THE QUEST FOR FORM:
THE FICTION OF MARY E. WILKINS FREEMAN

Thesis for the Degree of Ph. D.

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Thomas R. Knipp

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Thomas R. Knipp

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ABSTRACT

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by Thomas R. Knipp

This dissertation examines the themes and techniques of the fiction of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. To do this it first portrays Mrs. Freeman's girlhood in Randolph, Massachusetts, and Brattleboro, Vermont, because her best work emerges from this personal background. Then, after examining the early development of regionalism in New England and the vital role of Lowell and Howells in pioneering a realistic aesthetic and in providing an outlet for the literary products of the New England regionalists, it traces the evolution of a New England regional tradition through the works of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Rose Terry Cooke, and Sarah Orne Jewett. The dissertation reveals the realistic strengths of these regionalists while demonstrating their continual search for a form suitable to their themes. This search proved successful in the short stories of Mrs. Cooke and Miss Jewett, but unsuccessful in their novels.

The dissertation then examines the short stories of Mrs. Freeman's early collections, demonstrating the

success with which Mrs. Freeman worked within the limits of New England "doubleness"--that is, within the confines of Puritanism and down-east humor. It also argues that her great talent lay in her remarkable powers of observation and her ability to make carefully observed, realistically rendered details of ordinary New England life serve as symbols of the life and history of the region. It further argues that Mrs. Freeman's vision was essentially tragic.

In following chapters, the dissertation examines Mrs. Freeman's achievement as a novelist. It first considers her regional novels, Jane Field and Pembroke, and demonstrates the success with which she solved, in Pembroke, the problem of form that plagued the women of the New England tradition. This success, which was achieved by the development of a "tapestry" technique, was only momentary, however. Madelon reveals Mrs. Freeman's unfortunate retreat into the conventions of Dickensian melodrama which mitigate against her tragic vision.

Along with the early collections and Pembroke, Mrs. Freeman's major achievement lay in her two economic novels, Jerome and The Portion of Labor. The dissertation analyzes her portrayal of the class war in these two novels. Jerome portrays that moment in New England history when the agrarian order had disintegrated and

the industrial world was about to be born; The Portion of Labor depicts a world in which class lines are drawn and factories dominate the landscape. The novels fail structurally because Mrs. Freeman, without a world view or an intellectual system, was forced to rely on the conventions of Dickensian melodrama provided by the market place.

The later chapters of the dissertation trace Mrs. Freeman's career as a popular novelist and short story writer. Each novel and collection is examined and the realistic virtues are stressed. The chronic failure of form in the novels is noted, as are Mrs. Freeman's unsuccessful experiments with external unifying devices in her short story collections. It is also noted that she was forced by her need for commercial success to abandon the subjects and themes she knew so well in favor of more easily marketable material. In her last two novels and collections Mrs. Freeman did regain some of her early excellence. In them she returned to the themes and scenes of her earlier works.

Relying on her letters, particularly those to Hamlin Garland, the last chapter studies Mrs. Freeman's aesthetic and reveals her determination to write what she knew and what was true. At the same time it points out her willingness to be guided by her editors and other successful figures of the literary market place.

The dissertation concludes with a description of Mrs. Freeman's literary reputation from H. M. Alden's mistaken enthusiasm for her genteel qualities through H. S. Canby's praise of her realism to the near-oblivion that confronts her now.

Contents

I.	Background	1.
II.	The Tradition	28.
III.	The Great Collections	73.
IV.	The Search for the Complex Form	120.
V.	The Economic Novels	160.
VI.	The Popular Novelist	199.
VII.	The Later Collections	234.
VIII.	The Final Phase	267.
IX.	Reprise: Aesthetic and Reputation	300.
Bibliography		320.

CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND

A. Personal Background

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman was born in Randolph, Massachusetts, in 1852. In that year, Hawthorne published The Blithedale Romance, and Emerson, Prescott, Parkman, Whittier, and Lowell were the major literary figures of ante-bellum New England. Thoreau's Walden, the masterpiece of the Transcendental Movement, was still two years away. But with this New England of metaphysical elevation, moral vigor, and artistic productivity, Mrs. Freeman had little to do, in spite of the fact that, as Edward Foster points out, she did indeed later preach the Emersonian doctrine of self-reliance to aspiring young writers and was a literary chauvinist in the best New England tradition.[1] Her world was a different world, one of desolation and decay, which Babette M. Levy describes as consisting

> . . . of a number of extremely unpleasant older people, some in poor-houses, some still making life miserable for their relatives; a great many middle-aged women, a few of them married to somewhat nebulous husbands, more of them widowed or single; some--but not too many--attractive women in their twenties, most of them on the verge of a "decline" because of a misunderstanding

1. Edward Foster, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (New York, 1956), p. 53.

with their wooers . . .[2]

This is not flattering, but it is accurate. There are several reasons why Mrs. Freeman never wrote about genteel New England. One of the reasons is, of course, that she never lived in it.

Society in 19th Century New England, like society everywhere, was a vertical structure; and the Wilkins family inhabited a plane much lower--economically and culturally--than that occupied by the Emersons, the Lowells, the Holmeses, and even the Jewetts up in Maine. Both the Wilkinses and the Lothrops were old New England families, but neither was a family of much achievement or culture. There was no history in either family, for instance, of college education or professional life.

Mrs. Freeman's mother, Eleanor Lothrop, came from a family of hard-working, uninspired people. If there was any sensitivity for the child to inherit from this side of the family, it was exemplified in her maternal grandfather, Barnabas Lothrop, who had a neurotic fear of winds and storms so strong that, in defiance of the architectural styles of the day, he built a low, rambling one-storey house. The house contained, in the center, a windowless room into which he would retire at the coming

2. Babette M. Levy, "Mutations in New England Local Color," New England Quarterly, XIX (September, 1946), 353.

on of a violent storm. But Eleanor Lothrop seemed to be free of all this fear. She has been described as cheerful and practical.[3]

The author's father, Warren E. Wilkins, was a carpenter. He was, apparently, a diligent and competent workman; but his career was somewhat checkered because he seemed to possess an excessive sensitivity. Combined with this sensitivity and the "dark" moods consequent upon it were an ambition to climb socially and economically and a definite inability in business matters. These three qualities determined, to an important extent, the family environment in which Mrs. Freeman matured.

It was in this family and with these people that she grew up in relative tranquility and prosperity before the Civil War. Her father, though moody at times and perhaps tense in his drive upward toward gentility, encouraged her in her reading, her schooling, and later in her earliest attempt to write.[4] She attended the town grammar school and apparently did well enough. She did not play much with other children, but rather spent most of her time with the adult women of her family--with her mother, grandmother and others--listening to

3. Foster, p. 5.

4. Ibid., p. 23.

their conversations and observing their activities. And what she heard and saw--the soul-killing littleness of their world and the intensity within that world--later became the stuff of her best art. Edward Foster suggests that

> the girl sensed that these women even in their cattiness were holding on to life, that she recognized that their endless chatter about seeming trifles was important.[5]

It was not a rich life, but it was a secure enough life for a child. It lasted until she was ten; and then almost simultaneously came the shoemaking machines, the war, and the loss of markets for shoes made in Randolph shops. Mary Wilkins Freeman's world would never be the same again. There is no way of knowing what the young girl's reactions were; but in Randolph she did see the coming of the big factories, the change from village to suburb, and the loss of the foreign shoe trade and with it the loss of Randolph's prosperity.

Having failed to achieve prosperity in carpentry and in Randolph, Warren Wilkins moved his family to Brattleboro, Vermont, in 1867. There he entered into a partnership in a dry goods shop. His daughter Mary was not quite fifteen.

In Brattleboro Mrs. Freeman went to high school and seemed to do well. However, for the first time she

5. Ibid., p. 21.

encountered isolation--in two distinct forms. Although she found her dearest friend, Evelyn Sawyer, in Brattleboro, the meeting did not occur until her schooling had been completed. Her four high school years and her additional year at Mount Holyoke were lonely, with few close friends, no boys, and no family to take up the slack. There was intellectual isolation, too. Brattleboro was a self-contained town on the Connecticut River, and unlike Randolph, which was an hour from Boston, the Vermont town was prosperous with an insular prosperity that looked no farther than the agricultural valleys which surrounded it.

This prosperity did not last long after the Wilkinses arrived. The panic of 1870 shook the town and the family resources. The next twelve years were bleak ones. Mrs. Freeman's father tried a variety of schemes designed to bring prosperity to the family, with no other result than what Foster calls "shabby gentility."[6] Toward the end of the decade they were forced to take rooms in the house of a more prosperous neighbor, for whom Mrs. Wilkins acted as a housekeeper. In the meantime, the father had returned to carpentry. Mrs. Freeman's lessons in "upward mobility" and the economics of the gilded age were completed by the embezzlement of the local banker, Colonel Wait, who was to turn up years later as Bolton

6. Ibid., p. 37.

in An Alabaster Box.

These were also years of personal grief for Mrs. Freeman. Her only sister, seven years younger than she, died in 1876. In 1880 her mother died suddenly. Then in 1882 her father, his hopes of gentility in ruins, like many other New Englanders of the time, emigrated to Florida as a construction worker. Of this departure from the native soil and the grief it brought, Mrs. Freeman was to write often. But she wrote even more often of those who, like herself, did not leave--of the women who stayed behind. In 1883 her father died in Florida. Mrs. Freeman was 31 years old. She was alone and nearly penniless, but she had begun to write. In 1884 she returned to Randolph, where she made her home with friends for the next eighteen years.

These first thirty years were the preparatory years for Mrs. Freeman as an artist. Though they did not contain all the things that she attempted to write about, they did contain most of the situations and experiences about which she wrote well. The boundaries of this early world were pretty well the limitations of Mrs. Freeman the artist. Sixty years ago Charles M. Thompson provided an accurate list of them--environment, education, sex--and pointed out their consequences in her work:

> The fact is not surprising that of the twenty-eight stories in A Humble Romance [sic] every one is told from the point

> of view of some woman--and that there are very few which do not deal with one of those family or neighborhood quarrels which have been referred to as the staple of women's gossip in small country towns.[7]

B. Economic Background

Certain literary works acquire significance because they have the good fortune to partake of and to capture the tempo of great historical movements. Mrs. Freeman's best stories are of this kind. The movement that she depicts is a decline. Consequently the stories have a bleakness about them that an ascendant movement would not produce. Nevertheless, they are "mythic"; they depict the going to seed of a great cultural flowering. They do this because the life that she lived, saw, and wrote about, though as narrow as Thompson suggests, was nonetheless typical of a whole region.

The decay of rural New England did not come about quickly; in fact, the forces of decay were at work for many years prior to the Civil War.

> Summer for this country was the period 1790 to 1830--the opening of new farms, the development of small industries; 1830 to 1870 brought autumn--a thriving sheep industry and the stimulus of railroad building but also the competition of the West and the cities. By 1877 . . . it was winter.[8]

7. Charles Miner Thompson, "Miss Wilkins--An Idealist in Masquerade," Atlantic Monthly, LXXXIII (May, 1899), 670.

8. Foster, p. 47.

Emigration from rural New England really began in earnest when the Erie Canal was opened in 1825 and by 1830 had become such an issue in New England that Senator Foote of Connecticut wanted congress to restrict the sale of land in the West.

Emigration, however, was not unchecked through the rest of the 19th Century; rather, it was accelerated--especially by the construction of railroads.

> The railroads, . . . did not bring to the hill country [inland New England] the new lease of life that had been anticipated. Instead of being checked, the decline in rural population intensified.[9]

Harold Wilson describes this accelerated decline as "selective migration," a process whereby the aggressive, the venturesome, and the intellectually active left for regions of greater opportunity. The men who remained were those least able to bring about the changes necessary for prosperity. The women also remained. This selective migration is extremely important to an understanding of Mrs. Freeman's work, for the world she wrote about was inhabited by these shadowy men and by women without men.

The railroads carried away many things. Many traditional economic and social customs were rendered either unattractive or impossible by the presence of the railroad. Further, the isolation in which the Calvinistic

9. Harold F. Wilson, The Hill Country of Northern New England: Its Social and Economic History (New York, 1936), p. 48.

ethic flourished was destroyed. The self-sufficient village and the self-sufficient farm disappeared in the path of the tracks that led to Boston, to New York, and to points west. Emerson and his doctrine of self-reliance were swept from the New England scene--if not from the soul--by the railroads. But most importantly, the people left so that by 1900 New England "was covered by abandoned farms."[10] In such circumstances, what could the abandoned women do but turn inward upon themselves and produce, not Emerson's self-reliant moral sweetness, but the grimness and eccentricity of New England, and of Mrs. Freeman's blighted world?

Along with the lure of the West, the other great attraction which caused New Englanders to leave their rocky soil was the lure of the cities--New England's cities as well as others.

> With the gradual loss of commerce and with the aid of the tariff, New England opened up a new economic era for itself, particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century by developing its manufacturing.[11]

The factories of Boston and the mills of Lynn and Lowell had been expanding since well before the war. A labor union, the New England Workingman's Association, was established as early as 1845. A further key development

10. Edward F. Humphrey, An Economic History of the United States (New York, 1931), p. 437.

11. Seymour E. Harris, The Economics of New England (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), p. 56.

in the histories of Brattleboro and Randolph--especially Randolph--was Lyman R. Blake's invention in 1858 of a machine for sewing shoes. Within twenty years the factories of Lynn had made 200 million pairs of shoes, and Randolph had become a suburb of industrial and sprawling Boston and a very minor shoe town as well. The Irish and other immigrants had come.[12] As a girl Mrs. Freeman saw it all, and though her imagination digested it only imperfectly, she tried heroically to make what she saw the stuff of her art. She did not succeed as she did with rural decay, but she was among the first to make industrialization, labor-management relations, and the ethics of the golded age her themes. In fact industrialization and rural decay are her two chief social themes, and in the former she was a pioneer in the new lands that Herrick and Dreiser and Norris were to chart later.

C. Literary Environment and Background

Randolph, the self-sufficient manufacturing town becoming an industrial suburb, and Brattleboro, the self-sufficient country town going into decline--these provided Mrs. Freeman with the setting for her art. The Lothrops and their neighbors along with the spinsters of Brattleboro--these were the prototypes of her most

12. Humphrey, p. 332.

memorable characters. In other words, the world of her first thirty years provided her with the matter of her art. The form was a different problem. This came from her response to what might be called her literary environment and background.[13]

At different times in her career Mrs. Freeman deliberately conveyed the impression that she was not influenced by the literary scene in which she found herself. She claimed that she refused to read any work that might affect her style and in 1913 she had this advice for aspiring authoresses: "It is a great mistake to listen too much to individual criticisms of literary efforts and to be swayed by them."[14] However there is considerable evidence that she was influenced--greatly influenced--by the literary scene and background and that she knew it. Two examples should suffice here. In an 1889 letter to Hamlin Garland she admitted the possibility that she might have been a realist because of the realistic literary environment,[15] and in 1899 she sought out the influence and advice of the genteel editor, Richard

13. It might be argued further that it was her knowledge of this literary environment and background that provided assurances that her subject matter was marketable; and marketability was important to her, as her letters to Harper and Brothers show.

14. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "The Girl Who Wants to Write: Things to Do and Avoid," Harper's Bazaar, XLVII (June, 1913), 272.

15. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, letter to Hamlin Garland, March 1, 1889 (Huntington Library, San Marino, California).

Watson Gilder.[16]

Mary Wilkins Freeman was a wide-ranging and avid reader through the early and most productive years of her career. An interviewer commented on her reading in 1891:

> She has been a great reader of English literature. Thackeray is one of her favorites; Dickens she likes because he amuses her. Miss Jewett and Miss Catherwood are especially admired by her, and she is particularly fond of "Border Ballads."[17]

In 1898, J. E. Chamberlin wrote of her sitting room in Randolph that he saw Scott's novels "On the high mantelshelf in the chimney," and added that she also was reading Hardy, Tolstoy and "even" Dostoievsky at the time.[18] Two years later M. W. Welch quoted her as saying, "If I could write a book like Lorna Doone, or Anna Karenina, or Quo Vadis, or the story of Gasta Burling by that new Swedish writer, I should be happy."[19] She had, in fact, been an avid reader since her girlhood. In addition to the writers mentioned, as a girl she read the works of Auerbach, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Poe, and Mrs.

16. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, letter to Richard Watson Gilder, August 4, 1899 (Columbia University Library, New York).

17. "Miss Mary E. Wilkins," The Book Buyer, VIII (March, 1891), 53.

18. J. Edgar Chamberlin, "Miss Mary E. Wilkins at Randolph, Massachusetts," Critic, XXIX (March 5, 1899), 155.

19. M. H. Welch, "Mary E. Wilkins," Harper's Bazaar, XXXIII (January 27, 1900), 69.

Stowe.[20]

She was aware of all the parts of the literary environment of her era. She was familiar with the New England tradition, and with the local color story, through Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Mrs. Stowe, and Miss Jewett. She also knew great panoramic novelists of Europe: Tolstoy, Dostoievsky, Scott, Dickens, Thackeray. They furnished, significantly, vast repositories of traditional techniques and devices for her use. She was also familiar with the realistic movement around her as her letters to Garland in the 1880's indicate.

Mrs. Freeman's relations with the realistic movement of her time and her dependence on the techniques of Dickens and Scott will be discussed later. That is important now is to consider her position in the traditions of New England. And she did consider herself as a part of traditions of which she was conscious. Furthermore, she recognized the variety of strands which were woven together in her time to comprise the fabric of the post-war New England literary tapestry.

One strand which ran back thirty years was femininity, the contemporary interest in woman, not simply her rights, but her temperament, potential, and future. Mrs. Freeman was not just a writer who happened to be a woman; she was a woman writer. Her sensibility was feminine,

20. Foster, p. 33.

her insight was feminine, her characters (for the most part) were feminine, and her world was feminine. Fiction for women is as old as Pamela, but in America, fiction for and by women did not become an important force on the literary scene until the 1850's.[21] Most of this early feminine fiction was extravagently romantic and gratified a taste for sentiment, melodrama, and moral instruction. One of the most successful periodical purveyors of this fiction was Robert Bonner's New York Ledger, which featured the genteel and melodramatic work of such women as Fanny Fern and Mrs. Sigourney. When these "damned scribbling women," as Hawthorne called them, and their male counterparts of the 1850's wrote with moral earnestness, they produced such things as Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852) and Ten Nights in a Barroom by Timothy Shay Arthur (1854).

Not all the feminine fiction of the Fifties was this kind of inferior Dickens.[22] The best of it was of of a different sort because of the interweaving of several more strands, including the strand of native humor or frontier humor, which became respectable in the 1850's and out of which the local color movement seemed

21. F. L. Pattee, The Feminine Fifties (New York, 1940), p. 74.

22. In subject matter, sensibility, attitude and technique, it is Dickens that these writers imitate. Even the better writers--Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Stowe among them--when in doubt fall back on the narrative devices of what might be called the Scott-Dickens tradition.

to grow.[23] The other strand was the New England tradition itself, which had already, in the works of Whittier and Lowell, absorbed frontier humor and made it respectable. Speaking of women and the later New England tradition F. L. Pattee said:

> The literary sons of the Brahmins were all daughters. Note in the period after the war the recorders in fiction of the New England decline: Rose Terry Cooke, Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary E. Wilkins, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Annie Trumbull Slosson.[24]

The one woman he does not mention who is a vital link in the developing tradition of New England local color is Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose first important piece of literary genre painting, The Minister's Wooing, was published in 1859.

Regionalism was one of the dominant qualities of American literature throughout the entire 19th Century and especially of New England literature of the 1850's and before. The attention scholars have given to the regionalism of the local color movement has caused them to neglect this fact; but it is true, as B. T. Spencer points out, that "the fact that the literary mode of the day was romantic rather than realistic . . . does not invalidate the regional impulse and temper everywhere

23. Pattee, p. 57.

24. Ibid., p. 303.

present in ante-bellum American letters."[25] This regionalism went everywhere hand in hand with strong elements of humor. As Constance Rourke pointed out, "Localism had been the very basis of the comic in America,"[26] and in New England as elsewhere the quality and nature of the locality determined to a great extent the quality and nature of the comic.

This tradition, which is, then, both regional and comic can be traced through three or more decades before the Civil War. Among the earliest writers working in the tradition were Seba Smith, the creator of the rural sage Jack Downing, and Thomas C. Haliburton, the creator of the crafty itinerant Yankee Sam Slick. Both of these men were writing in the 1830's. Downingville, Jack Downing's home, was the first of a long line of Yankee towns to appear in the regional literature of the next seventy-five years.

> Downingville prefigures the Jalaam of Lowell's Biglow Papers, the Poganuc and Oldtown of Mrs. Stowe's novels, the Deephaven of Miss Jewett's stories, the Tilbury Town of Robinson's poems, and so represents a large forward step in the

25. Benjamin T. Spencer, "Regionalism in American Literature," Regionalism in America (Madison, Wisconsin, 1951), p. 228. In this essay Mr. Spencer distinguishes three phases in 19th Century American regionalism: the period of ante-bellum sectionalism; the period of local color (1865-1890); and the period after 1890 when regionalism though still present became subservient to other purposes and principles of form.

26. Constance Rourke, American Humor: A Study of The National Character (Garden City, N.Y., 1931), p. 180.

development of New England's regional literature.[27]

He might well have added Mrs. Freeman's Pembroke and Barr. These two literary pioneers were followed by Lowell's Hosea Biglow, B. P. Shillaber's Mrs. Partington, and Frances M. Whitcher's Widow Bedott. These last two, writing in the 1850's, brought on the stage in comic mode the shrewd, wise Yankee women who were to occupy so many of the pages of the later female regionalists. These were the prototypes of Almira Todd, Jane Field, and the rest.

The themes of the later regionalists are almost all found in the pages of the early purveyors of Down-East humor. The confrontations of urban and rural values, the cunning that triumphs over hostile nature and "the system," the isolation that twists personalities into singular shapes, the "faculty" that enables generations of New Englanders to make do with little, the pride, and the Calvinism--they all are here. The point of view changes, the style changes, the mode changes; but the themes of the New England regional tradition are all established before the Civil War. So too are some of the technical virtues of the later regionalists, part of whose excellence is due to the fact that, like the

27. Daniel G. Hoffman, Form and Fable in American Fiction (New York, 1961), p. 48.

humorists before them, they did observe and record the habits, gestures, sounds, and similes of the folk.

There are differences, however, between the down-east humor of the 1830's and the local color of the late 1850's and early 1860's. Among the differences are the greater accuracy of language, background, and characterization, and the greater specification of person and place among the later writers. The undifferentiated New England of the earlier writers becomes the Maine coast of Mrs. Stowe's The Pearl of Orr's Island and the Massachusetts shoe town of Mrs. Freeman's Portion of Labor. Claude Simpson, in wrestling with the definition of the elusive term "local color," said that it resulted from the author's fidelity to locale, dialect and mores. And in defining the purpose of the local colorist, he said, "The ultimate aim of the local colorist is, as Garland indicates, to create the illusion of an indigenous little world with due regard for those qualities that differentiate it from the world 'outside.'"[28] This aim and these techniques together with the qualities of picturesqueness and nostalgia might well stand as a definition of local color.

Certainly the second of the four women who constitute the central tradition of New England regionalism, Rose Terry Cooke, reflects these local color qualities

28. Claude M. Simpson, The Local Colorists: American Short Stories, 1857-1900 (New York, 1960), p. 1.

and goals.

> In the first five volumes [of The Atlantic] appeared eleven short stories by Rose Terry (Cooke), pioneer work in local color a decade before Bret Harte and George W. Cable. She had begun as a writer of the Sylvanus Cobb type with idolized heroines and supernaturally black villains, but the influence of Lowell seemed to awake in her new powers. The New England Yankee she portrayed in all his vulgarity and meanness and all his strength of character.[29]

Rose Terry Cooke, then, writing twenty years after Seba Smith, is a full-fledged local colorist of merit.

Her talent was not only recognized but actually shaped by James Russell Lowell; and Lowell, the great arbiter of taste with the powers of both critic and editor, is the watershed of New England local color and regional realism. He encouraged both Mrs. Cooke and, before her, Mrs. Stowe. And he published them because they conformed to his aesthetic criteria.

Howells said of Lowell, "He was a man of very catholic taste,"[30] but this is really a friend's charitable view of a man filled with self-contradictions. Because of these contradictions, he was, in the long view, a poor critic as Van Wyck Brooks has suggested. At times he was flagrantly genteel; in one speech he anticipated Howell's chaste young girl by declaring Fielding to be unsuitable reading for young ladies. He

29. Pattee, p. 328.

30. Wm. Dean Howells, Literary Friends and Acquaintances (New York, 1902), p. 232.

oscillated--both as a critic and a creator--between positions of extreme gentility, Gothicism, and romance on the one hand and chauvanistic enthusiasm for contemporary regionalism on the other.

However, Lowell was a major force in American letters, and it was as a regionalist that he made his most important contribution. Among his creative efforts, it is his regional work that survives.

> The Biglow Papers remained as a permanent landmark. No other work compared with it, either then or later, for showing the homogeniety of New England, its common stock, its common faith.[31]

But it is Lowell the critic more than Lowell the poet who served well the cause of regionalism and realism.

Whether he was praising Fielding because the novelist "realized the actual truth around him,"[32] or encouraging Howells to enter the field of realistic fiction,[33] or praising Sarah Orne Jewett's work as characteristic of rural life in New England, Lowell always seemed to be drawn to the regional and the real. He felt that--in America at least--the real had to be regional. "The literature of a people," he said, "should be a record of

31. Van Wyck Brooks, The Flowering of New England (New York, 1952), pp. 330-331.

32. James R. Lowell, Letters and Political Addresses (Boston, 1895), p. 65.

33. Robert Spiller, et al, Literary History of the United States (New York, 1953), p. 880.

its joys and sorrows, its aspirations and its shortcomings, its wisdom and its folly, the confidant of its soul."[34] He then went on to speak of the tremendous variety in America, a variety so vast that it could be encompassed only in regional pieces. In another context he claimed that "we cannot produce a national satire or character, because there is no butt viable to all parts of the country at once."[35]

Lowell was a man of letters--a man of words--and it was to words that his response was most profound and most definite. He always loved the language of a place. In 1859 he wrote, "No language, after it has faded into diction, none that cannot suck up feeding juices from the mother-earth of a rich common-folk talk, can bring forth a sound and lusty book."[36] A year later he was praising Trowbridge's now-forgotten novel The Old Battleground for "marvelous fidelity of dialect."[37]

Lowell's immediate and immediately favorable response to folk speech and folk life can be seen everywhere through his long career. When, in the sketches of Rose Terry Cooke, he encountered old ladies in the hinterland

34. Lowell, Letters and Political Addresses, p. 228.

35. Lowell, quoted in Walter Blair, Native American Humor (San Francisco, 1960), p. 117.

36. Ibid., p. 53.

37. Lowell, "Review of The Old Battleground," Atlantic Monthly, VI (September, 1860), 12.

complaining, "I can't do it. I can't: I'd as lief root out twitch-grass out o' a ten-acre lot,"[38] he liked it and guided it into print. Before that he had written happily to Whittier concerning "Skipper Ireson's Ride," "I like it all the better for its provincialism--in all fine pears, you know, we can taste the old puckers."[39] Less linguistic but equally regional was his praise of Harriet Beecher Stowe's The Minister's Wooing: "What especially charmed me in the new story was that you had taken your stand on New England ground."[40]

As the first editor of The Atlantic, Lowell's values and judgments were important. More than any other man, he had the power to make or break a tradition; and he made one. Because he liked language, characters, and situations which "realized actual truth," he published stories and sketches which contained them. But he did more than that. He set The Atlantic on the path of realism--genteel, of course, but realism all the same. He prepared the way for a number of successful imitators and competitors, especially for Harper's Monthly and The Century. And he is the first of a whole series of editors who, whether they guided public taste or followed it,

38. Rose Terry Cooke, "Amandar," Somebody's Neighbors (Boston, 1887), p. 214.

39. H. E. Scudder, James Russell Lowell: A Biography (Boston, 1901), p. 417.

40. "Introduction" to Harriet Beecher Stowe, The Minister's Wooing (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1895), pp. ix, x.

provided reputable and profitable outlets for regional writers and who travelled with these writers from the world of Whittier to the world of Sherwood Anderson. Among the editors were Howells, Scudder, Alden, and even Richard Watson Gilder. All of which is to say, as Brooks has already said, "As an editor, he played a historic role."[41]

Lowell, then, was the first of a series of editors who encouraged the lady regionalists.

> The new realism was admitted freely into the magazine and the short story, which had been brushed up anew in France and was coming again to be a ruling literary form, Lowell admitted in unprecedented quantity. During the four years of his editorship there appeared in the magazine some eighty-seven short stories, nearly half of them by women.[42]

This editorial position was maintained through the decades by succeeding editors. Matthiessen points out, "Miss Jewett thus found her niche virtually carved for her. All she had to do was step gracefully into it."[43] While it is the accepted thing to stress the magazine's influence in the direction of the short story, it should be pointed out that most of the New England regionalists wrote novels too and that The Atlantic and other magazines serialized these novels. Both Mrs. Stowe and Mrs.

41. Brooks, p. 635.

42. Pattee, p. 328.

43. F. O. Matthiessen, Sarah Orne Jewett (Boston, 1929), pp. 62-63.

Freeman wrote for serialization.

Because the key editorial figure after Lowell was William Dean Howells, a brief analysis of his attitude will make clear the conditions of the literary market place in which Mrs. Freeman tried to sell her wares. Howells stood for regionalism, gentility, and realism. Students of local color have always found Howells its friend. Constance Rourke says, "The concerns of Howells were largely regional,"[44] and to this Simpson adds, "In the course of his reviewing for The Atlantic, Harper's Monthly and Harper's Weekly he gave discriminating attention to virtually all the important work of the local colorists."[45] He bestowed this discriminating attention for two reasons. First, he thought much local color writing good. He encouraged Sarah Jewett to contribute to The Atlantic and praised Mary Wilkins Freeman's work; and in after years he always referred to them together--"the exquisitely realistic art of Miss Jewett or Miss Wilkins."[46] Secondly, he thought regionalism was inevitable. Noting the lack of social texture and density in America, he thought that naturally "we excell in small pieces with three or four figures, or in studies of rustic communi-

44. Rourke, p. 206.

45. Simpson, pp. 15-16.

46. Howells, Literary Friends and Acquaintances, p. 94.

ties, where there is propinquity, if not society."[47]

In their critical biography of Howells, Clara and Rudolf Kirk describe his editorial policy thusly: "What Howells was looking for in the thousands of manuscripts that passed under his eyes was the writer's sense of 'reality' freshly perceived--whether humorously, subtly, starkly, or touchingly hardly mattered."[48] His critical writings are studded with little justifications and definitions of realism. Most famous is his statement, "Realism is nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material."[49] To this he added elsewhere the significant statement that the realist "finds nothing insignificant."[50] Finally he required organic relationships if not organic structure; "The novel ends well that ends faithfully."[51] Certainly these are the demands the New England regionalists tried hard to meet, although they found the virtue of organic structure to be elusive in their longer work. These are the demands which they did meet; otherwise Howells wouldn't have published them.

The final requirement of Howells the editor was a

47. Clara and Rudolf Kirk, Wm. Dean Howells (New York, 1962), p. 87.

48. Ibid., p. 66.

49. Howells, Criticism and Fiction and Other Essays, Clara and Rudolf Kirk, eds. (New York, 1959), p. 38.

50. Spiller, p. 879.

51. Howells, Criticism and Fiction, p. 43.

certain degree of gentility. The gentility that he demanded was not something inherent in the nature of man or in the nature of realism. It was, he thought, inherent in the nature of young girls and of magazines. His famous statement about material suitable for young ladies does not need repeating. The lady regionalists--most of them either sexless or repressed--were more than willing to stay far distant from the great Victorian taboo of sex. It might also be added that their stories were, for the most part, free of violence. The one lady who sometimes broke through the barriers was Mary Wilkins Freeman.

H. M. Alden of Harper's Monthly was one of the most important editors of his time; and like a good Harper's editor, he followed a trail pretty well blazed by The Atlantic. William Allen White called him a "guardian of the hearthstone."[52] And indeed he was. He encouraged realism and regionalism; his support of and guidance to Mrs. Freeman at a time when she needed it was proof of that. But he also subscribed to the theory of the limiting nature of the magazine.

> We do not say that everything that could be published with propriety in a book could fitly be published in a magazine. The purchaser chooses his book; the magazine goes to an audience to which it is committed by a pledge.[53]

52. Wm. Allen White, "Fiction in the Eighties and Nineties," American Writers on American Literature (New York, 1931), p. 390.

53. Henry Mills Alden, Magazine Writing and the New Literature (New York, 1908), p. 68.

He was Mrs. Freeman's editor, and she knew, or soon learned, his "pledge," which is to say that she, like Mrs. Stowe, Miss Jewett and others before her, knew her market.

CHAPTER II

THE TRADITION

Lowell published works by Harriet Beecher Stowe and Rose Terry Cooke before Bret Harte had written anything but his name, and in doing so he established a tradition--or at least made it possible for one dating back to Seba Smith to move down new paths. There is little doubt that there was a tradition--a continuity that was both technical and thematic. It has been so recognized and so treated by a wide variety of critics including William Dean Howells, F. L. Pattee and Van Wyck Brooks. Brooks is most explicit.

> Before these admirable realists [Mrs. Stowe and Mrs. Cooke], with their homely art, no one had truly conveyed its [New England's] color and savor, its rude strength and depth of feeling. . . . In Mrs. Stowe's books one found most of the "chestnut burrs" that became the stock-in-trade of New England fiction, the philosophical sea captains, the stubborn farmers and wild young men, the regiment of Yankee spinsters, infinite in variegation.[1]

Further on he adds, "Rose Terry Cooke was the founder of the school that produced Miss Jewett, Miss Wilkins and Alice Brown."[2]

The work of Mrs. Stowe, Mrs. Cooke, Miss Jewett

1. Van Wyck Brooks, New England: Indian Summer (New York, 1950), p. 87.

2. Ibid., p. 88.

and Mrs. Freeman has certain characteristics in common.[3] They all use "local color" details, dialect, and similar story patterns. They all write about certain gnarled Yankee types with an emphasis on women. They all draw freely from the long tradition of Yankee humor and move between the pole of this sly Yankee humor on the one hand and the stern moral vision of the Puritans on the other.[4]

But their stories stretch across the years from Mrs. Stowe's early work in the 1850's to Edgewater People in 1918, a period of over sixty years. And in that time they work within a living and changing tradition, not a petrified convention or cliche. Regionalism is only regionalism after all; it is the material upon which the artist draws--it is the stuff of art, and the art will change as the stuff changes. As New England went to seed after the flowering, so the tone of its writers changed. The idyllic and joyous note that swells through The Pearl of Orr's Island is not found in the later ladies, not even in the work of Sarah Jewett, who was forced by Maine's neglected piers and abandoned boats into a mood of melan-

3. This is not to infer that there were no other New England regionalists; there were. Elizabeth O. B. Stoddard, Annie Trumbull Slosson and Rebecca Harding Davis are among them. Although they are all "of the tradition" none of them achieved the quality of the four women discussed here, and a discussion of their work would add nothing to an understanding of the tradition of which they are a part.

4. Babette M. Levy, "Mutations in New England Local Color," New England Quarterly, XIX (September, 1946), 338-340.

choly. Taine suggested a critical approach which includes scrutiny of la race, le milieu, and la moment. Such an approach helps define regionalism, including that of New England. Under the pressure of changing conditions the quality of New England life changed, and the pressure of these changes twisted the durable Puritan race into singular and unexpected shapes. Therefore, in order to be able to evaluate Mary Wilkins Freeman's achievements and her limitations it is necessary to trace briefly the changes in this tradition.

A. Harriet Beecher Stowe

In the middle '50's when Harriet Beecher Stowe turned her attention to the New England which was to be her fictional preserve for over twenty years, she was already the most famous writer in America. Uncle Tom's Cabin had come out in 1852 and Dred in 1856. These two novels lie outside the tradition of New England regionalism and outside the scope of this chapter, but they do reveal one characteristic of Mrs. Stowe's writing and the writing of all the ladies who follow her. They are the result of observation and experience. (Forty years later Mrs. Freeman was to identify herself with Hamlin Garland's "veritism.") Charles Foster explains Mrs. Stowe's sources this way: "Her books, generally speaking, were products of her own experience and observation buttressed by family reminiscence and a wide and deep knowledge of New

England intellectual history."[5] Her main contributions to New England regionalism, The Minister's Wooing (1859), The Pearl of Orr's Island (1862), Oldtown Folks (1869), Oldtown Fireside Stories (1869) and Poganuc People (1878), flow from the same sources.

One thing that Mrs. Stowe observed and experienced is what Charles Foster called "New England doubleness." This doubleness might be described as the movement of the New England character between the poles of Puritan moral fervor and sly Yankee shrewdness. The genuine regional characters that Mrs. Stowe created tended to come from one or the other of these two extremes.[6] The strength of the growing movement of regional realism is revealed by the fact that it was for her humorous regionalism that her contemporaries praised her. In 1872, T. S. Perry, writing in the North American Review, said, "With all her faults she is a humorist. . . . Sam Lawson . . . is an extremely amusing person . . . an admirable copy of an original that can be found in almost any New England

5. Charles Foster, The Rungless Ladder: Harriet Beecher Stowe and New England Puritanism (Durham, N.C., 1954), p. 242.

6. One is tempted to see this as inevitable. Among the folk sources on which she drew or, at least, to which she reacted unconsciously, the two strongest traditions were the moral and fervent tradition of mysticism and the "special providence," dating back through the Mathers to Bradford's miraculous meeting with Squanto, and the humorous tradition of sly Yankees like Jack Downing and Sam Slick, which had such wide exposure in the newspapers of the day.

village."[7] Walter Blair quotes Howells who praised the short tales which "lure us to read them again and again by their racy quaintness and the charm of the shifty Lawson's character and manner."[8]

But this is only one pole. For Mrs. Stowe there was always the other:

> The author of Uncle Tom's Cabin was . . . too stern a daughter of Puritanism to write solely from what she disparagingly called "a merely artistic point of view." The daughter, sister, wife, and mother of ministers, she rarely wrote without a moral purpose. "It is the moral bearings of the subject involved," she declared, "which have the chief influence in its selection."[9]

Here is the "doubleness," the vital "doubleness" which is important because it is the characteristic of the whole tradition. All the authors of the New England tradition write about characters clustered around these two poles. When the humorous and the moral fuse in a single character and a single scene, as they do in Mrs. Cooke's Freedom Wheeler and Mrs. Freeman's Thayer family, something approaching a masterpiece is produced.

A. H. Quinn calls Mrs. Stowe a transitional writer, that is, one of a group of writers who are partly romantic and partly realistic. The question is, which parts are

7. T. S. Perry, quoted in Walter Blair, Native American Humor (San Francisco, 1960), p. 140.

8. Wm. Dean Howells, quoted in Blair, Native American Humor, p. 141.

9. Herbert R. Brown, The Sentimental Novel in America--1789-1860 (New York, 1959), p. 133.

which? In Mrs. Stowe's case and in the case of the later ladies, this distinction must be made because the relation of the real to the romantic--and the relation of the good to the bad, for that matter--depends on the type of thing they wrote. Claude Simpson has expressed the widely held view by saying, "The short story was the characteristic medium of the local colorists." He goes on to say:

> Almost all the local colorists seem to have tried their hand at indigenous novels, although the results were seldom successful. Their difficulties may suggest reasons why the short story was a better vehicle for their aims: either their long fiction was episodic--almost resembling a collection of tales--and so lacked unity, or they achieved an organic structure by subordinating local color interests to some other unifying principle.[10]

Since Mrs. Stowe wrote six novels and Mrs. Freeman thirteen, local color writers clearly did more than try their hand at the longer form; yet the above quotation reveals the heart of the problem: the regional novelists' quest for form.

Provincial manners, or universal situations given a special regional coloring, provide unity enough for the short story. (Mary was obviously aware of the latter in such stories as "A Village Lear.") But the novel was something else. Again and again, after striking out on the road to critical realism and the comedy of manners,

10. Claude Simpson, The Local Colorists: American Short Stories, 1857-1900 (New York, 1960), p. 2.

the regional writers would retreat to the safe confines of the Dickensian plot. The result was that most of the novels--the most serious efforts, after all--were romantic at the center. And the romance was melodramatic and bad. Mrs. Stowe's main plots are love stories; her heroes are conventional and her heroines (sublimations of her own girlhood, perhaps) are tender, pale, intuitive, noble, and conventional. It is on the periphery of the story that Mrs. Stowe's realistic virtues are found. Her old women (usually comic), sea captains, town handymen and her subplots are her greatest successes.

In this "doubleness," her search for form, and her peripheral realistic excellence, Mrs. Stowe is characteristic of the whole tradition. She is also representative of it in her themes and values: her analysis of domestic virtue and domestic crises, her concern with the lot and role of women, her Wordsworthian fascination with the moral power of children (though Miss Jewett may be exempted here), her belief in the power of innocence, and her interest in the contrast between the rural and the urban.

She stands at the beginning. The world she portrays is one of ripeness. As she writes, New England is going into decay, and she catches the last sweet, whole moment. She is, as Miss Levy points out, "the only one of the local colorists thus to stress the intellectual side of

New England."[11] She does a better job with male characters because there were better men to observe. A weak will and gnarled reticence were not qualities of a Henry Ward Beecher.

> She describes large and fairly prosperous families, although everyone needs to work hard. While there are eccentrics and village characters, they are relatively few and not extreme types. Compared with other fictional New Englanders, many of her men and women lead well-rounded lives with political, social, intellectual, and religious interests. The men vote and take part in village political squabbles. There is much social life, with the various levels of society well recognized.[12]

This is a pleasant vista, but it was a view looking backward from the top of the hill. From there the road went down.

The Minister's Wooing, which Harriet published in 1859 after it was serialized in The Atlantic Monthly, is a good example of the New England local color tradition and its search for the solution to the problems of the transition from romanticism to realism. As is generally true of all the literary ladies, Mrs. Stowe's "realism" is better than her "romance" although she makes better use of conventional plot and character devices than do her successors.

