s knitting, “she had not the least idea of giving in. She knitted more zealously than ever Sundays; indeed there was...a religious zeal in it” (305).

Circumstances intervene as her neighbor’s mother dies and their house is repossessed, leaving the elderly daughter, Lavinia, with no money and no home. Lavinia despairs of life in the poorhouse, talking of dying at home of the cold rather than of old age at the poorhouse with an “air of feeble recklessness” (308). Her protestations against her fate are characterized as weak and ineffectual. Lavinia is a character acted upon rather than one who is in control. Esther answers poor Lavinia’s “pitiful bravado” with actions—wrapping a quilt around her friend—and with words—telling her that there

"ain't no sense in your talkin' that way. You're jest a-flyin' in the face of Providence, an' Providence don't mind the little flappin' you kin make, any more than a barn does a swaller" (308). I particularly like this metaphor because of its naturalness and its lack of indulgent self-importance, qualities we find in Esther herself: she sees everyone is within God's embrace as naturally as a barn-swallow is within a barn's. Esther is an eloquent, intelligent, and moral character and these qualities become more important as the story approaches its resolution.

She offers to take Lavinia in herself, but Lavinia refuses because of Esther's non-church-going and so is bundled off to the poorhouse. Several months pass. Esther's granddaughter, Hatty, pines for her fiancé. Esther hears that Lavinia has been taken ill and needs more care than the poorhouse can adequately provide. Finally, Esther sees a way to settle all of the problems and she initiates negotiations with all of the parties involved. First, she takes on the town selectmen:

"I'm a-payin' too much on that leetle house," said she, standing up, alert and defiant. "It ain't wuth it." There was some dickering, but she gained her point. Poor Esther Gay would never make again her foolish little boast about her large tax. More than all her patient, toilsome, knitting was the sacrifice of this bit of harmless vanity. (311)

Next, Esther took on Hatty's fiancé's mother in a confrontation described as militaristic. Esther is forceful and forthright in declaring her intentions immediately and in defining the terms under which she will engage the enemy, Mrs. Little.:

Esther advanced and knocked, while Henry stood staring.

Presently Mrs. Little answered the knock. She was a large woman. The astonished young man saw his mother turn red in the face and rear herself in order of battle, as it were, when she saw who her caller was; then he heard Esther speak.

"I'm a-coming right to the p'int afore I come in," said she. "I've heard you said you didn't want your son to marry my granddaughter because you didn't like some things about me. Now, I want to know if you said it."

"Yes; I did," replied Mrs. Little, tremulous with agitation, red, and perspiring, but not weakening. (311).

Esther interrogates Mrs. Little to ascertain that it is not Hatty of whom the Littles disapprove. When she has satisfied herself of this point, she presses home her point: "Then I want to come in a minute. I've got something I want to say to you, Mrs. Little" (311). The once formidable Mrs. Little retreats with, "Well, you can come in—if you want to" (311). Her retreat is physical, as she allows Esther into the house, and it is verbal, as she hedges her invitation with the phrase, "if you want to," a clear example of a one-time power structure in the little community overturned. Once, Mrs. Little had only to imply that Hatty was no marriage prospect for her son because of the grandmother's scandalous refusal to attend Sunday services and the engagement was off. Now, Esther takes control of the discourse involving her, thus gaining a measure of control and power over circumstance. Mrs. Little has come to see that "she'd been kind of silly to make such a fuss" about Esther's habit (312). As Esther tells Hatty, "I reasoned with her, an' I guess she saw I'd been more right about some things than she'd thought" (312). What Esther demonstrates for us is that knowledge is power. She told Mrs. Little what the knitting money went towards and why that was

a more charitable, and hence Christian, act than sitting in a church building for two hours a week without being able to hear the sermon.

Her third project is to persuade Lavinia to move in with her because Esther is capable of providing the nursing care Lavinia needs. Lavinia assents and in the cart on the way to Esther's house, the driver told her, apparently accidentally, that Esther had been the anonymous benefactor for so long. Lavinia apologizes for her earlier refusal and Esther does not let her feel guilty about it, telling Lavinia that everyone needs to do what they feel is right: "You was bound to stan' up for what you thought was right, jest as much as I was. Now we've both stood up, an' it's all right" (314).