The novel is rich in local color virtues. Mrs. Stowe uses dialect with restraint, humor, and wisdom. She

11. Levy, New England Quarterly, pp. 343-344.

12. Ibid., p. 341.

portrays with light satire, especially in the opening chapters, the social structure, social relationships, and class distinctions of New England society. She writes with obvious technical knowledge of regional occupations and working conditions--the dressmakers, the ministers, the seamen, etc. She writes with great perception of the special qualities of the New England mind. In Mrs. Scudder, the heroine's mother, is embodied that rare quality called "faculty," which enabled poor, proud people to maintain their pride and their place in society on the slenderest of resources. Mrs. Marvyn, the hero's mother, is a fine example of the kind of gloom that settled over the New England personality after a careful search for the "signs of salvation" proved fruitless. And all of the local characters--the minister especially--reveal the Puritan preoccupation with theology.

There are brilliant scenes rooted deeply in the region. When Mary Scudder and the hero's mother, Mrs. Marvyn, learn that young Jim Marvyn is lost at sea, they search the past together for signs of his salvation. But for every brilliant scene there is a bad one in which Mrs. Stowe is guilty of sentimentally bad writing:

> And then Madame de Frontignac broke out into a caroling little French song which started all the birds around into a general orchestral accompaniment.[13]

13. Harriet Beecher Stowe, The Minister's Wooing (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1896), p. 225.

She is also cursed with the Victorian affection for the generalization. She cannot resist proceeding from her own particular to the general through some kind of discursive discourse. Every few pages "one sometimes sees . . .," and she is off.

In The Minister's Wooing Mrs. Stowe deals with some success with the popular regional theme of the conflict between indigenous and external values--in this case moral values. Dr. Hopkins' theology and moral fervor, Mrs. Scudder's practical virtues and Mary Scudder's Edwards-like mysticism (she is curiously like Sarah Pierpont) pretty well run the complete spectrum of Puritan virtue. And against them are set two kinds of evil: a negative evil as found in the Browns, the local rich family who fail to live up to their Puritan beliefs; and an active evil found in the characters of the "French" sub-plot. In Madam de Frontignac and her American lover, Aaron Burr, are found all the wickedness of the world, the flesh, and the devil, against which the virtues of the minister and his allies do battle.

In many ways the presentation of this confrontation of values is quite good, but the presence and nature of the "French" sub-plot reveal the central weakness of this novel and the central problem of the New England local colorists. Not knowing what story to tell, they fell back on telling the old melodramatic story of the senti-

mental tradition.[14] The Minister's Wooing is basically the love story of a faithful young girl and an irresponsible young man. They are temporarily separated. A great deal of sentiment is expended on his supposed death in a shipwreck. He returns and marries, reformed by wealth and a good woman's love. The girl, Mary Scudder, is also loved by the minister, an interesting variant in that the older lover is a man of God, rather than a rake, who nobly steps aside into what we are assured will be future happiness. The other complication is Aaron Burr's attempt to seduce Mary. Not only do Mary's virtues thwart him, but they also inspire virtue in his French mistress, who returns to her husband and makes the birds sing.

Charles Foster, the sympathetic critic who has charted the path of Puritanism in Mrs. Stowe's work (it is very wide in The Minister's Wooing), says, "It is only in the superficial outlines of plot that we can make The Minister's Wooing accord with the thousand and one nineteenth century novels in which the young lady's lover is apparently lost at sea."[15] But this is not the case. The lost lover is at the very center of the story, as are the minister's love and Burr's lust. Right there in the middle,

14. Mrs. Stowe's concern over the problem of what story to tell and how to tell it is revealed in her statement, "strictly speaking, it is necessary to begin with the creation of the world in order to give a full account of anything." Ibid., p. 11.

15. Charles Foster, The Rungless Ladder, p. 126.

the story is just one more variation on a theme from Charlotte Temple. It is the realistic virtues which are peripheral. And because this is so, The Minister's Wooing is a prime example of the New England regionalists' unsuccessful search for a viable form for accurate and occasionally profound realistic observations.

The Pearl of Orr's Island, which came out in 1862, reveals the same strengths and weaknesses, the same successes and failures, as does The Minister's Wooing. It contains fine descriptions of the Maine coast and successful, restrained down-east dialect. It is sprinkled with the indigenous metaphors which are the special delight of regional fiction. Captain Kittridge, just before dinner, says he is as "hungry as Time in the Primer."[16] As in The Minister's Wooing, the secondary characters--Aunt Roxy and Aunt Ruey, Captain Kittridge and others--are good, though they and the strong scenes in which they prevail are more richly comic than in the previous novel. (Here Mrs. Stowe is dealing with a less refined group of people living close to the wilderness.) Charles Foster says they "erupt realistically, humorously, and vigorously."[17]

But again Mrs. Stowe loses her way in the search for

16. Harriet Beecher Stowe, The Pearl of Orr's Island: A Story of the Coast of Maine (Boston, 1884), p. 140.

17. Charles Foster, The Rungless Ladder, p. 146.

form--a search which comes down eventually to the fundamental question, "What story shall I tell?" She says, "Now I cannot think of anything more unlikely and uninteresting to make a story of than that old brown "linter" house of Captain Zephaniah Pennel down on the south end of Orr's Island."[18] Having made this decision, she decides, reasonably enough, to tell another kind of story that won't be so "unlikely and uninteresting." She tells the melodramatic story of the star-crossed love of Mara, a mystical and consumptive orphan, and Moses, a headstrong castaway whose Gothic origins are filled with passion and Catholicism. The story, which is structurally loose, marred by great lapses of time, and by the awkward insertion of additional stories within the main plot, follows the hero and the heroine and their dear friend Sally through childhood, past the sentimental and redeeming death of Mara and the redemption of Moses to his marriage to Sally, a marriage, the main purpose of which is to keep pure the memory of Mara.

The novel falls into two parts. The central characters are not conditioned by <u>place</u>; their personalities are not defined in terms of region. Consequently they are simply part of the accoutrements of the Scott-Dickens tradition which fills the vacuum at the center. In the first half of the novel, while the central characters are

18. Stowe, <u>The Pearl of Orr's Island</u>, p. 10.

children and delightful minor characters hold the stage, the effect is good, strong, comic, and regional, though the children themselves are drawn badly enough.[19] As they grow up and dominate the action, however, there is a great falling off both in regionalism and in quality. And the failure is again caused by the fact that the central statement of the novel is not regional--it is not about certain people in a certain place at a certain time.

Oldtown Folks, (1869) published the year before The Luck of Roaring Camp, is probably Mrs. Stowe's most successful regional novel. And it is so because she had been speculating on the problems confronting her and, as a result, had worked out a fairly comprehensive regionalist aesthetic.

> Henceforth my story must be a cord with three strands, inexplicably intertwisted, and appearing and disappearing in their regular intervals, as each occupies for the moment the prominent place. And this threefold cord is composed of myself, Harry and Tina. To show how the peculiar life of old Massachusetts worked upon us, and determined our growth and character and destinies, is a theme that brings in many personages, many subjects, many accessories. It is strange that no human being grows up who does not intertwist in his growth the whole idea and spirit of his day, that rightly to dissect out his history

19. The children--Moses and Mara--are only stereotypes representing Harriet's child psychology. She explains Moses by saying, "Seldom do we meet sensitiveness of conscience or discrimination of reflections as the indigenous growth of a very vigorous physical development." Mara, on the other hand, was too sensitive and discriminating for earth. She died of an excess of virtue, a rare, fatal malady. Ibid., p. 178.

> would require one to cut to pieces and analyze society, law, religion, the metaphysics and the morals of his times; and as all these things run back to those of past days, the problem is still further complicated. The humblest human being is the sum total of a column of figures which go back through centuries before he was born.[20]

Earlier she had had her narrator, Horace Holyoke, say, "My object is to interpret to the world the New England life and character in that particular time of its history which may be called the seminal period."[21]

Although Oldtown Folks is generally considered her best novel and although she speculated with insight and accuracy on the problems of the regional writer, she didn't really solve these problems. She didn't find the proper form. Her narrative persona is colorless, her central characters sentimental and melodramatic, her heroine a ghastly girl in the pattern of Mary and Mara--sexless and genteel. Mrs. Stowe also provides those two staples of sentimental fiction, the foul rake (Ellery Davenport) and the tragic fallen woman (Emily), who serve as object lessons to maidens. There are also other melodramatic elements--buried pasts, family secrets, surreptitious meetings, etc.

Still it was her best novel. One reason is that in

20. Harriet Beecher Stowe, Oldtown Folks and Sam Lawson's Oldtown Fireside Stories (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1896), p. 229.

21. Ibid., p. xxiii.

it she makes her best use of the Dickensian tradition. Many of her regional characters are in reality caricatures, and good ones too. Among the finest creations in the whole of New England local color are the gnarled Calvinists Crab Smith and his sister Asphyxia (note the talent for names), who belong among the most chilling portraits in all New England literature.

Another reason why it is a good book is that it is a very long one--so long, in fact, that the melodramatic central story plays a minor part. She may not have found the right story to tell, but she tried at least to get away from the wrong one. The result is that while the realistic virtues are peripheral and the center is weak, here the center is smaller. Constance Rourke said, "Oldtown Folks--now too little known--was ostensibly a novel but actually a crowd of small, episodic sketches on a colorless string of story, full of pawky humor and packed with the spare hard background out of which that humor had sprung."[22] Charles Foster agrees by saying, "It must be admitted that its sketch aspect, evident in such chapters as "The Old Meeting House," is perhaps its chief delight, its primary claim on our attention."[23]

"The Old Meeting House" is a digression, moving away

22. Constance Rourke, American Humor: A Study of the National Character (Garden City, N.Y., 1931), p. 180.

23. Charles Foster, The Rungless Ladder, p. 173.

from the central story toward brilliant genre painting. In Crab Smith and Asphyxia Mrs. Stowe provides us with one of several environmental studies; that is, she really shows the "peculiar life of old Massachusetts" working on character. With great success she handles what must be called comedy of manners, providing various portraits of Calvinists and Anglicans, the latter chiefly satiric. The confrontation of Anglicanism, an urban and foreign faith, and the old time religion provides one of the most important and successful digressive themes. In no other book are so many of the themes of New England local color presented with such skill. The only problem is that Mrs. Stowe hasn't found a way to make them fit.

In the same year that she brought out Oldtown Folks, Mrs. Stowe also published Sam Lawson's Oldtown Fireside Stories. These stories contain all the required local color ingredients--dialect, regional eccentrics and eccentricities, regional mores and values, local humor. And, interestingly enough, they are framework stories, collected through the unifying agency of the narrator, Sam Lawson, who is an excellent example of Mrs. Stowe's superiority in creating male characters. Although they seem to point the way toward Deephaven, The Country of the Pointed Firs, Pembroke, and Edgewater People, they are only a minor achievement because of the nature and quality of the stories themselves. They are loose, rambling tales and sketches possessing none of those unifying qualities that

characterize the structure of all first rate short stories.

Mrs. Stowe's last major effort in the field of regional fiction was Poganuc People (1878). It contains all of the strengths and weaknesses of her earlier work--but in a minor key. The sentimental central story and the sentimental heroine (Dolly, the most autobiographical of her girls) are here. So are the expert little vignettes of genre painting, the humorous characters, and the preoccupation with theology. And importantly, the idyllic note is here as it is in all her work (it's in Sarah Jewett too, separating her from Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Cooke)--an idyllic note coupled with nostalgia. She said in a letter to her son Charles, "In it I condense my recollections of a by-gone era, that in which I was brought up. The ways and manners of which are now as nearly obsolete as the old England of Dickens' stories."[24] Whether this is the nostalgia of an old lady for her lost youth or a perception of decay doesn't really matter. Others were to see clearly. One such, whose lower position on the social ladder gave her a sterner viewpoint and whose greater technical control made her a better short story writer, was Rose Terry Cooke.

24. Harriet Beecher Stowe, "Introduction," Poganuc People and Pink and White Fancy (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1896), p. vii.

B. Rose Terry Cooke

Mrs. Cooke, who did most of her writing before her late marriage and whose short stories were not collected until quite late, was hardly one to look upon herself as a pioneer. Coming from an unprepossessing background, she revealed early a strong streak of the genteel in any number of sentimental poems. It is here, as F. L. Pattee points out, that the importance of James Russell Lowell is made abundantly clear.

> She was surprised to find that Lowell, the editor of the new and exclusive Atlantic, preferred it [her fiction] to her poetry. For the first volume of the magazine he accepted no fewer than five of her homely little sketches and praised them for their fidelity and truth.[25]

Thus, with Lowell showing the way, she became a pioneer in the field of regional realism.

Many of the subjects treated in one way or another in Mrs. Stowe's work are found in Mrs. Cooke's work too, especially in two collections of short stories, Somebody's Neighbors (1884) and Huckleberries Gathered from New England Hills (1891), and several novels, the best of which is Happy Dodd (1887). The characters are similar to Mrs. Stowe's but come more exclusively from the region's lower classes.

> She dealt more and more with New England farm and village characters, with common laborers and nondescript types found in

25. F. L. Pattee, A History of American Literature Since 1870 (New York, 1935), p. 230.

> country towns--with tight-fisted farmers and rural deacons and the women they ruled with patriarchal despotism.[26]

This emphasis was deliberate; her preface to Huckleberries reveals her concern with the region and its effect on the individual:

> I have called this latest collection of New England stories by the name of a wild berry that has always seemed to me typical of the New England character. Hardy, sweet yet spicy, defying storms of heat or cold with calm persistence, clinging to a poor soil, barren pastures, gray and rocky hillsides, yet drawing fruitful issue from scanty sources.[27]

The metaphor cloys a bit today, but as a statement of a regionalist aesthetic it does not differ substantially from Mrs. Stowe's.

F. L. Pattee says of Mrs. Cooke's work, "Of the great mass of fiction dealing with New England life and character her work excels in humor--that subdued humor which permeates every part like an atmosphere."[28] On the other hand Blair makes reference to "Rose Terry Cooke, who wrote tales in which humor was an occasional, grim, incidental intrusion."[29]

26. F. L. Pattee, The Development of the American Short Story: An Historical Survey (New York, 1923), p. 175.

27. Rose Terry Cooke, Huckleberries Gathered from New England Hills (Boston, 1891), p. vi.

28. Pattee, American Literature Since 1870, p. 230.

29. Blair, Native American Humor, p. 140.

Together, these partial views present the complete picture of the characteristic New England doubleness of the regionalists--that body of fiction which moves between the poles of frontier humor on the one hand and grim Calvinism on the other. And it is especially in displaying the gnarled products of Calvinism that Rose Terry Cooke displays what Miss Levy calls "an amazing streak of realism."[30]

Mrs. Cooke's regional realism goes one important step beyond Mrs. Stowe's. She is able to bring her realist point of view into the center of her story. Harriet's realism remains external; the sentimental tradition still reigns over the main plot and the central characters. In Mrs. Cooke's work the central characters are the hypocritical deacons, self-righteous farmers and grim spinsters of a dying region; the main plot concerns their struggle for survival while "clinging to a poor soil." The great distance she travelled down the road of realism can be seen in her treatment of women--especially in her willingness to probe--gently, of course--in areas guarded diligently by Victorian taboos.

> People may have their eyes on heaven, but there is such a thing as physical passion, even in the so-called gentle sex. Mrs. Cooke approached this last problem cautiously, but beneath her careful reticence may be felt the force of young Sybil Saltonstall's tragic desire for a man she knew to be unworthy or

30. Levy, New England Quarterly, p. 346.

> of "odd" Miss Todd's for a man young enough to be her son.[31]

After Mrs. Stowe's Mara and Dolly, this is a major step in the direction of realism.

Mrs. Cooke, genteel as she was, was able to hold sentiment at bay in many of her stories by keeping them short and by avoiding love stories. But this is not to say that she solved the problem of form that plagued Mrs. Stowe's short stories; for she did so only partially. Many of her short pieces could more properly be called sketches and tales than short stories. They often cover great periods of time--whole marriages, whole lifetimes. Although particular scenes are built well, the stories themselves are diffuse and thin, existing only for the sake of the particular scenes. They are filled with coincidence and conventional happy endings. Her best stories, however, show greater control. There is contraction of time and point of view; there are fewer characters. In her later stories she finally breaks away for the curse of the discursive tale, the long narrative beginning. Nine out of the eleven stories in Huckleberries begin with direct speech.

Mrs. Cooke's other big problem was language, and to this she never really found a solution. Simpson says "stylistically her work was an interesting combination of

31. Ibid., p. 347.

schoolmarm correctness and well-rendered dialect speech."[32] But there is no "interesting combination" at all. There is the jarringly imperfect discord of prose moving uncertainly between two idioms. There are fine folk-metaphors.

> "I think he's small pertaters and few in a hill."[33]

There is excellent, restrained writing.

> Nothing very serious seemed to ail the old man. He had been rheumatic, taken cold, gone to bed, and found it was a warm, comfortable place, and lain there till the unused muscles and dulled circulation became a fixed physical habit.[34]

There is refreshingly accurate observation and description.

> She had a long nose, a fallen-in and yet wide mouth, a distinct chin, and a pair of weak gray eyes with red lids; all overshadowed by a severe front of false chestnut hair set in stiff puffs.[35]

But for every passage that exhibits the control of the realist there is a passage of baroque prose in the worst genteel tradition.

> But spring at last kissed the land: the brown sad fields softened in tint, the brooks laughed, the winter grain sprung up afresh on hill and dale, the bluebirds ventured to call out their small encouragements from leafless trees.[36]

32. Simpson, The Local Colorists, p. 87.

33. Rose Terry Cooke, Somebody's Neighbors (Boston, 1884), p. 245.

34. Ibid., p. 232.

35. Ibid., pp. 193-194.

36. Ibid., pp. 222-223.

Again.

> The trees were his conquerers; he knew them individually. It was his delight to lie at length under their aerial canopy and see the golden fleks of sunshine dance athwart their perfect grace and verdure . . .[37]

Inexplicably, Huckleberries has received most of the scant attention that has been paid to Mrs. Cooke's work. Somebody's Neighbors is a better collection, and it is so chiefly because of two stories, "Freedom Wheeler's Controversy with Providence" and "Mrs. Flint's Married Experience." Freedom Wheeler is, perhaps, the most impressive character she created. He and his wife are genuine rural New England Calvinists; "The Assembly's Catechism had been ground into them both . . . and they quoted its forms of speech by 'an automatic action of the unconscious nerve centers.'"[38] Freedom's defiance of the Lord and his final humility before the Lord's grace strike one as genuine. So does his reaction to the deaths of his children--deaths which are a judgment on and a cross for Freedom Wheeler--deaths which are "special providences" of a kind that Solomon Stoddard would have recognized one hundred and fifty years before.

"Mrs. Flint's Married Experience," marred as it is by a shift in emphasis from the daughter (Mindwell) to the mother (Mrs. Flint), is still the strongest piece she

37. Cooke, Huckleberries, p. 85.

38. Cooke, Somebody's Neighbors, p. 321.

wrote. The daughter, with all individuality drained out by her upbringing, the mother, willing to accept the consolations of this world, the monstrously hypocritical deacon she takes as a second husband--these are all ably drawn. The themes are hypocrisy and the defenseless position of women. But most important in addition to this success in handling character and theme is the mastery of tone--a mastery achieved but not maintained.

> Well, Mindwell [says Mrs. Flint], I have counselled a good deal about it. I was happy as the day is long with your father. I don't say but what I cleaved to this world consider'ble more than was good for my growth in grace. He was about the best. But it pleased the Lord to remove him, and it was quite a spell before I could really submit: the nateral man rebelled, now I tell you. You can't never tell what it is to lose a companion till you experience it.[39]

This is right. The hinted dialect, the word "companion," the suggestion of sexual pleasure and her ambivalent attitude toward it, the catechetical language and the consciousness of God's will all combine to form a rich, subtle portrait of the rural New England mind. But this was a tone and a quality she could not maintain. It is not until the later work of Sarah Orne Jewett that writing of this quality is maintained.

Huckleberries Gathered from New England Hills is inferior to Somebody's Neighbors. The humor and the stern realism are there but in smaller doses, and the

39. Ibid., p. 368.

sentimentality and gentility of the time are evident everywhere. Some of the stories in the collection--"Old Fashioned Thanksgiving" is an example--are holiday pieces. Like most holiday pieces, they are very bad. "How Celia Changed Her Mind" is possibly the best story in the collection. It is a good study of family relationships in rural, Puritanical New England. In Celia we have a sympathetic, rather than a comic, portrait of an old maid drawn with great feeling and restraint. She and her more comic companions in "Ammander" and "Odd Miss Todd" are certainly closely related to the women who inhabit the pages of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman. In fact, like them and unlike Mrs. Stowe, Mrs. Cooke writes best and most frequently of middle-aged and old women--the lonely widows and spinsters who, in this regional tradition, become symbols of the region decaying around them.

C. Sarah Orne Jewett

Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1909) was always a conscious and even self-conscious stylist and artist. One thing of which she was conscious was the tradition from which she drew her themes and materials; and she was as willing as anyone else to point out her debt to it--especially to Harriet Beecher Stowe, who first showed her the way.

> A strong motivating force in the career of Sarah Orne Jewett . . . was Mrs. Stowe's <u>The Pearl of Orr's Island</u> (1862), which

> showed her that the familiar Maine village and country folk were worthy of literary treatment.[40]

She came early to this book; Cary says she read it when she was thirteen.[41]

Her debt to Mrs. Stowe was extensive. Not only did she find in The Pearl of Orr's Island and other stories proof that literary material lay all around her as she accompanied her father on his medical rounds; she also found there the nostalgic tone and the aristocratic point of view.

> The other similarity in Mrs. Stowe's and Miss Jewett's delineations of New England has to do with class distinctions. Here the later writer is more emphatic, for in her tales the social levels of New England's democracy stand out with painful, occasionally almost ludicrous clarity.[42]

Which is to say that Mrs. Stowe and Miss Jewett were Brahmins while Mrs. Cooke and Mrs. Freeman were of the folk; and also that Mrs. Stowe and Miss Jewett were more sentimental, while Mrs. Cooke and Mrs. Freeman tended to look upon the New England scene with a colder, more critical eye.

It was, as we have seen, the fate of New England regionalists to wrestle with certain literary problems--of language and of form. Mrs. Cooke and Mrs. Stowe never

40. Simpson, The Local Colorists, p. 21.

41. Richard Cary, Sarah Orne Jewett (New York, 1962), p. 23.

42. Levy, New England Quarterly, p. 351.

discovered an idiom. Miss Jewett did. Horace Scudder once remarked, "Both Miss Wilkins and Miss Jewett recognize the very subordinate value of dialect. They give just enough to flavor the conversation."[43] But this flavor was genuine.

> She [Miss Jewett] had not only the eye, she had the ear. From childhood she must have treasured up those pithy bits of local speech, of native idiom, which enrich and enliven her pages. The language her people speak to each other is a native tongue.[44]

And what is equally important is that this native speech is integrated with the rest of the prose. She is free of those violent extremes of localism and gentility that mar the pages of Mrs. Stowe and Mrs. Cooke.

Although she was able, for the most part, to avoid the pitfalls of Dickensian imitation, Sarah Jewett was not so successful in solving the problem of structure as she was with developing a style blended of the native and the literary. She was capable of subtle character revelation. One aspect of this subtlety most attractive to modern readers is, as Cary points out, that "the ironies of self-revelation appeal strongly to Miss Jewett."[45] But he is forced to conclude, somewhat reluctantly, that

43. Horace Scudder, quoted in Helen McMahon, Criticism of Fiction: A Study of Trends in the Atlantic Monthly (New York, 1952), p. 22.

44. Willa Cather, in Sarah Orne Jewett, The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett, preface by Willa Cather (Boston, 1925), p. 10.

45. Cary, Sarah Orne Jewett, p. 53.

"her defect of narrative skill and vigor is the commonest critical complaint."[46] Her short stories, with exceptions like "The White Heron" and "Miss Tempy"s Watchers," tend to be diffuse and sketch-like. Her novels are charming, but very thin. Even her masterpiece, The Country of the Pointed Firs, with its series of sketches strung on the worn string of a woman's summer adventures, is, for all its merits, structurally insignificant.

Her strength lay, rather, in her ability to depict New England characters at a moment when they were "dwindling downward from competence to poverty."[47] She depicts more men than she has been given credit for, but many are not carefully drawn. Those which are like Dan'l Gunn and Almira Todd's brother William are old and emasculated. They are, however, not her main business.

> The primary subject of Miss Jewett's stories is women: young, middling, and old; dependent and self-sufficient; grim and commercial; impecunious and well-to-do. They usually face untenable situations and accept them meekly, fight them vehemently or simply laugh them off. The two most numerous groups are the self-reliant matrons and the impoverished or lonely spinsters or widows.[48]

If her strength lay in her characterization, her significance lay, partially at least, in her ability to make symbols of her characters. Van Wyck Brooks said, "Her vision was certainly limited . . . but her people

46. Ibid., p. 88.

47. Ibid., p. 38.

48. Ibid., p. 103.

were genuine Yankees and stood for the rest."[49] In the light of the final (or at least semi-final) statements on symbolism made by Tindall and Feidelson, this comment needs qualification. To accommodate realists like Miss Jewett and Mrs. Freeman, one must distinguish among the kinds of symbols. There are of course the kinds of symbols that Melville and Whitman used and Hawthorne almost used. These suggest meanings and relationships apprehended in non-rational ways. They might, for purposes of this discussion, be termed transcendental. They somehow involve the world of moral values and the spirit, and they bring one to the verge of truths beyond the realm of articulation.[50]

There are in more realistic work, on the other hand, what might be called naturalistic symbols. They deal with social values, and they function within social rather than metaphysical dimensions. They are capable of full or nearly full explication. Thus, Dreyfoos symbolizes the ignorantly destructive forces of capitalism in A Hazard of New Fortunes. It is with symbols of this second type that Miss Jewett--and Mrs. Freeman--succeed. The barren marriages of impotent old men and their aging sweethearts, the rotting boats on the Maine shore, and the grim old maids waiting with courage and resignation as their fruitless lives flicker slowly out are all part of a symbolic history

49. Brooks, New England: Indian Summer, p. 356.

50. This is descriptive and in no sense exhaustive or definitive.

of northern New England--a history told, fugue-like, in a series of counterpointed symbols.

But there are limits to Miss Jewett's picture, inherent in the very real talent of a woman who always worked within narrow limits.[51] These limits are, paradoxically, her greatest strength and her greatest weakness. For while they are the source of her wonderfully smooth style and her sweetness of tone, they keep her from the tragic heights and depths that her younger colleague, for all her faults, occasionally achieved. Cary says,

> Voluntarily addicted to graciousness, affability, and resignation, Miss Jewett never develops a competence to deal with the tragedies of compulsion and repression which mark the blockaded lives of women.[52]

Cary claims however that Miss Jewett deals with the wretched and the wicked, and he cites such stories as "The Courting of Sister Wisby" and "The Town Poor." The limitation is not in the subject matter; it is in the tone, which is also "the bedrock of Miss Jewett's continuing appeal."[53]

Scudder saw the problem eighty years ago. "Sarah Orne Jewett has difficulty making her characters 'act for themselves.' At present . . . they cling to her skirts

51. Francis Otto Matthiessen, Sarah Orne Jewett (Boston, 1929), pp. 89-90.

52. Cary, Sarah Orne Jewett, p. 49

53. Ibid., p. 48.

and she leads them about with her."[54] What he means is that everything she treats becomes part of the pattern imposed by her unifying tone and style, which are themselves the product of a single emotional response. Compared to this, Mrs. Freeman's inquiring mind puts her on the side of--if not the angels--at least George Eliot. The emotional response of Miss Jewett's is nostalgic, and the effect is romantic and genteel.

> A faint odor of rose leaves emerges. You are reminded of her inability to portray passion in her books. She always paints the gentler emotions: blinding hates and jealousies, the fever of lust and the thirst of avarice never throb there.[55]

Throughout a productive career that stretched almost thirty years from the 1870's into the first decade of the twentieth century, Miss Jewett tried her hand at a wide variety of literary forms--sketches, short stories, framework stories and novels. Old Friends and New (1877), her first collection of short stories (she produced nine) was not very good. Though it contained many of the elements of her later, better work, most of the sketches are unsatisfying for two reasons. They are too diffuse; there is simply not enough structure on which to hang her reflections. More important, however, there is a failure in tone--a failure to escape the danger against which she fought all through her career, that is, the patronizing

54. McMahon, Criticism of Fiction, p. 49.

55. Matthiessen, Sarah Orne Jewett, pp. 144-145.

tone of the aristocrat. There are, however, redemptive qualities such as the Hawthorne-like Gothicism of "Lady Ferry" and the fine genre painting of "A Bit of Shore Life."

At the beginning of "A Late Supper" she states what is to be a lifetime awareness, revealing that she had indeed learned well the lesson of The Pearl of Orr's Island:

> One never hears much about Brookton when one is away from it, but for all that, life is as important and exciting there as it is anywhere; and it is like every other town, a miniature world, with its great people and small people, bad people and good people, its jealousy and rivalry, kindness and patient heroism.[56]

Notice that the story is not only interesting (an important justification of local cclor), it is representative--"like every other town." This is the naturalistic symbol of the realist.

Among the best of her later collections are The King of Folly Island, and Other People (1888) and A Native of Winby, and Other Tales (1893). In the former the stories range from very loose sketches like "Low Lane" to very tightly structured stories like "Miss Tempy's Watchers." These short stories reveal Miss Jewett's lifelong preoccupation with the technical problems of point of view and with the relation of point of view to tone. "The Courting of Sister Wisby" is a frame story; "The Landscape Chamber,"

56. Sarah Orne Jewett, Old Friends and New (Boston, 1879), p. 81.

among others, uses the first person narrator, a device she used frequently to capture subtle contrasts among characters, classes, and cultures.

Two of the best stories in the collection are "The Landscape Chamber" and "Miss Tempy's Watchers." The first is what Miss Jewett calls a "glimpse of a defeated life."[57] It is the story of a well-bred girl and her father, who "fears want, yet seems to have no power to provide against it."[58] They live in--in fact, are almost imprisoned by--a shabby, once magnificent, old house. This is an obviously Hawthorne-like story of people imprisoned by the past and defenseless against the future. And because the Flowering is past, there is no Holgrave--there is no solution. The vision here is unusually bleak for Miss Jewett, who is usually more wistful and nostalgic.

In "Miss Tempy's Watchers" several old ladies sit up through the night with the body of their late friend, Miss Tempy. In excellent dialog they reveal Tempy's character and their own. The story reveals Miss Jewett's ability to depict the subtle relationships between characters and her fine artistic restraint in dealing with the elemental. One of the watchers says of death, "'Tis a great thing for anybody to have got through, ain't it?"[59]

57. Sarah Orne Jewett, The King of Folly Island, and Other People (Boston, 1888), p. 95.

58. Ibid., p. 100.

59. Jewett, The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories (Garden City, N. Y., 1947), p. 239.

A Native of Winby contains, along with rambling and sentimental stories like "Decoration Day" and several bad stories about the incoming Irish (she never wrote well about new and foreign groups), three stories that display the durable elements and themes of New England regionalism. They are "A Native of Winby," "The Failure of David Berry," and "The Flight of Betsey Lane." The first, which is one of her best, deals most explicitly with emigration as a central fact of New England's decay and contains Sarah's best insight into the relationship of decaying New England to the brash, successful West it had spawned. The whole village, but especially Abby Hender, a typically heroic, middle-aged Jewett heroine, await the return of a native who had gone west and found fortune. They await him with ambivalent feelings--with both pride and resentment. And then the native, Laneway (note the significant name), arrives and reacts first with disappointment but then with joy as he finds the old values submerged, perhaps, but still intact. An example of significant detail at work in a realistic study occurs when he says to Abby of his boyhood home, "It was difficult at first to find exactly where the house was; even the foundation had disappeared."[60]

"The Failure of David Berry" is not a typical Jewett story; it is more like a Freeman story or one by Rebecca Harding Davis. It deals with the gradual destruction by

60. Jewett, A Native of Winby and Other Tales (Boston, 1893), p. 9.

the impersonal forces of industrialization of an individual, a shoemaker, who represents the old, self-reliant order. In Sam Wescott, Miss Jewett depicts, as she seldom does, the new breed of man--the corporate man--who is capable of destroying an individual with no remorse at all. The confrontation of values is well conceived and points the way that realism is to go. However, the story is marred, almost ruined, by the sentimental ending. It is almost as though Miss Jewett and the other ladies of the New England regional tradition suffer a failure of nerve when they finally confront the conflict at the center of the cultural decline. They fall back on sentimental cliches. They leave the center hollow, and the failure of nerve becomes a failure of form.

"The Flight of Betsey Lane" has always been one of Miss Jewett's most popular stories. It is rich in humor and folk speech. There is no condescension here. The tone is affectionate, and the reader sees in Betsey that success in failure and dignity in poverty that mark so many of the best New England heroines. Betsey becomes an egalitarian symbol in the way that Huck and Jim are egalitarian symbols. Aunt Lavinia can say of her, "She'd been a very understandin' person, if she had the advantages some does."[61]

One story of Miss Jewett's which has always been

61. Jewett, The Country of the Pointed Firs, p. 197.

admired is "The White Heron," which presents representations or symbols that do not fit into the historical and social limits of the other stories. Here she is most like Hawthorne, as she tells of a young girl who must choose between a heron and a young man who is hunting the bird. The young girl keeps the birds secret; "she is truer to nature than to the potential lover she is dimly conscious of in the young hunter."[62] Whether one agrees with Matthiessen's choice or not (and one is tempted to see negative patterns in so sterile a choice), one can see the complexity and psychological involvement of the symbol. Matthiessen points out that Mrs. Freeman especially liked this story.

> Mary E. Wilkins, who had just printed her first book of New England stories, "A Humble Romance," and had received from Miss Jewett an enthusiastic letter of appreciation, now answered: You are lovely to write me so about my stories, but I never wrote any story equal to your "White Heron." I don't think I ever read a short story, unless I except Tolstoy's "Two Deaths," that so appealed to me. I would not have given up that bird any more than you would if he came back.[63]

However, Miss Jewett did not often write this way, and when Mrs. Freeman tried, she did it rather badly.

Like the other New England regionalists who searched for a viable mode for their matter, Miss Jewett tried her hand at novels. She wrote three: A Country Doctor (1884),

62. Matthiessen, Sarah Orne Jewett, p. 83.

63. Ibid., pp. 83-84.

A Marsh Island (1885), and The Tory Lover (1901); the last one a historical novel of no consequence.

In A Country Doctor Miss Jewett recalls with nostalgia and precision an older day when men were closer to each other and to nature. In contrast to the new jerry-built New England in which she lived, she points to the old, honest days when everyone knew "the workman and the work." And these were the days and this was the place where life was more rhythmic and elemental:

> While death seems far more astonishing and unnatural in a city, where the great tide of life rises and falls with little apparent regard to the sinking wrecks, in the country it is not so. The neighbors themselves are the ones who dig the grave and carry the dead, whom they or their friends have made ready, to the last resting place. With all nature looking on,--the leaves that must fall, and the grass of the field that must wither and be gone when the wind passes over,--living closer to life and in plainer sight of death, they have a different sense of the mysteries of existence. They pay homage to death rather than to the dead.[64]

It is in such tones and moods that she is at her best.

The central theme of A Country Doctor is a girl's decision to become a doctor. It is, as Cary points out, "as close to a problem novel as Miss Jewett ever comes."[65] The alternative to a medical career is, of course, marriage. Miss Jewett makes an attempt to deal with the conflict as a social question, but she doesn't really succeed.

64. Sarah Orne Jewett, A Country Doctor (Boston, 1884), pp. 38-39.

65. Cary, Sarah Orne Jewett, p. 141.

Of marriage her heroine is able to say with ease (perhaps speaking, more than was intended, for the author), "It does not belong to me."[66] And in the end Miss Jewett is guilty of evading the problem after she has brought it up. The girl treats her own choice as socially irrelevant. "I know better and better that most women are made for another sort of existence."[67]

Here on the verge of finding a valid longer form--one step away from the realistic novel--Miss Jewett draws back and says she doesn't mean it. The novel has other faults as well. The plot is thin and occasionally suspended for genre painting; parts of it are melodramatic, and the love story anemic. While the lower class characters are uniformly strong, the aristocratic characters are poor. George Gerry, the lover, is so colorless that the heroine is not be to blamed for her choice. The doctor, an idealization of Miss Jewett's father, is impossible and is the source of lapses into fine writing--lapses that Miss Jewett seldom makes. "The benefaction of his presence was felt by every one," she says. The heroine, like Mrs. Stowe's Dolly, is a sublimation of the author, and not very successful.

A Marsh Island is much thinner than A Country Doctor. Its central situation is one with which Miss Jewett liked to deal, the contact of the rural citizen and the sophisti-

66. Jewett, A Country Doctor, p. 325.

67. Ibid., p. 327.

cated summer boarder. The main story is a love story, and Miss Jewett didn't write them very well. Her heroine, like Mrs. Stowe's, is antiseptic and terribly deficient in sexuality. The hero, Dick Dale, is an urban painter "familiar with the rural interiors in England and France." Here as always she is at her best with characters who are eccentric or who can be caricatured or who can be identified with regional characteristics, such as Farmer Owen and Jim Fales, who are salty enough down-easters. In such characters, in their dialog, in folk humor, and in certain passages of genre painting her sure hand is at work. But these are parts--fragments. There is no whole; only the vacuum at the center.

Form and tone combine most successfully for Miss Jewett in Deephaven (1877) and The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896). They are both episodic stories in which summer visitors visit the rural Maine coast and record the highly impressionistic patterns of their experiences. The region is revealed to and through the eyes of the visitors, and the interplay of urban and rural values is subtle and fine. Cary points out of the young visitors of Deephaven:

> They have the advantage of coming freshly and reacting originally to an unfamiliar community. The local plight is more apparent to them, for it contrasts sharply with the urban, Brahmin surroundings to which they are accustomed.[68]

68. Cary, Sarah Orne Jewett, p. 134.

In Deephaven she is especially conscious of wanting to get the picture straight. She refers to her "unconscious desire to make some sort of explanation to those who still expected to find the caricatured Yankee."[69] To get the accuracy she wants, she includes carefully detailed descriptions of old Maine houses and extended discussions of local occupations and customs. And of course she uses skillfully her fine ear for native idiom and metaphor. She has Mrs. Bonny, a superb comic character, say:

> That's my oldest brother's wife, Clorinthy Adams that was. She's well featured, if it were not for her nose, and that looks as if it had been thrown at her, and she wasn't particular about having it on firm, in hopes of getting a better one. She sets by her looks though.[70]

Earlier Miss Jewett had said, "It was curious to notice in this quaint little fishing village by the sea, how clearly the gradations of society were defined."[71] And she observes them, getting fine comedy-of-manners effects depicting the contrasts between the older generation and the new, the high-born and the poor, the rural and the urban. The structure made the contrasts especially available.

But Deephaven is more than a picture of social contrasts; it is the picture of a people and of a place and of the movement of a society. The people and the place

69. Sarah Orne Jewett, Deephaven (Boston, 1893), p. 3.

70. Ibid., p. 40.

71. Ibid., p. 81.

stand as symbols that depict the social movement. Matthiessen says, "She was aware now, as she commenced to fill in the outlines of Deephaven, of how many things in nature stood as symbols to her mind."[72] But it was not only nature but people and places that stood "as symbols to her mind." One of the finest passages in the book deals with the discovery of Brandon House and the story of Miss Katherine Brandon. The spinster was beautiful, correct, kind, useful, and sterile--a nobility with nothing following after. And the house--, "It was impossible to imagine any children in the old place; everything was for grown people; even the stair-railing was too high to slide down."[73] But for all its virtues Deephaven is a thin book, as Miss Jewett, in after years, admitted. It shies away from deep emotion and is content with sentiment and gentility.

The Country of the Pointed Firs is Miss Jewett's masterpiece. It was written twenty years after Deephaven, and its superiority to that earlier work lay in its maturity of tone. Matthiessen points out:

> The key to the difference between her early and her late work lies rather in a remark she made afterwards to Willa Cather: The thing that teases the mind over and over for years and at last gets itself put down rightly on paper--whether little or great, it belongs to literature.[74]

72. Matthiessen, Sarah Orne Jewett, p. 49

73. Jewett, Deephaven, p. 25.

74. Matthiessen, Sarah Orne Jewett, p. 103.

And when she got it down, it was free of the gentility of the earlier work; and the sentiment had been refined to a kind of nostalgic but courageous lament for the old days and the old values--a lament that was also an indictment of the new, industrial age. Mrs. Fosdick (speaking for Miss Jewett) says:

> There, it does seem so pleasant to talk with an old acquaintance that knows what you know. I see so many of these new folks nowadays, that seem to have neither past nor future. Conversation's got to have some root in the past, or else you've got to explain every remark you make, and it wears a person out.[75]

And again:

> What a lot o' queer folks there used to be about here, anyway, when we was young, Almiry. Everybody's just like everybody else now; nobody to laugh about and nobody to cry about.[76]

The characterization is superb. One after another the characters are brought forth until they become a medley of counterpointed symbols telling the story of a region and of the durable human qualities that shine through any conditioning of time and place. One such character is Captain Littlepage, who, like the ancient mariner, is a compulsive talker; and he talks of the decline of New England which he himself represents. There is Joanna, who lives alone on Shell Heap Island, "a dreadful small place to make a world of." Mrs. Todd's brother William lives a life significant both in its dignity and its

75. Jewett, The Country of the Pointed Firs, p. 58.

76. Ibid., p. 60.

futility. Mrs. Todd says of him:

> He ought to have made something o' himself bein' a man an' so like mother; but though he's been very steady to work, an' kept up the farm, an' done his fishin' too right along, he never had mother's snap an' power o' seein' things just as they be.[77]

Most important there is Almira Todd--strong, proud, dignified, noble; but forsaken, lonely, and childless. In her dignity and Emersonian self-reliance she stands for New England's past; in her isolation and childlessness she predicts its future.

Willa Cather was an enthusiastic admirer of The Country of the Pointed Firs. She said it is "so tightly built and significant in every design. The design is, indeed, so happy, so right, that it seems inevitable; the design is the story and the story is the design."[78] One is tempted to agree, but then much depends on the meaning of the word design. Certainly the design--"scaffolding," Matthiessen called it--is not a plot. Miss Jewett's recurring themes of man and nature, the present and the past, and the rural and the urban are there, but they are not in the plot. Cary's analysis is excellent:

> Several unifying factors are continuously at work in this para-novel and an over-all pattern, though imprecise, is discernible. A speculative kind of unity is furnished by the peripatetic presence of the narrator. . . . A firmer integration emerges from the establishment of two symbolic

77. Ibid., p. 6.

78. Cary, Sarah Orne Jewett, p. 147.

> focal points, the school house and the Bowden Place. . . . A third tissue of unity grows out of the spaced ceremonials of funeral, visits, tribal reunion, and wedding.[79]

So in the last analysis this masterpiece achieves unity externally--through tone and symbol--but not organically. The unity is in the artist not the art; it is empathic not sympathetic. Thus, Miss Jewett did not solve the problem of form; she simply avoided it.

The New England regional tradition was a limited tradition. Perhaps its chief limitations were intellectual. In place of a coherent political and social philosophy and in place of a comprehensive world view, it came equipped only with nostalgia and, in Mrs. Cooke's best stories, an honest but uncritical talent for realistic observation. Even these observations were limited by the genteel values of society in general and the magazine publishing world in particular. These intellectual limitations became structural flaws. The tradition produced short story masterpieces ("Freedom Wheeler's Controversy with Providence," "Miss Tempy's Watchers"); but in the longer form, to which all the writers aspired, this failure of intellect became a vacuum at the center of the story. Because these women responded to the declining world around them, in a sense, without thinking, they never wrote a really vital regional novel. They never discovered what story it was that they had to tell.

79. Ibid., pp. 149-150.

CHAPTER III

THE GREAT COLLECTIONS

Speaking of the literature of the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, Rudolf and Clara Kirk say, "By operation of the law of supply and demand, the short stories, abundant in quantity and excellent in quality, are forthcoming because they are wanted [by the magazines]."[1] Another way to put it is to say that the magazines, in setting up criteria for publishable material, created a working aesthetic. The New England regionalists, by conforming to these criteria and by sharing with one another both problems and themes, created a tradition. Mary Wilkins Freeman belonged to this tradition because she conformed, encountered technical problems, and developed regional themes.

She began writing seriously around 1880; and, at the beginning of her career, had some success writing children's literature for magazines like Wide Awake. In 1881 she wrote and sold her first story for adults--a poor, atypical piece she later tried to forget. Henry Lanier quotes her as saying:

> I wrote my first adult story, a fifty dollar-prize tale, for a Boston paper. It was called "A Shadow Family," and was a poor imitation of Dickens. I loaned it and it was never returned,

1. Clara and Rudolf Kirk, William Dean Howells (New York, 1962), p. 63.

and no copy exists.[2]

It was printed in January, 1882. After this false start, she found her way fairly quickly. In 1883 Harper's Bazaar published two of her better stories, "Two Old Lovers" and "A Tardy Thanksgiving." Finally in June, 1884, she reached the "big time." H. M. Alden, who was to be her literary adviser for many years, accepted "A Humble Romance" for Harper's.[3] The long partnership between author and journal had begun. Occasionally she demanded more money; once or twice she engaged in minor defections; frequently she published elsewhere what Harper's didn't want. But for forty-five years she was basically a Harper's writer. In 1887 almost all of the short stories of the period 1881-86 were gathered into a collection called A Humble Romance and Other Stories. In 1891 Harper and Brothers brought out a second collection, A New England Nun and Other Stories. These two collections contain almost all her first-rate short stories.

The ladies of the New England regional tradition had produced many fine short stories before twenty-seven of Mrs. Freeman's were gathered into A Humble Romance. Mrs. Cooke's "Freedom Wheeler" and Miss Jewett's "Lady Ferry" and "A White Heron" had been printed. Diffusion,

2. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, The Best Short Stories of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, ed. Henry W. Lanier (New York, 1927), p. ix.

3. Edward Foster, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (New York, 1956), pp. 55-59.

description, and summary narration--the faults of the sketches and tales of an earlier period--had been overcome. For the most part, the technical difficulties had been solved. The form, as she read it in The Atlantic and elsewhere, lay ready at hand; and she used it well from the beginning.

Babette Levy claims that Mrs. Freeman lacks restraint.[4] On the other hand, Claude Simpson says, "With Mary E. Wilkins Freeman . . . the short story achieved a degree of artistry and controlled form seldom found in her nineteenth century contemporaries."[5] They are, of course, both right in different times and different places. There is naturally a wide range of quality and technique in a collection of twenty-seven stories which, in the first edition, ran to more than four hundred pages. Some stories, like "Two Old Lovers," are temporally loose and tend to wander through the years; others, like "A Tardy Thanksgiving," have tremendous concentration. In many, like "A Taste of Honey," there are unflinching glances at what Canby calls "the influence of a hard unlovely life upon temperament,"[6] while others, like "An Honest Soul" and "A Moral Exigency," are thin, slight, and sentimental.

4. Babette Levy, "Mutations in New England Local Color," New England Quarterly, XIX (September, 1946), 354.

5. Claude M. Simpson, The Local Colorists: American Short Stories, 1857-1900 (New York, 1960), p. 64.

6. Henry Seidel Canby, A Study of the Short Story (New York, 1943), p. 58.

In some cases it isn't so much that she loses artistic control of her material as that she loses emotional control of herself. She averts her eyes from the forbidding scene, and the result is a loss of tone which is almost always serious because she had no intellectual foundation to rely on.

Part of the control that Simpson speaks of can be seen in her occasional mastery of point-of-view. Although many stories--including some good ones--are told from the traditional omniscient point of view, others, like "A Tardy Thanksgiving" and "A Mistaken Charity," achieve an objectivity and impersonality that point in the direction of Hemingway and other twentieth century writers. In "A Symphony in Lavender" and other stories she uses first person narrators. Edward Foster singles out "Gentian" as an example of another important modern technique:

> In "Gentian" Miss Wilkins moves far toward one of the shrewdest devices of the modern writer--restriction of subjectivity to the chief actor. "Gentian" is the story of one woman; it is finely concentrated.[7]

Many of her techniques are of the kind Howells praised. Her stories are character studies; the emphasis is on character not plot. And the characters are revealed dramatically not analytically or descriptively. Many of the stories, like "A Tardy Thanksgiving," begin with dialog; others with the characters caught in revealing action or

7. Foster, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, p. 72.

attitude. The first story, "A Humble Romance," begins with the following dramatic picture:

> She was stooping over the great kitchen sink, washing the breakfast dishes. Under fostering circumstances, her slenderness of build might have resulted in delicacy or daintiness; now the harmony between strength and task had been repeatedly broken, and the result was ugliness. Her finger joints and wrist bones were knotty and out of proportion, her elbows, which her rolled up sleeves displayed, were pointed and knobby, her shoulders bent, her feet spread beyond their natural bounds . . .[8]

The sentences are direct and tend to be short. Everywhere the language is idiomatic, pointed, and controlled. Dialect is controlled and significant.

> "You have always been very fond of mathematics, haven't you, Mrs. Troy," said the minister in his slow retreat.
>
> "Lor, yes. I can't remember the time when I wa'n't crazy to cipher."[9]

Here is speech used to distinguish both character and class.

These last two points about description and speech reveal the source of Mrs. Freeman's great strength--her powers of observation. Her art was the art of seeing all the little details and selecting from them those which would carry her insights and themes. Scudder saw this in his review of A New England Nun. "Her art lies in her selection," he said. She achieves her effects by "holding steadily before the mind the central, vital idea to the

8. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, A Humble Romance and Other Stories (Boston, 1887), p. 1.

9. Ibid., p. 369.

exclusion of all by-thoughts."[10] Henry Lanier was depressingly genteel and excessively lauditory, but he did respond to what was fundamental in her art.

> Comprehendingly viewed, there's no such thing as an insignificant detail, whether of a butterfly's wings or a human being--as the Chinese painter has known for thousands of years, and Count Keyserling has recently discovered. These individual minutiae grow from something inside. They flare with beauty and significance when they take their place in the pattern.[11]

That this was the source of Mrs. Freeman's strength has always been recognized. After the publication of A New England Nun, the Bookman reviewer said, "Her gift is that of Jean François Millet, to see the symbolism of homeliness, the sacred pathos of the daily toil of dutiful lives."[12] Forty years later Arthur Hobson Quinn said, "What attracted attention was the art with which she proceeded to take the very humblest forms of life and interest her readers by embuing these characters with some quality that made them memorable."[13]

Lanier provides the label for Mrs. Freeman's art--and for that of the other regional realists as well. It is "realism of the significant detail." The details, which are at the basis of this art, are, of course, care-

10. Horace Scudder quoted in Helen McMahon, Criticism of Fiction: A Study of Trends in the Atlantic Monthly (New York, 1952), pp. 33-34.

11. Freeman, The Best Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman, p. viii.

12. "Mary E. Wilkins," Bookman England , I (December, 1891), 103.

13. A. H. Quinn, American Fiction, an Historical and Critical Survey (New York, 1936), p. 433.

fully observed and faithfully rendered. They are significant for two reasons: they are indigenous and they are representative. They are particular to the region and to conditions in the region, and they reveal the effect of the region on character. By revealing the interplay between region and person and among regionally-conditioned persons, the details become a symbolic statement of and judgment on the indigenous culture. Finally by displaying fundamental emotions and virtues and vices within a regional context, this art achieves universal statements or insights <u>through</u> and <u>within</u> the regional. Foster put it this way:

> One of the quiet sources of richness in the earlier stories and novels was the restrained employment of symbolism. . . . it is felt lightly in virtually all of Miss Wilkins' writing. The symbols work their way precisely because they seem to emerge from ordinary observation and casual reflection; they blend easily with surface realism because, for the most part, they do not suggest a conscious striving for symbolic effect.[14]

Among those few who have concerned themselves with the question, there is some agreement on the nature of Mrs. Freeman's major themes. Charles M. Thompson pointed out, "At least seventeen of the stories are tales of happiness postponed, or misery caused by an unbending will."[15] Years later Babette Levy saw in Mrs. Freeman's short

14. Foster, <u>Mary E. Wilkins Freeman</u>, p. 147.

15. Charles Miner Thompson, "Miss Wilkins--An Idealist in Masquerade," <u>Atlantic Monthly</u>, LXXXIII (May, 1899), 671.

stories a great interest in the "rebellion of the weak."[16] Foster interprets many stories as conflicts resulting from the character's need for personal fulfillment on the one hand and the pressure to conform to the "village code" on the other. I. H. Herron considers the mind's fight against the forces of evil as a major theme. To these she adds the themes of decay, environmentally retarded growth, revolt from convention.[17] Perhaps to get a clear picture of Mrs. Freeman's thematic range and to see the areas of common response it elicited from critics it is necessary to distinguish in kind among her themes. The distinction can be made between historical (or cultural) themes and psychological themes. Of course it must be recognized that the distinction is a critical convenience and does not reflect any dichotomy in her work.

One of Mrs. Freeman's chief psychological concerns is with the problem of personal fulfillment within the limits of the regional environment. This personal fulfillment is sought in terms of others--in terms of the seeker's place in the community. Her heroines need to love someone or something, and they need to be loved. They also need to function in the community; they need to serve and be served. And finally they need respect or recognition--recognition of their talent or their dignity or their

16. Levy, New England Quarterly, p. 355.

17. Ina M. Herron, The Small Town in American Literature (Durham, North Carolina, 1939), pp. 91-95.

place. When these necessities of self are threatened by the code by which the community lives, the characters revolt. But it should be noted that they revolt--as they lie and connive--for personal not ideological reasons.

In Mrs. Freeman's moral perspective the greatest psychological barrier to love, service, and respect is pride, envisioned as a compulsive convolution of the will. This pride is her second major theme. Another barrier, closely related to pride, is duty. Many of her heroines, like the central character of "A Taste of Honey," are so encircled by their own compulsion to duty that they are cut off from those who offer love and fulfillment. Thus, the tragic consequence of both pride and duty is isolation. And the isolated life is a blasted, wasted one. Foster's comment is illuminating.

> We now speak of the alienation of man from the universe, from other men and from himself, and usually in existential terms. But this sense of the human predicament is not a new thing. Mary Wilkins knew it but not as deeply as Kafka.[18]

Some of her strongest stories are of people who, in their isolation, must resort to subterfuge and deception--of self or another--to escape, into insanity if necessary, from the unbearable consequences of isolation. In her concept of isolation as the product of internal rather than external forces she comes closer to the tragic vision of Hawthorne and Melville than do any of the other

18. Foster, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, p. 160.

New England ladies.

Mrs. Freeman's historical or social themes grow out of her psychological ones or, at least, are represented by the characters depicted in all their psychological twists and deceptions. Her characters are prisoners of place and time. Simpson describes it this way: "Her distinctive tone derives from the sense of decline and narrowed opportunity in small New England towns now past their peak of importance and vigor."[19] The place was small and the means were meager. Over and over she was to note in a character the need to perform on a bigger stage. She saw clearly and she recognized what she saw. The tenets of environmental determinism, had she known them, would have been most congenial.

And she was aware of time. Both Mrs. Stowe and Miss Jewett were nostalgic. They looked back with affection to what Mrs. Stowe called "good old catechising, church-going, school-going, orderly times."[20] Mary Wilkins Freeman, however, is like Mrs. Cooke. She observes the present. But no New Englander is devoid of a sense of the past and she sees the present as a consequence of the past. Foster argues that she was aware of the interplay of past and present because she lived in both.

> Spiritually she was obliged to live in at least three ages--the Puritan village of the late eighteenth century which still

19. Simpson, The Local Colorists, p. 64.

20. Levy, New England Quarterly, p. 344.

> survived to a degree in Randolph; the vigorous idealism of Concord in the 1840's in books and faintly in the spirit of Brattleboro and in the minds of her editors; and the relative rigidity and decadence of her immediate environment in Randolph.[21]

She sees the present as a consequence of the past chiefly in two ways. First, the past had set up the moral limits within which the present operated. Her people are Puritans. Their faith may be weaker; their fervor may have subsided, but the moral habits of Puritanism--the pride, the wilfulness, the sense of sin, the compulsion to truth in the face of mercy and the compulsion to duty in the face of love--these all remain. Secondly, her characters are encircled by the past because the present was a constriction of the past. Her people are the thin, poor bearers of noble names, the ends of noble lines, and the hoarders of what was left of fortunes and honors. Many of her eccentrics are driven to their strange ways by the demands made of them by their own sense of the past.

These themes are communicated through the characters and the situations in which they find themselves. And the characters were based frequently on people she knew. She denied this of course; J. E. Chamberlin reported the following after an interview with Mrs. Freeman:

> She does not go about at all looking for "material" for her stories. She never puts Randolph people into them; though she has,

21. Foster, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, p. 80.

> indeed, put into them dead and gone people. Barnabas, in "Pembroke" with the awful will, was a man who had lived.[22]

But this was piety and not true at all. Her neighbors later in Metuchen, New Jersey, knew what she was doing and got mad about it. And Foster says of her earlier work:

> For characters and situations, Miss Wilkins went directly to her own experience and that of her family and friends. She and her own people were at the center: her own experience of life and death, her disappointment, her phantasies often projected into middle-aged and elderly women, her mother and father, Grandfather Lothrop and his wife, and the aunts and uncles of Randolph--especially the pattern of weak husband and strong wife. In herself and in her immediate family, she knew the life, the cultural ideal, the character traits of the middle-class New England villager. She wrote of what she knew best.[23]

Elsewhere Foster says of these relatives of Mrs. Freeman, "Work, Thrift, Family, Gentility, the righteousness of the Ten Commandments--her men and women folks agreed in worshipping at these altars."[24] Which is to say of both her point of view and her material, as Pattee said, "When she approached literature, therefore, it was as a daughter of the Puritans, as one who had been nurtured in repression."[25]

22. J. Edgar Chamberlin, "Miss Mary E. Wilkins at Randolph, Massachusetts," Critic (March 5, 1898), p. 156.

23. Foster, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, pp. 64-65.

24. Ibid., p. 20.

25. F. L. Pattee, A History of American Literature Since 1870 (New York, 1935), p. 236.

As one would expect in a volume of twenty-eight short stories, there is great variety--not only in theme but also in quality. The stories range from masterpieces to very bad popular fiction. Most of the inferior stories are so not because of any failure in Mrs. Freeman's acute powers of observation but because, usually through contrived endings, she slides over into sentimentality. A few of these minor stories deal with courtship. They include "A Symphony in Lavender," "Robins and Hammers," "Cinnamon Roses," "A Lover of Flowers," "A Moral Exigency," "In Butterfly Time," and "A Conquest of Humility." Some deal with young lovers, some with old; some with requited love and some with unrequited. Most of them have some good things in them, but they are not major and deserve little comment. The ending of one, "A Moral Exigency," underscores a vital theme. The heroine Eunice renounces a man in favor of her dear friend Ada, but she knows the price she will have to pay. The story ends with the line, "'Love me all you can, Ada,' she said. 'I want--something.'"[26] "Robins and Hammers" is interesting because it gives a picture of the subsistence-level economy at work even among the professional classes. And it is especially interesting because, as a story of love delayed by a vow made in anger, it is a prelude to Pembroke.

26. Freeman, A Humble Romance, p. 233.

Other stories deal in other ways with the need for love. The heroine of "A Gatherer of Simples" fights to keep a child to whom she has no legal right. In "An Unwilling Guest" a crippled woman resorts to strategem to get back to her "place" and her "things." "An Object of Love" tells of an old woman who loses her cat. In her desolation she defies God. The cat's return humbles her. "The Bar Light-House" is another story of thwarted people who defy the Lord in their pride and anger and need. So is "An Old Arithmetician."

Even the least consequential of the early stories have delightful touches made possible by the author's sensitive powers of observation within her milieu. In the Gothic "A Far-Away Melody" Mrs. Freeman presents two old sisters who, on wash day, hang the best things on the line nearest the street. "On Walpole Road" is full of fine dialect and of folk-knowledge such as the fact that "barns full of fresh hay are likeliest to burn." But in the early pieces there is no need to search through sentiment and formal failure for good patches. There are stories that are uncompromising in theme and statement.

The first two stories in the book, "A Humble Romance" and "Two Old Lovers," have certain features in common. They are both sentimental tales of lovers past their prime. The first is a story of the love of a hired girl and a peddler. The story opens with a vivid description of the girl; it deteriorates quickly, however, into a

sketch with great chunks of melodramatic action. After a short period of happy married bliss ("I wouldn't go with the king, if--it wasn't to--go honest--"),[27] the peddler is forced to leave by the reappearance of his supposedly dead first wife. During his absence love enables Sally, the wretched little hired-girl wife, to "bear up." After a suitably prolonged separation the evil first wife dies, and the couple are reunited. Although it is obviously a sentimental cliché, the story is satisfying--in a curious way. Mary succeeds here--and in only a few other places--in setting a conventional plot in realistic circumstances. Perhaps its the shock attendant upon this juxtaposition, the shock of confronting a romantic heroine with splayed feet and rough, red elbows; but there is a melding here rather than just a vacuum at the center.

"Two Old Lovers" is a better story, and one with richer overtones. Maria, a spinster of sixty, is called to the deathbed of David Emmons, who had courted her for forty years. Holding out his hand to her, David says, "Maria, I'm dyin', an'--I allers meant to--have asked you--to--marry me."[28] The kindly, ineffectual man, the patient deserving woman ("She, although the woman, had the stronger character of the two."[29]), the unconsummated love, the

27. Ibid., p. 6.

28. Ibid., p. 36.

29. Ibid., p. 32.

sleepy shoe-town in which the story takes place,--all these combine to provide a moving statement on the decay which surrounded the author.

But David and Maria are gentle, and for all its futility they had had love. Mrs. Freeman is capable of selecting more significant details to tell more harshly stories of the present's painful obligation to the past. "An Honest Soul," which Mrs. Stowe liked so much when the great Henry Ward Beecher read it aloud to her,[30] opens with the description of a small house set way back on a very large lot. The house has no windows facing the road.

> Not much remained to spend on the house after the spacious lot was paid for, so he [Simeon Patch, the builder] resolved to build as much house as he could with his money, and complete it when better days should come. . . . That time never came. He died in the course of a few years, after a lingering illness.[31]

After his wife's death, his daughter is left with pride, independence, no skills, no money--and with a house that has no windows facing the road.

Martha Patch, the daughter, supports herself by sewing. The crisis of the story occurs during a slack time when Martha, too proud to beg, collapses from starvation.

30. Harriet Beecher Stowe, Letter to Mary E. Wilkins, written for her by her daughter (American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York).

31. Freeman, A Humble Romance, pp. 78-79.

> She kept making efforts to rise, but she could not stir. . . .
>
> She saw some dust on the black paint of a chair which stood in the sun, and she eyed that distressfully.
>
> "Just look at that dust on the runs of that cheer!" she muttered. "What if anybody came in! I wonder if I can't reach it!"
>
> The chair was near her, and she managed to stretch out her limp old hand and rub the dust off the rounds. Then she let it sink down.[32]

Although the story slides off into sentimentality, this picture remains--an old lady in a blind, little house on a big lot warding off the motes in the sunbeams. The scene functions symbolically, set as it is in the house which is all that she has left of the grandiose dream of her father's--a dream represented by the large lot in which her meagerness and that of the house are accentuated.

The two stories which best reflect New England's twin heritage of pride and poverty are "Old Lady Pingree" and "A Taste of Honey." Old Lady Pingree lives in a decaying old mansion which had once been the headquarters of a noble line of which she was the very last. She has been reduced to taking in poverty-stricken boarders and accepting neighborly gifts of food surreptitiously offered to avoid wounding her delicate pride. Her one great desire is to be buried with her own money in the Pingree lot.

I want to be put in that vacant place at the

32. Ibid., p. 87-88.

> end of the Pingree lot, an' have a flat stone, like the others you know. If I leave it with you, you'll see that it's all done right, won't you, Mis' Holmes? I feel pretty perticklar about it. I'm the last of the hull family, you know, an' they were pretty smart folks. It's all run out now. I ain't nothin', but I'd kinder like to have my buryin' done like the others. I don't want it done by the town, an' I don't want nobody to give it to me.[33]

The plot moves through a series of confrontations of pride with generosity. Miss Pingree offers her poor boarders an egg although she has only two. The boarders pay the rent although they have neither work nor food. Finally when the elderly boarder dies, Miss Pingree forces on the daughter her own burial money--the savings of twenty years--insisting that she has more. She makes the gesture and protects it with lies because she is generous but also because she is a Pingree. "She felt for herself the respect that she would have felt for an old Pingree in the palmiest days."[34] One can also see in this proud, inevitable gesture toward the past another of Mrs. Freeman's favorite themes: the need for respect in the community. The story has been criticized for its sentimental ending. Miss Pingree is saved the final shame of burial by the town through the almost divine intervention of the railroad, which is to be built through part of the crumbling Pingree estate. In the context it

33. Ibid., p. 152.

34. Ibid., p. 157.

is sentimental and coincidental, but it is appropriate at least on a symbolic level. If salvation is to come, surely it is to come from that direction--from industrialization.

"A Taste of Honey" relies rather more than it should on coincidence, but it is one of Mrs. Freeman's strongest stories because it does not soften the blows. Inez Morse lives on a mortgaged farm with her widowed mother. She works the farm alone and goes to great lengths to earn a few pennies. She says, "cents are my dollars."[35] She even keeps bees, but only as an investment; she and her mother never eat the honey. When the mortgage is paid, they promise each other, they will enjoy the honey. One night Willie Linfield calls on her, and, never having had a lover, she does not understand his intentions at first. When he proposes, she makes him wait until the mortgage is paid although she risks losing him. Her commitment is to the past--to her dead father.

> "Finally I told him one day--it was when he was able to be about, just before he gave up; I was out in the garden picking peas, and he was there with his cane. 'Inez,' says he, 'I've got to die an' leave that mortgage unpaid, an' I've been workin' ever since I was a young man to do it.' 'Father,' says I, 'don't you worry. I'll pay up that mortgage.' 'You can't, Inez,' says he. 'Yes, I will,' says I; 'I promise you, father.' It seemed to cheer him up. He didn't fret so much about it to me afterwards, but he kept asking me if I really could. I always said, 'Yes.'"[36]

35. Ibid., p. 94.

36. Ibid., pp. 101-102.

When the mortgage is finally paid--when the obligation to the past and to duty has been met--Willie has gone to marry a girl in another town. Inez returns home, and her mother asks:

> "Where's your beau. . . ."
> "He ain't coming, mother. He's gone over to West Dorset to get married. . . ."
> Mrs. Morse sat down and began to cry.
> Inez had taken her things off, and now she was getting out the moulding-board and some flour.
> "What air you doin' on, Inez?"
> "I'm making the warm biscuit for supper, mother, to eat with the honey."[37]

Here again it is the past that robs the present by imposing on it obligations which drive out happiness. Pride and duty are the two chief ways in which the prosperous, Puritan past imposes itself on the decaying present in the stories. In "A Taste of Honey" there is an added richness--a successful, controlled use of irony, something rather rare in the regional realists.

Inez and Old Lady Pingree in their isolation are bent and twisted by the past, but they are not driven to <u>defiance</u> of their heritage by it. Others are. Two stories of defiance or rebellion are "A Conflict Ended" and "A Tardy Thanksgiving." The two stories form a nice contrast and in their opposing modes display the author's considerable range. "A Conflict Ended" is a humorous story. As in "Robins and Hammers" and <u>Pembroke</u>, the hero, Marcus, makes a vow in anger and keeps it out of pride.

37. <u>Ibid</u>., pp. 105-106.

His vow is to sit on the church steps during Sunday service as long as the minister of whom he disapproves is settled in the parish. Esther, his fiancée, refuses to marry him so long as he makes himself look foolish in his defiance of the community. Things are at an impasse until Esther changes her mind and decides to sit with him. The thought of her looking so foolish brings him to his senses, and they enter the church together. The rebellion here is rooted in pride, but the consequences are comic rather than tragic. Esther says of Marcus, "No, he ain't crazy; he's got too much will for his common sense, that's all, and the will teeters the sense a little too far into the air."[38]

"A Tardy Thanksgiving" is the dramatic, tightly written story of Jane Muzzy, who defies not the community but God himself.

> "I ain't agoin' to hev any Thanksgivin' to hum. I ain't got nothin' to give thanks fur, as I see on. I s'pose if I could go to meetin' Thanksgivin' mornin' an' hear the searmon, an then set down to turkey an' plum-puddin', an' be a-thankin' the Lord in my heart for lettin' my husband fall off the scaffold in the barn an' git killed last summer, an' for lettin' my daughter Charlotte die of quick consumption last spring, an' my son John two years ago this fall, I might keep Thanksgivin' as well as other folks. But I can't an' I ain't a-goin' to purtend I do. Thar's one thing about it-- I ain't a hypocrite, an never was."
>
> "What air you agoin' to do, Mis' Muzzy?"
>
> "Do!" Mrs. Muzzy sniffed. "Do! I'm

38. Ibid., p. 388.

a-goin' to stay to hum, an'--do my pig work."[39]

She is true to her word; but in the process of making lard, she spills hot grease on her foot and sustains painful burns. She knows with Whom she has had an encounter. When her sister brings her some turkey, Jane insists on eating it before her foot is tended.

> "I want to eat some turkey an' plum-puddin' afore I'm an hour older, an' keep Thanksgivin'. I said I wouldn't but the Lord got ahead of me, an' I'm glad he has."[40]

Hers is a solemn defiance and one which separates her from her fellows. In fact, its correction requires a special providence in the best Puritan tradition. Like all rebellion rooted in pride--be it comic or tragic--it must stop and the pride must be humbled before the individual can find his place in the order again. Pride brings isolation--from God and man; isolation is terrible. Jane Muzzy has no more to be thankful for at the end of the story than she did at the beginning, but at least she is no longer alone.

Another story of rebellion is "Gentian," but here the problem is somewhat different. Lucy, a timid wife, defies her husband and brings down his wrath and pride and also the author's wry comment on a favorite topic--the role of women in the New England society she knew. Lucy's defiance lies in her disobelience of her husband's

39. Ibid., p. 50.

40. Ibid., p. 59.

commands. She puts gentian in his food to act as a tonic after he has expressly forbidden it. That she does it out of love and because she is concerned for his health is of no consequence. He forces her to leave him. She accepts the separation (a separation imposed by pride and by social patterns inherited from the past) because she is a lover and no true rebel at all. She not only accepts, she defends his action. "I deceived him, and it's been 'most killin' me to think on't ever since."[41] Finally love takes her the step beyond acceptance. She asks to be forgiven. Her plea enables her husband to overcome the male pride that is part of his Puritan heritage. He not only takes her back but asks her to prepare more gentian for him.

Mrs. Freeman sees--and this is something that most New England regionalists never saw--the irony in the rather complex situation. The wife, Lucy, is both right and wrong--right in caring for her husband and wrong in disobeying. That she had to disobey in order to care for him only intensifies the irony. He, of course, is profoundly wrong. He reacts in the traditional way out of pride. And the wrong can only be righted by the elimination of pride. The resolution is a comic delight. Only when, by begging forgiveness, Lucy admits that he is right, can he admit that he is wrong and ask her to come back on her own terms.

41. Ibid., p. 257.

Mrs. Freeman's picture of the woman's role is sentimental in "A Humble Romance" and "Robins and Hammers"; it is comic in "A Conflict Ended" and "Gentian." But in "A Patient Waiter" it is tragic. The tragedy is that of the isolated soul driven to insanity by loneliness. Fidelia Alny's lover Ansel had left town to seek his fortune--the fortune with which he would marry her. He had promised to write. For forty years Fidelia has made daily trips to the post office. She has also raised a niece who, in turn, has had a lover who leaves, promising to write. After enough time has elapsed for the parallel to be established, the girl's letter finally comes.

> "Oh, Aunt Fidelia!" she cried, "the letter's come!"
> ". . . Ansel's--letter!"
> Lily sobbed right out in the midst of her joy: "Oh, poor Aunt Fidelia! Poor Aunt Fidelia! I didn't think--I forgot. I was awful cruel. It's a letter from Valentine. He's been sick. The folks wrote, but they put on the wrong state--Massachusetts instead of Vermont. He's comin' right home, an' he's goin' to stay. He's goin' to settle here. Poor Aunt Fidelia! I didn't think."
> Fidelia lay back on her pillow. "You dear child," she whispered, "you won't have to."[42]

Fidelia, in spite of her name, is no genteel heroine. She is a half-crazed unattractive old woman with bad color, yellow-gray hair and a compulsive nod to her head caused by a nervous disease. She waits for something that will never come because there is nothing else a woman can do. Suggestive of the whole historical drift of the

42. Ibid., p. 413.

region and representative of thousands of her sisters who clung to self-deceptions in the face of isolation, she is real and completely believable down to her final death-bed request. "The evenin' mail . . . It's time for it. You'd better hurry or you'll be late."[43] It is women like Fidelia who justify Van Wyck Brooks' observation:

> She was "a sort of sordid Aeschylus." There was something fierce and primitive in her view of life, and the Furies existed for her.[44]

A Humble Romance was fairly well received both by the critics and the public. A British edition appeared three years after the first publication; and in 1897, a second American edition appeared. Among the important people who liked it was the critically benevolent Howells, who said, "They [the stories] are good through and through, and whoever loves the common face of humanity will find pleasure in them."[45] A New England Nun, however, (1891) is a better--or at least a deeper--collection. Blair refers to Mary Wilkins Freeman as the writer "who better than any other in the period, perhaps, reproduced the sharp comedy and the tragic irony of New England repression."[46] It might be truer to add "isolation" to "repression," but

43. Ibid., p. 414.

44. Van Wyck Brooks, New England: Indian Summer (New York, 1950), p. 475.

45. Wm. Dean Howells, "The Editor's Study," Harper's Monthly, LXXV (September, 1877), 640.

46. Walter Blair, Native American Humor (San Francisco, 1960), p. 140.

the statement is nonetheless valid as it stands. Of the two major collections it is true to say that in A Humble Romance the emphasis is on comedy, frequently sharp but just as frequently blunted by sentiment; in A New England Nun the emphasis is on tragic irony. This emphasis was recognized by the reviewers of the time. The Atlantic review said, "There is, indeed, a common character to the whole series, an undertone of hardship, of loss, of repressed life, of sacrifice, of the idolatry of duty."[47]

Structurally the stories in the two volumes are quite similar. Foster sees no advance.

> It is hard to discover any real technical growth as one moves from the first to the second collection. Like so many of the local colorists, Miss Wilkins had hit pay dirt fast and would never greatly surpass her first effort.[48]

In both, the raw material is the same and so is the unblinking observation and the resulting realism of the significant detail. There is, in contrast to Sarah Orne Jewett's work, the same casual attitude--often casual excellence--to the problems of point of view. Occasionally there is controlled, partial omniscience and occasionally a narrator. The fondness for parallel action--the repetition of the same kind of action as in the repeated offering of gifts in "Old Lady Pingree"--is found here in "A

47. "Review of A New England Nun," Atlantic Monthly, LXVII (May, 1891), 848.

48. Foster, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, p. 89.

Village Lear" and elsewhere. But the use of parallel plots, as in "A Tardy Thanksgiving," "A Conflict Ended," and "A Patient Waiter," is not found in the second volume.

But there are technical advances in the second book. First Mrs. Freeman developed the skill to use objects within the story as symbols underscoring the main theme. Thus in "A Poetess" a pet canary's ability to sing provides a counterpoint to the poetess's inability to do so. And the scent of roses in the story of that name represents lost years and lost sexual fulfillment. Secondly, she writes with greater composure and compression. She relies less and less on the passing of decades to tell the story. She is more capable of beginning with the central dramatic situation, developing background through narrative and returning to the action.

Finally, although she still likes to start with drama and dialog ("The Revolt of Mother," "A Church Mouse"), she shows a leisurely fondness for setting the scene. The result is, in "A Gala Dress," "A New England Nun," and elsewhere, that the stories fall nicely into two parts. In the first part the scene is developed with careful attention to significant or symbolic details. This is often the best part of the story because here the symbols and representations are free to work their own will. The second part of the story, the plot, is often conventional and artificial, or at least weakened by sentiment, coincidence, and convention.

Like its predecessor A New England Nun runs well over four hundred pages. It contains twenty-four stories, many of them of little consequence.[49] Among the minor stories are several examples of that ominous occasional form that was to torment Mrs. Freeman all through her career--the Christmas story. Two of them, "Christmas Jenny" and "The Twelfth Guest," are especially weak. "A Stolen Christmas" is more interesting without being better. It tells of an old tailoress, pauperized by the new factory system, who steals gifts for her grandchildren's Christmas. But it's Christmas; and rather than deal with the questions of personal and social guilt thus raised, Mrs. Freeman lets the story trail into sentiment and coincidence. But it is an important theme, and she was to return to it again and again. "Cala-Lilies and Hannah" deals with the same theme almost as ineffectively.

Several of the minor stories deal with the dominant theme of isolation and the need to love. They remain minor because they remain sentimental. Among them is "The Scent of Roses," which deals with two sisters in love with the same man who returns from the West, where he had found his fortune. "A Gentle Ghost" tells of a little child who sees ghosts which are the imaginative outgrowth of her

49. It is interesting to note that of the stories she wrote between 1884 and 1891 only two--"The Story of Little Mary Whitlow," and "A Wandering Samaritan"--were not included in the two collections. She was, in these years and those immediately following which brought Jane Field and Pembroke to the press, at the peak of her powers.

need for a loving family. When "she had found her place in the nest of living hearts,"[50] (an appalling image) she no longer sees the ghosts.

Of course, everywhere in the minor stories as well as the major ones there is evidence of Mrs. Freeman's accurate eye and ear. The opening passages of "A Wayfaring Couple" paint a vivid picture of the life of the industrial working classes in "a long row of little cheap houses."[51] The picture in "A Discovered Pearl" of the whining, senile old man picking out bastings for his seamstress granddaughter is as chilling a picture of age as she ever produced. And in "A Pot of Gold," James Amesbury's mother is a vivid symbol of the New England the author knew.

> His mother, a dark sallow figure, sat on the upper one [step]. She held herself rigidly, and did not lean against the door casing. She was very tired but her will would not let her old bones and muscles relax. Jane Amesbury never "lopped" as she termed it.[52]

One story that depicts Mrs. Freeman's view of New England is "A New England Nun." It is the story of Louisa Ellis, who has waited for her man Joe Dagget to return from the West to marry her. When he does return, she doesn't want him and gladly turns him over to a more ardent rival. Louisa is unlike most Freeman heroines

50. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, A New England Nun and Other Stories (Boston, 1891), p. 251.

51. Ibid., p. 121.

52. Ibid., p. 5.

whose need for love is great, but like them she is a product of environmental pressure. Privation and habit have made her emotions dry and thin--so thin that she is willing to substitute habit for passion.

The story contains examples of two of Mary's technical strengths--her ability to construct internal symbols (those whose symbolic nature and function are not imposed upon the story but rather emerge from it) and her ability to make one significant detail bear the weight of a complex insight. Louisa's reaction to the world and to passion is neatly underscored by her canary's panic at the sight of Joe. And in the back yard Louisa keeps chained the big, phlegmatic dog which has not been dangerous for years and which she has persisted in feeding corn cakes instead of meat. Nothing could make the conditions of her emotions clearer.

After Joe's first visit in years, which violates her parlor and terrifies her canary, comes to an end, the following scene takes place:

> Then she set the lamp on the floor and began sharply examining the carpet. She even rubbed her fingers over it and looked at them.
>
> "He tracked in a good deal of dust," she murmured. "I thought he must have."
>
> Louisa got a dust pan and brush and swept Joe Dagget's track carefully.[53]

The gesture reveals the woman, and the woman represents a group, and the group stands for a given region at a given time. The technique is typical of what The Atlantic

53. Ibid., p. 5.

critic called "the disposition of Miss Wilkins to single out for her subjects highly accentuated phases of New England life."[54]

"A Gala Dress" is a tightly constructed story in Mrs. Freeman's best comic vein. Elizabeth and Emily Babcock are two elderly, spinster sisters who never go together to any important functions--not even to church. The reason is simple; they have only one good black dress between them. When one sister comes in, she carefully removes her hem decorations. Then the other sister just as carefully sews on hers. Matilda, a lowborn neighbor, suspects the plight of the poverty-stricken sisters and tries to confirm her suspicions. The proof is important to her because she has always chafed at the Babcock's superior status, of which the dress is a constant reminder. By allowing the dress to be burned by an Independence Day firecracker, she gets the proof she wants. The story ends with an unexpected windfall of good dresses from a rich Babcock in the West. There are enough even for Matilda.

The dress is a particularly rich symbol of New England's decadence. It is both of great age and great quality. It serves to distinguish those who come from glory from the lower classes--the Babcocks from the Matildas. But like New England's Puritan and patrician past, it restricts the activities of its possessors.

54. "Review of A New England Nun," Atlantic Monthly, p. 847.

They cannot go anywhere without it and they spend most of their time trying to maintain it. And there is only one dress, so that while it distinguishes them and is the badge of their superiority, it also limits them and is the badge of their failure. Only when salvation comes, significantly enough, from the West, can they escape the burdens and limits of the dress and share its glories with Matilda, who having exposed it now gratefully accepts it although it has been "mended nice."

"The Revolt of Mother," possibly the most popular story Mrs. Freeman ever wrote, deals with the question of the role of women in this decaying society. The theme is explicit; Mother says to her daughter:

> You ain't found out yet we're women folks, Nanny Penn . . . You ain't seen enough of men-folks yet to. One of these days you'll find it out, an' then you'll know that we know only what men-folks think we do, so far as any use of it goes, an' how we'd ought to reckon men-folks in with Providence, an' not complain of what they do any more than we do of the weather.[55]

But women have rights; matrons are entitled to decent kitchens and maidens to parlors where beaux may call. Mother's revolt isn't doctrinaire and it isn't radical. It is personal and conservative; she rebels to protect her place. She must, ironically, rebel against her place in order to maintain it. When her husband, a prosperous farmer, builds a new barn instead of a much needed new house, she moves the family into the barn.

55. Freeman, A New England Nun, pp. 451-452.

Here Mother is driven to revolt by, among other things, New England reticence. The author points out, "There was never much conversation at the table in the Penn family."[56] Mother Penn humbly assaults this silence, which on her husband's part is a species of the pride that is the root of evil.

> Sarah Penn had not sat down; she stood before her husband in the humble fashion of a scripture woman--"I'm goin' to talk real plain to you; I never have sence I married you, but I'm goin' to now.[57]

To her eloquent plea his only reply is a refrain, "I ain't got nothin' to say." When the deed is done, the husband is shocked out of his pride; and with the returning consciousness of love, he weeps. Mother Penn weeps too; "Sarah put her apron up to her face; she was overcome by her own triumph."[58] This is a good woman winning her point against a good man--her man. But she is no rebel, and she has no cause other than the parlor and the kitchen. As will be seen in her later works, Mrs. Freeman never liked the new, "emancipated" women.

"A Church Mouse" is also a story of rebellion, in which old Hetty Fifield moves into the church because she has no place else to go, taking over the job of the recently deceased sexton. She argues that she can do the

56. Ibid., p. 453.

57. Ibid., p. 455.

58. Ibid., p. 468.

job better than a man. "Men git in a good many places where they don't belong, an' where they set as awkward as a cow on a hen-roost, jest because they push in ahead of women."[59] By defiantly moving into the church, she forces the community to define its relationship to her. Like Mother she finds her place by rebelling against it. In each case the rebellion is a gigantic step to the woman involved. Mother is likened to Wolfe at Quebec, Hetty to Joshua.