Esther controls the discourse with her community by convincing the city selectmen to reduce her taxes, by explaining to the Little mother why Hatty and Henry should be allowed to continue courting, and, finally, by persuading Lavinia to move in with Esther so that she can receive care all week long--even on Sundays, when most people are in church. Lavinia moves in, Henry begins courting Hatty again, and Esther literally has the last laugh: "Standing at the well, looking up at the windows, she chuckled softly to herself. 'It's all settled right,' said she, 'an' there don't none of 'em suspect that I'm a-carryin' out my p'int arter all'" (314).

In "A Church Mouse," the female protagonist, again successfully, controls the discourse which had for many years in her little town excluded women from becoming part of the religious institution. Unlike, however, "The Revolt of Mother," to which this story bears a significant resemblance, the community of women who listen and respond to Hetty Fifiel's words ultimately determine the outcome of this story.

Hetty Fifiel had lived most of her life with a Mrs. Grout, a sick, old woman for whom Hetty, receiving no wages other than room and board, had

worked. When this woman died, Hetty “gathered in the few household articles for which she had stipulated, and...walked out of the house when the new tenants came in” (*Nun* 415). The town in which she lived had no poorhouse and none of the townspeople would take her in as she “had somehow gotten herself an unfortunate name in the village. She was held in the light of a long-thorned briar among the beanpoles, or a fierce little animal with claws and teeth bared...she had the reputation of always taking her own way, and never heeding the voice of authority” —in other words, of being independent and outspoken (*Nun* 416). Hetty has two problems to solve: finding a place to live and a means of support. She finds a job immediately: church sexton. She takes her proposal to Caleb Gale, “a deacon, the chairman of the selectmen, and the rich and influential man of the village” (*Nun* 407).

When the story opens, the two are discussing the matter standing outside in Caleb Gale’s hay field. As he tries to rake, the wind blows and “the rowen hay drifted around Hetty like a brown-green sea touched with ripples of blue and gold by the asters and golden-rod” (408). Hetty points out that she could keep the church cleaner than the old sexton could, and that she could ring a bell as well as anyone, but Caleb will not engage Hetty; “his large face...scanned the distant horizon with a stiff and reserved air; he did not look at Hetty” (407). He does not want to enter into this discussion; a woman has never been sexton before and his reluctance to look Hetty in the face shows literally how women are invisible within the church he knows.

Hetty is described as being part of the field in which she stands, “a May-weed that had gathered a slender toughness through the long summer” and when she realizes how to solve both her problems by moving into the church as the new sexton, her declaration billows forth with the force of a natural phenomenon: “Suddenly she raised herself upon her toes; the wind caught

her dress and made it blow out; her eyes flashed. 'I'll tell you where I'm goin' to live,' said she. '*I'm goin' to live in the meetin'-house*'" (409). Even her words are blown over, typographically speaking, by the force of her pronouncement. Caleb may not want to listen to her, but she is not to be ignored or moved from her stand.

Caleb tries to keep Hetty from carrying out this plan by continuing to argue that she is physically incapable of the work, then by ignoring her and continuing to rake "until he was forced to stop or gather her in with the rowen-hay," and finally by attempting to keep the key to the building away from Hetty (410). He capitulates when he realizes that this old woman has no place to sleep tonight, and he warns her sternly that she "mustn't take no stove nor bed into the meetin'-house" but "Hetty went on as if she did not hear" (411). Caleb ignores Hetty when he does not want to argue with what she is saying just as she ignores him when she does not wish to follow his orders.

Similar to the situation between Sarah and Adironam Penn in "The Revolt of 'Mother,'" Caleb's ignoring Hetty and his refusal to discuss the situation more with her is not due to an inability to speak, but to "a linguistic control, a repression of discourse" (Cutter, "Frontiers" 203). In this story, however, Hetty's voice, not Caleb's, is finally heard and she ultimately controls the situation.

Even though "Hetty as a church sexton was directly opposed to all their ideas of church decorum and propriety in general," she was diligent in keeping the meeting house clean and tidy and the "neatness and the garniture went far to quiet the dissatisfaction of the people" (416). Her bell-ringing skills could have been better, perhaps, but several months went by before their tolerance for having Hetty live in the church wore thin. Not

until the smell of Hetty's cooking pervaded the meeting house and, tolerant no more, the deacons met and decided that Hetty had to move out.