"A Church Mouse" is inferior to "The Revolt of Mother," but it does include an additional vital theme--the theme of isolation. To Mary Wilkins Freeman, no stranger to loneliness, that isolation which prevented the individual from filling the need for love and human contact and which was caused by the fact that the individual was himself not needed--that isolation was the most terrible of fates. Against it her heroes and heroines fight with every resource at their command.[60]

One who fought against her loneliness is Candace Whitcomb in "A Village Singer" who, after being the church soloist for forty years, is turned out in favor of a younger woman. After being dismissed she stops going to church. Instead, on Sunday morning she opens the windows

59. Ibid., p. 407.

60. That these stories of the isolation of individuals can be read as analogues of the condition and drift of the whole region makes them richer stories.

of her house next door to the church and waits.

> When the bell had stopped tolling, and all the people entered the church, Candace went over to her organ and seated herself. She arranged a singing book before her, and sat still, waiting. Her thin, colorless neck and temple were full of beating pulses. Her black eyes were bright and eager; she leaned stiffly over toward the music-rack to hear better. When the church organ sounded out she straightened herself; her long, skinny fingers pressed her own organ-keys with nervous energy. She worked the pedals with all her strength; all her slender body was in motion. When the first notes of Alma's solo began, Candace sang. She had really possessed a fine voice, and it was wonderful how little she had lost it. Straining her throat with jealous fury, her notes were still for the main part true. Her voice filled the whole room; she sang with wonderful fire and expression. That, at least, mild little Alma Way could never emulate. She was full of steadfastness and unquestioning constancy, but there were in her no smouldering fire of ambition and resolution. Music was not to her what it had been to her old rival. To this obscure woman, kept relentlessly by circumstances in a narrow track, singing in the village choir had been as much as Italy had been to Napoleon--and now on her island of exile she was still showing fight.[61]

This is a fine comic paragraph. First there is the scene rendered vividly with attention to detail. Then comes the defiant and comic act. The reader is then permitted to savor the act while he contemplates the qualities of Candace's voice. It is interesting, too, to note the explicit reference to the conflict between personality and circumstances. This near-naturalism becomes a growing element in Mrs. Freeman's work.

Candace begins slowly to die in her bitterness and

61. Freeman, A New England Nun, pp. 29-30.

rejection. She wonders sourly where "the Christianity comes in." On her deathbed she finds out where, and she forgives the community and even Alma for the wrong they have done her. As her final request, she asks Alma to sing "Jesus, Lover of My Soul." The whole final scene, in danger of melting into a pool of Dickensian sentiment, is saved by Candace's final words to Alma, "You flatted a little on--soul."[62]

"A Poetess" is a minor story, vastly inferior to "A Village Singer," but it deals with the same theme. (One feels that when Mrs. Freeman became aware that she had a good thing she was not above trying to tell the same story twice.) Betsey, a spinster village poetess, achieves status and a sense of place in the community from her modest reputation as a poet, her volume of privately printed verses, her occasional appearance in the local newspaper and her popularity as a writer of epitaphs. When she discovers the true value of her doggerel, she receives a blow from which she cannot recover. And in her own way, she poses the question of determinism already raised in the better story:

> "I'd like to know if it's fair," said she. "I'd like to know if you think it's fair. Had I ought to have been born with the wantin' to write poetry if I couldn't write it, had I? Had I ought to have been let to write all my life, an' not know before there wa'n't any use in it?"[63]

62. Ibid., p. 36.

63. Ibid., pp. 154-155.

Mother and Hetty are forced to rebel in order to assert their claim and place in society. Candace and Betsey are forced to lash out at a society that would take from them their place, function, and dignity--and ultimately their raison d'etre. Betsey says to the minister who disillusions her:

> If you would jest write a few--lines about me--afterward--I've been thinkin' that--mebbe my--dyin' was goin' to make me--a good subject for--poetry, if I never wrote none. If you would jest write a few lines.[64]

There are others, however, who deliberately turn their backs on society--who because of pride and will, those twin burdens of their Puritan heritage, deliberately cut themselves off from their fellows. Two such are Nicholas Gunn in "A Solitary" and Luella Norcross in "Life-Everlastin'."

Nicholas Gunn had been terribly hurt by his wife's desertion. His response is to cut himself off from all affection and pleasure in order to guard against the return of pain. "I figured out that if I didn't care anything for anybody, I shouldn't have no trouble from 'em; an' if I didn't care anything for myself, I shouldn't have any from myself."[65] During a severe winter frail Stephen Potter asks to rest in Nicholas' unheated house as he passes by. At first Nicholas refuses; then he relents gracelessly. The scene is repeated several times

64. Ibid., p. 159.

65. Ibid., p. 231.

as Stephen makes his way from his sister's rooming house to the market. Then in the middle of a cold night Stephen comes with the terrible news that his sister plans to send him to the poor house. He hopes to stay the night only. Nicholas lets him in and--symbolically--lights the fire. Then--

> "Look a-here!" said he, "you might jest as well understand it. You ain't a-goin' to any depot tonight, an' you ain't a-goin' to any train, an' you ain't a-goin' to any depot tomorrow nor any train, an' you ain't a-goin' the next day, nor the next, nor the next, nor the next after that."
>
> "What be I a-goin' to do?"
>
> "You are a-goin' to stay jest where you are. I've fought against your comin' as long as I could, an' now you've come, an' I've turned the corner, an' you're a-goin' to stay. When I've been walkin' in the teeth of my own will on one road an' havin' all I could do to breast it, I ain't a-goin' to do it on another. I've give up, an' I'm a-goin' to stay give up. You lay still."[66]

Stephen falls asleep "leaning on the will of another." Ironically, he is leaning on a will that has grown strong through capitulation. Nicholas had withdrawn from men; but that was the way of death.

> "Well, I was all wrong . . . I've give it all up. I've got to go through the whole of it like other folks, an' I guess I've got grit enough. I've made up my mind that men's tracks cover the whole world, and there ain't standin'-room outside of 'em. I've got to go with the rest."[67]

Luella Norcross in "Life-Everlastin'" is the village atheist and eccentric. Through intellectual pride she

66. Ibid., p. 229.

67. Ibid., p. 232.

cuts herself off from both man and God. The goodness at the center of Luella's nature finds expression in her kindness to itinerants and a few elderly crabs. While taking a pillow she had made to an irritable old man she discovers a murder, and later she discovers the murderer hiding in an empty house she owns but has refused to let the town use. Her problem is to determine how to help John Gleason, the murderer, without betraying the murdered man and the townspeople from whom she had cut herself off. The answer has to combine the elements of justice and mercy. She turns Gleason over to the sheriff--and prays for him.

> "I don't believe in a lot of palaver about things like this--I've made up my mind that I'm goin' to believe in Jesus Christ. I ain't never, but I'm goin' to now for"--Luella's voice turned shrill with passion--"I don't see any other way out of it for John Gleason."[68]

Here is a character standing on the brink of Dreiser's universe of Godless flux, confronted with evil and the demands of justice and charity. She draws back from the void and embraces Christ. She believes because belief is necessary--because God and, through God, communion with one's fellows are the bases on which life is predicated. Isolation, hers and John Gleason's, is intolerable. It has been traditional to describe Sarah Jewett as a disciple of Hawthorne. Mary Wilkins Freeman, however, is the most Hawthorne-like of the New England women writers. Nicholas

68. Ibid., p. 312.

and Luella, forlorn in their pride and self-induced isolation, are direct descendents of Chillingworth, Coverdale and others.

Many of these short stories were praised in the author's own time and later, but always the praise was restrained and often it was for the wrong things. Charles M. Thompson complained about the absence of "charming people charmingly drawn."[69] Years later Van Wyck Brooks could call her sterner portraits "morbid symptoms."[70] Such critics were deceived by not seeing in a New England regionalist what they expected to see. Consequently, they failed to see in Mary Wilkins Freeman's work that vital quality that set her apart from--and, in a few stories, above--her fellow New Englanders. Matthiessen saw it. He said she "had a deeply rooted feeling that life was a tragedy."[71] Perhaps the feeling was intermittent rather than deeply rooted; but when it underlay a story, that story had an intensity unmatched by any of her contemporaries' or predecessors' stories. Among the few stories that have this feeling of tragedy are "Amanda and Love," "A Village Lear," and "Sister Liddy."

"Amanda and Love" is the simple story of a middle-

69. Thompson, Atlantic Monthly, p. 674.

70. Brooks, New England: Indian Summer, p. 482.

71. F. O. Matthiessen, "New England Stories," American Writers on American Literature, ed. John Macy (New York, 1931), p. 408.

aged, ungainly virgin who has raised her younger sister. Possessing "faculty," Amanda has been able to prosper modestly, but the graces are beyond her. They are so far beyond her that she frightens off her younger sister's suitor. Dimly realizing the consequences to her sister's more delicate nature, she swallows her pride--a big swallow for a New Englander--and asks the young man to return. He does.

> Willis came at eight o'clock. Amanda let him in and left him with Love in the sitting-room. She herself sat down at the kitchen window in the deepening dusk, and stared out over the shadowy fields. She could hear the voices of her sister and her lover, now fairly started on that path of love which was as strange to this rigid-lived single woman as that of death, and whither she was far less able to follow. Amanda sat there and wept patiently, leaning her head against the window-casing.[72]

This is a rich scene in spite of the younger sister's name and the unfortunate word "whither." The aging, unattractive New England spinster sits in the twilight and weeps for many reasons--because she has had to humble her pride, because she will lose her sister and be alone, especially because she perceives in the awkward rural courtship a dimension and beauty in life that she will never have or even understand. This isolation is terrible and consciously accepted; therefore it is tragic. It is also representative. In her isolation and tears Amanda is Mrs. Freeman's tenderest and truest picture of what Holmes called "the great army of the unloved."

72. Freeman, A New England Nun, p. 304.

Barney Swan, the village Lear, is a man from whose life all the barriers to desolation have been or are being removed. He has been deprived of his function, his status and, most important, the love to which he has a right. He had been a shoemaker, but several shoe factories have come to town and prospered, depriving him of his livelihood. Then his daughters decide to tear down the shoe shop itself--an eyesore to them but a refuge and a source of dignity to him. He has long since ceased to function as a father and to receive the respect due to fatherhood. His daughter Malvina "saw to it that his clothes were comfortably warm and mended, and he had enough to eat, although his own individual tastes were never consulted. . . . She did not like to have him in the house and showed that she did not."[73]

The story opens with a powerful and pathetic scene in which Barney is reduced to trickery and bribery to get a kiss from his grandson. He greedily consoles himself with this purchased affection. He speaks to the hired girl, Sarah. "Jest look at him," he said, admiringly. "I tell you what 'tis, Sary, that little feller does like candy. I can allers toll him in with a stick of candy."[74] He has to clutch at such deceptions; they are all that he has. He has ceased to exist as an individual for those around him. The servant girl doesn't listen to him.

73. Ibid., p. 276.

74. Ibid., p. 271.

"Sarah, in her brown dress, with her fair rosy face, stood waiting until the old man should finish talking."[75] His daughters don't consult him. And on the day of his granddaughter's wedding he is exiled to the cobbler's shop. When he tries to see the ceremony, his daughter Ellen "shut the door upon Barney."[76]

Having spent his entire savings on a present for his granddaughter Annie's wedding, he finds himself and his present totally ignored. Annie goes away without it. "Old Barney's piteous cry of 'Annie! Annie! jest come here a minute!' was quite lost." From this moment Barney begins to fail. Then some weeks later when he discovers the plan to tear down the shoe shop, his destruction is complete and he flees in desperation. The only mitigating circumstance in this bleak picture of a ruined, isolated old man is the willingness of Sarah the servant to take him in his last agony. She performs the function of Cordelia. But the picture is not softened much. Even as he dies his daughter ignores his individuality and his need. Sarah's husband speaks:

> "He's all upset because his shop's going to be torn down," said he.
> "'Tain't that," replied Malvina. "He's dretful careless; he's been goin' round in his stockin'-feet, an' he's got more cold."[77]

Barney dies, unfeelingly misunderstood by his daughter

75. Ibid., p. 271.

76. Ibid., p. 283.

77. Ibid., pp. 286-287.

and hugging the illusion that his granddaughter had finally come for her wedding present.

"Sister Liddy" is the story of Polly Moss, who lives in the almshouse, which, together with its inmates, seems to function as a symbol of New England.

> There were no trees near the almshouse; it stood in its bare, sandy lot, and there were no leaves or branches to cast shadows on its walls. It seemed like the folks whom it sheltered, out in the full glare of day, without any little kindly shade between itself and the dull unfeeling stare of curiosity. The almshouse stood upon a rising ground, so one could see it for a long distance. It was a new building, Mansard-roofed and well pointed. The village took pride in it: no town far or near had such a house for the poor. It was so fine and costly that the village did not feel able to give its insane paupers separate support in a regular asylum; so they lived in the almshouse with the sane paupers, and there was a padded cell in case they waxed too violent.[78]

The people in it are representative.

> Many and many an afternoon the almshouse old women sat together and bore witness to their past glories. . . . Their present was to them a state of simple existence, they regarded their future with vague resignation; they were none of them thinkers and there was no case of rapturous piety among them. 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.[79]

Here is New England, well-built and visible to all. It is supported by its inmate's children who are outside--that is in the West. It accommodates both the sane and the insane (the eccentrics that Puritanism seemed to

78. Ibid., p. 81.

79. Ibid., p. 92.

produce in such numbers), all of whom, like good New Englanders, live in the glories of the past. Two hundred and fifty years after Winthrop had launched New England with the ringing metaphor of the "city upon a hill," one of its most perceptive daughters sees it as almshouse on a little rise of ground.

It is in this setting that Mary presents characters and incidents of intense realism unsurpassed in the nineteenth century. Following is a scene in which Polly responds to a pauper child's request that she play with him.

> "I'll tell you what Polly an' Tommy can do. We'll jest go out in the hall an' we'll roll the ball. Tommy go run quick an' get his ball."
>
> Tommy raised a shout and clapped out of the room; his sweet nature was easily diverted. Polly followed him. She had a twisting limp, and was bent so that she was not much taller than Tommy, her little pale triangular face seemed to look from the middle of her flat chest. . . .
>
> In the corridor Polly Moss played ball with the children. She never caught the ball, and she threw it with weak, aimless jerks; her back ached but she was patient, and her face was full of simple, childish smiles. There were two children besides Tommy--his sister and a little boy.
>
> The corridor was long; doors in both sides led into the paupers' bedrooms. Suddenly one of the doors flew open, and a little figure shot out. She went down the corridor with a swift trot like a child. She had on nothing but a woolen petticoat and a calico waist; she held her head down, and her narrow shoulders worked as she ran. Her mop of soft white hair flew out. The children looked around at her; she was a horrible caricature of themselves.[80]

80. Ibid., pp. 85-86.

This last is poor mad Sally who compulsively tears her bed apart every day. It is such scenes that Matthiessen had in mind when he said, "Mary Wilkins is unsurpassed among all American writers in her ability to give the breathless intensity of a moment."[81]

Amid such surroundings and such incidents, Polly listens to the others vie among themselves with references to past glories. Polly, like Mrs. Freeman's other heroes and heroines, has to have something. So she lies, and, in her lie, invents a Sister Liddy whom she invests with all virtues and all luxuries. The story ends with Polly's deathbed confession.

> "I want to tell you somethin'," Polly repeated. "I s'pose I've been dretful wicked, but I ain't never had nothin' in my whole life. I s'pose the Lord orter have been enough, but it's dretful hard sometimes to keep holt of him, an' not look anywheres else, when you see other folks a-clawin' an' gettin' other things, an' actin' as if they was wuth havin'. I ain't never had nothin' as fur as them other things go; I don't want nothin' else now. I've--got past 'em. I see I don't want nothin' but the Lord. But I used to feel dretful bad and wicked when I heerd you all talkin' 'bout things you've had, an' I hadn't never had nothin', so--" Polly Moss stopped talking, and coughed. The matron supported her. The old women nudged each other; their awed, sympathetic, yet sharply enquiring eyes never left her face. The children were peeping in at the open door; old Sally trotted past--she had just torn her bed to pieces. As soon as she got breath enough, Polly Moss finished what she had to say. "I--s'pose I--was dretful wicked," she whispered; "but--I never had any sister Liddy."[82]

81. Matthiessen, "New England Stories," American Writers on American Literature, p. 406.

82. Freeman, A New England Nun, pp. 97-98.

Certainly a chilling slice of life is sliding off here into sentiment. But it doesn't slide too far. The Puritan fear of God is genuine and the dialect is real. Above all, at the most sentimental part of the speech, the author interrupts Polly to refocus our attention on the nudging of the inquisitive old ladies and the undressed meandering of crazy Sally.

In a handful of these stories--in "A Gala Dress," "Sister Liddy," "A Village Lear," "The Revolt of Mother," and perhaps one or two others--the New England regional tradition in fiction reaches its highest achievement. Mrs. Freeman's stories with their dramatic beginnings in the middle of the central incident, their succinct narrative interpolations of past action and background, their terse sentences and closely observed details are the products of a talent which had solved the structural problems plaguing her predecessors. With their irony, their subtle symbolism, their tragic insight, and their thematic density, these stories reveal an artistic sensibility of greater depth than either Mrs. Stowe or Mrs. Cooke and of much greater breadth than Miss Jewett. But she was never to write so well again. Like her predecessors, she responded to the lure of the longer form. For the remainder of her career her chief interest was in the novel, a form in which she wrote many things of interest but nothing of greatness. Like her literary sisters she was to fail in that genre to solve the problem of form.

CHAPTER IV

THE SEARCH FOR THE COMPLEX FORM

The first half of the 1890's must have been a happy period for Mary Wilkins Freeman--possibly the happiest of her life. She continued to live with her friend Mary Wales in Randolph; friends and relatives were all around her in the town. She made occasional trips to Brattleboro especially to see her dear friend Evelyn Sawyer Severance. She made other trips as well--to Boston, to New York, and in 1893 even to far-away Chicago, where she stayed for ten days. It was on a trip to New York and Metuchen, New Jersey, to visit the Aldens in the early nineties that she first met Dr. Charles Freeman. She was just forty years old.

Her professional life seemed as placid and prosperous as her personal life. In the late eighties she had had a flattering correspondence with Hamlin Garland. She had met Howells, who praised her work, and who, in 1891, wrote to solicit contributions from her--very high praise, indeed.[1] There was a friendly exchange of letters with Miss Jewett, and both James Russell Lowell and the Beechers wrote their admiration. The Rudyard Kiplings up in Vermont became her friends and admirers. And praise

1. Wm. Dean Howells, letter to Mary E. Wilkins, December 20, 1891 (American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York).

came from England too. In 1893 Sir Douglas Straight asked her to contribute to The Pall Mall Magazine. She was never ostentatious or aggressive (except in financial matters), but she was obviously and genuinely pleased with the demand for her work.

She was pleased also with the increasing strength of her economic position. Having known slender circumstances and even poverty, she enjoyed the things her new prosperity enabled her to do. She enjoyed buying good clothes, taking trips, and helping friends. But she was careful with her money and willing to fight to earn more. In May, 1893, she wrote to her editors and thanked them for their praise of Pembroke. She devoted the last paragraph of that letter to a request for a raise. In a follow-up letter of June 9, 1893, she requested that her royalty be increased from 10% to 15%.[2]

Mrs. Freeman was not only active socially and economically between 1890 and 1895; she was also very active creatively. And while she continued to write short stories all her life, this creative activity tended to take the form of a search for a longer form. The fruits of that search were Giles Corey, Yeoman: A Play (1893), Jane Field (1893), Pembroke (1895), and Madelon (1896).

F. O. Matthiessen called Mrs. Freeman's vision of life tragic. Giles Corey, for all its faults, lends

2. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, letter to Harper and Brothers, June 9, 1893 (Columbia University Library, New York).

support to this position; it is a tragedy in six acts. Based on the records of the Salem witchcraft trials of 1692, it is the story of Giles Corey, his wife Martha and his daughter Olive, victims of the witch-hunters. Martha and Olive are arrested as witches. Although Olive is eventually released, her mother is burned as a witch. Part of the evidence that convicts her consists of her husband's own words flagrantly misconstrued. For the rest, it is her own good sense in a world of madmen that brings about her doom. Stricken by his own unwitting role in his wife's conviction, Giles vows not to speak when he is arrested as a wizard. To force him to speak, the authorities resort to "pressing," that is, to placing heavy stones upon his chest. But he keeps his vow and is crushed to death.

Here was an indigenous New England story with a powerful theme and rich overtones. Mrs. Freeman brought to it her clear intelligence and her moral passion. But she was not Hawthorne, and the results were not happy. What she finally produced was not a major tragedy or even a good drama, but rather an object lesson. She learned that she could not write plays. She never tried again.

The play has many faults. Her characters are not individualized. The dramatic focus shifts from Olive to her mother to Giles and back to the daughter again--a novelist's trick but not a dramatist's. The trial scene is bad, especially the shifting of testimony, the quick

retractions, and the presentation of written depositions by characters who never appear on the stage. The last act, in which a series of messengers run on and off stage reporting on the slow death of Giles Corey, is not effective at all; it proves only that she must have read Antigone. A special word must be said about her dialog. In this play, as in her historical novel (The Heart's Highway) and her occasional historical short stories, her dialog achieves a level of badness rarely matched in published American fiction.

Among the play's few virtues are its psychological validity, or at least its insight in keeping with the modern temper. The "victims" of witchcraft are spiteful and neurotic. Those who actually attempt to practice it are weak-minded. The authorities are autocratic, self-seeking, and self-righteous. Among them common sense, science, reason, and integrity do not have a chance. In fact Mrs. Freeman's view of the trials is much like Arthur Miller's in The Crucible. Another of the play's virtues is that it is indigenous; it is about the history and psychology of New England. It is about that special kind of will that can feed on itself and remain strong enough to hold the entire community at bay Deborah and Barney Thayer in Pembroke could be descendants of Giles Corey.

For all its weaknesses, there were those who wanted to produce Giles Corey, Yeoman. Out of this desire arose

one of Mrs. Freeman's continual financial disputes. She was concerned about the financial possibilities of productions in New York and Boston and especially about her rights in a production at the Theater of Arts and Letters. Pride, fear, and financial instinct were all involved. Apparently the weaknesses of the play were obvious enough even to its supporters in 1893. They had it revised by Eugene W. Presbrey. Mrs. Freeman didn't know whether to permit his version or not, although she claimed that she liked it very much. It would have entitled her to a much smaller share of both the money and the glory if it were successful. But she pointed out:

> There is of course no doubt that in a way in case of a failure, it would be better to have his version presented Saturday night, since it would not reflect so strongly upon the original.[3]

It was this last attitude, this timidity in the face of possible criticism, that prevailed at last. This timidity was part of her general attitude and not confined to Giles Corey alone, for over a year later in a different context entirely she wrote to a Mr. Wilcox:

> I confess to being a little cowardly. . . . It does seem rather senseless to expose one's self to scathing remarks about something that is over and gone, and one cannot help, no matter how necessary they may be in the interests of truthful and conscientious criticism.[4]

3. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, letter to Harper and Brothers, March 27, 1893 (Columbia University Library, New York).

4. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, letter to Mr. Wilcox, August 20, 1894 (Columbia University Library, New York).

Giles Corey, Yeoman was a minor business; it was the result of thesearch for a form. But 1893 found Mrs. Freeman involved in a major piece of business as well. The major business was Jane Field, her first novel. Van Wyck Brooks has described Mrs. Freeman as the creator of "practical widows and sedate old maids."[5] Jane is a "practical widow" cast in the role of a tragic, naturalistic heroine.

Jane Field of Green River is a reserved, undemonstrative widow living with her only daughter, a consumptive school teacher, whom poverty seems to have put beyond the reach of recovery. Just when her daughter's case becomes acute, Jane receives a letter directed to her own dead sister. The letter, from an attorney in the distant town of Elliot, states that the dead sister, Esther Maxwell, has inherited a small fortune from an in-law. Jane, who, despite a façade of indifference, is suffering greatly because of her daughter's illness, goes to see the lawyer, intending to ask him to return to her from the Maxwell estate a sum borrowed from her own husband many years before. She hopes to provide for her daughter's recovery with the money.

When she appears in the lawyer's office, he mistakes her for her sister and bestows upon her the money and the house which constitute the estate. Because the house and

5. Van Wyck Brooks, The Confident Years (New York, 1952), p. 37.

town are in a much healthier location than Green River, Jane remains silent and allows her daughter to follow her. Although Lois, the daughter, scorns her mother's illegal action and rejects all the ill-gotten wealth, she keeps silent, remains in Elliot and recovers. Jane doesn't use any of the money either. The result is that the town thinks of her as a miser, condemns her for not taking better care of Lois, and finally leaves her pretty much alone--so alone that when she is visited by three old friends from Green River, she is not found out. However, the guilt becomes too great to bear. She confesses her deception and in confessing frees her daughter to love her once again and to marry an Elliot suitor. But she does not free herself. For the rest of her life she is the victim of a neurotic compulsion to stop strangers and tell them, "I ain't Esther Maxwell."

Here is a novel free from the vacuum at the center that marred Mrs. Stowe's stories. Here is a realistic regional study which does not have to fall back on the cliches of Dickensian melodrama. Mrs. Freeman deals here with problems that are both indigenous and elemental, and she keeps the problems firmly in the central situation. Howells saw this and praised her for it--for grasping, as he put it, "the wolfish problems of existence."[6] But the problem of form was not completely solved. The novel

6. Clara and Rudolf Kirk, William Dean Howells (New York, 1962), p. 337.

has one serious structural flaw. It is thin; there is simply not enough action and complication in the central situation to warrant a novel 267 pages long. The result is a work so padded that the central story keeps blurring out of focus.

Jane Field is not without certain structural virtues. The author is careful to reveal her central characters through an introductory chapter of conversation between two minor characters. She also presents with insight and accuracy the details of the hard life of rural New England. In this way she uses the first third of the book to set the scene.

Of her secondary characters, the two most important are Mrs. Maxwell and her daughter Flora, to whom the money should have gone in the event of Esther Maxwell's death. They serve a dual purpose. First, it is against their need and their right that Jane Field's action is to be judged. Secondly, they form a relationship parallel to and contrasting with the mother-daughter relationship of Jane and Lois. Between Flora and her mother there is a reticence and a failure to communicate that leads finally to Flora's sudden and unannounced marriage to a man her mother disapproves of. The two relationships also comment on one another in many other ways, often ironically. There are many contrasts: one mother is silent, the other garrulous; one daughter is sick, the other robust; one daughter rejects her mother for violating society's norms,

the other for following them; one daughter refuses to marry with her mother's permission, the other daughter marries without it. And old Jane, the silent one, in the moment of greatest mental stress, cracks and speaks compulsively while garrulous old Mrs. Maxwell in her moment of truth is able to stare down the inquisitive town and keep her own counsel. These, of course, are virtues: the division of the story into two parts, setting and action, the parallel sub-plot, and the use of one character to comment on another. They are the structural virtues of her short stories. And that is what Jane Field is--an inflated short story.

Because of the thinness of the main plot and the paucity of incident, Mrs. Freeman was forced to elaborate details that focused attention outside the center. The detailed exposition of the relationship between Mrs. Babcock and Amanda Pratt, Jane Field's two Green River friends, is fine character study; but it shifts the focus or at least impedes the action. In chapter IV twenty-two pages are devoted to the painful details of a dinner disaster in Elliot. New England manners, character and character relationships are revealed, but none of them have anything to do with the main action. The best humorous passage in the book is the one describing Amanda Pratt's preparation for her trip to Elliot, but it too is irrelevant.

Another flaw that results from the paucity of inci-

dent is Mrs. Freeman's habit of inserting excesses of observation into the relevant incidents. For instance, chapter II introduces us to Lois Field. We see her collapse along the road from fatigue, clearly in the incipient stages of consumption. She is brought home in a neighbor's buggy.

> Lois' pale face and little reaching hands appeared around the wing of the buggy. Amanda ran around to the horse's head. He did not offer to start; but she stood there, and said, "Whoa, whoa," over and over in a pleading voice. She was afraid to touch the bridle; she had a great terror of horses.[7]

The main points of chapter VI are Flora's unexpected and defiant marriage and Lois' fear of discovery at Mrs. Maxwell's tea party. Yet here is the scene as the late tea party guests are awaited:

> Presently Lois, at the window, saw Mr. Tuxbury's sister, Mrs. Lowe, coming, and the minister's wife, hurrying with a voluminous swing of her skirts, in her wake. The minister's wife had been calling, but Mrs. Lowe, who was a little deaf, had not heard her, and it was not until she shut the iron gate almost in her face that she saw her. Then the two came up the walk together.[8]

In each case the observation is fairly made; however, Amanda's fear of horses, Mrs. Lowe's deafness, and the minister's wife's haste have nothing to do with the main action. In fact they--and many other bits of like writing--delay the action. They are simply a species of

7. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Jane Field (Boston, 1899), p. 45.

8. Ibid., p. 15.

high-grade padding.

As with the incidents, so with the characters. Many of the secondary characters are well drawn, but they are not relevant. Lawyer Maxwell's pomposity is amusing. Amanda Pratt and Mrs. Babcock are also amusing. Mrs. Freeman's eye and ear were functioning perfectly when she recorded Mrs. Babcock's unconscious cruelty of victory in chapter VII.

> "Well, I s'pose women that have men folks to do for 'em ought to be kind of obligin' sometimes to them that ain't."

And later:

> "Well, if you ain't a double and twisted old maid!"

Her apology makes it worse.

> "Land, Mandy, . . . don't get mad. I didn't mean anything. Anybody knows that old maids is jest as good as them that gets married.[9]

Amanda's lonely timidity as she resolves to visit Elliot is touching.

> Amanda went into the house and shut the door. She stood in the middle of the parlor and looked around. There was a certain amaze in her eyes, as if everything wore a new aspect. "They can talk all they've a mind to," she muttered, "it's a great undertakin'. S'pose anything happened? If anything happened to them whilst they were gone, there's folks enough to home to see to things. S'pose anything happened to me, there ain't anybody. If I go, I've got to leave this house jest so. I've got to be sure the bureau drawers are all packed up, an' things swept an' dusted, so folks won't make remarks. There's other things too. Everything's got

9. Ibid., p. 196-197.

to be thought of. There's the cat.[10]

This is quite good, but it interposes itself between the reader and the main business at hand, which is Jane Field's moral confrontation. The result has been that the novel has either been ignored or disparaged. Foster says:

> The illusion is overwhelming when we are in the mind of her heroine; but the representation of the struggle in action and dramatic scene is commonplace, implausible, uneven in tone.[11]

This is a wrong-headed critical judgment. The action is not implausible, and its commonplace quality is its strength. But the uneven tone is there, and it is caused by these digressions.

One of the sources of strength in Mrs. Freeman's short stories is her use of symbols--the dog and canary in "A New England Nun," the poorhouse in "Sister Liddy." In Jane Field this is not the case. Although the story is longer and the incidents and characters more numerous, she has not found a way to make her symbols function throughout the story. Consequently they appear unexpectedly, function briefly, and are discarded. The thunderstorm which burns down the barn across from Mrs. Field's illegally occupied house in Elliot is an old-fashioned providence. It is treated as such. "The Lord will overrule it all; it is He speakin' in it." says the

10. Ibid., p. 206.

11. Edward Foster, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (New York, 1956), p. 117.

visiting Mrs. Green.[12] Mrs. Freeman treats these rather Gothic intrusions, these residue of her heritage from Hawthorne, rather solemnly. The result, in a novel which tends to be equal parts realistic character study and genre painting, is the unevenness of tone Foster complains of.

Jane Field treats a number of the author's favorite themes. It treats the themes of love and loneliness especially, and in its essential treatment it is rich in the ambiguities and ironies of tragedy. Jane does what she does out of love for her daughter. But in performing the act of love she violates both her own conscience and the mores of the community. Speaking to Lois, she says, "I'm a-followin' out my own law an' my own right . . . I ain't ashamed of it."[13] But she pays the price. She becomes isolated and guilt-ridden. When a character comments on the loneliness of the big old house Jane has just moved into, the author feels compelled to comment, "Of the awful lonesomeness of it truly, this smiling, comfortable young soul had no conception."[14]

The theme of isolation is reinforced in several ways through both character and setting. These are inarticulate people--people on whom the region and its mores have

12. Freeman, Jane Field, p. 237.

13. Ibid., p. 169.

14. Ibid., p. 89.

placed the burden of silence. Amanda is unable to explain her fears to her friends. Jane is unable to articulate her love to her daughter. Mrs. Maxwell greets the curiosity of the town with her only weapon--courageous silence. Jane's symbolic slowness of speech allows the lawyer to mistake her for her dead sister. When forced to speak, the characters can only stammer. In proposing to Lois, Francis can only mutter, "I like you." Jane when quizzed about her knowledge of Elliot can only repeat, "I guess I don't remember it," as later she is forced to repeat, "I ain't Esther Maxwell."[15] And of course, it is because Jane cannot speak in Elliot that her motives and actions are misunderstood by the town. The setting also helps to intensify or underscore the theme of isolation. Jane travels to an unknown town where she is the stranger. In bringing together the people from Green River and the people from Elliot and giving comic treatment to a comedy of manners theme,[16] Mrs. Freeman also underlines Jane's isolation.

Mrs. Freeman's attitude toward Jane Field's actions, guilt, and isolation is by no means simple. Jane pays a high price for her deeds because she "took it on myself to do justice instead of the Lord, an' that ain't for any

15. Ibid., pp. 58-61, 260-267.

16. Jane's Green River friends observe defensively, "There's considerable more dress here, but I guess, on the whole, it ain't any better a place to live in than Green River." Ibid., pp. 241-242.

human bein' to do."[17] Her sanity gives way. But she pays for success. She permitted herself to be involved in the original deception in order to save her daughter's life. Her daughter lives, forgives her mother, and marries happily. Any alternative to Jane's action is unthinkable.

Most interesting of all, however, is the fact that Jane is not so much guilty of action as of inaction or reaction. At the beginning of the novel Jane watches with surface stoicism and secret agony as Lois is stricken with consumption. When Mrs. Green says, "She hadn't ought to teach school another day, Mis' Field," Jane can only reply, "I dun'no how it's goin' to be helped."[18] Then just as Lois becomes worse, the letter comes addressed to Jane's dead sister. It announces the death of a man who, morally at least, owes Jane Field fifteen hundred dollars. Lois's illness forces Jane to journey to Elliot to ask the estate lawyer for the money. Mr. Maxwell, the estate lawyer, thinks Jane is the heiress, Esther Maxwell. Jane does nothing to support or deny his conviction. She allows him to persist in his mistake, but the initiative is his, not Jane's. When Lois follows her, Jane does not ask her help. When Elliot townspeople test her memory, she denies any recollection of having been there before. And finally, although she inhabits the house and thereby

17. Ibid., p. 259.

18. Ibid., p. 31.

allows Lois to recover in the more healthy environment of Elliot, she never touches a penny of the money. In fact she and Lois almost starve themselves. Coincidence and fate conspire to offer to Jane the great gift of Lois's health, asking of her only silence. Jane complies, knowing that the money she will receive is morally hers. But her New England conscience cannot bear the weight of this justice which is paradoxically wrong. Here is a woman clearly at the mercy of the conflicting forces of coincidental circumstances, maternal emotion, and environmental pressures. She is finally destroyed by these forces and in this destruction becomes very nearly a naturalistic heroine. Jane, who appeared in 1892, the year before Crane's Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, is not Mrs. Freeman's only "naturalistic" character. This naturalism will be discussed later.

Jane Field has been out of print for fifty years. It never received the attention paid to Jerome, The Portion of Labor, or The Shoulders of Atlas. Its faults are many; but its virtues are genuine, as Foster recognized.

> Despite the amateurishness of the complications, the struggle at the center of Jane Field is meaningful and potentially dramatic. The deepest demands of a New England woman are pitted against each other.[19]

The word "amateurishness" is not quite fair. Although the padding is excessive and although the incidents are frequently interrupted by unnecessary details, they are,

19. Foster, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, p. 116.

nevertheless, the very professional habits of a short story writer feeling her way uncertainly in the longer form. They reveal the virtues that Hamlin Garland admired.

> As a student of minute forms of conduct, she had no superior. The amazing part of her genius lay in her ability to see the near-by life of her neighborhood in artistic perspective. In her ability to characterize elderly folk she had no superior.[20]

The key word in the Foster quotation is the word "center." For the first time in the forty-year history of the New England regional tradition a piece of long fiction had been written with a meaningful struggle at the center.

In 1894 Harpers published Pembroke. From the time that it first appeared it has been recognized as Mary Wilkins Freeman's masterpiece. It was well received by the reading public and stayed in demand for thirty years. The critics were kind to it too; some were extravagant in their praise.

> He [Sir Arthur Conan Doyle] had just read Pembroke. His admiration for her previous work was unbounded but "this novel," he said, "is the greatest piece of American fiction since The Scarlet Letter." I have found his opinion shared by other eminent critics since then, and in England especially is her name heard most frequently in connection with Hawthorne's.[21]

This hyperbole is gone, but the novel remains highly regarded. Foster, her biographer, considers it her finest

20. Hamlin Garland, Roadside Meetings (New York, 1930), p. 34.

21. "Mary E. Wilkins Freeman," Harper's Weekly, XLVII (November 21, 1903), 1880.

long work.

Mrs. Freeman had failed to make Jane Field a significant novel because she had been unable to provide her central situation with sufficient complexity of incident and wound up with an extravagantly padded short story. But she learned from the process of writing it. She found the solution to this essentially technical problem in an external principle of unity--thematic unity. In her preface to the first edition of Pembroke she said:

> Pembroke was originally intended as a study of the human will in several New England characters, in different phases of disease and abnormal development, and to prove, especially in the most marked case, the truth of a theory that its cure depended entirely upon the capacity of the individual for a love which could rise above all considerations of self.[22]

She followed her plan with admirable success.

Pembroke is the story of a town. It contains a number of plots and a great variety of characters, all of whom are woven into a rich tapestry of New England village life. Mrs. Freeman said, "Pembroke is intended to portray a typical New England village of some sixty years ago."[23] But she did not intend to write a historical novel and she was certainly free of the nostalgia that marked the works of Mrs. Stowe and Miss Jewett. She said in her preface that many little towns like Pembroke

22. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Pembroke (New York, 1899), p. iii.

23. Ibid., p. v.

still existed, still inhabited by eccentrics. One is tempted to think that she placed the story in a bygone age to avoid the unpleasant naming of actual names such as took place after The Debtor came out.

The main story in Pembroke is the story of Barney Thayer and Charlotte Barnard. One night Charlotte's father Cephas orders Barney from his house in the midst of a political argument. Barney refuses ever to return. His own mother Deborah orders him from her house for refusing to marry Charlotte. He goes to live in the half-finished farm house he had been building for Charlotte. He lives alone for nine years; but when he falls ill, Charlotte braves the censure of the town to nurse him. Her act of self-denying love redeems him. He returns to Cephas Barnard's house and marries Charlotte.

Because of Barney's wilful conduct, Deborah refuses to let William Berry court her daughter Rebecca. Caught between the diseased wills of Deborah and the miser Silas Berry, the young couple make love secretly. Rebecca conceives a bastard child, and Deborah drives her from the house. Although the bastard dies and a legitimate child is born to the hastily married Berrys, Rebecca lives out her life in shame.

Deborah then turns on her invalid second son, Ephraim. Fearing that he might lose his soul, she beats him, not knowing that he had secretly gone sledding for the first time in his life and overtaxed his weak heart. He col-

lapses and dies. As Charles Thompson says, "She loses all her children rather than yield to them the least shadow of her authority."[24] She suffers agonies of remorse, thinking she had killed him. When she discovers his sledding escapade, she collapses and dies.

The third main story is that of the middle-aged courtship of Sylvia Crane and Richard Alger. Richard, who has called every Sunday night for twenty years, finds Sylvia not at home on a fateful Sunday. He refuses ever to return. He is finally brought to his senses by the sight of Sylvia in the town wagon being taken to the poor house. He relents, repents, and marries her.

This tapestried structure was neither new with Mrs. Freeman nor confined to the New England tradition; in fact it is still popular with regionalists. Pembroke is reminiscent structurally of Oldtown Folks and Cable's The Grandissimes and it looks forward to Winesburg, Ohio and Faulkner's Light in August. But Mrs. Freeman uses the form well. She weaves many characters into the various plots, making each character's position in relation to wilfulness and love comment on the position of the others. These two concepts of wilfulness and love underlie all the interlocking plots, but out of them grow Mrs. Freeman's comments on isolation, the relation of the present to the

24. Charles M. Thompson, "Miss Wilkins--An Idealist in Masquerade," Atlantic Monthly, LXXXIII (May, 1899), 665.

past, and the role of women in New England society. Thus, in a complex series of interrelated plots and characters she is able to touch on all her favorite themes.

The village of Pembroke is portrayed through the interrelated lives of three families: the Thayers, the Barnards, and the Berrys. In each family, lives are ruined by a species of wilfulness which either forces love into abnormal or illicit channels or smothers it altogether. Each family is dominated by a character so twisted by the combined pressures of strong psychological drives and rigidly circumscribed environment that he becomes what Sherwood Anderson was to call a grotesque. Silas Berry is a miser whose cunning and shameless greed brings near-ostracism on his children. Cephas Barnard is a zealot and an addict of specious reasoning. In the finest comic scene in the book he reasons wildly to the conclusion that it is meat that makes men mean. In his search for more spiritual food he bakes sorrel pies and forces his family to eat them. Confronted with the ghastly food, his wife resists by pointing out that horses eat no meat, yet many of them are mean. Cephas counters with logical sureness.

> "Ain't I told ye once horses were the exceptions?" said Cephas, severely. "There has to be exceptions. If there wa'n't any exceptions, there couldn't be any rule. Women can't never get hold of things straight. Their minds slant off sideways the way their arms do when they fling a stone."[25]

25. Freeman, Pembroke, pp. 54-55.

The most important family in the story--the most important thread in the tapestry--is the Thayer family. They are the most important for a variety of reasons: Deborah Thayer and her son Barney are the most extreme cases of diseased wilfulness in the story; the Thayers are involved more intricately in the various plots; all the plots save one, the love story of Sylvia Crane and Richard Alger, flow in one way or another from Deborah Thayer. It is from her that Barney inherits his diseased will. He looks like her, Mrs. Freeman says; and when Rebecca assures her father that Barney will relent, the old man answers, "No, he won't . . . no, he won't. He's jest like your mother."[26] It is Deborah who drives her daughter out of the house and into William Berry's arms. It is she who drives her invalid younger son to rebellion and death. In fact she is the ultimate cause of Sylvia's anguish. It is Barney's inherited diseased will that causes Sylvia to miss her appointment with Richard. It has been almost a tradition to praise Pembroke and then add quickly the statement that it could just as easily have been a collection of short stories.[27] The thematic

26. Ibid., p. 104.

27. That this is a critical commonplace can be seen in the following statement: "Easily breakable into a succession of short stories. Excellent as a study until marred by a happy ending." This is the complete entry on Pembroke in Crawford, Kern, and Needleman, American Literature, p. 184, the Barnes and Noble outline. F. L. Pattee also reflected this common judgment on Mary's talent when he said, "She is strong only in short efforts. She has small powers of construction." While true as a generality,

unity, the tapestried structure, and the controlling causality of Deborah Thayer all indicate that this is an unfortunate and superficial judgment.

Without ostentation or undue force, Mrs. Freeman gives added unity and density to the story by the use of parallelism of plots. The Sylvia-Richard story is a counterpoint to the Barney-Charlotte story, and they work against one another like movement in a piece of music. Chapter I introduces the Barney-Charlotte story and chapter XIV (the final chapter) concludes it. Chapter II introduces Sylvia's story and chapter XIII concludes it.

Sylvia's plight is conventional enough in the sentimental fiction that abounded in the '90's. What gives it texture and quality is the complete reality of the setting and the accuracy and bite of the dialog, together with the fine descriptions of the decay of her resources--both spiritual and material--until she is defenseless against the pain she finds everywhere. In terrible isolation which she finally can no longer fight, she drifts into poverty, starvation, and repressed sexual fantasy. And her sisters, separated from her by the chasm of matrimony, batter her with words. Sarah Barnard says:

> "Women don't worry much on their own accounts, but they've got accounts. . . . You're gettin' older, Sylvy."

this statement is not true of Pembroke. See F. L. Pattee, A History of American Literature since 1870 (New York, 1917), p. 239.

> "I know it," Sylvia had replied, with a quick shrinking, as if from a blow.[28]

Her other sister, Hannah Berry, wounds her with the words, "You ought to be mighty thankful you ain't got any man at all, Sylvy Crane."[29] Later she strikes from the other quarter. "Well, two old maids in the family is about enough, according to my way of thinkin'."[30] Sylvia reacts with as much patience and forbearance as possible, on one occasion saying shyly to Charlotte, "I guess you ain't got all there is to bear."[31]

Mrs. Freeman's use of parallelism is not confined to the broad counterpoint of plot and sub-plot. It is also employed in the detail of specific action. In chapter I Barney is sent away from the Barnard household. In chapter II Richard is sent away from Sylvia Crane's by the big stone placed in front of the door. In the end both men are brought back by the action of the town. Richard is shocked into an act of self-denying love by the sight of Sylvia being transported to the poorhouse. Barney is brought back to the Barnards by the town's attempt to censure Charlotte for staying with him during his illness. This parallelism, which makes the novel almost symetrical, can also be seen in the first chapter where Charlotte

28. Freeman, Pembroke, p. 27.

29. Ibid., p. 47.

30. Ibid., p. 268.

31. Ibid., p. 39.

pushes past her father to call Barney back, an action which is repeated in the last chapter when she pushes past him and his threat to bar her forever to tend the stricken Barney.

An outgrowth of Mrs. Freeman's need to convey structurally the unity of her theme is her use of parallel characters--characters whose conduct casts light on the conduct of others. The contrast between Rose Berry, who will marry anyone to fulfill her need for love, and Charlotte, who has the pride to remain single, is enforced in several scenes in which the two engage in extended conversation. Barney is contrasted with Thomas Payne, the squire's son who wants to marry Charlotte. Barney, chained to the past and to Pembroke where, in the beginning of the novel, he contentedly anticipates dying, is incapable of escaping his inheritance of corrosive stubbornness. Thomas, on the other hand, having been to college--that is, having escaped Pembroke--is free of the limiting and punishing effects of the place. He is free to be courteous and self-sacrificing. Finally, Rebecca's sin is seen in contrast to the plight of Mrs. Sloane, the only prostitute in the area, in whose house she coincidentally finds shelter and in contrast to the minister's wife who aids her in her time of trial.

Pembroke displays many other virtues of the author in addition to her fine controlled use of parallelism. The dialog is excellent. So are many of the dramatic

scenes. In the scene in which Deborah discovers Rebecca's pregnancy, Mary comes close to melodrama--in fact she deals with the classic melodramatic situation, even to the falling snow. But the indirection, restraint, and simplicity of the writing carry it off.

> She worked assiduously; by the middle of the forenoon the dress [which she was making for Rebecca] was ready to be tried on. Ephraim and his father were out in the barn, she and Rebecca were alone in the house.
>
> She made Rebecca stand up in the middle of the kitchen floor, and she began fitting the crimson gown to her. Rebecca stood drooping heavily, her eyes cast down. Suddenly her mother gave a great start, pushed the girl violently from her, and stood aloof. She did not speak for a few minutes; the clock ticked in the dreadful silence. Rebecca cast one glance at her mother, whose eyes seemed to light the innermost recesses of her being to her own vision; then she would have looked away, but her mother's voice arrested her.
>
> "Look at me," said Deborah. And Rebecca looked; it was like uncovering a disfigurement or a sore.
>
> "What--ails you?" said her mother, in a terrible voice.
>
> Then Rebecca turned her head; her mother's eyes could not hold her any longer. It was as if her very soul shrank.
>
> "Go out of this house," said her mother, after a minute.
>
> Rebecca did not make a sound. She went, bending . . .[32]

There is also good genre painting. The tavern scene and the cherry-picnic in Silas Berry's orchard are detailed, vivid, and charming. The opening scene of the novel is also good regionalism. In it Mrs. Freeman depicts the Thayer kitchen and the family--Caleb, Deborah, Rebecca, Ephraim, and Barnabas--assembled around the fire-

32. Ibid., pp. 192-193.

place on a Sunday night reading the Bible. This is so right, so appropriate, so significant a detail that it functions as a symbol. So does the scene later on where Barney walks down the road past the old Crane place.

> It appeared scarcely more than a lane; the old wheel-ruts were hidden between green, weedy ridges, the bordering stone walls looked like long green barrows being overgrown with poison-ivy vines and rank shrubs. For a long way there was no house except Sylvia Crane's. There was one cellar where a house had stood before Barney could remember. There were a few old blackened chimney-bricks still there, the step-stone worn by dead and forgotten feet, and the old lilac-bushes that had grown against the front windows. Two popular trees, too, stood where the front yard had met the road, casting long shadows like men.[33]

Everett Carter, in his study of Howells and realism, says that realists were not very interested in symbolism. Such is clearly not the case with Mrs. Freeman in Pembroke. She uses various kinds of symbols and she uses symbols in various ways. Here more than elsewhere the influence of Hawthorne can be found. The unfinished house in which Barney goes to live and Barney's illness at the end of the book are Hawthornesque. So is the relationship of Barney's physical and psychological condition. As Barney's fixed attitude grows stronger, he looks more deformed physically. When Thomas Payne meets Barney on the road, he stares at him.

> A horror as of something uncanny and abnormal stole over him. Was the man's back curved, or had he by some subtle vision a perception

33. Ibid., p. 166.

> of some terrible spiritual deformity, only symbolized by a curved spine?[34]

This is like Hawthorne--even to the author's ambivalent attitude. Unfortunately it is the poorest section of the book. Barney's reaction to Mrs. Sloane, the prostitute, as a symbol is also like Hawthorne.

> To this young man brought up in the extreme thrift and neatness of a typical New England household, this strange untidiness, as he viewed it through his strained mental state, seemed to have a deeper significance, and reveal the very shame and squalor of the soul itself, and its own existence and thoughts, by material images. (italics mine)[35]

These symbols remind us of Hawthorne because through them Mrs. Freeman is trying to do what Hawthorne did. She is trying to make the narrative bear the weight of her psychological insights--her insights into the nature of the "diseased will." But because she is saying other things as well, her symbols also work in other ways. For instance, they function in a historical or social context, Pembroke is a comment on the relation of the present to the past in New England--of the crushing burden of the past weighing down on the present. In each of the three main families in the story, the younger generation is forced into unnatural paths and into permanent or temporary unhappiness by the older generation. The presence of Silas Berry, Cephas Bernard, and Deborah Thayer makes

34. Ibid., p. 298.

35. Ibid., p. 205.

the free development of a happy life impossible for their children.

Silas is the sly Yankee turned mean by poverty. Cephas is almost a caricature of the Calvinist theologian. However, it is Deborah who is the great naturalistic symbol of New England Calvinism; in fact she is Mrs. Freeman's most explicit and detailed picture of the terrible pressure of New England's Puritan past. She has three children. Each of the children has a weakness--Barney a psychological one, Rebecca an emotional one, Ephraim a physical one. In each case Deborah's moral rigidity drives the child from her and contributes to the destruction of the child. Barney and Rebecca are driven from their home and Ephraim is driven to his death by a woman whose response to human failing is, "I shall be just as hard on him as the Lord for it."[36]

Deborah is possibly Mrs. Freeman's greatest creation. She is a successful creation to the modern reader because, among other things, she is presented ironically. While accusing other characters of being prisoners of the past, she is herself the epitome of the past. Her most dramatic scene, the one in which she punishes Ephraim, is richly ironic. Ephraim had always been forbidden any physical activity and rich food because of his bad heart, and he had always been afraid of his mother. One night unknown to Deborah he goes sledding and, on returning, eats half

36. Ibid., p. 58.

a mince pie. The next day he fails to communicate a message of Deborah's to her husband Caleb. Brooding over the moral failures of her other children, she decides to punish him; and Ephraim, for the first time, is not afraid. He has become free of her. She persists in punishing him when it is too late and for the wrong thing. After she strikes him once, he collapses, not from the blow as she thinks but from the exertions and food of the previous night. Then she prays:

> It was a strange prayer, full of remorse, of awful agony, of self defense of her own act, and her own position as the vicar of God upon earth for her child. "I couldn't let him go astray too!" she shrieked out. "I couldn't, I couldn't! O Lord, thou knowest that I couldn't! I would--have lain him upon--the altar, as Abraham laid Isaac! Oh, Ephraim, my son, my son, my son!"[37]

Here is the neurotic identification with the Lord's will, the ironic willingness to offer that which is no longer hers, and the tragic determination to strike at Barney and Rebecca through the child. The scene closes with Deborah praying compulsively in her room while a neighbor woman and the doctor's wife keep the vigil with the corpse.

> About two o'clock Mrs. Ray tiptoed into the pantry, and brought forth a mince-pie. "I found one that had been cut on the top shelf," she whispered. She and the doctor's wife ate the remainder of poor Ephraim's pie.[38]

In this last scene and others like it Mrs. Freeman writes

37. Ibid., p. 240.

38. Ibid., p. 242.

with a sureness and skill unsurpassed by any novelist of her time.

Pembroke provides Mrs. Freeman with an opportunity to touch on another favorite theme--the role of women in New England society.[39] It was the rather unhappy role of women to accept as best they could the conditions created by men. Sylvia can only wait for Richard to come to his senses. Mrs. Barnard has no choice but to accept her husband's culinary foolishness. And Charlotte has to live in a world made jointly by Cephas and Barney. "Charlotte had acquiesced forlornly; there was nothing else for her to do."[40] Mrs. Freeman's attitude toward the situation is somewhat ambivalent. Charlotte and Sylvia are clearly victims, but because of the constancy of their loves, they are noble and admired. Deborah, who usurps the man's role in her own house, is destroyed by the dimensions of her own will. This clearly is not the woman's way. However, women may break out of the confines of their role in the name of love--that self-denying love that overcomes

39. This special concern with the impact of New England upon women was detected as a major motif even by the earliest critics.

"She draws many pictures of the American girl--not the rather attenuated smart person which we may meet fresh any month in Mr. Howells' pages--not the brilliant omnipotent belle of fashionable life, but the fair, delicate, nervous, independent flower of New England, the girl who "teaches school," works at dressmaking, or on the farm, whose slender form and pink and white complexion cover a resolute will and sensitive nerves." Mary E. Wilkins," Bookman [England] I (December, 1891) 102.

40. Freeman, Pembroke, p. 10.

will. Charlotte does.

Women in Mrs. Freeman's fiction pay a price for the role they are forced to play. It is one of the strengths of Pembroke that the writer, refined if not reticent, deals more honestly than any other writer of the New England regional tradition with the sexual part of that price. She presents the strong sexual attraction between Barney and Charlotte and pain that denial brings. Her awareness of sexuality is also shown in Rebecca's illicit relations with William Berry, in Rose Berry's pathetic pursuit of sexual fulfilment with any husband, and in Sylvia's poignant, spinsterish fantasies.

Pembroke is pervaded by a mood of naturalism. The major characters are compulsive people driven to untenable positions by uncontrollable forces. When Thomas Payne tells Barney to mend his ways, Barney's answer is as follows:

> "I can't help it," he said.
> "Can't help it, you ----"
> "I can't, before God, Thomas."[41]

Rebecca and Ephraim are driven to their tragic situations by circumstances they cannot control. Mrs. Freeman's women are victims. They are passive in the face of situations over which they have no control. And surrounding these compulsive characters and these victims is a world essentially indifferent to them. This indifference is

41. Ibid., p. 297.

displayed in chapter XIV through a manipulation of point of view. Years having passed since the initial complications and Deborah's death, the author has the tragedies retold in summary form by a neighbor woman driving through the village with a visitor from out of town.

> After the door had slammed behind Rebecca the two women drove home, and the guest was presently feasted on company-fare for supper, and all these strange tragedies and histories to which she had listened had less of a savor in her memory, than the fine green tea and the sweet cake on her tongue. The hostess, too, did not have them in mind any longer; she pressed the plum-cake and hot biscuits and honey on her cousin, in lieu of gossip, for entertainment. The stories were old to her, except as she found a new listener to them, and they had never had any vital interest for her.[42]

Mary Wilkins Freeman was neither a biological determinist nor an environmentalist. But she did record insights that approached these positions. This extreme realism--this approach toward naturalism--can best be considered as resulting from her attitude toward place, the effect of time on place, and the effect of a time-laden place on character. The customary way of considering Mary Wilkins Freeman is to consider her in relation to Sarah Orne Jewett. Simpson says in making his comparison, "Miss Jewett is the more mellow and genteel in that her psychological realism is seldom pushed to the point of grimness or morbidity."[43] "Mellow" is a particularly

42. Ibid., pp. 308-309.

43. Claude M. Simpson, The Local Colorists: American Short Stories, 1857-1900 (New York, 1960), p. 21.

apt word because it connotes a seasoning--a comfortable attitude toward the past. She had made her peace with her ancestors and created out of her fondness for them a kind of golden age. In other words, Sarah looked upon the past with nostalgia; and because her attitude toward the past was nostalgic, she did not see her characters as "pushed to the point of grimness or morbidity" by it.

Mrs. Freeman presents time in terms of place. That is, she portrays New England's past in terms of its effect on the diminished present of a specific locality. Her characters' relationship to their environment is their relationship to the past. She views this relationship ironically and tragically. She is free of nostalgia and, therefore, a realist. F. L. Pattee has said, "For external nature she cares little. The backgrounds are meager . . . There is no Mary E. Wilkins country as there is a Sarah Orne Jewett country."[44] This is not really true. There is a Mary E. Wilkins country, but it is viewed realistically, not nostalgically. It is also viewed functionally, as an agent shaping the lives of characters. H. S. Canby points out:

> Mrs. Wilkins-Freeman, whose pen is far more skillful [than that of Miss Jewett] goes further. With her the setting is interesting only for its effect upon the dwellers of her hill country. . . . She is a conscious realist.[45]

44. F. L. Pattee, A History of American Literature Since 1870 (New York, 1917), p. 238.

45. Henry Seidel Canby, A Study of the Short Story (New York, 1913), p. 58.

Pembroke--restrictive, burdensome, diminished Pembroke--is Mary E. Wilkins country. Because she sees it for what it is and sees what it _is_ in terms of what it _was_ and because she is able to project this insight into several short stories, _Jane Field_, _Pembroke_, and parts of several later works, her work constitutes, at its best, the farthest advance and finest achievement of the New England regional tradition. It is this vision of time and place that enables her to do more than her predecessors.

> The author of "A Humble Romance" had come to grips with many more sides of life than the author of "Deephaven," and she set them down unflinchingly. She had observed the New England character and could record its peculiar traits. Her early stories burn with the life of hard experience.[46]

It was Mary Wilkins Freeman's fate, however, to share with many greater writers an almost total inability to develop a critical perspective about her own work. She never knew what her best work was, and she never knew the difference between her good and bad work. Most unfortunately, she never seemed to know when she had worked out a form especially adapted to her talent and needs. Consequently, after finishing _Pembroke_, a novel which had solved the problem of form that had plagued her predecessors--after telling a genuine regional and realistic story with no vacuum at the center--she began almost at once to follow false lights.

Her first misfortune of this kind was a collaboration

46. F. O. Matthiessen, _Sarah Orne Jewett_ (Boston, 1929), p. 146.

with J. E. Chamberlin, the genteel editor of The Youth's Companion. Together they wrote The Long Arm (1895), a mystery story which won a publisher's prize in England where it first appeared. Mrs. Freeman enjoyed the prize (she was always very appreciative of recognition), but she became upset when the British publisher, Bacheller, Johnson, and Bacheller, issued a cheap paper edition over which she had no control. The situation was further complicated by Mrs. Freeman's demand that the American edition be in Harper's hands. Chamberlin stayed in the background and let Mrs. Freeman direct the battle. The result was a long and rather unpleasant correspondence over money. Several things emerge from the correspondence. First, she was popular in England--popular enough for publishing houses to consider her an investment. Secondly, as the years passed, she became financially sharp and quick to do battle in defense of her profits. This is only to be expected; she was single and had to make her way.

The Long Arm can be considered a momentary diversion which achieved its purpose, the British prize. Madelon (1896) is a more serious sign of the failure of the author's critical intelligence. In it she seems to have forgotten all that she learned about the construction of a regional novel. All of the hard-won progress that can be traced through Jane Field and Pembroke seems to be lost. On the brink of a masterpiece, with a near masterpiece behind her, she abandons the realistic pose almost entirely

and plunges unhappily into romantic melodrama.

Madelon is the story of Madelon Hautville who is loved indifferently by Burr Gordon, her heart's desire, and relentlessly by Lot Gordon, Burr's rich evil cousin. One dark night Lot Gordon forces his attentions on Madelon, who is dark and passionate because of distant Indian ancestry. She stabs him. Burr takes the blame and is indicted for attempted murder. Lot promises to free Burr if Madelon will marry him. She agrees. He has a change of heart, releases them both and dies, leaving all his money to Burr.

The novel is weak from almost every point of view. The characters are unidimensional and melodramatic. Burr does not develop, and Lot's reversal is completely unbelievable. The main action is thin--hardly more than a short story. Consequently the novel is padded. Mrs. Freeman frequently interrupts the action--even the most dramatic confrontations--with long passages of genre painting. The central situation is a triangle. The author keeps the story going simply by adding complicating lovers on either end. One such character, Jim Otis, is carefully developed, dominates two chapters, and then drops out of the story completely. The lovers' dialog, which takes up considerable space, is almost invariably bad. Most seriously, Mrs. Freeman begins to drift away from the stark sentences, which seemed to come so naturally right from the beginning, and into undergraduate fine writing.

Describing a horseback ride she says, "Then she spared not the mare for nigh three miles on the New Salem road."[47] She was also guilty of many other flights like the following.

> All that day, and many days after that, poor Madelon Hautville, who had been striving like any warrior against the powers and principalities of human wills and passions, and had grounded her arms after a victory which had left her wounded almost to death, carried her bleeding heart and walked her woman's treadmill.[48]

The novel does treat in its own way several serious and recurring themes. One of these is the role of women in a man's world. Some of the best scenes in the book deal with Madelon's inability to make men believe her and to take her seriously. When she tells her father the truth about the stabbing, he replies, "You have done nothing worse than go daft, as women will, to shield a fellow that's used you ill."[49] Earlier she had been driven to impotent range when "David smiled down at her convulsed face. 'She's nothing but a woman' he thought to himself."[50] The theme is not focused throughout the story as it is in Pembroke and in a number of short stories. Madelon's rebellion is not really successful or,

47. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Madelon (New York, 1896), p. 60.

48. Ibid., p. 171.

49. Ibid., p. 171.

50. Ibid., p. 56.

in the last analysis, relevant. It is through her sacrificial willingness to marry Lot, not through any rebellion against the woman's role, that she provides the basis for a happy ending.

In its own way Madelon also reflects Mrs. Freeman's continuing interest in determinism. In this novel, as in Pembroke, heredity is offered as a basis for action. Madelon's charms are explained as a "grace, inherited from a far-away French grandmother."[51] Her stabbing of Lot is also explained as heredity. "The mixed blood of two races, in which action is quick to follow impulse, surged up to Madelon's head."[52] This is conventional stuff, found in much of the woman's fiction of the time, as is the contrast between the dark, passionate Madelon and the blond, demure Dorothy Fair. There is other evidence in the novel, however, that she was thinking seriously about the relation of heredity to character. Lot explains his malevolent conduct this way:

> But we've got to swing our shoulders one way, whether we will or no, because our father and our grandfather did before us. Good Lord, aren't men in leading-strings, no matter how high they kick? . . . You never can get out of this one gait that you were born to except in your own looking-glass.[53]

Later when Madelon tells him that his plans are mad, he

51. Ibid., p. 11.

52. Ibid., p. 38.

53. Ibid., p. 56.

answers "No madder--than--my ancestors made me."[54] It is interesting to note that Mrs. Freeman was reading Ibsen in the '90's.

Some of the recurring themes are there, but they are not enough to save the mood. Foster's analysis of the author's intention is probably correct.

> Clearly Miss Wilkins was attempting strong incidents and a frankly romantic tone even as she sought to preserve some of the sobriety in observation and character delineation of her earlier stories.[55]

The attempt, however, was not successful. Mrs. Freeman was apparently not aware of the dimension of her failure, and she gratefully accepted whatever praise the novel received. Among those who liked it was Hamlin Garland. In a letter to him dated October 4, 1896, she says, "I am delighted that you are pleased with Madelon."[56] She did not, however, try to repeat it.

54. Ibid., p. 160

55. Foster, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, pp. 138-139.

56. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, letter to Hamlin Garland, October 4, 1896 (University of Southern California Library, Los Angeles).

CHAPTER V

THE ECONOMIC NOVELS

Although Mrs. Freeman never developed the critical intelligence to become discriminating and selective in organizing and exploiting her own literary virtues, she was able to recognize rank inferiority when it confronted her. She came to recognize Madelon for what it was and never wrote anything like it again. But she did continue to write--voluminously. A. B. Maurice said:

> The years between 1897 and 1904 were feverously productive. To that period belong "Jerome: a Poor Man," "The Heart's Highway," "Understudies," "The Wind in the Rose Bush," and half a dozen others. These novels are histories of New England localities, uncompromisingly faithful to fact.[1]

Maurice omits The Portion of Labor, calls Understudies a novel and claims that The Heart's Highway is faithful to fact. After such a display, one doubts that he ever read Mrs. Freeman's work. However, he is right in this regard: it was a period of feverish activity--activity that produced, in addition to the works mentioned, The People of Our Neighborhood, Silence and Other Stories, The Love of Parson Lord and Other Stories, The Homecoming of Jessica, Six Trees, The Givers, The Jamesons, and, in 1905, The Debtor. The decade after Madelon, during which

1. Arthur B. Maurice, "Makers of Modern American Fiction," The Mentor, VII (August 15, 1919), 1.

time she married and moved to Metuchen, New Jersey, was indeed productive.

Of these many books, the most interesting--that is, the ones that reveal an advance as well as a falling off--are these novels: Jerome, a Poor Man (1897), The Portion of Labor (1901), and The Debtor (1905). The first two novels bear an important relationship to Pembroke. With Pembroke they can be viewed as a trilogy of New England regionalism. Pembroke deals with "old" New England, the rural hinterland which lay under the heavy yoke of Calvinism and subsistence agriculture. Jerome deals with the same hinterland in a time of transition. In this novel the old rural code and way of life confront the new, urban code and its values. The time is the moment of impact when agriculture and cottage industry begin to retreat before the powerful march of the industrial revolution. The Portion of Labor deals with the "new" New England after the shift from an agricultural to an industrial economy. The story is set in a provincial mill town where the class lines are drawn, the class war is being fought, and the Calvinistic conscience wrestles with the values of the Gilded Age. Part of Mrs. Freeman's strength as a realist can be seen in her treatment of these two ways of life. Confronted by the sophistries and Jerry-built ethics of the Gilded Age, Sarah Orne Jewett and even William Dean Howells tended to treat the old rural order nostalgically and romantically under the species of the

"good old days." The intellectual privation of Pembroke and the poverty-stricken boyhood of Jerome Edwards, however, are not sentimentalized; Mrs. Freeman had no illusions about the life of the proletariat. (This is not to say that sentimentality is not a flaw in these novels; it is. But it is the result of Mrs. Freeman's failure to solve structural problems, not a failure in her powers of observation.) One can pursue the idea of the trilogy only so far, however, because there are significant differences between Pembroke and the two later novels. Mrs. Freeman was, apparently, aware of this difference. She said:

> I am delighted at Jerome's [sic] pleasant reception, and to tell the truth--astonished--I never felt so nervous and doubtful about a book in my life.[2]

This difference which caused some doubt resulted from what might be termed a relocation of emphasis. Pembroke, Jane Field and the early short stories revealed primarily a psychological and personal concern. In them the author writes chiefly of the relation of an individual to another and to his own soul. Although she treats economic and social forces and relationships, she keeps them in the background. In Jerome and The Portion of Labor, however, the emphasis is placed on these economic and sociological forces. The novels reflect what Leon Howard called "the growth in social consciousness;" because of this growth,

2. Mary E. Wilkins, letter to H. L. Nelson of Harper's, August 31, 1897 (New York Public Library).

Mrs. Freeman becomes a critical realist. Her limited knowledge of economic theory, her undeveloped critical intelligence, and her difficulties with the longer form, however, keep her from becoming a successful one.

Speaking of Jerome, Edward Foster said:

> Warned presumably by the failure of Madelon, Miss Wilkins returned to the subject she knew--New England middle class character, represented with minimal sensationalism.[3]

"Middle class" is not a fortunate term. Jerome deals more with a relationship between squirearchy and peasantry, and the best parts of the book deal with the lives and thoughts of the rural poor. She was, however, writing about characters she knew well; and the central story is of Jerome's great "middle class" journey from poverty and the lower classes to wealth, honor, and the hand of the squire's daughter. It is Mary Freeman's version of what Trilling called "the young-man-from-the-provinces theme."

Mrs. Freeman is not really serious in recounting Jerome's rags-to-riches story. She is simply using a convention which everyone from Horatio Alger to Mrs. E.D.E.N. Southworth was using in the popular magazines and best sellers of the day. It is in character, character relationships, and occasional symbolism that she makes her important thematic statements. In other words, having abandoned the tapestry technique of Pembroke, she is once again, under the limitations of New England re-

3. Edward Foster, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (New York, 1956), p. 144.

gionalism, allowing richness of matter to be dissipated by weakness of form.

Among the characters who constitute part of the thematic statement, the lower class characters are the most successful. Jerome's parents and Uncle Ozias are developed in more detail than most of the others, and all three of them are naturalistically conceived. For example, after Abel, Jerome's father, disappears and is presumed dead, Ozias says of him:

> He ain't been a-lookin' forward to eatin', but to payin' up the interest money when it came due; he ain't been a'lookin' forward to heaven but to clearin' off the mortgage. It's been all he's had. It's bore down on his body and his soul, an' it's braced him up to keep on workin'.[4]

Here is a life constricted by economic circumstances. The limits of this life are made explicit and poignant by Mrs. Freeman's use of the significant detail. While going over her missing husband's clothing, Ann Edwards comes across a silk scarf.

> "His father thought so much of that neckerchief," said Mrs. Edwards, catching her breath. "It was most the only thing he bought for himself for ten years that he didn't actually need."[5]

Ann, the hypochondriac mother, is also a naturalistic figure--a victim. After her husband disappears, she struggles to keep the farm on which the heartless Doctor Prescott holds the mortgage; but she is ignorant of law and of

4. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Jerome, A Poor Man (New York, 1899), pp. 38-39.

5. Ibid., p. 52.

the world of finance. However, Ann is a "naturalistic" character not only because she is a victim at the mercy of the economic system but also because Mrs. Freeman portrays her without the softening effects of sentiment. She points out that, "In spite of her fierce independence, a lifetime of poverty and struggle against the material odds of life had given a sordid taint to her character."[6] Poverty had made her neurotic, defensive, querrulous, and unattractive. "So hostile had been all her conditions of life that she never laid down her weapons."[7]

Uncle Ozias Lamb, a shoemaker, is also conceived naturalistically as a victim.

> He was almost resolved into a statue illustrative of his own toil. He never stood if he could help it; his knees felt weak under him if he tried to do so. He sank into the first seat and settled heavily forward into his one pose of life.[8]

He differs from Abel and Ann in that he has both self and social consciousness. He is aware that he and his class are victimized. He warns Jerome,

> You've got to work for the breath of your nostrils; and not for the breath of your mind or your soul. You'll find you can't fight your lot in life, J'rome Edwards; you ain't got standin' room enough outside it.[9]

Elsewhere he says of the class in general, "They ain't

6. Ibid., p. 239.

7. Ibid., p. 239.

8. Ibid., p. 38.

9. Ibid., p. 206.

got any natural weapons. Providence ain't looked out for 'em."[10]

Scattered through the novel are other, briefer portraits of the victimized poor. In chapter IV Abel's funeral is attended by women "worn and old before their prime, their mouths sunken."[11] Elsewhere Mrs. Freeman introduces us to the inmates of the poorhouse and to the repressed, spinster school teacher who starves on her salary "until she died, some ten years later, being of a delicate habit, and finding no place of comfort in the world."[12]

The upper-class characters are not so successfully portrayed. Because she does not see them as victims of the system and because she will not view them as the agents of exploitation, the author does not treat these characters naturalistically. As Van Wyck Brooks says, "She became unreal and self-conscious in the presence of high life."[13] In Jerome this "unreality" takes the form of the Anglicizing and sentimentalizing of the Merritts, the family of gentry into which Jerome eventually marries. The three women in the family are all disappointingly asexual. The squire himself, with his heroic upper class

10. Ibid., p. 190.

11. Ibid., p. 54.

12. Ibid., p. 182.

13. Van Wyck Brooks, New England: Indian Summer (New York, 1950), p. 476.

cronies, his constant joviality, his cloying affection for his daughter and "Englished" speech (he is forever saying "By the Lord Harry") is as unsuccessful a character as Mrs. Freeman ever created.

The only interesting upper-class character in the novel is Dr. Prescott. He has all the conventional characteristics of the villain. Selfish, unfeeling, and proud, with punctilious habits of church attendance and religious observation, he is a typical, Pharisaical Puritan hypocrite. He is grasping, which is to say he is a Yankee gone sour. After Jerome has witnessed his threat to foreclose on a man who was indebted to him for medical services, the doctor tells the boy, "Don't give and don't take; then you'll make your way in life."[14] Conventional as he appears, he serves well enough in the role of capitalistic antagonist in the class war. He is also the antithesis of Jerome.

The character of Jerome himself is presented unevenly. At times he reveals the author's insight into the tastes and values of the poor. When he first sees the squire's den, he is shocked. "'No carpet,' he thought, 'and no haircloth sofa, and no rocking chair.'"[15] But for the most part, he is sentimentalized; Mrs. Freeman was always coy in writing of children. Jerome is wise beyond his years, Lucinda Merritt, the squire's daughter, is virtuous

14. Freeman, Jerome, p. 130.

15. Ibid., p. 87.

beyond belief, and as they grow up together and fall in love, no comedy of manners, of which Mrs. Freeman is so capable, develops. There is only sentiment.

As the story unfolds, Jerome becomes a strikingly obvious Christ figure. He suffers poverty and engages in hard work with heroic resignation. As he matures, he discovers in himself the capacity to heal the sick. In one extensively developed scene he significantly breaks the Sabbath to heal a sick woman. He vows to give away any money that might come to him; and when he unexpectedly gets wealth, he does just that. The parallel is not perfect, however. For all his generosity Jerome has one unchristian flaw--he is unable to receive. In his willingness to give everything to others coupled with his inability to receive even the smallest gift, he is actually a caricature of Emersonian self-reliance rather than a symbol of Christian charity.

Foster says, "Despite its surface realism, Jerome is virtually an allegory of unhealthy pride."[16] Although he overstates the case, Foster is right; the hubristic allegory is there, as it is intended to be. Three characters represent different states of the soul. The doctor is completely self-centered and self-reliant; he neither gives nor receives. Jerome is incapable of reciprocal love because pride will not let him receive. The squire, with his easy exchange of love among his family and friends,

16. Foster, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, p. 144.

represents the properly poised soul. None of these characters thinks or acts in economic or social terms; they function chiefly in terms of personal relationships and virtues. The character who puts these relationships and virtues in an economic perspective (and who, for all his rant, seems to possess the same poise as the Squire) is Uncle Ozias.

Uncle Ozias Lamb, the most richly comic character in the novel, is, like most of the other elements in the book, not completely successful. He is a major character in the first half of the narrative; in the second half he ceases to have any relevant function. This is true of many characters in many novels, but it creates special problems for Mrs. Freeman. She doesn't know quite what to do with him when he occupies the center of the stage, and she doesn't know how to get rid of him when she no longer needs him. He is a variety of things. A shoemaker, he also is the village atheist--a common figure in the fiction of the time. Another example is Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson, who appeared only three years earlier. Ozias had stopped going to church when he was silenced for criticizing rich and influential members of the congregation. But he is more than a conventional "village atheist;" he is a socialist--a vocal militant in the class war. It is largely through him that Mrs. Freeman brings into focus the economic themes of the novel.

He is only vocally militant, however. Mrs. Freeman

never had an economic theory of her own, and she was never certain of her handling of economic theory--especially radical theory--in the context of a novel. Her solution was to place potentially dangerous theory in the mouths of characters who were either weak or evil. The radicals of The Portion of Labor are evil; Ozias is weak. "Ozias Lamb would deliver himself of riotous sentiments but . . . he would have pegged there through a revolution."[17] The author sympathizes with Ozias; but in making him ineffectual she makes his views trivial. This ambivalent treatment of radical sentiments and character stems from Mrs. Freeman's basic flaw as an economic novelist. Everett Carter defines critical realism as "literature which truthfully reports warped and maladjusted social relationships so that men may study and improve them."[18] Mary Wilkins Freeman was not certain who was warped and maladjusted because she was not certain where, in the economic order, truth lay. Unlike Howells, Henry Fuller, and Norris, she had no system.

Jerome asks the key economic question--the question which many characters in other novels were also asking in this waning decade of the Gilded Age--

> He thought of the one poor, little bit of soil which he was going to offer him [the doctor], to keep a roof over his head. Why should this man have all this, and he

17. Freeman, Jerome, p. 192.

18. Everett Carter, Howells and the Age of Realism (Philadelphia, 1954), p. 171.

> and his so little? Was it because he was better? Jerome shook his head vehemently. Was it because the Lord loved him better? Jerome looked up in the blue sky. The problem of the rights of the soil of the old earth was upon the boy, but he could not solve it--only scowl and grieve over it.[19]

Ozias' provides one answer--an answer rooted in the concept of class-war. Ozias is quite explicit. "I tell ye that is the reason for all the sufferin', and the wrongs, and the crucifixion on this earth. The rich are the reason for it all."[20] Earlier he had given a vivid picture of the town's two successful capitalists.

> You've heard about cuttle-fishes, J'rome, ain't ye? . . . Well, I'll tell ye what they be. They're an awful kind of fish. I never see one, but Belinda's brother that was a sailor, I've heard him tell enough to make your blood run cold. They're all head an' eyes an' arms. Their eyes are big as saucers, an' they're made just to see things the cuttle-fishes want to kill; an' they've got a hundred arms, with suckin' claws on the ends, an' they just search an' seek, search an' seek, with them dreadful eyes that ain't got no life but hate an' appetite, an' they stretch out an' feel, stretch out an' feel, with them hundred arms, 'till they git what they want, an' then they lay hold with all the suckers on them hundred arms an' clutch an' wind an' twist an' overlay, till, whether it's a drownin' sailor or a ship, you can't see nothing but the cuttle-fish----By-an'-by these ain't nothin' but cuttle-fish.[21]

Ozias' solution to the class-war is explicitly socialistic. He suggests a complete redistribution of wealth,

19. Freeman, Jerome, p. 124.

20. Ibid., p. 216.

21. Ibid., p. 195.

although he allows that with the "graspin' qualities" of the rich and the "spillin' qualities" of the poor the same group would tend to regain control.

> "Well," returned Doctor Prescott, "what then, Mr. Lamb."
>
> "Give it back again," said Ozias, shortly.[22]

Ozias articulates the class war, but many other characters and scenes also exemplify the theme. Ann and Abel Edwards and all their naturalistically conceived relatives are victims of the class-war. So are the various townspeople who are driven by foreclosure into the poorhouse. One of these is John Upham, after whose ancestors the town of Upham Corners was named. The defeat of John Upham by the doctor might well stand as a symbol of the defeat of the old rural order by the new urban capitalists.[23]

Jerome's relations with the doctor also develop the theme of the class-war. Throughout chapter V Jerome's mother repeats as a refrain the terrible phrase, "Doctor Prescott has got the mortgage." When Jerome goes to negotiate the mortgage, the doctor keeps him waiting because he won't leave his dinner for a poor man. Having completed his painful negotiations with the doctor, Jerome speculates on his own fate in a cruel world.

22. Ibid., pp. 216-217.

23. Suggestive in the same way is the manner in which the doctor--the capitalist, technician, Yankee--dominates the minister. The old Calvinist values disintegrate under the impact of the Gilded Age.

> "He [Jerome's father] said that a poor seller was the slave of a rich buyer; but I think--" Jerome hesitated. He was not used yet to expressing his independent thought.
> "Go on," said the squire.
> "I think it works both ways, and the poor man is the slave either way, whether he buys or sells," said the boy, half defiantly, half timidly.
> "I guess you're about right," said the squire.[24]

In statements like this one Jerome is clearly thinking and speaking along lines articulated by his uncle. But when he tries to establish his own relationship to the class war, he fails. Speaking to his uncle, he says:

> "The rich have everything--all the land, all the good food. The poor have nothing. It is wrong." Then he said, "If ever I am rich, I will give to the poor."[25]

In this answer Jerome takes an economic problem--a class problem--and makes it a problem of private virtue and morality. He feels no loyalty to a group or a movement but rather an obligation to traditional virtue. Foster has said that "Jerome, despite its diatribes against the rich and avaricious, is in no sense a proletarian novel."[26] It is Jerome's solution and the book's solution to the economic problem that makes Mr. Foster's statement true.

Here in this answer Mrs. Freeman's two artistic weaknesses come together. Her first weakness might be called a failure of intellection; the second, flowing from

24. Freeman, Jerome, p. 94.

25. Ibid., p. 198.

26. Foster, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, p. 145.

it, is the failure of form. Having created a vivid setting, having brought all her powers of observation to bear on the position of the poor at the moment of confrontation between the old and the new values and having created two worthy antagonists in Ozias Lamb and Dr. Prescott, she could offer no better a system for solving the incipient class-war than little gestures of private philanthropy. Without a system or rationale she was unable to put her good economic characters into the central conflict and keep them there. She was left then with the old problem of the New England regional tradition--the vacuum at the center. Into this vacuum, like Harriet Beecher Stowe before her, she poured all the various clichés of Dickensian melodrama. The central story is simply one more tale of a poor boy's climb to wealth and the hand of a rich man's daughter. Maidens grow faint; lovers have premonitions; long lost loved ones are returned to their families; stray youths are appropriately married off; crises are solved by the appearance of sudden wealth.

Those individual scenes which are not rooted in the class-war are usually overdone. In one scene Jerome kisses the squire's boots. As a result the book is incredibly uneven. Fine, vivid scenes growing out of Mrs. Freeman's wonderful gifts of observation are followed by scenes of pathetic treacle. The final result is not one but three novels of varying degrees of badness. As a psychological novel and an allegory of pride it is in-

ferior to Pembroke, which was less encumbered by sentiment and melodrama. As a Dickensian melodrama it is on no higher a level than the works of Mrs. Southworth. As an economic novel it begins with great possibilities; but in its tepid solution of philanthropy and in its forced, conventional solutions to problems of private wealth and marriage, it evades the important questions that it raises. In this evasion lies the central failure of the book.

Jerome was followed in 1899 by The Jamesons and a year later by The Heart's Highway, but neither of these can be considered a major effort. The next important novel was The Portion of Labor (1901). Under the title of Ellen it began to appear serially in Harper's in late 1900. A letter from the editor, H. N. Alden, to Mrs. Freeman in August, 1900, indicates her ever-increasing stature in the literary market place. In the letter he praised Ellen and offered $6,000 for the serial rights. Mrs. Freeman accepted happily.