When they went to tell Hetty this, none of the men wanted to begin the discussion. They "nodded stiffly; there was a pause; Caleb Gale motioned meaningly to one of the others, who shook his head; finally he himself had to speak" (418). Unable to force himself into solely controlling the discourse, he wanted Hetty to accept some of the responsibility, and so he began by suggesting that Hetty found the meeting house cold and inconvenient. She rebuffs him, saying that she is more comfortable here than anywhere else. Caleb finally says, "we've found a nice, comfortable place for you, an' I guess you'd better pack up your things" as if Hetty had agreed with him or never spoken at all (419). She refuses to leave and Caleb goes for his wife, thinking that another woman would be able to reach this recalcitrant one. The other men wait outside, unable to face Hetty's hurt and anger, and she bars the doors and windows.

Caleb and Mrs. Gale return, a crowd gathers, and, barricaded within her "sacred castle," Hetty leans out of the window and begs to "say one word...jest one word" (424). She pleads to stay in the church, offering to work even harder to earn her keep, saying since she has "always had a dretful hard time" perhaps now she deserves to "take a little comfort the last of it" (424). Mrs. Gale, her voice "clear and strong and irrepressible" replied immediately that Hetty should "stay jest where you are; you've kept the meetin' house enough sight cleaner than I've ever seen it. Don't you worry another mite, Hetty" (424). Other women joined in and together they decided that Hetty should stay, where she could best set up her room, who would help her move, and all the other details of setting up Hetty's house in the Lord's.

The women gave Hetty a chance to speak. They listened and responded and through their communal effort took control of a discourse which had previously shut them out. The women's voices were strengthened by their emotions and their support for Hetty was strengthened by her obvious need. Together, they were strong enough to break a barrier which had previously ignored or excluded them. This scene, with Hetty, Mrs. Gale, and the other women gathered in support, is a vivid picture of feminine unity and the strength to be found therein.

Conclusion

Freeman was a successful short-story writer. Her work was of a specific time and place and, widely published, served to entertain as well as instruct. But why read it now? Many do not. When Freeman is included in an anthology or a survey course or text, it is usually as a representative of the "local-color" school from late 19th century America. "The Revolt of Mother" and "A New England Nun" are two stories academics can claim without apparent compromise. Most readers find her work sentimental or predictable-- embarrassingly un-modern. I agree; some of the stories do seem sappy. Why, then do I keep wanting to come back to them? I think it is because they reveal individual women's powerlessness in the face of an increasingly modern, patriarchal society as they demonstrate women's empowerment through community.

Her stories are sometimes like autopsies, laying open the hidden conflicts of those who strive to conform when they need to rebel, as well as those who do rebel and must then accept the sometimes grim consequences. Freeman shows her readers where women live and work-- recognizable staging within which her stories are played, conjured up as much by the reader as by Freeman.

One of the things about Freeman's work that has held my interest for this interminable process is that it does resist a tidy categorization. The stories are often far too grim to fit in the local color tradition of the outsider telling stories of life among the amusing bumpkins--her narrators are too sympathetic, too closely identified with those upon whom she is reporting. Some of her stories anticipate naturalism in that her characters are not

"agents of their own lives" (Fetterley and Pryse). They are people worked on by circumstance who occasionally flail about in an effort to take control. Sometimes they succeed, sometimes they do not. Occasionally, some stories are amusing and some rather sappily sentimental. But many are calls for women to stop their disempowering passivity and to assert their importance in a world where they are often invisible.

What, then, can we make of Freeman? I think she is a transitional figure in American literature. Her work reflects that twilight change, the period when little can be relied upon and the immediate future looks dark. Her stories are like a sunset--it can be pretty, but it is sad and a little scary because the night is here. She cannot invoke the comforting, rooted feminine that Jewett does because she does not really believe in it. She does not indulge the sensual romanticist like Chopin, because she is too pragmatic. Freeman's work shows the inevitable decline of an old order and pushes the reader to choose an alternative to her pessimistic and angry view of one path into the new.

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VITA

Betty Ann Sisson

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Thesis: GENDER NOT GEOGRAPHY: THE LOCALE OF MARY
WILKINS FREEMAN'S LOCAL COLOR

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Education: Graduated from University of Maryland, College Park in May 1979 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Art History. Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts degree with a major in English at Oklahoma State University in July 1996.

Experience: Worked in Marquette University Art Museum, employed in retail galleries, employed by Oklahoma State University as a graduate teaching assistant in Freshman Composition I & II and in Technical Writing I & II, 1990 to present.

Professional memberships: Teacher-Consultant for OSU Writing Project.