From the time of its publication The Portion of Labor has called forth more critical comment than any other Freeman novel except Pembroke. Howells, who ten years before had written of unionism and the class-war in A Hazard of New Fortunes, praised the book for portraying the psysiognomy of the American poor.[27] A generation later Arthur Hobson Quinn said, "The Portion of Labor (1901) belongs

27. Clara and Rudolf Kirk, William Dean Howells (New York, 1962), pp. 342-343.

to the fiction of protest."[28] In Economic Criticism in American Fiction (Philadelphia, 1936) Claude Flory offers a brief defense of the novel for its realistic view of the conditions of the working man.[29] More recently Babette Levy has said:

> The Portion of Labor, a novel published in 1901, has its setting in a factory town. . . . In this one novel the newer aspects of the class struggle, labor versus capital, unions versus paternalistic owners, stand out clearly; especially sad is the fate of the over-aged worker.[30]

These brief comments establish two points: first, that Mrs. Freeman was writing an economic novel; second, that the novel's merits result from her powers of observation as they are focused on the plight of the working classes. What these comments don't establish is the novel's merit qua novel. This merit can best be determined by an examination of its themes and techniques, a consideration of Mrs. Freeman's solutions to the problems raised, and a study of the relationship of the main theme to the structure of the novel.

The central story in The Portion of Labor is simply a variation of the main plot of Jerome. In this novel Ellen Brewster, a poor, talented girl, grows up in a

28. Arthur H. Quinn, American Fiction: An Historical and Critical Survey (New York, 1936), p. 437.

29. pp. 219-220.

30. Babette M. Levy, "Mutations in New England Local Color," New England Quarterly, XIX (1946), 353.

working-class home, temporarily works in a factory, and, after a suitable display of nobility, marries the rich, young factory owner. Because the main plot is such a cliché, it is in the subplots and secondary characters that we find the important economic themes developed.

As in Jerome, Mrs. Freeman presents here a number of characters who are victimized by life and fate. Foster sees "Calvinist determinism" in The Portion of Labor.[31] That Mrs. Freeman is a determinist is evident. What is to be questioned is the Calvinism involved. Mrs. Freeman never formulated an economic theory and her thinking tended to drift in religious matters, for theological speculation was not characteristic of her habit of thought. Her determinism grew out of her close observation of the life of the poor of Randolph and Brattleboro and out of her sympathy for the unfulfilled lives she saw on every side. She had said as early as 1885:

> Nobody knows how some of the country women, with large families and small purses, do work. O, they are the ones I would help, if I were rich. Nothing, hardly, touches me so much.[32]

Considering this sympathy and her lack of theoretical speculation it might be most just to call her an emotional determinist. But because she viewed her characters as victims of economic forces, her emotional response is most

31. Foster, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, p. 155.

32. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, letter to Mary Q. Booth, April 21, 1885 (Columbia University Library, New York).

like that of the contemporary naturalists.[33] She had said that she didn't know she was a realist until someone told her she was. It is unfortunate that no one told her she was a naturalist; it might have helped her overcome the problems she never solved.

Among the naturalistically conceived characters is Joe Atkins, a co-worker of Ellen's father. After the factory has been shut down because of falling prices, the workers begin to congregate in the Brewster kitchen. When the door opens, the comment is made, "I do believe it's Joe Atkins; sounds like his cough."[34] His co-workers sympathize with Joe, who is obviously dying of consumption. Joe takes consolation in the fact that his family will profit from his death.

> "My life is insured for two thousand dollars," Joe Atkins said with an odd sort of pride. "I had it done three years ago. My lungs was sound as anybody's then, but that very next summer I worked up under that tin roof, and came out as wet as if I'd been dipped in the river, into an east wind, and got a chill. It was the only time I ever struck luck--to get insured before that happened. Nobody'd look at me now, and I dunno what they'd do. I ain't laid up a cent, I've had so much sickness in my family."[35]

33. This is not to say that any emotional response to material is implicit in any kind of naturalism but rather that certain American naturalists--Dreiser and Norris among them--tended to view their victimized characters with a kind of Olympian pity.

34. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, The Portion of Labor (New York, 1901), p. 97.

35. Ibid., p. 99.

Joe, whose family is kept poor and who is killed by the conditions under which he is forced to toil, is clearly a casualty of the class-war.

So are Ellen's Aunt Eva and her husband Jim Tenny. After the birth of their daughter, Jim is laid off; Eva is able to work, however. Because of this role reversal, Jim slides through stages of cynicism and bitterness into a kind of moral vacuum and finally runs away with another woman. Grieving for her lost husband, Eva loses her mind but not before she has laid the blame at the proper doorstep.

> "It's the tyrants that's over us that's to blame." Eva's voice shrilled higher. "Curse them!" she shrieked. "Curse them all!--every rich man in this gold-ridden country."

And later in the same scene:

> "He wouldn't have made that move if the manufacturers hadn't made theirs."[36]

There are many other victims of exploitation, such as Granville Joy, the intellectual young factory worker, whose economic circumstances prevent him from developing his capacities; and Sadie Peel, the ignorant shop girl whose love of the finery she sees in the lives of the rich makes her vulgar and eventually causes her to betray her class. But the most important and carefully drawn victim of the economic system is Andrew Brewster, Ellen's father.

Andrew Brewster is a victim in several important ways. As a victim of the frequent factory shut-downs, he shares

36. Ibid., pp. 286-287, p. 289.

with the other workers a very circumscribed and precarious existence constantly at the mercy of the manufacturers. His great love for his daughter causes him to invest his small savings in hopes that he will be able to provide Ellen with "advantages." The stock is a swindle. Penniless, he is unable to pay for the luxuries he has given Ellen. One fine scene, in which he is harassed by his creditors, becomes a nightmare of money. He is victimized by speculators and merchants as well as by manufacturers, and then he is discharged because he has slowed up. "'Oh, my God, I'm too old, I'm too old!' he sobbed; 'I'm out of it! I'm too old!'"[37] His humiliation is complete when Ellen goes to work to support the family and to pay his debts for the gifts he has given her. Here as in the case of Eva and Jim, the system forces on its victims a reversal of role, and the psychological consequences are tragic.

The Portion of Labor is not a successful novel. One of the chief reasons for its failure lies in the character of its heroine. Mrs. Freeman frequently sentimentalizes the innocence of children. She did in Jerome; she does again with Ellen. In childhood her characters are wise beyond their years; in adolescence they remain incredibly innocent. Consequently that most popular of American themes, the rite of passage, in Mrs. Freeman's hands comes to nothing.

In her maturity Ellen seems to be the author's answer

37. Ibid., p. 332.

to the "new woman." In Howells' A Hazard of New Fortunes, Garland's A Spoil of Office and elsewhere we encounter intellectual women involved in social reform--that is, we encounter the "new woman." In The Portion of Labor Ellen becomes involved in a strike and sets out to be a leader, but in mid-strike she has a change of heart and marries the boss. She rejects the role she had created for herself and agrees with her lover who had said, "It is not for a little, delicate girl to worry herself over the problems which are too much for men."[38] Ellen is as close as Mrs. Freeman ever comes to a sympathetic portrait of the feminist; all her other "new women," like Margaret Edes in The Butterfly House, are drawn unsympathetically.

Mrs. Freeman sentimentalizes the intra-class personal relationships of her upper-class characters. Risley's self-abnegation before Miss Cynthia and old Mrs. Lloyd's sacrificial devotion to her husband are sentimental clichés. But as in Jerome, these upper-class characters in The Portion of Labor are convincing in their roles as exploiters--that is, in their inter-class relationships. The relationship between rich and poor is characterized by a lack of communication--an economic variation of the isolation theme touched on so often in the short stories. The rich are guilty of romanticizing their own economic function--old Mrs. Lloyd sees her husband as a benefactor; Miss

38. Ibid., p. 278.

Cynthia worries about little Ellen Brewster because she does not think that the poor love their children as the rich do.

More serious consequences attend the rich man's contempt of the poor--his conviction that the workers need to be told nothing of their own futures. Mrs. Freeman says this of the elder Lloyd, who never came into contact with the men:

> His reasons for action were in most cases self-evolved and entirely self-regulated. He had said not a word to anyone, not even to his foreman, of his purpose to close the factory, until it was quite fixed; he had asked no advice, explained to no one the course of reasoning which led to his doing so.[39]

Much later his nephew follows the same path when he reduces wages because of a business slump and encounters the workers' opposition.

> "Did you explain all this to the committee?" asked Risley.
> "Explain? No! . . . They are all alike; they are a different race. We cannot help them and they cannot help themselves, because they are themselves."[40]

In Upham Corners and Pembroke there are rich people and poor, squire and peasant; but the relationships are chiefly of a personal and moral nature. There may be classes and even class-war, but there is little or no class consciousness. Consequently Ozias Lamb is a revolutionary, uttering new and dangerous ideas. Here in the

39. Ibid., p. 120.

40. Ibid., p. 499.

mill town, however, class lines are clearly drawn and each character knows what side he belongs to in the class war. The rich have a definite view of the poor as a group apart from themselves. In the following passage Risley reveals the rich man's awareness of distinctions and of distinctions within distinctions:

> "Cynthia," he said, "you do not realize that pride finds its native element in all strata of society, and riches are comparative. Let me inform you that these Brewsters, of whom this child sprung, claim as high places in the synagogue as any of your Lennoxes and Risleys, and, what is more, they believe themselves there. . . . The Lands, on the other side--the handsome aunt is a Land--are rather below caste, but they make up for it with defiance."[41]

Later Risley, a democrat at heart, paraphrases the general attitude of his class.

> There she [Ellen] is in her sphere of life, the daughter of a factory operative, in all probability in after-years to be the wife of one and the mother of others. . . . Now why do you want to increase the poor child's horizon farther than her little feet can carry her. Fit her to be a good female soldier in the ranks of labor, to be a good wife and mother to the makers of shoes. . . . The system of education in our schools is all wrong. It is both senseless and futile. Look at the children filing past to school, and look at their fathers, and their mothers too, filing past to the factory. Look at their present and look at their future. And look at the trash taught them in their text books--trash from its utter dissociation with their lives. You might as well teach a Zulu lace-work.[42]

When young Lloyd, the manufacturing heir, begins his

41. Ibid., pp. 81-82.

42. Ibid., p. 165.

uncertain courtship of Ellen, he becomes painfully aware of the gap between classes.

> Young Lloyd saw the mother coarsely perspiring and fairly aggressive in her delight over her daughter, when poor Andrew hoped he saw him well, and Mrs. Zelotes eyed him with sharp approbation, and Eva, conscious of her shabbiness, bowed with a stiff toss of the head.[43]

The poor are as conscious of class distinctions as the rich. They are obsequious in the presence of the factory owners, and they hate themselves for it.[44] Most clearly of all, they see the rich as their natural enemies and themselves as natural victims. Mrs. Freeman says that when the workers look at Lloyd they see

> . . . an aristocrat by birth and training, who was in trade because of shrewd business instincts and a longing for wealth and power, but who despised, and felt himself wholly superior to, the means by which it was acquired.
>
> "We ain't anything but the rounds of the ladder for Norman Lloyd to climb by, and he only sees and feels us with the soles of his patent leathers," one of the turbulent spirits in his factory said.[45]

The poor, then, are not only aware of class distinctions, they are aware of class struggle. One of the most interesting themes of the novel is the consideration of the nature of this struggle. Chapter IX is the key chapter in Mrs. Freeman's consideration of alternatives avail-

43. Ibid., p. 203.

44. They are aware of language differences. Ellen compares young Lloyd's elegant language with that of Granville Joy, her worker lover, who said "wa'n't" instead of "wasn't." Later her co-workers in the shoe factory accuse her of being "stuck up" because she uses grammatical English.

45. Freeman, The Portion of Labor, p. 76.

able to the poor in the struggle. As the workers assemble in Andrew Brewster's kitchen to discuss the possibilities of collective action, Mrs. Freeman uses them to exhibit the various responses to the condition of the poor. Jim Tenney says that he is not interested in the plight of labor in general. His only concern is to get back his old job at Lloyd's. Andrew tries to bring the conflict into the realm of metaphysics and at the same time defend individual bargaining and self-reliance. Arguing against them is Nahum Beals; as they put forth arguments he refutes them. Jim Tenney says:

> "I guess there's work in this world for them that's willin', and don't pick and choose."
> "There ain't," declared Nahum shortly.

Later Andrew offers a weak defense for Lloyd.

> "Well, he's earned his money, I suppose," Andrew said slowly. . . .
> "Earned his money? He didn't earn his money," cried Nahum Beals. "We earned it, every dollar of it, by the sweat of our brows, and it's for us, not him, to say what shall be done with it."[46]

As the novel proceeds, Mrs. Freeman considers the various aspects of the problem of unionism as a weapon in the class war. She discusses scabs, strikes, strike-breaking, solidarity, and the firing of union employees. But at two crucial moments she evades the interesting and complex questions that she raises. During the course of the novel she introduces two "labor organizers," Nahum

46. Ibid., p. 102, p. 103.

Beals and Amos Lee. During one crisis Nahum assassinates Norman Lloyd. During a later crisis, the strike in which Ellen takes part, Amos (in an inept plot repetition) tries to assassinate Ellen. Thus making these characters melodramatic villains, she discredits their point of view with a kind of fictional argumentum ad hominem.

In place of economic realities (Nahum, murderer or not, is right; there is no work for Andrew in his age or for Jim Tenny in his youth), Mrs. Freeman offers only vague ideals and sentiment. Ellen speaks thusly of work:

> Since I have been at work, I have realized what work really is. There is a glory over it, as there is over anything which is done faithfully on this earth for good motives, and I have seen the glory; and I am not ashamed of it.[47]

Then having become a scab, she becomes strike-breaker, urging the men to accept a pay-cut and return to work on the owner's conditions. That is, she embraces the principle of exploitation as being an integral part of the universe.

> "I wonder," she said to herself, "if, after all, this inequality of possessions is not a part of the system of creation, if the righting of them is not beyond the flaming sword of the Garden of Eden? I wonder if the one who tries to right them forcibly is not meddling, and usurping the part of the Creator, and bringing down wrath and confusion not only upon his own head, but upon the heads of others?"[48]

The book doesn't really come to an end; it drowns finally

47. Ibid., p. 389.

48. Ibid., p. 519.

in a sea of sentiment. Ellen wanders off to marry the factory owner, and her father, wealthy at last because of the unexpected rise in his stocks, discovers the conventional moral justification for oppression.

> He seemed to see that labor is not alone for itself, not for what it accomplishes of the tasks of the world, not for its equivalent in silver and gold, not even for the end of human happiness and love, but for the growth in character of the laborer.
> "That is the portion of labor," he said.[49]

Vernon L. Parrington accused Mary Wilkins Freeman of intellectual dishonesty and of failing to indict industrialism because "the Yankee was profiting enormously from this fouling of the Puritan nest."[50] In making such an accusation Parrington allowed his moral indignation to cloud his critical intelligence. The Portion of Labor is not an intellectually dishonest book; it is a non-intellectual book--a book which fails because its author's intellectual failure in the central situation brings about a structural failure. Mrs. Freeman had no formal exposure to economic theory. Her schooling provided her with none; and there is no evidence that she read either the orthodox economists of her time or the radicals like Henry George, with whose work Garland was acquainted. There is no evidence that she read the "literary" figures who concerned themselves with the problem--Carlyle, Morris,

49. Ibid., p. 563.

50. Vernon L. Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought, III, "The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America" (New York, 1930), p. 68.

Ruskin and others. In the America of her girlhood and her creative years, there were two groups of writers who dealt with the encroachments of industrialization: the realistic socialists like Edward Everett Hale (How They Lived in Hampton--1888) and Howells, and the Utopians like Bellamy, William Simpson, and, again, Howells. None of these writers deals specifically with the problems of labor unions in the way that Mrs. Freeman attempts to deal with them. Without a guide and without a theoretical background, however, she was unable to see anything between fatalistic acceptance and anarchistic revolt except resignation, luck and philanthropy.

The insertion of these elements into the center of the novel made of her potentially fine realistic studies little more than sentimental and melodramatic tales of pluck and luck. As in Mrs. Stowe's work, realism becomes peripheral, the focus blurs (Mrs. Freeman begins conflicts, like that between Andrew and his more vulgar wife, and then drops them), and the emphasis dissipates (she begins a number of times to show the acute effects of privation, but she backs off). The net result is that for all her gifts of observation and her ability as a symbolist of significant realistic detail, she achieves little more than did Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Rebecca Harding Davis in short stories written over a generation earlier.

One can say of Mary Wilkins Freeman what Bernard Duffey has said of Joseph Kirkland, "Kirkland confined his

realism largely to setting and character, spinning his plots out of sentiment and melodrama."[51] The dimension of Mrs. Freeman's failure is made clearer when one considers how people of lesser gifts wrote more powerful novels because of the cohesion of their intellectual values. In 1893 Henry Fuller wrote The Cliff-Dwellers. The novel lacks the realistic details of Mrs. Freeman's work, its characterizations are less subtle, and its dialog is much poorer. But it is a superior novel. Fuller saw life in Chicago as a confrontation of values--the civilized values of the old order and the raw, crude, values of money and power which characterized the Chicago of the 1880's. Since he kept that confrontation in the center of his story, he was able to use the skyscraper, with its defiant upward thrust out of the mud of the prairie, as a controlling image of Chicago and its values. The centrality of this image (or symbol) gives added richness to many scenes and much incidental dialog.[52] Mrs. Freeman, the master of the significant detail, approached this kind of structural symbol with the uncompleted house in Pembroke. That she

51. Bernard Duffey, The Chicago Renaissance in American Letters (East Lansing, Michigan, 1954), p. 95.

52. Sitting in the basement coffee shop of the skyscraper, the waitress Cornelia McNabb reflects of a society matron, "Course I don't want that she should come down here and wash my dishes, but wouldn't I like to go up there and eat off of hers." Later as she marries a prosperous banker with offices higher up in the "cliff," the richness of the central image comes into play again. This is no sentimental story of Cinderella; this is the movement of a society. Henry Fuller, The Cliff-Dwellers (New York, 1893), p. 117.

was unable to make the shoe factory function in the same way in The Portion of Labor prevented her from writing "economic novels" of the caliber of those of Fuller, Herrick, and Norris.

Having failed to achieve an integrated form while using materials with which she was thoroughly familiar, Mary Wilkins proceeded to use materials with which she was totally unfamiliar. The cause of this shift was a profound change in her personal life. On New Year's Day 1902 she married Doctor Charles M. Freeman of Metuchen, New Jersey. She had met him some ten years earlier in the New York home of her publisher and friend, Henry M. Alden. The courtship was neither precipitous nor passionate. Even allowing for the retiscence of a New England maiden (albeit, one of forty-nine), there are surprisingly few references to the doctor in her correspondence in the 1890's. It almost seems as though the two of them drifted toward marriage, although the lady did not drift without qualms. She postponed the marriage several times. It is unfortunate that she overcame her misgivings; the marriage was not happy. It lasted twenty years, during which period Dr. Freeman was institutionalized three times for alcoholism. In 1922 he made a will cutting off his wife and sisters. After his sudden death in 1923, Mrs. Freeman and the Freeman sisters contested the will and succeeded in having it set aside. In her last years with all this misery behind her, Mary Wilkins Freeman was wonderfully

free of recriminations and even willing to shoulder part of the blame for her husband's unhappy life. She lived in Metuchen until her death.

Her marriage was an artistic as well as a personal misfortune. It took her away from the region in which her art was rooted, put her most treasured themes beyond the pale of her observation, and brought her into contact with a new region and new people. At first she was bored by life in Metuchen, and boredom is not an attitude out of which good literature springs. She said in a letter to Carolyn Wells:

> I have not a blessed thing to write about. Live in Metuchen, N. J. and see if you would have. I read a crazy diary in a paper last night which just about fits a Metuchenite. It was something like this. Jan. 8, shook my head 17 times. Jan. 9, shook my head twenty times. We have little bridge parties which do vary the monotony.[53]

When the boredom wore off, she tried heroically to master this new material but with little success. Hawthorne once said that New England was quite as large a lump of earth as his heart could take in. The same is true of his literary descendant; and The Debtor, Mrs. Freeman's first Metuchen novel, is, like The Marble Faun, the work of an uprooted talent.

Although The Debtor sold well enough, its appearance in 1905 caused more of a stir in Metuchen than in the

53. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, letter to Carolyn Wells, n.d. (University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Virginia).

literary world. The people of the town thought the story a kind of exposé and claimed to recognize one another in Mrs. Freeman's fictional characters. There was a considerable amount of gossip and hostility when the book first appeared, but the hostility eventually died down and its author went on to become a pillar of Metuchen society. The book failed to attract critical attention because, although it attempted some interesting and novel things, it was not successful. It was not successful because Mrs. Freeman did not know enough about the interesting aspects of her subjects to treat them with consistency, accuracy, and confidence.

The Debtor is an early novel of suburbia--and the suburb is pretty clearly Metuchen although she called it Banbridge.

> All winter long there were luncheons and teas and dances. There was a whist club and a flourishing women's club, of course. It was the women who were thrown with the most entirety upon the provincial resources. But they were a resolved set, and they kept up the gait of progress of their sex with a good deal of success. They improved their minds and their bodies, having even a physical culture club and a teacher coming weekly from the city. That there were links and a golf club go without saying.[54]

There are patches of finely observed detail and good comedy of manners in The Debtor. But Mrs. Freeman didn't know New Jersey and she didn't know barber shops. Several key scenes in The Debtor take place in Banbridge's barber

54. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, The Debtor (New York, 1905), p. 1.

shop where the humbler characters of the town gather. One is an Irishman given to Malapropisms; another is a German who fractures the English language. The others are also stereotypes. She was forced to these "Mister Dooley-isms" by her unfamiliarity with the area. She was even less familiar with New York and the world of offices and stock manipulation, the locale of several key scenes.

However, in one way the book marks a technical advance over Jerome and The Portion of Labor. In The Debtor Mrs. Freeman is able to make her major economic theme revolve around her central character, whereas in the other two novels the main plot contradicted the main theme. This novel is the story of the life, sins, and final change of heart of Captain Carroll, who is Mrs. Freeman's rather belated personification of the ethics of the Gilded Age. It is with him that we are primarily concerned. The conventional love story between Carroll's daughter Charlotte and Randolph Anderson is of subordinate interest. These lovers, like the lovers in the two preceding novels, are separated by economics.

Because the author is not sure how to present Captain Carroll, she is inconsistent in her presentation. He is both a confidence man and a dead-beat, an amoral gold-seeker of the Gilded Age and a tormented victim of uncontrollable drives. When asked about his wickedness, he replies:

As well ask a shot fired from a cannon how

> it likes being hurled through the air. I was fired into this. . . . There are forces for every living man for which he has no power of resistance. Mine hit me.[55]

Yet he is cynical and calculating until his change of heart and atonement.

Mrs. Freeman is much more successful in portraying the women of the Carroll family and through them the morals of the Gilded Age and of the new urban society. The women are thoughtlessly amoral, as in the following search for a dressmaker:

> "How about Miss Sargent? She was very good."
> "Miss Sargent, Amy dear!"
> "Do we owe her much, Ina?"
> "Owe her much? We owe her everything!"
> "Madam Rogers?"
> "Madam Rogers! The last time I asked her to do anything she insulted me. She told me to my face she did not work for dead-beats."
> "She was a very vulgar woman, Ina."[56]

Clearly they are also snobs. They spend a great deal of time considering their obligation to their "position." When Charlotte describes Anderson as handsome, her sister asks:

> "Who?"
> "Mister Anderson. . . ."
> "Why, Mr. Anderson is the grocer! That's the man you mean isn't it, honey?"
> "Yes," replied Charlotte with defiance.
> "Oh, well, that doesn't count," said Ina.[57]

That Mrs. Freeman's portrait of the women is much

55. Ibid., p. 191.

56. Ibid., pp. 184-185.

57. Ibid., pp. 254-255.

stronger than that of the men is natural enough. With them she was on familiar ground. The best piece of characterization in the whole novel is Mrs. Carroll, the flighty, innocent, amoral wife and mother, whose *non sequiturs* and thoughtlessness make her the most successful symbol of the uncertain age. It is she who articulates the rootlessness that in the author's eyes was responsible for the decay in values and virtues.

> "I never can remember the date," said Mrs. Carroll, "and I never can remember whether it is Banbridge or Banridge, so I never write the name of the place, either."[58]

In her rootlessness and innocent cruelty, she is the predecessor of Scott Fitzgerald's Daisy Buchanon and a whole host of fictional, twentieth-century women.

Mrs. Freeman presents two characters that contrast to the Carrolls and their amorality. The first is the young son and heir of the Carroll family, Eddy. Here as in *Jerome*, *The Portion of Labor*, and *By the Light of the Soul* she purveys her "true" values through the character of a child. This is unfortunate. Unlike Twain, Mrs. Freeman had no insight into the lives and attitudes of children. Because her powers of observation failed her, the boy is a sentimentalized prig.

She is not much more successful with Randolph Anderson, the hero who places first things first--but always with Yankee manliness.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 233.

> Randolph Anderson had a large contempt for money used otherwise than for its material ends. A dollar never meant anything to him except its equivalent in filling a need. Generosity and the impulse of giving were in his blood, yet it had gone hard several times with people who had tried to overreach him even to a trifling extent.[59]

But Randolph (and it is tempting to speculate about his name) is a lawyer who has become a grocer. As such he seems to represent the decline in fortune of the old families and the old values in the new world of Carrolls and confidence men. At one point in the story he counsels a young lawyer to keep up the fight and not accept a lower position. This contradictory attitude together with several digressions of the author's on the submerged dignity of grocers indicates that she shares the Carroll's class-consciousness and snobbery without knowing it.

Like Jerome and A Portion of Labor, The Debtor is an uneven novel. It has good scenes like those among the Carroll women and the one in which Captain Carroll is confronted by servants, dressmakers, merchants and other creditors, who, using his own Gilded Age values, drive him to the wall. There are several fine satiric portraits of suburban values and mores. But it is a poorer novel than its predecessors, not because it is less integrated than they, but because the author was less certain of her material. She, like the Carroll's, was uprooted. As a result The Debtors is a talky novel with too much exposi-

59. Ibid., 70.

tion and too few good dramatic scenes. Her "comic" men, the barber, milkman, etc., are stereotypes, lacking the stamp of authenticity that make Uncle Ozias and Nahum Beals memorable. Finally, Mrs. Freeman is guilty of an excess of sentimentality which she equals in no other novel. At the end of the story, Captain Carroll, financially ruined but morally regenerated, disappears and gets a job as a song-and-dance man doing "nigger" dances. In this way he intends to pay his debts and once more be restored to the bosom of his family. On a cold winter night he returns secretly to Banbridge and gazes in the Anderson window at the happy hearth of Charlotte's and Randolph's. He then goes away exaulted.[60] In this scene and the others like it lies Mrs. Freeman's failure as an economic novelist.

In these three novels--especially in The Debtor--Mrs. Freeman has moved in theme and subject matter and in time and space a long way away from her predecessors in the New England tradition. But she brought with her to this consideration of the confrontation of Puritan and industrial values, the class-war, and the ethics of the Gilded Age the virtues of that tradition--refined powers of observation, sensitivity to the rhythm of the spoken language, great skill in the development of individual dramatic scenes and in the manipulation of the symbolism of the significant detail. But she also brought with her

60. Ibid., pp. 562-563.

their failure to solve the problem of form. The vacuous central story that marred the work of Harriet Beecher Stowe was still with her, more because she didn't recognize the solution Pembroke offered than because she had not worked out a solution for herself. Another reason was, of course, that she had neither the will nor the desire to withstand editorial demands for sentimental edification.

She inherited the intellectual as well as the artistic limitations of her tradition and her sex. She responded to the most complex social and economic change in history. In this response she displayed an affinity with academically oriented novelists like Robert Herrick and Frank Norris and with journalist-novelists like Harold Fredrick and Theodore Dreiser. Because of her narrow intellectual background, her limited circle both in Randolph and in Metuchen, her indifferent schooling, and her ignorance of the world of men--of offices, stocks, production--she was much less equipped than they to put the problems in perspective and to provide a systematic solution or even to use an economic system as a means of imposing unity on her material. As a result her response was uncertain and sentimental. F. L. Pattee had said of the Brahmins, "All their sons were daughters." In the heroic failure of this daughter to deal successfully with the problems of the twentieth century one can see the end of the whole tradition--the real Indian Summer.

CHAPTER VI

THE POPULAR NOVELIST

Late in 1887 Mary Wilkins Freeman wrote the following significant sentence in a letter to her new-found friend, Mary Booth of Harper's: "I begin to see very plainly that there are rocks ahead, in my literary course, that I may split upon, though I cannot just define their nature to myself."[1] During the next three decades Mary failed to develop either the faculty of self-criticism, a comprehensive and sophisticated view of the world, or a unifying vision. Any one of these would have been enough to redeem her work, but they escaped her as they escaped so many of her countrymen who wrote one or two good books only. This is her tragedy--as it is the tragedy of Bret Harte and Edgar Watson Howe among her contemporaries and later on Floyd Dell and others.[2] The result is that after Pembroke her whole career is a kind of falling off. F. O. Matthiessen says, after praising her two early collections:

> But she never went beyond them. Her long list of pictures of other regions and ro-

1. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, letter to Mary Booth, November 5, 1887 (Columbia University Library, New York).

2. It is also true of Mrs. Cooke and Mrs. Stowe. Miss Jewett's unity of tone serves to raise her longer work above that of her sisters although it doomed her to a permanent performance in a minor key.

> mantic novels is disappointingly pale, and also reveals an unexpected sentimental streak.[3]

Although it is necessary to point out that this sentiment appears more by default than by design, Matthiessen's assessment is just.

Although Mrs. Freeman never surpassed the achievement of her early works, she tried hard enough to find a way. Pembroke can be seen as a maturation, a development of the themes and patterns of Jane Field; and the other novels are not imitations. Madelon is very different from its predecessors. So is Jerome. She does not repeat herself, but the results are either inconsequential or actually bad. This badness results ultimately from the failure of intellect just described. The requirements of the long form forced her beyond limits of New England doubleness within which the short stories were developed with such sureness of touch. And beyond these boundaries of the Puritan and the Yankee--the moral and the comic--she needed some system, some vision, to impose order and form on the detailed items of observation of which she was such a master. Wanting this, she was forced to take up the device that lay nearest at hand in the market place. The result was the species of inferior Dickensian melodrama.

Of the novels written before the turn of the century, two have not been discussed, The Jamesons (1898) and The Heart's Highway (1900). Their humble place in the Freeman

3. F. O. Matthiessen, Sarah Orne Jewett (Boston, 1929), p. 146.

canon is revealed by the fact that neither one was published by Harper's, who always had first claim on her work. The Jamesons was published by Curtis of Philadelphia, for whose Saturday Evening Post she wrote a number of short stories in the following two decades. The Heart's Highway was published by the American News Company.

The Jamesons is a charming and genuinely amusing little book (177 pages), but it is the kind of book Mrs. Freeman could write only once. It is a comic idyll, in which she says all the nostalgic things about village life that her realistic observation did not permit her to say in the other books. The action takes place in a remote village which, unlike the villages in most Freeman stories, basks under a sun of continual prosperity. The narrator says, "We were all comfortably provided with all the necessities of life."[4] Into this comfortable world nothing unpleasant is allowed to intrude, not even death. The story ends with a reference to Grandma Cobb, "who does not seem to grow feeble at all."[5] The matriarchical village is inhabited almost exclusively by women, the husbands either being dead or surviving timidly on the fringes of the matriarchy. None of the pain and passion of life has survived. Unlike most of Mrs. Freeman's stories, The Jamesons is told in the first person--by a

4. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, The Jamesons (Philadelphia, 1898), p. 1.

5. Ibid., pp. 176-177.

very feminine narrator with a slightly bad heart, a sympathetic ear, and a safely dead husband.

Mrs. Freeman writes more like Sarah Orne Jewett in this novel than she does in anything else she ever wrote. Her main theme here is the confrontation of, and conflict between, the new values of Boston--the urban, industrial world--and the old values of the village. The narrator, who is of the village but sufficiently detached from it to see the humor in rural provincialism, is successful in maintaining the proper tone of the confrontation. She is amused both by urban literary taste and rural decorative art. The tone is gentle, but where in Miss Jewett's work the gentleness is nostalgic, here it is comic. This comic tone makes the work Mrs. Freeman's own in spite of the fact that the conflict centers around the permanent residents and summer boarders in a seaside town.

The novel contains the usual village types that the author knew so well. There are the women of "faculty" whose gentility is maintained more by will than by money, the reticent farmers who proffer no more advice than is asked for, and the Puritan mothers whose consciences are so narrow that they almost squeeze the joy out of their children's lives. The story contains in addition, however, Mary's only full-length portrait of the "new woman." Mrs. Jameson is a Puritan bluestocking who accepts with loud humility the self-imposed task of updating and upgrading the mores of the village. She is physically large (as

her obsequious husband is small) and vocally large. She trods heavily on flowers and habits and comes near to carrying all before her by sheer momentum. She is supercilious and confronts all the village women with the greeting, "My good woman." She attends all the meetings and tries to dominate each one. "She rapped with the scissors on the table. 'Ladies,' she said, 'Ladies, attention.'"[6] Mrs. Freeman never liked "emancipated" women, but here her dislike is mitigated by good humor.

The novel is really just a collection of comic scenes and events hung together on the character of Mrs. Jameson and on the conventional love story of her daughter and a rural suitor who are united after a melodramatic fire (the only intrusion of melodrama into the idyll) helps their mothers overcome prejudice. The comic incidents, all told at a leisurely and savoring pace, include a false fire alarm turned in by Mrs. Jameson which causes the flooding of a rural parlor and its carefully itemized treasures, and a picnic ruined by Mrs. Jameson's enthusiasm for health foods. However, the finest comic scene in the book is the meeting of the village ladies' literary society highlighted by Mrs. Jameson's loud and inaccurate reading of one of Browning's casuistic poems while the supper burns in the kitchen. In this mellow mood Mrs. Freeman does not let the satire get too harsh, and the result is one of the finest comic scenes she ever wrote.

6. Ibid., p. 61.

The second half of the book concerns the adventures of the Jamesons on their newly acquired farm. This section, inferior to the first, is an only partially digested collection of jokes and folk sayings on the common subject of the city dweller's ineptitude on the farm. It includes jokes about the planting of improper crops and the wearing of improper attire and an overly long section about Mrs. Jameson's determination to have her chickens wear shoes. The story ends with Mrs. Jameson's domination of the village's centennial celebration. Having obtained the services of Representative Elijah M. Mills and Lucy Beers Wright, the lady novelist who never spoke in public, Mrs. Jameson talks so long that they never have a chance to speak.

Throughout the novel Mrs. Freeman's fine eye for comic realism is everywhere evident. Among the subjects here satirized with perception is the literary world itself. Lucy Beers Wright reveals the author's awareness of the comic potential of the trinomial lady novelist and of her own foibles in particular. The Browning meeting is excellent, and the novel ends on a literary note with Grandma Cable's explanation of Mrs. Jameson's changed attitude toward her daughter's marriage.

> My daughter became convinced that Robert Browning would have been in favor of the match,--and that settled it. My daughter proves things by Browning the same way as people do by scripture--it seems to me sometimes.[7]

7. Ibid., p. 141.

The Heart's Highway is as atypical as The Jamesons, but in a very different way. In his biography, Foster says:

> During the last Randolph years the struggle between the tendencies roughly named romantic and realistic was clearly evident. The Portion of Labor had its element of accurate documentation of lower middle class worker life; The Heart's Highway was frankly romantic in subject and inner feeling . . . Each of these works expressed real impulses though the deeper may well have been romantic and symbolic.[8]

This last sentence is a hasty judgment. That Mrs. Freeman is a symbolist is true enough, if one considers her use of significant details; but this is a kind of symbolism found in realists from Howells to Steinbeck. However, it is highly doubtful that romance is a "deeper impulse." Certainly The Heart's Highway is not good evidence that this is so because it is not a good book and--importantly--it is not a "deep" book. It is superficial. Those aspects of the work of Mrs. Stowe and Miss Jewett that may be called romantic were not always successful but they were always indigenous. The Minister's Wooing deals with the New England of 1800. Oldtown Folks deals with the "good, old catechizing days." Miss Jewett wrote with fondness of the happy days before the "Jerry-built" present in which she was forced to live increasingly alone. These writers were exploiting their own "usable past." The romanticism of their treatment lay in their tone, which was one of nos-

8. Edward Foster, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (New York, 1956), p. 162.

talgia. Out of this nostalgia grew the tendency to idealize moral, social, and economic aspects of the past. It is this idealistic view and presentation of the past that enabled them to use it as a criterion against which to judge the present. The same might be said of the realistic Mr. Howells, who found the yardstick with which to judge the moral growth of his characters either in the past or in those rural areas that preserved the values of the past. This is a legitimate and, in the best passages, a deep romanticism; and, importantly, it doesn't break the circle of New England doubleness.

Mrs. Freeman never had this idealized view of the past. As seen in Pembroke and elsewhere, her view is much more ambivalent and ironic. And The Heart's Highway is not about this usable, indigenous past at all. It is a tale of seventeenth-century Virginia. Insofar as it deals with any theme that Mrs. Freeman treats seriously, it treats of pride and the need of the soul to be purged of pride before it can love. It is the very conventional story of the saving of a young maiden from her own impetuosity and pride. It is told by a first-person narrator, a nobleman fallen on evil days through Quixotic noblesse oblige, who must overcome humility (for variety's sake, perhaps) before he can save and finally marry the girl. These and the other characters bear no resemblance to anyone living or dead, though there are many counterparts in the popular fiction of the time and in the historical films of the

present.

The Heart's Highway has the distinction of being the only one of Mrs. Freeman's longer works that is completely unreadable. It is filled with melodramatic devices and contains three hundred pages of simulated archaic language (the first person narrator makes it necessary even in the pages free of dialog) which has never been surpassed for unreality and unreadability. One example should serve:

> "'Tis sheer folly, lad," I burst out then, "and let us have no more of it. 'Tis but the idle prating of a lovesick girl. . . ."
> "So said I to Cicely," Sir Humphrey cried, eagerly, too interested in his own cause to heed my slighting words for his sister. "'Tis the rankest folly, I told her. Here is Harry Wingfield, old enough almost to be Mary's father, and beside, beside--oh, confound it, Harry," the generous lad burst out. "I would not like you for a rival, for you are a good half foot taller than I, and you have that about you that would make a woman run to you and think herself safe were all the Indians in Virginia up, and you are a dark man, and I have heard say they like that, but, but,-- oh I say, Harry, 'tis a damned shame that you are here as you are, and not as a gentleman and a cavalier with the rest of us."[9]

This is not the deep, nostalgic romance of idealism; this is the shallow romantic cliché of the market place.

If there is a deep and genuine romantic impulse in Mrs. Freeman not to be found in her attitude toward and use of the past, it must be found by looking in another place. Her editor gives us a hint of where to look.

> Anyone supposing that Miss Wilkins derives her stories from studies of New England life

9. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, The Heart's Highway (New York, 1900), pp. 148-149.

> and character is grossly mistaken: she is, first of all, an impressionist, with a dominant subjective motive, her fiction taking on outward shape from an inward prompting, having only such connection with life as there is in the texture of a dream.[10]

Here again we have an example of the wrongheadedness that characterizes the remarks of so many of Mrs. Freeman's friends, editors, and early critics that one wonders if they actually read her. But Alden does point to the place and nature of whatever "romanticism" characterizes her work. The subjective element is revealed in the characterization of Ellen in The Portion of Labor and in the heroines of "Doc" Gordon, The Shoulders of Atlas and The Alabaster Box. In such characters Mrs. Freeman romanticized parts of her own past and qualities of her own personality subjectively perceived. These genteel sublimations of her own girlhood are almost without exception failures as fictional characters, who function as nothing more than the romantic heroines of popular fiction. The total failure of the intellectual and "sociological" dimensions of Ellen in The Portion of Labor is a case in point, as is the ending in which Ellen fulfills the fundamental requirement of all heroines of popular fiction--upward mobility--by abandoning all principle and marrying the boss.

The most extended and serious and, in some ways, the best autobiographical heroine is Maria (a romantic variant

10. Henry M. Alden, "Fifty Years of Harper's Magazine," Harper's, C (May, 1900), 956.

of her own name) in By the Light of the Soul. Foster says of this novel:

> The serialized novel, By the Light of the Soul (1906), is Mrs. Freeman's boldest attempt to realize the possibilities of the subjective and religious elements of Jerome, The Portion of Labor, and "The Apple Tree." For precision and fullness of detail in the treatment of minor characters and of the New Jersey and New England setting, it is a realistic and regional novel--another Pembroke; in the development of the inner life of its heroine, Maria Edgham, it appears to be lightly disguised spiritual autobiography.[11]

This is a very general statement which overlooks the structural differences between Pembroke and By the Light of the Soul and the idealization of the heroine; but in stressing the subjective, autobiographical element it does point out the source and nature of Mrs. Freeman's romanticism.

By the Light of the Soul is the author's most extensive study of the place of women in society--of the possible responses to life available to women in the society of the time. But her interest is not just sociological; it is also psychological. She is interested in what she calls at various places in the novel "soul truth," "soul-growth," "straightness of body and soul," and "the seasons of the human soul." To achieve these two goals she contrasts various female characters with one another. (In no other novel of hers are male characters so unimportant.) Among the various important secondary characters are Lily, Maria's neighbor, and Evelyn, Maria's sister. These two

11. Foster, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, pp. 169-170.

girls have the responses and vision of typical fictional women of the time. They are chaste, modest, sweetly disposed. They have all the reputable virtues. But they are clearly women living in a man's world. They are passive and dependent and desperately eager to marry a man on his own terms and function contentedly in a secondary role for the rest of their lives. Though their lives and goals are honorable, they are clearly not capable of the richest kind of "soul-growth."

In this novel, which begins with the death of Maria's New England mother while the child is very young, one of the most complex and interesting characters is the stepmother Ida. There is no one else quite like her in Mrs. Freeman's work; but she is, nevertheless, one of the species of "new women" that Mrs. Freeman so disliked. She is characterized chiefly by two traits. First, she has the ethical and economic values of the Gilded Age. She is concerned with "possession" and is agressive in the acquisition of material objects and vulgar in their display. Secondly, she is cold and unfeeling. "She was so unemotional as to be almost abnormal, but she had head enough to realize the fact that absolute unemotionlessness in a woman detracts from her charm."[12] What was in Mrs. Jameson a comic insensitivity to the situation becomes in Ida a cruel, masculine ability to exploit others for her own chiefly

12. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, By the Light of the Soul (New York, 1906), p. 89.

economic purposes. This coldness, it would seem, is the very antithesis of what Mrs. Freeman felt a woman should be.

The most interesting and best drawn of the secondary women is Maria's Aunt Maria, a spinster from New England. Mrs. Freeman is very sure-handed in her treatment of the aunt; here she is on familiar ground. Aunt Maria is poor, but she has "faculty" and is able to maintain her self-respect on only one hundred dollars a year knowing full well that "it takes a little extra money even to keep clean."[13] Because in drawing Aunt Maria the author is dealing with patterns of life in which her own life is most firmly rooted, she is able to provide significant details in a way which her reportorial skills were unable to provide for the New Jersey characters.

> "I am glad you have come, Maria," said she. "I have been standing quite a while. You are late."
>
> "Yes, I am rather late," replied Maria. "But why on earth didn't you sit down?"
>
> "Do you suppose I am going to sit down more than I can help in this dress?" said her aunt. "There is nothing hurts a silk dress more than sitting down in it."[14]

Mrs. Freeman treats Aunt Maria in both a comic and a pathetic perspective. The old maid's girlish vanity when she comes down to New Jersey to care for her dead sister's child--her naive attempts to attract her younger brother-in-law's attention--is movingly funny. But there is more

13. Ibid., p. 236.

14. Ibid., p. 288.

to this woman's life than that which warrants a gentle chuckle, and she herself knows it. She says of her niece, "Oh, Lord . . . to think that child has got to go through the world just the way I have, when she don't need to!"[15] Here then are three feminine responses to the man's world in which women are forced to live: meek and passive acceptance, unfeminine calculation, and courage and "faculty" in the face of thwarted needs.

In contrast to these women and these responses stands the heroine, Maria Edgham. In this long novel (498 pages in the first edition) there is ample space to portray the development of Maria's soul and her ability to respond to the world in her own feminine terms rather than in patterns imposed upon her by men. Maria's childhood is portrayed with more skill than was that of Jerome or Ellen. The scenes of agony and hostility between the girl and her stepmother are well-done. But as Maria grows--and grows into the author's most fully-depicted valedictorian woman--she grows tiresome. Mrs. Freeman is trying to depict an intense passional, intellectual, and moral nature which works out a principle of self-containment and contentment. Maria is, in other words, her most Emersonian character. The fact that in her other and better work she clearly rejects this principle might go a long way toward explaining the failure to make Maria a successful fictional char-

15. Ibid., p. 306.

acter. The best she can have Maria do is develop an attitude of morally superior philanthropy toward the poorer classes of New England and the "poor whites" of New Jersey. Her other chief activity is bestowing the men who love her on her more dependent friends and on her sister. At the end she finds joy in a manless world, in renunciation, and in the friendship of a deformed companion named Rosa. Her soul receives this final illumination while she stands unobserved outside her recently married sister's window (a device of which Mrs. Freeman was unfortunately fond) and observes "the sweet docility which Maria remembered."[16] "She seemed to suddenly sense the highest quality of love: that which realizes the need of another rather than one's own."[17]

Foster is right in saying that By the Light of the Soul is autobiographical. First, Mrs. Freeman is trying to embody in Maria her own attitude toward the world and her personal concept of a noble pattern of action. In this sense Maria is Mary Wilkins Freeman as she would like to be. It is also autobiographical in the sense that Maria's activities and attitudes are those of the author herself, filtered through the lenses of sentiment and memory. The following passage clearly romanticizes her own experience.

> Maria, little, slender, trembling girl, with

16. Ibid., p. 497.

17. Ibid., p. 498.

> all the hysterical fancies of her sex crowding upon her, all the sufferings of her sex waiting for her in the future, and with no mother to soften them, slipped out of bed, stole across her room, and opened the door with infinite caution.[18]

Where she could, she softened the pains of memory, "In spite of her prettiness, she was not a favorite even among the boys. . . . Without knowing it, they were envious."[19] This being the case, several passages in the novel take on significance for the biographer. One such passage is an extended description of the rite of passage in which "she had lost her dreams."[20] Another section describes Maria's religious attitudes. Among the comments made are the following:

> Religion had never impressed her with any beauty, or sense of love. Now, for the first time, after her father had died, she seemed all at once to sense the nearness of that which is beyond, and a love and longing for it.[21]

In the same passage she describes Maria's distaste for the emotion of fundamentalist religion.

Although this is the most "interior" and the most feminine of Mrs. Freeman's novels, it still manages to touch on several of her favorite social themes. The treatment of the lower class characters--especially those in

18. Ibid., p. 185.

19. Ibid., p. 38.

20. Ibid., p. 199.

21. Ibid., p. 367.

New Jersey--is less compassionate and naturalistic than in the other novels. What determinism there is here is biological rather than environmental, and the "deserving poor" are portrayed as an inferior species. "Maria, although her strength was inferior, had spirit enough to cope with any poor white."[22] It is also interesting to note that the degenerate New England family that Maria tries to defend is a maison de' trois, an example of Mrs. Freeman's only partially successful struggle against gentility. There are also extended passages of dialog devoted to discussions of the economic questions of the day. In one rather curious scene Maria's dying father advises her always to buy bonds rather than stocks because "bonds are always safer for a woman."[23]

Technically By the Light of the Soul is interesting in one way. It is a story told chiefly through the consciousness of its heroine, a young girl.[24] For the rest, many of the crises are forced and artificial, and as the novel wears on the author relies more and more on coincidence. Consequently, although she chooses not to reward her heroine with a man, a hearth, and upward mobility,

22. Ibid., p. 107.

23. Ibid., p. 207.

24. Although this restricted point of view is not always controlled or successful, it does lead one to wonder when Mrs. Freeman read The Portrait of a Lady. One reason for the failure is that the action is episodic--almost picaresque.

Maria is just one more of those heroines of sentimental, Dickensian fiction on which Mrs. Freeman, because of her failure either to find a form or to develop a coherent system of thought, was forced to rely.

All through the years of transition from New England spinster to New Jersey housewife, Mrs. Freeman continued to work hard. She had volumes of short stories published in 1900, 1901, 1903, 1904, and 1907 in addition to the novels of 1900, 1901, 1905 and 1906. She was tired and felt that she needed a rest. But she kept at it all through 1905 and 1906 in spite of occasional complaints about her health. Early in 1906 she wrote to her friend in Randolph, Miss French, "I am straining every nerve to write a frightful novel, to be finished by March 15th. . . . I fear the work is pretty bad."[25] She went on to say that she had hopes for its saleability. She was right about its quality, but she was mildly disappointed by its sales.

The book she was writing was published late in 1906 by the Authors and Newspapers Association as "Doc" Gordon. It was reissued the following year as Doctor Gordon. It is a poor book--poorer than its predecessors. It has many good things in it, but nowhere is Mrs. Freeman less successful in integrating the good results of her observational skills with the melodramatic framework she was compelled to use. A further weakness is her inability to

25. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, letter to Miss French, January 27, 1906 (Pierpont Morgan Library, New York).

sustain and develop serious themes and materials, once she introduces them, as if she were too tired to keep up the effort.

The opening two chapters illustrate this artistic dilemma perfectly. The novel begins with young Doctor Elliot walking twenty miles to his first job as assistant to Doctor Gordon. As he walks along he passes through a grimy industrial town where he encounters a sullen working man with a cough and a surly railroad worker who hates the philanthropy (indicative of a possible advance in the author's social thought since The Portion of Labor) and the hypocrisy of the rich. This worker, who has remained single because of the difficulties of raising a family in industrial America, does not trust the doctor because his English is too good. When the young doctor stops for lunch, he encounters a waitress who is "pretty and pathetic with a vulgar, almost tragic prettiness and pathos--she was anemic and painfully thin."[26] This is an auspicious beginning to what is, in a sense, the most naturalistic book Mrs. Freeman ever wrote, but she is not able to sustain the quality of the doctor's journey. After he leaves the restaurant, he encounters a girl passing a lonely stretch of wood where she is set upon by a dark, mysterious stranger. As she faints the doctor saves her only to discover that she is Doc Gordon's niece. And so melodrama

26. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "Doc" Gordon (New York, 1906) p. 7.

and coincidence take over.

The plot is absurd. Doc Gordon and his wife accept responsibility for the daughter of Mrs. Gordon's sister and her brutal degenerate husband after the sister dies and the husband disappears. They move to a strange town where Mrs. Gordon poses as the girl's mother and Doctor Gordon's sister. When the girl reaches marriageable age, her father returns and tries to dominate her. Doc Gordon allows his dog to injure the degenerate father who dies of an infection. The girl then marries young Doctor Elliot. The escapes, captures, midnight maneuvers, kept secrets, and other Gothic devices almost justify Foster's decision to ignore the novel entirely.[27]

But the book is not without its significance both as fiction and as an example of the impasse to which the author and the whole New England tradition had been brought. The melodramatic nonsense is interrupted from time to time by a series of events and characters right out of frontier humor and reminiscent of Georgia Scenes. There is a shooting match in which wooden pigeons substituted for clay pigeons are the undoing of a local "hustler." There is a detailed presentation of a horse trade in which Doc Gordon gets revenge on an overly-shrewd local farmer. The doctor's friends, the innkeeper and the various farmers, are presented in a more traditionally regional way than any of Mary's characters since Jerome.

27. Foster, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, p. 169.

The best of these indigenous characters is Mrs. Slocum, the miserly and hypocritical keeper of a boarding house. Mrs. Slocum is, in one sense, a Dickensian caricature of greed, but she is firmly rooted in the soil; her frequent mutilations of the language belong in the tradition that stretches back through the newspaper humorists to Seba Smith's Jack Downing. Above all, it is her reality that convinces us, as when she says to young Doctor Elliot, "Doctor Gordon took away my boarder. And if I'd had him sick and die in my house, I could have got extra. Now what I want is jest this."[28] Thwarted in her economic ploy but determined to miss nothing, Mrs. Slocum attends the stranger's funeral where she "sniffed audibly through the service which was short."[29] In such characters Mrs. Freeman's talent, tired as she was, was as sharp as ever.

However, these characters are islands in a sea of melodrama. The main characters are of another order entirely. Dr. Elliot is a conventional young lover, and the niece, Clemency, is one of Mrs. Freeman's high-strung, sentimental heroines like Ellen in The Portion of Labor. Mrs. Ewing, who is in reality Mrs. Gordon, is one of the author's magnificent older women--large, statuesque, and ennobled by the fact that she is suffering bravely from cancer. The degenerate father functions melodramatically

28. Freeman, "Doc" Gordon, p. 211.

29. Ibid., p. 216.

as a mysterious stranger addicted to midnight rambles and peering in windows. One serious weakness of the novel is that it is around him that much of the naturalistic theme revolves.

The figure with which Mrs. Freeman attempts to hold together these worlds of regional realism and melodrama is Doc Gordon. But rather than hold these worlds together, she only succeeds in tearing the doctor apart. With one set of characters he is shrewd, genial and garrulous.

> He no longer looked even a gentleman. He had become of the soil, the New Jersey soil. As they drank and played, he told stories and roared with laughter at them. The stories also belonged to the soil, they were folk lore, wild, coarse, but full of humanity.[30]

With the other set of characters, he is an aristocratic gentleman and a Conradian hero, given to speculation, who concludes sadly, "A soul is a horribly lonely thing in the worst places of life."[31] Young Doctor Elliot wonders about his employer, "Why should a man be one hour a country buffoon, the next an absorbed gentleman?"[32] The central weakness of the book lies in the fact that the author does not and cannot answer this question. As a result, the book consists of two unequal and unintegrated parts.

30. Ibid., pp. 54-55.

31. Ibid., p. 253.

32. Ibid., p. 77.

In this most naturalistic of her novels, Mrs. Freeman shows her preoccupation with determinism in various ways. Not only does she portray incidental characters, such as those young Doctor Elliot encounters in chapter I, as victims of circumstances and of the economic system; she has Doctor Gordon comment on the effect of environment on character. He says of his patients, "After all, they are a harmless, good lot, but stiffened with hereditary ideas, worse than by rheumatism."[33] Elsewhere the doctor says of one of his poor patients:

> That girl has had symptoms of about every known disease. . . . Call it hysteria or what you will. I call it injustice on the part of the Higher Power. I suppose that is blasphemy, but I am forced to it. Can that girl help the longings for her rights, her longings which are abnormally acute because of her over-fine nervous system? Those longings, situated as she is, can never be satisfied except for her own harm.[34]

This last is as specific a statement as Mrs. Freeman ever made concerning the pressures of both environment and heredity on the individual. The theme of heredity also appears in the central love affair. Doctor Gordon fears that young Elliot may wish to call off the engagement upon discovering Clemency's real father. "You may fear heredity," he suggests.[35] Elliot denies this, and the two doctors reassure themselves that the girl has inherited

33. Ibid., p. 60.

34. Ibid., pp. 282-283.

35. Ibid., p. 274.

all her traits from her mother.

Doctor Gordon not only comments on, but exemplifies in himself the control that circumstances have over the fate of the individual. The author says of the doctor, "Thomas Gordon was a man whom a happy and untroubled life would have kept from all worldly blemish."[36] But his life was not untroubled. His first serious encounter with evil had caused him to disguise his marriage. The second encounter--the return of his evil brother-in-law--forces him to violence. In a long introspective scene (pp. 166-177) the doctor evolves and analyses his plan to have the dog attack Clemency's father. At first he recoils in horror from the act of violence; but as he thinks of _inaction_ and its consequences to his loved ones, his mind and emotions harden and he becomes capable of murder.

Later in the story he is driven by circumstances to turn the hand of violence toward his wife. Mrs. Freeman uses Mrs. Ewing's acute suffering caused by cancer, to raise late in the novel the serious social theme of euthanasia. Although it shows her ungenteel willingness to investigate any theme in her fiction, it comes too late to save the novel, already swamped by melodrama. Doctor Gordon brings the issue into focus somewhat bluntly:

> She has suffered more lately. . . . There has never been the slightest possibility of a surgical operation. From the very first it was utterly hopeless, and if it had been the dog there, I should have put a bullet

36. _Ibid._, p. 174.

> through his head and considered myself a friend.[37]

The issue is dissolved, however, in the sentimental ending. Both Doctor Gordon and Doctor Elliot think that they are responsible for giving Mrs. Ewing the fatal injection for which, in her last final pain, she pleads. Clemency is horrified at the prospect. But it turns out that neither one is responsible. The old townswoman whom they had hired as a nurse conveniently performs the function of deus ex machina, kills Mrs. Ewing, accepts responsibility, and announces that she is going to leave town. This leaves Doctor Elliot and Clemency free to marry. Thus, interesting themes are raised but nothing comes of them; and because of the failure of characterization, the inability to integrate the main plot and the regional characters, and the inept sentimentality of the ending, "Doc" Gordon ranks with Madelon and The Heart's Highway as the poorest work to come from the pen of Mary Wilkins Freeman.

Tired and busy as she was in the first decade of the new century, Mrs. Freeman seemed to catch her second wind after "Doc" Gordon. The Shoulders of Atlas is a much better book--and one in which she returned, significantly, to the shoe towns of New England where her artistic roots had always remained firm. It is the story of Henry and Sylvia Whitman, a childless couple living a stern existence on a shoe-factory worker's wage. Sylvia inherits money,

37. Ibid., p. 226.

comes to believe that the money rightfully belongs to Rose, a young girl living with them, and finally confesses her guilt only to discover that the money is really hers after all. It is also the story of Henry's inability to adjust to prosperity and leisure. A second plot involves the mysterious death of the local teacher--either murder or suicide--and the threatening conduct of an unstable young girl.

Clearly, Mrs. Freeman has told much of this before. Sylvia and her secret guilt are a re-creation and re-examination of Jane Field and her Calvinistic sense of virtue and sin. Henry is really Andrew Brewster of The Portion of Labor in disguise. There are also other, less noticeable restatements. Lucinda, the hotel proprietress, is replaced as the church soloist in a reworking of "A Village Singer." This is not a very serious criticism, however, because there is surely room for more than one study of the relationship of the Puritan conscience to poverty and prosperity.

The striking similarity of the central character and plot to Jane Field affords us the opportunity to see just what Mrs. Freeman had done in the fifteen years between that novel and The Shoulders of Atlas. Jane Field is a thin story padded by the insertion of extraneous but often excellent local color. The Shoulders of Atlas reveals the dimension of the author's failure to learn. Having failed to solve the problem of form and having

evolved no integrated world view or "system" like those borrowed and used as form by her contemporaries, Jack London and Frank Norris, she can rely only on melodrama. The story is filled with mysterious characterizations, secret pasts, midnight walks, and various other Gothic devices of suspense.[38] It contains chunks of melodrama together with comedy of manners, moral and psychological analysis, and economic observation all held together on the two story threads of the murder-suicide and the secret will. This was 1908. Edith Wharton, Robert Herrick, Zona Gale, Ellen Glasgow, among others, were all publishing some of their best work; but Mrs. Freeman's resources were limited, and she never acquired any skills except those inherited from the New England tradition and those found quickly in the market place.

The main love story is conventional as are the lovers themselves. Horace, the young man, is a schoolmaster, of all things. The girl, Rose, is a poor little rich girl with a reasonable amount of romantic suffering in her past. Her urbane manners provide a contrast to Sylvia's rusticity. But Mrs. Freeman, always uncertain of the urbane, is not successful in her attempt to make the girl innocent and urbane at the same time. More interesting are several of the secondary characters, especially Lucy

38. "Doc" Gordon and The Shoulders of Atlas, her most Gothicized novels, together with The Wind in the Rose Bush collection, reveal an affinity for Hawthorne's world which lay dormant in her best work.

Ayers, the young paranoid, and her fiercely protective mother. Although they are only partially successful, they show a willingness to attempt characters and themes beyond the realm of the genteel. Also interesting is Miss Farrel.[39] Horace says of her:

> She seemed to have a feeling, poor soul, that, beautiful as she was, she excited repulsion rather than affection in everybody with whom she came in contact. "I might as well be a snake as a woman." Those were just her words, and God help her, I do believe there was something true about them.[40]

The most important characters in the story, of course, are Henry and Sylvia Whitman, who live the life of toil and privation which finally drives Sylvia to defy her conscience in an attempt to escape. The story begins with an extended portrait of Henry providing the economic framework within which the central moral drama takes place.

> Henry [felt] the sad and bitter resentment, which was his usual mood, instead of joy. He was past middle-age. He worked in a shoe-shop. He had worked in a shoe-shop since he was a young man. There was nothing else in store for him until he was turned out because of old age. Then the future looked like a lurid sunset of misery.[41]

39. Irma H. Herron says of Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Certain of his inhibited and sensitive characters might have served as models for Mrs. Freeman's repressed villagers." Miss Herron also accepted the myth that Mary had served as Holmes's secretary. She never did, and there is no evidence that she even read Holmes's fiction. But Miss Farrel and Lucy Ayers do resemble characters in Elsie Venner and A Mortal Antipathy. Irma H. Herron, The Small Town in American Literature, Durham, North Carolina, p. 113.

40. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, The Shoulders of Atlas (New York, 1908), p. 77.

41. Ibid., p. 1.

His house had "come to him from his father encumbered with a mortgage," which he was paying together with doctor bills. "Once he had saved a little money; that was twenty-odd years before; but he had invested it foolishly, and lost every cent." The result of all this is a resigned bitterness that enables Henry to say, "Well, if you can give me any good reason for saying grace, you will do more than the parson ever has."[42] The irony of Henry's life is that when prosperity does come, he finds that he is psychologically incapable of leisure. Broken to harness, he finds that labor is the portion of labor.

Sylvia, who fights her own conscience to keep her new found prosperity, is the most brilliantly created character in the book. Through Sylvia, Mrs. Freeman partially succeeds in bringing the melodrama within the pale of regional realism. When her friend Lucinda is suspected of murdering Miss Farrel, Sylvia retorts:

> "Arsenic in the peppermint! . . . You needn't tell me Lucinda Hart put arsenic in the peppermint though I dare say she had some in the house to kill rats. It's likely that old tavern was overrun with them, and I know she lost her cat a few weeks ago."[43]

She then proceeds to blame herself for not finding Lucinda a kitten. Her folk wisdom, however, won't let her dismiss Miss Farrel as a suicide.

> "A woman don't kill herself as long as she's

42. Ibid., pp. 1-9.

43. Ibid., p. 73.

> got spirit enough to fix herself up . . . I saw her only yesterday in a brand-new dress, and her hair was crimped tight enough to last a week and her cheeks--"[44]

The dialog between Sylvia and the other village women is as good as the best exchanges in the early short stories. The following exchange takes place after Henry returns to his job at the factory.

> "I thought," said Mrs. Jim Jones, driven to her last gun, "that you and Mr. Whitman had inherited enough to make you comfortable for life, and I felt real bad to find out you hadn't."
>
> Sylvia turned a little pale, but her gaze never flinched. She grunted again.
>
> "I suppose," said Mrs. Jim Jones, mouthing her words with intensest relish, "that there wouldn't be any need for Mr. Whitman to work any more, and when I heard he was going back to the shop, and when I saw him turn in there this morning, I declare I did feel bad."
>
> Then Sylvia spoke. "You needn't have felt bad," she said, "Nobody asked you to."
>
> Mrs. Jim Jones stared.
>
> "Nobody asked you to," repeated Sylvia. "Nobody is feeling at all bad here. It's true, we've plenty, so Mr. Whitman don't need to lift a finger, if he don't want to, but a man can't set down, day in and day out, and suck his thumbs when he's been used to working all his life. Some folks is lazy by choice, and some folks work by choice. Mr. Whitman is one of them."
>
> Mrs. Jim Jones felt fairly defrauded. "Then you don't feel bad?" said she, in a crestfallen way.
>
> "Nobody feels bad here," said Sylvia. "I guess nobody in East Westland feels bad unless it's you, and nobody wants you to."[45]

And finally, Sylvia is a rich character because the writer is able to surround her with genuine, closely-

44. Ibid., pp. 74-75.

45. Ibid., p. 241.

observed details, some of which function symbolically. Sylvia, anxious to get rid of her fine old furniture and replace it with flashy, cheap new merchandise, tries selling Calkins Soap. The involvement in the new commercial age, the rejection of the past, the substitution of false values implicit in this little situation stand not only as a comment on the central moral crisis but on the whole drift of life in New England. This is also part of a fairly complete picture of a rural New England aesthetic. Mrs. Freeman points out Sylvia's fondness for novels whose heroines had "a distinctly different personality from one chapter to another,"[46] and her disapproval of china that portrayed animals in other than their natural colors.[47]

Mrs. Freeman touches on a number of themes in The Shoulders of Atlas. One of these is the plight of single women. In trying to console her psychotic daughter, Mrs. Ayers says:

> It's all because you are a woman, and the natural longings of a woman are upon you. . . . It is right that you should have what you want, but if the will of God is otherwise, you must make the best of it. There are other things in life, or it would be monstrous.[48]

Sylvia tries to convince Rose that the single life is best; but she doesn't believe it, her ulterior motive being fear of the discovery of the will. Lawyer Meeks,

46. Ibid., p. 127.

47. Ibid., pp. 41 and 181.

48. Ibid., p. 154.

lamenting his own single state, comments on the spinster's lot with a reference to the Whitmans' dead benefactress:

> She had a mean, lonesome life of it. Sometimes now, when I go into that house where she lived so many years, I declare, the weight of the burden she had to bear seems to be on me. It was a cruel life for a woman.[49]

Mrs. Freeman's consideration of the consequences of loneliness and spinsterhood lead her to a rather distant treatment of homosexuality. Part of Miss Farrel's problem is that "she loved women better than a woman usually does, and women could not abide her."[50] In her role of Rose's secret benefactress, this same Miss Farrel acts in the following way:

> Rose had not been sent away to school for two reasons. One was Miss Farrel's, the other originated with her caretakers. Miss Farrel had a jealous dread of the girl's forming one of those erotic friendships, which are really diseased love-affairs, with another girl or teacher.[51]

The strangest scene in the book is the one between Rose and the mentally disturbed Lucy Ayers.

> She [Lucy] remained quiet for a few moments, leaning against Rose, her blue-clad shoulder pressing lovingly the black-clad one. Then she moved away a little, and reared her pretty back with a curious, snakelike motion. Rose watched her. Lucy's eyes fastened themselves upon her, and something strange happened. Either Lucy Ayers was a born actress, or she had become actually so imbued, through abnor-

49. Ibid., p. 206.

50. Ibid., p. 77.

51. Ibid., p. 158.

> mal emotion and love, with the very spirit of the man that she was capable of projecting his own emotions and feelings into her own soul and thence upon her face. At all events, she looked at Rose, and slowly Rose became bewildered. It seemed to her that Horace Allen was looking at her through the eyes of this girl, with a look she had often seen since their very first meeting. She felt herself glowing from head to foot. She was conscious of a deep crimson stealing all over her face and neck. Her eyes fell before the other girl's. Then suddenly it was all over. Lucy rose with a little laugh. "You sweet, funny creature," she said. "I can make you blush, looking at you, as if I were a man. Well, maybe I love you as well as one."[52]

Perhaps the homosexuality here is latent, but Mrs. Freeman, in her willingness to explore characters beyond the limits of conventional gentility, is here confronting a psychosis long taboo in a manner that is daring and explicit for the time. Finally avoiding the theme, however, the author packs the Ayers family off to the West where Lucy regains emotional composure and marries.

So there are many virtues in this fundamentally weak novel. Probably the most important virtue is maturity. In The Shoulders of Atlas, which is not an especially naturalistic book, Mrs. Freeman displays a "naturalistic" compassion for her troubled and victimized characters that is revealed in Mrs. Ayers' defense of her daughter.

> Sometimes, quite often, it may happen that too heavy a burden, a burden which has been gathering weight since the first of creation, is heaped upon too slender shoulders. This burden may bend innocence into guilt and

52. Ibid., p. 140.

> modesty into shamelessness, but there is no more reason for condemnation than in a case of typhoid fever.[53]

In the climactic scene conscience and compassion meet face to face. Sylvia reveals the secret will that takes away her inheritance saying "I tried to hide from God and myself what I was doing, but I could not."[54] When she finds that the money is really hers, she still acknowledges guilt.

> She stared helplessly at the worthless will which she still held. A young girl tittered softly. Sylvia turned toward the sound. "There is no occasion to laugh," said she, "at one who thought she was sinning, and has had the taste of sin in her soul, even though she was not doing wrong. The intention was there."[55]

It is part of the maturity of Mrs. Freeman's view that she can acknowledge the guilt while recognizing in the guilty person's circumstances the basis for compassion. That compassion is expressed in Henry's contemplation of Rose's future:

> Thank the Lord that she will never get so warped and twisted as to what is right and wrong by the need of money to keep body and soul together, that she will have to do what my wife has done, and bear such a burden.[56]

One indication of Mrs. Freeman's place in the pantheon of popular novelists at this time is her participation in

53. Ibid., p. 178.

54. Ibid., p. 291.

55. Ibid., p. 292.

56. Ibid., p. 294.

the absurd and interesting experiment which produced The Whole Family (1908). The Whole Family is a novel, each chapter of which was written by a different popular novelist ranging in skill and posthumous fame from Howells and James to John Kendrick Bangs and Mary Shipman Andrews. Each novelist was supposedly writing of an area of special knowledge, but Henry James commenting on the married son gives one pause. The plot concerns an engagement and marriage as seen by various members of the family. The fact that each chapter is told by a different first person narrator makes this an interesting technical experiment, if nothing else. Mrs. Freeman writes chapter II, "The Old-Maid Aunt." It is an extremely able early example of stream of consciousness. The character of the aunt is a subtle blend of vanity, eccentricity and desperate sadness--a sadness that stems from her and Mrs. Freeman's knowledge of her emptiness. She whispers to herself the author's final judgment on the spinster's lot, "I have everything except--well, except everything."[57]

57. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman in Wm. Dean Howells et al., The Whole Family: A Novel by Twelve Authors (New York, 1908), p. 43.

CHAPTER VII

THE LATER COLLECTIONS

In 1917 F. L. Pattee said of the then still very popular Mrs. Freeman:

> From her first story she was a realist, as enamoured of actuality and as restrained as Maupassant. She seems to have followed no one. . . . But to her realism Miss Wilkins added a power usually denied her sex, the power of detachment.[1]

After the publication of A Humble Romance and Other Stories (1887) H. M. Alden had said:

> Miss Wilkins' work could hardly have given a wider sense of life in a Yankee village and the outlying farms if it had greater structural unity. It has unity of spirit, of point of view, of sympathy; and being what the author intended, we ask no other unity of it.[2]

These two quotations attribute to Mrs. Freeman's short stories a wide variety of virtues: spiritual unity, sympathy, realism, restraint, and detachment. To the list might be added those of humor and symbolism, among others. But the list of virtues is taken from, and the favorable judgments are based on, the early short stories that make up the first two collections. The later collections--and there were nine of them between Pembroke and 1910--

1. F. L. Pattee, A History of American Literature Since 1870 (New York, 1917), pp. 235-236.

2. H. M. Alden, "The Editor's Study," Harper's LXXV (September, 1887), 640.

represent a falling off.

There are two apparent reasons for this, both of which are rooted in Mrs. Freeman's relation to the literary market. In 1895 she was a forty-three-year-old spinster living with friends and had every reason to expect to remain single. She had received from her parents none of the financial security that made Sarah Jewett's life so tranquil. The stories and collections were her livelihood, and she was willing to do whatever she could to increase her earning potential. As a result, she tried to develop groups of short stories held together by some thread of unity external to the stories themselves. She employed devices of structural, symbolic, and thematic unity, all of which tended to get between her great powers of observation and the finished product. Her eye was too often on the collection and its potential sales and not often enough on her subject. Secondly, in writing specifically for the market, she abandoned all too frequently the restraint and detachment that Pattee praised and indulged in the kind of sentiment that characterized so much of popular fiction of the day.

People in Our Neighborhood (1895) appeared four years after A New England Nun and Other Stories. The basis of unity for the collection is clear enough; it consists of eight studies of the people and customs of an unnamed New England village. The conception is fine enough, and Mrs. Freeman was to return to it with greater success twenty

years later. But here three significant faults tend to obscure the valid conception. The first fault lies in the structure of the stories. There is very little dramatic action. For the most part, they are sweeping, descriptive reminiscences more like Mrs. Stowe's sketches than her own best stories. Two of them, "A Quilting Bee in Our Village" and "A Christmas Sing," are pieces of genre painting without any plot at all. Secondly the stories employ a narrator--an interested observer. This device fails because Mrs. Freeman does not keep her narrator's observations objective and lets her stray into the private consciousness of the villagers. The narrator is also ineffective because, while she is supposed to be a villager herself, her diction is clearly superior to that of her neighbors, and her attitude toward them patronizing. She is not really a citizen of "this humble village of humble folk."[3] Finally the collection is weaker than its predecessors because it does not portray the "grotesques" through which the author gives real insight into the psychology of the region. It deals rather with the sentimental stereotypes of popular fiction.

"Timothy Samson: The Wise Man," "Little Margaret Snell: The Village Runaway," "Cyrus Emmet: The Unlucky Man," "Phoebe Ann Little: The Neat Woman," and "Lydia Wheelock: The Good Woman" are all sentimental and lacking

3. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, The People of Our Neighborhood (New York, 1898), p. 43.

in distinction, although occasionally they contain the significant details which Mrs. Freeman uses so well.

> Poor Lydia has not had a new carpet in her sitting-room since she was married. It is a dreadful thing in this village not to have a carpet in the sitting-room.[4]

In a strong, tightly-constructed story this carpet would have become a symbolic detail. Here, however, its significance is dissipated in a sentimental and diffuse tale. "Phoebe Ann Little" has possibilities. Phoebe is a compulsive housekeeper who spends her life cleaning and recleaning her already immaculate house. Here is a potentially rich situation--a "grotesque" which can stand as a symbol of Puritanism--, but it is a sketch, not a story, and told in a very patronizing tone.

These stories also display the deterioration of Mrs. Freeman's style. The pungent, direct style (Foster has discovered that forty-four percent of the sentences of "A Gala Dress" are simple sentences) disappears before the determination to court the market. We begin to encounter such sentences as the following from "Timothy Samson:"

> So much peppermint and sassafras and wintergreen, indeed, does Timothy infuse in his remedies that the doctor has been known to be very sarcastic over it.[5]

The length, the inversion, and the indirection of this

4. Ibid., p. 105.

5. Ibid., p. 9.

are all hallmarks of a "popular" style and not at all what Mrs. Freeman does well. And she never wrote a more sentimental or inept sentence than this one from "Little Margaret Snell:"

> There are other children, but she is the one all-pervading spirit of childhood which keeps us all fretting but powerless under its tyranny, and yet, if the truth must be told, ready enough to cut for it the sweet cake, which it loves, when it runs away into our hearts.[6]

The best story in the collection is "Amanda Todd: The Friend of Cats," which is also the best example of the reasons why The People of Our Neighborhood is not a successful volume. The first paragraph holds out a high promise.

> Amanda Todd's orbit of existence is restricted of a necessity, since she was born, brought up, and will die in this village but there is no doubt that it is eccentric. She moves apart on her own little course quite separate from the rest of us. Had Amanda's lines of life been cast elsewhere, had circumstances pushed her, instead of hemming her in, she might have become a feminine apostle of a new creed, have founded a sect, or instituted a new system of female dress. As it is, she does not go to meeting, she never wears a bonnet, and she keeps cats.[7]

This is good enough prose; the insight and the significant details and the implicit naturalism are there. This woman whose pride keeps her from church and whose craving for love and fulfillment compels her to share her life with so many cats is obviously a fictional lens which Mrs. Freeman

6. Ibid., p. 38.

7. Ibid., p. 87.

can focus on a number of her major themes. But Amanda is not a major portrait and the story is not a major story because the art is missing. The loose, sketch-like quality, the absence of drama and plot, and the overstatement of the obvious through very unprofessional repetition weaken a potentially strong portrait.

Mrs. Freeman's next collection, Silence and Other Stories, appeared in 1898, a very uneven collection containing two interesting stories and several pieces of very inferior writing. One thing worth noting is the increasing length of the stories. She was beginning to write more and more to fit the market, and one thing she had learned was that long stories paid more than brief ones. Her native gifts of economy and compression were, therefore, not to her economic interest. The collection also reveals her determination to mine for gold in the difficult terrain of historical romance. It also reveals by default the contemporary and realistic nature of her art. The farther back in time Mrs. Freeman goes, the worse she gets and the more she is willing to borrow ineptly from Hawthorne.

"The Little Maid at the Door" has for its theme the Hawthornesque idea that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children. The reappearance of the "little maid" who had died is clearly a special providence; but where such devices are often powerful symbols for Hawthorne, they are only sentimental tricks in Mrs. Freeman's hands.

"Silence" is a better story of the same type. The first half of it is filled with graphic details of an Indian massacre. The massacre as seen from a woman's point of view, the reactions of various individuals to horror, and the psychological after-effects of the terrible night are well done. But the story breaks into halves, and in the second half these virtues fade into a very conventional love affair. Hawthorne's influence can be seen in the use of such Gothic devices as witches, providences and prophesies ("I have seen blotches of blood everywhere all day. The enemy will be upon us."[8]). One lamentable weakness in these stories is monstrous, archaic dialog of the same kind that makes The Heart's Highway unreadable. Two other stories (there are only six in the collection) are conventional love stories that require no comment.

Of the sentimental stories of young lovers and marriage, the one that has merit is "Evelina's Garden," which was reissued separately in 1899. Evelina loved Thomas Merriam in her youth but did not marry him because of his inferior social station. While he married later and had a son, she remained a spinster. Her rejection of love and withdrawal from life are symbolized by the high hedge she builds around her garden. Within its narrow confines, however, she finds some joy. "She had lost the one way of human affection, but her feet had found a little single

8. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Silence and Other Stories (New York, 1898), p. 124.

sidetrack of love, which gave her still a zest in the journey of life."[9] Relying on the use of parallels, Mrs. Freeman presents Thomas's son, a minister, and Evelina's niece who confront the same situation. This time the girl does not turn aside from the "one way of human affections;" and neither does the minister, although old Thomas warns him of the hazards inherent in class distinctions.

> She ain't never eat in the kitchen, nor been scairt to set down in the parlor. And satin and velvit and silver spoons and cream-pots ain't never looked anything out of the common to her, and they always will to you.[10]

The central problem is genuine, the observations are right and rich in implication, and the parallel is successfully maintained; but the story falls off badly at the end. Because of inherited wealth and the upward mobility inherent in the ministerial calling, the young people are able to marry and live happily ever after. The ending is not only conventional; it is abrupt and technically crude. The reason is that "Evelina's Garden" was rapidly turning into a novel. Had she continued the story as an investigation of the inter-class marriage, Mrs. Freeman might have written something to rival The Rise of Silas Lapham.

The one atypical story in the collection is "A New England Prophet." Marred as it is by the forced insertion of a romantic relationship, it is still one of Mrs. Freeman's finest comic stories. It is the story of a religious

9. Ibid., p. 124.

10. Ibid., p. 136.

fanatic who prophesies the end of the world and who is believed by a small band of followers. His brother, who does not believe him, persuades him to sign over the farm effective the day after doomsday. The dialog between the two brothers, the Puritan and the Yankee, is as comic as any Mrs. Freeman ever wrote. The prophet himself is one of her finest grotesques, revealing the strange channels that repressed Puritan emotion tended to carve for itself. In the fine, Twain-like conclusion, the author makes good comic use of anti-climax. After waiting in prayer on a hilltop all night for the coming annihilation, the believers--eyes averted--slowly and silently drift home in a chill, grey dawn. The prophet himself sits "brooding over the ashes of his own prophetic fire."[11] Meanwhile his wife uses all the "faculty" at her command to save the farm. She finally retrieves the title by agreeing to bake for the Yankee brother all the mince pies that he demands--a small price for an apocalyptic vision.

The Love of Parson Lord and Other Stories, a haphazard collection of five fairly long sentimental tales, appeared in 1900. Four of the stories are only women's sentimental fiction. "Catherine Carr" is a story of the American revolution, characterized by the archaic language which is the hallmark of Mrs. Freeman's failure as a historical romancer.

"The Love of Parson Lord" has more to recommend it.

11. Ibid., p. 224.

It is a fairly conventional story marred by looseness of structure and shallow characterization, but it is redeemed partially by the characterization of Parson Lord and by the significance of his relationship to his daughter Love. The parson is a man whose normal human responses have become twisted by the harshness of his Puritan faith. In this regard, he is one of Mrs. Freeman's grotesques. Having vowed in the days of her infancy that the girl would become a missionary, the parson is tormented by his conflicting desires to rear her to her stern destiny and yet to gratify her childish desires with gifts and demonstrations of love. His irrational compromise is to play the stern father overtly while covertly providing her with dolls and treats. Here is a man driven to neurosis by the pressures inherent in his environment. And the minister's dilemma is not without its consequences on the personality of his daughter. Little Love (her name and the attempts of Calvinism to repress her are symbolic), victimized by the past, has ambivalent responses to the traditional delights of childhood.

> She felt unutterably guilty. Still there was a sweet comfort from the feeling of the doll in her arms which she could not help realizing in spite of her conviction of sin.[12]

The scene is reminiscent of Huckleberry Finn's crisis concerning the restoration of Jim to Miss Watson. The altered dimensions of the crisis make this a lesser story, of

12. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, The Love of Parson Lord and Other Stories (New York, 1900), p. 18.

course, but not necessarily a less valid one. The fatal flaws in the story lie in the author's patronizing tone and in the conventional love affair which provides the story's resolution.

The best story in the collection is "One Good Time," a tale which reminds one of Garland's "Mrs. Ripley's Trip" and Miss Jewett's "The Hilton's Holiday." Narcissa, the wife and mother and the central character in the story, is, like "mother" in "The Revolt of Mother," basically contented with her place in the patriarchical family. But she is neither foolish nor unaware of the wonders of the great world beyond. Aware vaguely of her right to some little portion of excitement and beauty, she rebels against the dullness of her life and goes to New York. When she returns, she returns more or less contentedly to her place in the family and community. Her account of her adventures provides the author with a number of opportunities for comic observations. The theme of urban-rural contrast is nicely focused in the country woman's view of city life.

Understudies appeared in 1901, just before Mrs. Freeman's marriage and migration to New Jersey. It consists of twelve stories: six about animals and six about flowers. The collection is held together by a common symbolic structure. Each story is about an animal or plant which functions symbolically and about a human parallel. Most of the stories are not successful. The reason is not hard to find. Mrs. Freeman was a realist. Her best gift was her

faculty of observation. She was able to transform the observed situation into a sign (symbol) of a deeply felt moral and social insight. But she was not an intellectual; she had no integrated system of values or pervasive world view. Thus when she reversed the process, when, instead of allowing symbol to grow from observation, she tried to impose an external device on her observations, she was building a fictional structure without an intellectual foundation. She was able to summon up no controlling image like Fuller's skyscraper or Norris's railroad. The result is not a controlling metaphor or symbolic situation of power; it is a coy and conventional trick of the market place. Mrs. Freeman herself was not completely happy with the two-fold division of the book. She wrote to Alden:

> Somehow the flowers and animals seem to me not to combine very well. They are so essentially different, one being symbolic, the other physiological.[13]

But for economic reasons she bowed to the wishes of her publisher. The result is a collection of twelve sentimental stories devoid, for the most part, of the fruits of observation, held together by an external unity device which doesn't really unify.

The first six stories about animals are little more than sentimental personifications. In one we encounter

13. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, letter to H. M. Alden, October 6, 1900 (Columbia University Library, New York).

"the poor monkey's desire for liberty."[14] In another a dog is accused of achieving "another level in the spiritual evolution of his race."[15] "The Squirrel" achieves a kind of whimsical charm.

> The squirrel lived with his life-long mate near the farm-house. He considered himself very rich, because he owned an English-walnut tree. Neither he nor his mate had the least doubt that it belonged to them and not to the farmer.[16]

But whimsical charm is fragile stuff and not the sort of thing that realists can handle much without damaging--as the previous quotations indicate.

The strongest and most successful story in the collection is not whimsical. "The Parrot" is the story of a parrot, who is imprisoned in a wire cage, and of his mistress, Martha, whose passions are imprisoned by the mores of the village and the morals of Calvinism. Here the parrot is the heroine's alter ego, and its curses are her protest against life. When the minister she had hoped to marry comes with his new bride to visit her, Martha sits in an environmentally imposed silence while the bird attacks the new bride. Later as they sit powerless in their respective prisons, Martha thoughtlessly asks the bird if it wants a cracker to eat. The bird replies:

14. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Understudies (New York, 1901) p. 23.

15. Ibid., p. 58.

16. Ibid., p. 39.

> What was that? What was that, Martha, Martha, Martha, Martha, Martha. Polly doesn't want a cracker; Polly will be damned if she eats a cracker. You don't want a cracker, do you Martha? Martha, Martha, Martha, want a cracker. What was that, Martha? Martha want a cracker? Martha will be damned if she eats a cracker. Martha, Martha, Martha![17]

Here in the final words of a strong scene--words which are possibly an hallucination--Mrs. Freeman stands on the threshold of insights and techniques that do not fully develop for another decade or more. But unaware of the new psychologies of her time, and cut off pretty much from the critical and aesthetic dialog of her time, she did not have the resources to repeat or develop these unfortunately isolated moments.

The second group of six stories, those built around flowers, are poorer than the first. The comparison between man and flower is forced, and the tricks used to get the flower planted somewhere in the story are all but unprofessional. The gaudy prince's feather relates to a flamboyant man, the morning glory to a promising boy who never amounts to much. Occasionally the insight is there as in the case of the forlorn clump of bouncing bet which struggles on in a semi-wild state much like the story's heroine. The author says wryly, "The last survivor was a woman, of course."[18] "Peony," also a story with possibilities, is the story of a gaudy, over-blown woman (a peony)

17. Ibid., p. 71.

18. Ibid., p. 107.

with great generosity of soul and of her thin, grasping, self-righteous niece. However, Mrs. Freeman is so busy with her flower symbols that she never develops the personality clash which, had it been developed through observation, might have been a relationship symbolic of the conflicting values of the New England of her day. No other story better illustrates the fallacy of the principle of organization.

Mrs. Freeman had been writing ghost stories for Everybody's magazine since before the turn of the century. All of these except "A Christmas Ghost" were collected into a volume called The Wind in the Rose Bush and Other Stories of the Supernatural (1903). The stories had such titles as "The South-West Chamber," "The Shadows on the Wall," and "The Lost Ghost." The title piece is about a little, neglected girl, who, after death, returns to haunt her evil stepmother. Most of the ghosts haunt houses, and most of the houses are inhabited by sisters--one soft sister who cries and trembles and one hard sister who denies the supernatural but is equally afraid. In "Shadows on the Wall" the following description appears:

> He cast a covertly sharp, comprehensive glance at Mrs. Brigham with her elaborate calm; at Rebecca quietly huddled in the corner of the sofa with her handkerchief to her face and only one small, reddened ear as attentive as a dog's uncovered and revealing her alertness for his presence; at Caroline sitting with a strained composure in her arm-

chair by the stove.[19]

Were the author not burdened with supernatural tricks, she could write a fine short story about this collection of sisters.

A quick summary of the weak points of "The Vacant Lot," the longest of the stories, reveals the essential flaw of the collection. A number of interesting situations--the plight of the unattractive daughter, the search for a husband, the sensitive wife versus the tough-minded husband--are touched upon but not developed. The various preternatural phenomena have no connection with one another or with the main plot; they just scare people. An old murder is forced into the story, apparently for the sake of atmosphere.

Hawthorne used various devices of this kind to wander in "byways of the spirit."[20] Mrs. Freeman uses them for their own sake. Where Hawthorne used "special providences" to probe ethical questions, she uses Gothic tricks to produce superficial sensations. In Pembroke and The Shoulders of Atlas she went to Hawthorne for more serious help than this. He served her no better there. Nothing underscores the basic realism of her talent so much as her inept handling of the paraphenalia of romance.

19. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, The Wind in the Rose Bush and Other Stories of the Supernatural (New York, 1903), p. 57.

20. Charles Feidelson, Jr., Symbolism and American Literature (Chicago, 1953), p. 2.

The one story that rises above all these weaknesses is "The Lost Ghost." The tale is marred by the unnecessary apparatus of a frame story. A family moving into one supposedly haunted house is entertained by an account of another. There is no other connection between the frame and the main story. (This looseness is not found in Mrs. Freeman's earlier work.) The main story tells of the ghost of a little, neglected girl who, even after death, continues her search for a mother. This search is counterpointed by the childless Mrs. Bird's search for a daughter. In the sentimental denouement they are united in death. The search, however, is genuine and touches on the need for love, which is one of the author's most consistent themes.

Another collection which came out in 1903 is Six Trees. Like Understudies it is a collection on which unity has been imposed from without, in this case by the repeated use of trees. The trees perform two functions. First, they act as symbols and parallels. In "The Lombardy Poplar" the author says, "As the tree was the last of his immediate family, so the woman who lived in the house was the last of hers."[21] Secondly, they are involved in the action of the plot. In "The Elm Tree" an old man lives and hides in a tree.

Edward Foster has high praise for this collection.

21. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Six Trees (New York, 1903), p. 132.

He says:

> A better volume [than The Wind in the Rose Bush] Six Trees, appeared in the same year. In thought and feeling the stories return to moments of nature mysticism . . . and to the doctrine of symbols expressed by Ozias Lamb in Jerome: Everything on earth means somethin' more'n itself if we could only see it.[22]

He goes on to say, "'The Apple Tree' and several others in this volume are lovely stories."[22] and to describe them as in the spirit of Emerson. Building on Alden's reference to Mrs. Freeman as an impressionist, Foster here tries to tie her to Transcendentalism rather than to the New England regional tradition. "The Elm Tree" is one story which he can use as testimony. Mrs. Freeman does build the tree into a symbol of transcendental unity and of the spiritual powers of nature, as the following quote shows.

> It [the tree] became . . . something akin to a testimony of God. . . . Something there was about the superb acres of those great branches curving skyward and earthward with matchless symmetry of line which seemed to furnish an upward lift for thought and imagination.[23]

Later she says:

> Out of the great spread of the tree, that majesty of green radiances and violet shadows and highlights as emeralds--out of this fairy mottle as of jewels and shadows and sunbeams, stared the face of old David Ransom, and the face was inexpressibly changed.

22. Edward Foster, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (New York, 1956), pp. 163-164.

23. Freeman, Six Trees, pp. 4-5.

All the bitterness and rancor were gone.[24]

This is faintly Emersonian, but one story does not make a pattern. Mr. Foster's attempt to "romanticize" Mrs. Freeman is unfortunate for two reasons. He fails to distinguish among the kinds of symbols. Speaking of what he calls symbols and signs, Tyndall says, "The difference seems to be that a sign is an exact reference to something definite and a symbol an exact reference to something indefinite."[25] Working with this distinction, we can see that Mrs. Freeman employs signs most of the time--signs or significant details within a historical and social framework. That is to say, she writes like a realist most of the time. So the attempt to see her as a romantic writer is based very much on a minority report. Secondly, Foster fails to make the necessary qualitative judgment. As the second excerpt from "The Elm Tree" shows, the author's more romantic writing is her poorer writing. This is the case from Barney's symbolically twisted shoulder in Pembroke through all of her unhappy excursions into the world of historical fiction. What she can't see, she can't write about.

The converse is also true; when she writes from experience and observation she writes well. "The White Birch," "The Great Pine," "The Balsam Fir," and "The Lom-

24. Ibid., p. 37.

25. Wm. York Tyndall, The Literary Symbol (New York, 1955), p. 6.

bardy Poplar" are all weak, sentimental stories onto which the symbolic function of the various trees has been forced. But even in these stories there are flashes of good realism. Of the heroine of "The Balsam Fir" she says:

> Martha had very little money, but somehow she always managed to keep her house in good order, though she had never had any blinds. It had always been the dream of Martha's life to have blinds.[26]

It is the imposed symbol of the tree that comes between Mary and the telling of the tale of Martha's forlorn little dream. In "The Lombardy Poplar" the realistic dialog achieves fine, vivid little scenes. Lonely old Sarah's cousin belittles the "popple."

> "It ain't a tree. It's a stick tryin' to look like one."
> Sarah answered, "That's why I like it."[27]

But in these sentimental tales of the triumph of one or another of the domestic virtues, these are only flashes.

Two stories stand out in the collection, "The Elm Tree," whose Emersonianism has been noted, and "The Apple Tree." "The Elm Tree" concerns a lonely old man who resists the town's attempts to take away his independence. He is a tough old individualist. "He was in spirit a revolutionist and anarchist. The mention of banks sent him into a white heat of rage."[28] The bank has taken away his home,

26. Freeman, Six Trees, p. 103.

27. Ibid., p. 143.

28. Ibid., p. 8.

and now the town wants to take away his freedom. The struggle for respect, the dialog, the relation of old David to his former property are all precisely observed and rendered. So also is the symbolic function of the tree.

"The Apple Tree" compares two families: the Blakes with their trimmed pear tree, their Thanksgiving preparations, their cane chairs, and their dead children; and the Maddoxes with their apple tree, their indolence, their love, and their children "grouped in a charming little cluster."[29] The point of the story is that life is redeemed by love. At the beginning we see the Maddoxes through the eyes of the Blakes, and their poverty is slovenly and repellent. At the end, however, it has been redeemed by their own mutual love; and it is their life which is rich in comparison to the cold, Calvinistic life of the Blakes.

The People of Our Neighborhood was unified by geography; Understudies and Six Trees by a controlling symbolism. The Givers (1904) is united by the common theme of gift-giving. Six of its eight stories are Christmas stories. Three of them, "Joy," "Lucy," and "The Chance of Araminta" are unexceptional. Araminta's chance is a chance at marriage, which, as all of Mary's characters know, is the fulfillment of a woman's life. "Joy" is the story of a girl who returns after many years to the farmer

29. Ibid., p. 203.

who loves her. The old unpainted farmhouse which the jilted farmer had shut up through the years room by room serves as an effective symbol of the ever-diminishing life of rural New England. These stories are not unpleasant but "The Last Gift" is aggressively bad. The story of a man whose "love of giving amounted to a pure and innocent but unruly passion"[30] and whose last gift is his honesty, about which he is also pathological, it is as poor a story as Mrs. Freeman ever wrote.

The Givers is a minor book, but, with the exception of "The Last Gift" and "Eglantina," it is not a bad book. In fact two of the Christmas stories, "The Givers" and "The Reign of the Doll," are very fine examples of this sub-genre. "The Givers" is a comic study both of manners and of selfishness. When a poor young couple marries, the various members of the community try to outdo one another in bringing gifts which are impressive but not functional. The presents are simply a species of vanity--an extension of self. When one gift is opened, the bride asks innocently:

> "What be the bowls for? Oatmeal?"
> The visitors all laughed.
> "Oatmeal!" cried Abby. "Why, they are finger bowls."[31]

As the givers gain humility, they retract their useless

30. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, The Givers (New York, 1904), p. 268.

31. Ibid., p. 11.

gifts and are able to make the gifts what they should be--gestures of love.

"The Reign of the Doll" concerns Fidelia and Diantha, two eccentric and stiff-necked old-maid sisters living across the street from each other but long separated by an argument over their father's will. Shortly before Christmas the worst electrical and wind storm in years descends upon the village. Driven by fear, the more timid sister enters the old family house for the first time in years. United by this "special providence," the sisters pass the stormy hours making clothes for a charity doll. As they work through the night, they are slowly united by the gift and the act of love. The dialog, which is excellent, and the characterization of the old maids make this a controlled story of sentiment rather than a piece of sentimental women's fiction.

Only two of the stories are not Christmas stories. One of them, "Eglantina," concerns the love of a blind boy for a girl with a disfigured cheek. Mrs. Freeman spends several discursive paragraphs on "inner beauty." The increasing number of her stories like this indicate that the pressures of the market were beginning to tell heavily on her. The brilliant realist, bright with promise, was gradually becoming a sentimental old woman--but not an old woman devoid of the spirit of adventure. The other non-Christmas story, "The Butterfly," shows her continued willingness to treat almost any subject. It is the story of a

man who hides from his daughter the fact that her mother is promiscuous. It is not a distinguished story; but, as Foster says, "The 'broken home' was a new subject in these days, and it is interesting to see that Mrs. Freeman could treat it well."[32]

If The Givers is merely an undistinguished collection, The Fair Lavinia and Others (1907) is an inferior one. Along with The Wind in the Rose Bush it displays Mrs. Freeman at her worst. It contains the farthest reaches of two unfortunate trends in her writing: historical narrative and the sophomoric style of the scribbling woman. "The Gold," an historical narrative, contains the following exchange:

> "Wherefore cannot you tell me where the gold is, Abraham Duke?"
> "I can tell you not, Catherine."[33]

"The Fair Lavinia," also historical, contains dialog equally bad and also coy overwriting. The following example will serve:

> The spring was wonderful that year: a year long ago; it was late, there had been many northeast storms and frosts, but it was at last fairly triumphant. The trees were forth all together in a silently hustling crowd, and it seemed as if many of them instead of taking their turns for flowering and leafing as usual were pushing to the front, regardless of all the laws of the vernal season. One looking from his window saw leaves of maples deepening from rose to green. . . . The dark limbs of oaks having chopped their last year's

32. Foster, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, p. 166.

33. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, The Fair Lavinia and Others (New York, 1907), p. 229.

> shag of russet, which had endured so long at their knotty knees, to be pierced by violets and spring beauties, showed tufts of gold. . . . The birches were clad as lightly as nymphs, revealing their graceful limbs, white with the passion of spring, through dim clouds of amber green.[34]

Canby and others have noted the close interrelation of character and setting in the best Freeman stories and the characteristic restraint in the treatment of setting. This restraint is what Helen McMahon has in mind when she finds Mrs. Freeman receiving deserved praise for "simplicity and the value of common forms, the appeal of being unmistakably true to life."[35] The excerpt quoted above indicates how far astray she had actually gone in following the false lights of the market place.

Most of the other stories are without distinction, although they do occasionally display moments of insight--like the scene in "Amarinda's Roses" where Amarinda, nearing thirty and still unmarried, thinks about putting on a spinster's cap and her maiden aunt weeps at the prospect. Two better stories are "The Willow-Ware" and "The Secret," both of which deal with the related themes of love and rebellion. In "The Willow-Ware" Adeline, a young girl, rebels at the role her rural New England village had assigned to her. Rejecting spinsterhood, she defies her old maid aunts and disrupts their orderly ways by buying ready-made

34. Ibid., pp. 3-4.

35. Helen McMahon, Criticism of Fiction: A Study of Trends in the Atlantic Monthly (New York, 1952) p. 19.

clothes and refusing to sew. All of this constitutes a kind of shaking of the fist at her personal fate, but not at the role of women in general, for she quickly grasps the opportunity to marry and play out that primary role which society provides for women. It should be noted that Adeline's attitude toward marriage is, like that of almost all the other Freeman heroines, acquisitive rather than sexual.

Catherine's rebellion in "The Secret" is deeper and more personal than Adeline's. When she unavoidably keeps her fiancé waiting, he demands to know where she had been. In making such a demand he is clearly operating within the approved patterns of his society. She, however, refuses to tell him; and he leaves, breaking the engagement. In trying to rectify the situation, her mother states the conventional attitude and Catherine replies.

> "As long as he's a man," she [the mother] said, "all a woman can do is sit still and do nothing."
>
> "I am not going to sit still and do nothing."[36]

This is the extent of her rebellion, but she does keep faith with her private self and maintain her integrity. When her fiancé relents and in relenting honors that private self, she marries happily. Her concern had been for the deeper personal needs of women not different social roles.

36. Freeman, The Fair Lavinia, p. 195.

In the decade after 1895 Mrs. Freeman wrote a number of very good short stories, but the number in relation to the quantity of pieces produced was small. The increasing interest in sentimental conventions and in historical romance, together with the preoccupation with story groups clustered around some artificial unifying device, led her away from her own best talent. The Fair Lavinia and Others--especially the title story--represents the end of this long decline. Her last three collections are better.[37] The first of the collections which signal a return to her former quality is The Winning Lady and Others (1909). Although the title story is a New Jersey story, the collection reflects a return to early New England themes and subjects. Historical romances are things of the past; the focus here is on regional manners and situations, dialect, humor, and, occasionally, tragedy. It even looks like her first two collections; over three hundred pages long, it contains eleven stories, the best of which display the old brevity and simplicity of style.

Most of the stories are undistinguished, ranging from the inconsequence of "Billy and Suzie" to the slight but pleasant humor of "A New Year's Resolution." But the very first paragraph of the first story indicates that the tide

37. "Mrs. Freeman's latest short stories, of which Edgewater People (1918) is a representative collection, rose almost to the level of her earliest work." Arthur Hobson Quinn, American Fiction: An Historical and Critical Survey (New York, 1936), p. 439.

has turned. After the introductory paragraph of "The Fair Lavinia" previously quoted, it is a relief to encounter the following:

> Mrs. Adeline Wyatt stood before her long mirror. She held a silver-framed hand-glass, and she surveyed her head crowned with a pretty toque at every possible angle. Adeline was always conscious of exercising stern heroism when she stood before her mirror. She spared herself nothing. She looked unflinchingly at every crease in her chin, every crow's-foot about her eyes, every hollow in her cheeks . . . She faced the worst, and as far as possible, without the use of arts which she despised, she remedied defects. She practised before her mirror exactly the carriage of head and arrangement of hair which were most becoming.[38]

Here is the closely observed, fully rendered scene and the use of the significant detail. Here is the ability to portray what Arthur Mizener has called "the meaning of the moment." But the character as well as the technique displays the return to form. Although the story is set in Metuchen, Adeline Wyatt is one of Mrs. Freeman's redoubtable New England women with her realistic courage, her willingness to do battle against time, and her scorn of deception. The story concerns Adeline's moment of weakness, in which she cheats at cards in order to win a punch bowl, and her moment of retribution, when she confesses. Like Jane Field and like Sylvia Whitman in The Shoulders of Atlas, she finds that she cannot live with the taste of sin. The plot and insight here are not original; but the

38. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, The Winning Lady and Others (New York, 1909), pp. 3-4.

story is fresh. It is Mrs. Freeman's powers of observation and her ability to make different details significant that enables her to retell substantially the same story without being guilty of the monotonous clichés that Bret Harte, George Washington Cable and other regionalists produced in their later years.

"Eliza Sam" is a clear return to the scenes and devices of her early masterpieces. The narrator speaks sadly of the New England Mrs. Freeman knew so well.

> My neighbors are mostly women. There used to be men enough years ago, when I was a boy and a young man, but they have all died or moved away.[39]

The story is comic; and the narrator, completely free of the patronizing tone that marked the author's occasional narrators from The People of Our Neighborhood on, recounts two different stories--the discouraging of an unwanted suitor and the reclaiming of a drunkard--which are rooted deeply in regional folk humor. As in "The Winning Lady," it is the language as much as anything that indicates renewed strength. Here it is the narrator's dialect.

> Her real name ain't Eliza Sam; it is Eliza Hunt. She's called Eliza Sam to distinguish her from the other Eliza Hunts. There are three in this village, and they have to have their fathers' and husbands' names tacked on to theirs to till 'em apart. Eliza Sam wasn't never married and her father's name was Sam. He died about five years ago. He kept the saw mill. Beside Eliza Sam there is Eliza John and Eliza Caleb. Eliza John is married to a man whose name is John, and Eliza Caleb ain't married, never was, and is never like

39. Ibid., p. 286.

> to be, but they have tacked Caleb onto her name to tell her from the others.[40]

The verb "distinguish" might be considered a flaw, but the regional sentence patterns and the hinted variant pronunciations give this a genuine ring. Above all the non sequiturs about Eliza Sam's father make the passage authentic and comic.

The two best stories in The Winning Lady grow out of two of Mrs. Freeman's most fundamental talents, her powers of observation and her tragic vision. The first, "Old Woman Magoun," is a tragic story set in a decaying little New England village called Barry's Ford. The main character is a salty, illiterate old woman who preserves her integrity and her values against the indolence and evil which pervade the life of the village and who devotes her energies to raising her probably illegitimate granddaughter. When the dissolute father claims the child, intending to let her become a gambler's mistress to pay for gambling debts, Old Woman Magoun takes the daughter for a walk and allows her to eat deadly nightshade. The story, which is very frank, is told fortunately in a style which is a reversion to the author's earliest, starkest prose. With its strong sense of tragedy, one is forced to wonder what she could have accomplished if her editors and confidants had encouraged this Aeschylian streak instead of urging on her the pious clichés of the market place.

40. Ibid., p. 286.

The other first rate story is "The Selfishness of Amelia Lamkin," which in length, tone, and theme is reminiscent of Rose Terry Cooke--especially of "Freedom Wheeler's Controversy with God." Amelia suffers from a martyr-complex and contributes to her family's weakening moral fiber by doing too much for them. The doctor says to her daughter, "Of course I realize how almost impossible it is to prevent self-sacrificing women like your mother from offering themselves up."[41] Using one of her favorite devices for underscoring theme, Mrs. Freeman contrasts Amelia's species of selfishness with her sister Jane's. Where Amelia is faded, Jane is fresh. Where Amelia is worried, Jane is serene. Where Amelia is put-upon, Jane is independent. Jane, who had her chances, chose the freedom of spinsterhood rather than the sacrifice of marriage. Her values are material.

> "Addie [Amelia's daughter] might do better when it comes to money."
> "Money isn't everything."
> "It is a good deal," responded Jane.[42]

When Amelia collapses from overwork, the various members of her family are plagued by feelings of guilt. The careless son hopes that mitten-mending hadn't been a contributing factor; the lazy daughter tries to justify her "delicacy." And Amelia's husband asks with guilty concern, "Jane, do you think putting in my sleeve-buttons and studs hurt her."[43] As Amelia begins to recover, the irony of the

41. Ibid., p. 148.

42. Ibid., p. 143.

43. Ibid., p. 149.

story and the title becomes clear. Amelia's selfishness is really love, and her family's concern is really a selfish desire to assuage their feelings of guilt.

When Mary Freeman died, she left behind between forty and fifty uncollected short stories. Of these, twenty were published between 1900 and 1910.[44] The stories range in nature from realistic studies in manners like "Humble Pie" through symbolic, Wordsworthian stories like "Prism" to the outright fantasy of "The Cautious King and the All-Round Wise Woman." They all have in common, however, the fact that they fall remarkably far short of her best work. The best of them, "About Hannah Stone," concerns a strong-minded New England spinster--an eccentric--who makes the parson spend two dollars for a Christmas tree for the church but then gives each parishioner a present. She defends her conduct with the simple New England philosophy, "Givin' is givin', and sellin' is sellin'."[45]

That these stories could find a publisher bad as they are indicates the degree of Mrs. Freeman's popularity, and the range of this popularity is indicated by the variety of magazines willing to publish her material: Everybody's, Lippincott's, The Century, Collier's, Ladies Home Journal. She also published in British magazines as varied as The

44. Foster errs in his fine Freeman bibliography by listing "The Revolt of Sophia Lane" as an uncollected story. It appeared later as the title story of The Givers.

45. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "About Hannah Stone," Everybody's, IV (January, 1901), p. 27.

English Illustrated and *Cornhill*. When one contrasts these inferior stories (the best ones almost always went to Harper's) with the stories that came earlier and those that came later and even with the best of this decade, one can see the pernicious effect that the market place had on Mary's writing. It gave her the formula of romantic love and sentimental self-sacrifice. It published everything she wrote according to this formula. In doing so, it intruded itself between her and the New England "doubleness" which was always the chief source of the regionalist's strength. Thus, it kept her from reaching and sustaining the high level of art of which she was capable. The market gave her popularity and financial rewards; but it made her, like Scott Fitzgerald, the victim of success.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FINAL PHASE

In 1912 Mary Wilkins Freeman was sixty years old. She had been a professional writer for thirty years and in that time had produced eleven short story collections and eleven novels. She had become financially secure not only through the successful sale of her books but through her marriage. Her health was not the best, but she did not slow down. Perhaps because she could see hints of failure in her ten year old marriage to Dr. Freeman, she continued to throw herself into her work. Writing, which had ceased to become a necessity, now became a habit--even a compulsion. Consequently, the next six years saw the publication of four more volumes: The Butterfly House (1912), The Copy-cat and Other Stories (1914), An Alabaster Box (1917), and Edgewater People (1918). This last, like The Copy-cat, is a short story collection.

The Butterfly House, like The Debtor, is a New Jersey story and a story of suburbia. However, it is a better book for two obvious reasons. First, Mrs. Freeman by this time had been in Metuchen longer and had developed a more definite attitude toward and response to this "material." Second she wrote mostly about women and the world of bridge parties, social calls, and literary societies rather than about the world of finance and stock market speculation,

of which she knew so little. The central plot concerns Annie Eustace, a young girl who is secretly a gifted novelist. Annie suffers in silence while Margaret Edes, whom Annie thought her dearest friend, claims credit for Annie's best seller. After a courtship of sufficient length and difficulty Annie marries the young minister Karl Von Rosen, who guesses and rejoices in her secret.

Stated thus baldly, the plot can be seen as another patchwork of the melodrama and sentiment that Mrs. Freeman used to piece together her novels. There were other, worse things added; Mrs. Freeman had learned well enough the prescription for writing marketable stories. The story begins with the discovery of an abandoned Syrian child on the doorstep of the bachelor minister's manse. While using this improbable piece of business to underscore the provincial American's fear of the foreigner, the author unconsciously reveals her own, speaking of "the soft guile of a race as supple and silent as to their real intentions as cats."[1] Only after she has exploited the mysterious presence of the baby for some time does she seem to discover that as a story line it would lead nowhere. Consequently, she has the baby kidnapped by its father and then turns her attention to the romance between Annie and Karl. And in the last two-thirds of the book the emphasis shifts back and forth between Annie and Karl on the one hand and

1. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, The Butterfly House (New York, 1912), p. 90.

Margaret Edes and her family on the other. The kidnapping is only mentioned once. Clearly it is a badly unfocused book. There are other weaknesses too, which indicate that the novel was written in haste. Mrs. Freeman is careless in placing her characters geographically. In one scene Annie lives a quarter of a mile away from Margaret; in another scene she lives right across the street.

Like The Debtor and "Doc" Gordon, The Butterfly House opens with a scene of comic realism. In this case the scene is the monthly meeting of the Fairbridge women's club, called The Zenith Club. The little vanities and social ploys of the suburban women are displayed with pitiless comic insight as the meeting builds to its climax: an authoress's talk on the subject, "Where does a woman shine with more luster, at home or abroad?"[2] Here also, before the melodrama begins, Mrs. Freeman has a chance to introduce the characters, some of whom are fine grotesque studies and others of whom gather about them some of her most repeated themes.

Three caricatures might be mentioned as examples of the note of biting satire that echoes through the suburban books. Mr. George B. Slade, one of the two contestants for the title of social leader of Fairbridge, is aggressive in pursuit of the values of the "new woman" and suspicious of simple, virtuous girls who "can't sing like Leila Mac-

2. Ibid., pp. 24-25.

Donald or Mrs. Arthur Wells or play the piano like Mrs. Jack Evarts or recite like Sally Anderson."[3] Bessy Dicky--an absurd name--is the spinster secretary of the Zenith Club, which has given focus and meaning to her meager life. She is tall, angular and rendered ludicrous by a slight cast in one eye. Her knees tremble with excitement when she reads the monthly minutes in the presence of Reverend Mr. Von Rosen, around whom centers whatever antiseptic fantasies she has. Mrs. Freeman indulges in a little autobiographical fun by creating the character of Martha Wallingford, the visiting author of Hearts Astray who never recites in public. Her visit to Margaret Edes' house gives the author a chance to display a talent for dialog. While Mrs. Freeman's dialect speech is often direct and effective, her higher class characters often speak appallingly. The Butterfly House shows that when the yeast of satire is added, the mixture is a success. The nervous dialog at the dinner given for Miss Wallingford is excellent.

Annie Eustace, the heroine, talks only infrequently and secretly about her novels. When she does, however, she reveals the author's somewhat ambivalent relationship to her profession. In one outburst Annie says joyfully of her novel, "You know it is selling wonderfully."[4] Earlier Annie had discussed the relation of history--especially

3. Ibid., p. 27.

4. Ibid., p. 290.

contemporary, local, social history--to fiction.

> I keep a journal. . . . and the journal was very stupid. So little unusual happens here in Fairbridge, and I have always been rather loathe to write very much about my innermost feelings or very much about my friends because of course one can never tell what will happen. It never seemed to me quite delicate--to keep a very full journal, and so there was in reality very little to write.[5]

Although it is always dangerous to infer too much about an author from what she puts into the mouth of a character, this statement is very tempting. This is the second of Mrs. Freeman's New Jersey novels. Since the first created an uproar among the good people of Metuchen, a number of whom considered themselves slandered, it seems clear that here she was trying to reassure local readers. One fears, nevertheless, that she was serious. Her novels <u>are</u> the result of not writing about "innermost feelings" and of not having innermost thoughts--that is, a world view--to fall back on. The persistence with which she wrote historical fiction and melodramatic love stories--admittedly to sell in the market place--indicates an unawareness of those reportorial skills which enabled her to use the usual to depict life where "so little unusual happens." The statement quoted above is not satire, and the speaker has the author's complete sympathy. Mrs. Freeman was not a cynic bent on deception. One reasonable conclusion is that Annie speaks for the author and reveals her deficient powers of self-criticism.

5. <u>Ibid</u>., p. 176.

In spite of the sentimental and melodramatic clichés at the center of the book, The Butterfly House is really a book about values and responses to life. Three different characters respond to life in three different ways; that is, they love in three different ways. The characters are Annie Eustace, Alice Mendon, and Margaret Estes. These three also portray Mrs. Freeman's awareness of the limiting effect of environment on the response a character is able to make to life. She says of Margaret, "Mrs. Edes had a Napoleonic ambition which was tragic and pathetic because it could command only a narrow scope."[6] Further on she says quite explicitly, "One living within narrow horizons must have limited aims."[7] Nevertheless, it is not the dimensions of one's environment but the object of love and the direction of sympathies that distinguishes the good from the bad person--although environment might well separate the happy from the unhappy.

Annie is a typical Freeman heroine, conventional in her needs and attitudes; and like most of the author's young girls, docile and dependent. She needs to love and be loved; her greatest desire is to play the traditional woman's role. To this end she tells Karl that she is more than willing to give up her writing after marriage, but finding her talent a rather charming addition to the cata-

6. Ibid., p. 56.

7. Ibid., p. 60.

log of wifely virtues, he encourages her to continue. Clearly, however, she is willing to subordinate her will to the needs of others. This is one response--one kind of love. The problem is that Annie is not a successful characterization. She and the clichés of her secret authorship and her love affair exist only on the level of popular women's fiction.

Alice Mendon is an interesting character and an unusual one for Mrs. Freeman to create. The only other Freeman heroine with whom she can be compared is Maria Edgham in By the Light of the Soul. Like Maria, Alice is seemingly immune from the ravaging consequences of isolation and spinsterhood. "Alice Mendon has never cared a scrap about getting married anyway . . . Some women are built that way. She is."[8] She finds her fulfillment in a love that is completely self-denying--that "realizes the need of another, rather than one's own."[9] As one considers these two heroines, Maria and Alice, one wonders if Mrs. Freeman's growing disillusion with her own marriage might not have forced her toward the conclusion that these free spirits really did have the best of it.

Whatever their differences, Annie and Alice were able to achieve responses toward life and dispositions of will that permitted happiness or at least contentment. This

8. Ibid., p. 282.

9. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, By the Light of the Soul (New York, 1907), p. 497.

is not the case with Margaret Edes, the woman who claims to be the author of Annie's book. Hers is a diseased will. She is disposed not to love but to rule; the object of her every concern is herself. Alice says of her, "Margaret is a self-lover; her whole heart turns in love toward her own self."[10] Mrs. Freeman's insight into this selfish woman, who by her involvement in literary clubs and social activities is clearly a species of the new woman or feminist that the author disliked so much, is subtle and fine. Margaret's self love makes her vain, and vanity is the foundation of her sturdy self-discipline. Margaret is capable of sitting still for hours in the intense heat to keep her clothes fresh and pressed in order to make a favorable impression.

Margaret's moral position displays Mrs. Freeman's most modern and ironic insight into the nature of evil. Margaret has committed a serious social wrong and a mortal sin. When the consequences of her deed penetrate her vanity, she determines to confess her guilt. Because confession will ruin her unsuspecting and virtuous husband's career and all but destroy the lives of her children as well as her own, she discovers that her punishment for sin is that she cannot confess it. She is doomed to live her lie. Margaret is one of Mrs. Freeman's finest characters and her moral crisis is well-conceived and ironically presented, though weaker than it should be because of the

10. Freeman, The Butterfly House, p. 208.

vacuity of the main plot.

In 1917 Mary Wilkins Freeman was sixty-five years old, but she showed no indication that she intended to put down her pen. Not only was she hard at work on the stories that were to comprise her last collection, she was also completing An Alabaster Box in collaboration with Florence Morse Kingsley, a Wellesley-educated Ohioan then living in Staten Island. Mrs. Kingsley had written thirty novels prior to the collaboration. Most of them were Biblical romances like Titu, A Comrade of the Cross (1894) and Tor, A Street Boy of Jerusalem (1905). The rest, like The Star of Love (1909), were commonplace romances of the kind that flooded the woman's market. Her reputation was always sub-literary. Although An Alabaster Box was a corporate effort and Mrs. Kingsley later adapted it for the screen, it can be treated as Mrs. Freeman's work because the good things in it are the things Mary did well (grotesques, regional dialog, etc.) and because the central situation came out of Mary's girlhood in Brattleboro.

An Alabaster Box is set in Brookville, a town deteriorated after its bank was ruined by the embezzlement of its president, Mr. Bolton. The relation between this situation and Colonel Silas Wait's embezzlement in Brattleboro in 1880 is obvious. Years after the crime Bolton's daughter Lydia returns to Brookville to try to repair the damage her father had done. Although the story tends to get mired in Lydia's romance with Jim, it portrays primarily the

town's reaction to her return. The result is the best dramatic characterization and the most penetrating investigation of the evil ways of diseased wills since Pembroke. In its self-devouring evil, its xenophobia, and its violence, Brookville might be in Yoknapatawpha County as easily as in New England. Even the central love affair is successful in that Jim's response to Lydia is the only valid alternative to the town's hostility. In love there is salvation.

Nothing indicates Mrs. Freeman's rejuvenation so much as the dialog. There are fine, long comic passages in which garrulous old ladies gossip about furniture and other scenes in which sullen men speculate on the ulterior motives behind the new library. The author's ear was never better. Not since Jane Field had she so successfully suited sound to sense in the comic mode as in An Alabaster Box. Explaining why her horse kicked its traces Mrs. Daggett says:

> I guess that's so, Ann . . . Dolly got kind of fractious over his headstall when I was harnessin'. He don't seem to like his sun hat, and I dunno's I blame him. I guess if our ears stuck up through the top of our bunnits like his we wouldn't like it neither.[11]

The following exchange reveals not only the precision of Mrs. Freeman's ear but also her instinctive response to the folk wisdom that lay at the root of regional comedy.

"My if it ain't hot," she observed.

11. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Florence Morse Kingsley, An Alabaster Box (New York, 1917), p. 194.

"You're so fleshy, Abby, I'd think you'd feel it something terrible."

"Oh, I don't know," said Mrs. Daggett placidly, "Of course I'm fleshy, Ann; I ain't denying that; but so be you. You don't want to think about the heat so constant, Ann. Our thermometer fell down and got broke day before yesterday, and Henry says, 'I'll bring you up another from the store this noon.' But he forgot all about it. I didn't say a word, and that afternoon I set out on the porch under the vines and felt real cool--not knowing it was so hot--and along comes Mrs. Fulsom, a-pantin' and fannin' herself. 'Good land, Abby,' says she; 'by the looks a body'd think you didn't know the thermometer had risen to ninety-two since eleven o'clock this morning.' 'I didn't,' I said placid: 'our thernometer's broke.' 'Well, you'd better get another right off,' says she, wiping her face and groaning. 'It's an awful thing, weather like this, not to have a thermometer right where you can see it.' Henry brought a real nice one home from the store that very night; and I hung it out of sight behind the sitting-room door; I told Henry I thought 'twould be safer there."

"That sounds exactly like you, Abby," commented Mrs. Whittle censoriously. "I should think Henry Daggett would be on to you by now."

"Well, he ain't," said Mrs. Daggett.[12]

This dialog is good. So are the various narrative devices that Mrs. Freeman had used before, such as the scenes of general discussion in the general store and at the women's club meeting. She always liked to get characters talking about relevant situations, thereby revealing both incident and character, but this is genre painting and can only contribute so much to the success of a work of art. What makes this one of Mrs. Freeman's better novels is that the central situation, conventional romance, weak ending

12. Ibid., p. 128.

and all, is structurally valid. In the telling of this central story she is able to develop a powerful theme of the confrontation of good and evil--the confrontation of the girl who comes to right an old wrong and the town which has become rigid in patterns of evil.

Like "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg," this is a story of a village ruined by the evil that rests in the hearts of men. Brookville's primary failure is its failure to recognize the source and universality of that evil. When the old banker Andrew Bolton returns from prison, broken in health and mind, he indicates clearly the universal nature of the evil that is destroying the town.

> You spoke just now of the village as being ruined years ago by the villainy of one man. That's a lie! The village ruined the man. . . . Every Tom, Dick, and Harry, for miles about; every old maid with a book to sell; every cause--as they call the thousand and one pious schemes to line their own pockets--every damned one of 'em came to Andrew Bolton for money, and he gave it to them. He was no hoarding skinflint; not he. Better for him if he had been. When luck went against him, as it did at last, these precious villagers turned on him like a pack of wolves.[13]

Having denied the evil in his own heart, each villager is free to seek hell according to his own lights--and to resist salvation in his own way. In presenting the reactions of the villagers to Lydia's attempts at philanthropy, Mrs. Freeman presents vivid, complex characters with the greatest skill since Pembroke. In some of

13. Ibid., pp. 240-241.

the characters their response is fairly simple. Fanny, the younger sister of Lydia's lover, repays Lydia's acts of kindness with hostility partly because she sees her as a rival for the affections of the young minister but also because she is jealous of the more urbane girl's manners and dress. Mrs. Solomon Black, a kindly enough matriarch, feeds her vanity on the fact that Lydia is her boarder. Of such slender stuff she weaves a social victory. Henry Daggett, the reasonably honest proprietor of the general store, rejoices in Lydia's philanthropic habits and unlimited earning power and begins cautiously to expand his store.

These are simple responses. Other characters are more corroded and more complex. Deacon Whittle, a conventionally pious hypocrite, is almost paralyzed by his conflicting instincts. Willing to engage in a variety of schemes to defraud Lydia, he is nevertheless reluctant to sell her the old Bolton place which he had been attempting to sell for years. Unable to believe in the girl's sincerity, he suspects a trap. Paralyzed by the conflicting emotions of greed and fear, he stands motionless and vivid as one of Mrs. Freeman's finest characterizations.

Another complex portrait of evil is Lois Daggett, the poisonous old maid. Lois resents Lydia partly because she possesses a larger than average dose of typical rural xenophobia. This, however, exists side by side with curiosity, which drives her to a tea at Lydia's at the earliest

moment. Resentful of Lydia's prosperity and contemptuous of her generosity, she is nevertheless eager to capitalize on them. She succeeds; Lydia says that she will buy five copies of Famous People, a gift book which Lois sells.

> "There's nothing neater for a Christmas or birthday present," shrilled Lois Daggett joyously. "And so informing."
>
> She swallowed her tea in short, swift gulps. Her faded eyes shone. Inwardly she was striving to compute the agent's profit on five leather-bound copies of Famous People. She almost said aloud, "I can have a new dress."[14]

In spite of Lydia's persistent kindness, Lois does not abandon these conflicting but equally base motives. The determinist in Mrs. Freeman was quick to point out, however, the limits of Lois's culpability.

> She had had a poisoned life, in a narrow rut of existence, and the toxic emotions had become as her native atmosphere of mind. Now she seemed to be about to breathe in a better air of humanity, and she choked under it.[15]

The author presents several of these characters by way of contrast. She contrasts Mrs. Daggett and Mrs. Whittle, Lydia and the rural Fanny, the direct, blunt Jim and the polite, pious Wesley Elliot. Wesley, an interesting character, reveals the complexity and subtlety of Mrs. Freeman's insight. He is the local minister and a reasonably good one, but he is also a boy in love with love and looking for a wife--boyish and boring, pious and pompous,

14. Ibid., p. 134.

15. Ibid., p. 250.

self-centered and self-sacrificing. In his complexity he becomes a successful character and escapes completely the stereotype that trapped so many ministers in the fiction of the period.

The town's reaction to Lydia and her philanthropy culminates in a violent mob attack on the recently restored Bolton mansion. The account of the attack on the girl and her house is as dramatic and violent a scene as Mrs. Freeman ever painted. This attack _is_ a culmination, and it has that quality so necessary in realistic fiction--inevitability. The story is, like _Pembroke_, clearly a tragedy. But here again Mrs. Freeman retreats from the consequences of her own tragic vision. The story concludes with the moral regeneration of the town and the happy union of Wesley and Fanny and Jim and Lydia. When one man admits that he took part in the attack on Lydia, the response is, "Aw, never mind if you did. We all know you wa'n't yourself that night, Lucius."[16] It is astounding that Mrs. Freeman didn't realize that the first three hundred pages illustrated beyond any question that he was indeed himself that night and also make clear why he was like that. This failure of nerve at the end, together with the author's unfortunate attempts to shroud the old banker and his daughter in Gothic mystery, keep this novel from taking its place next to _Pembroke_ as one of her most suc-

16. _Ibid._, p. 304.

cessful. But its fine dialog, its many insights, its excellent characterizations and its viable central situation show that the skills of her youth had not left her and that she was still capable of artistic growth and experiment.

Along with these novels Mrs. Freeman produced two volumes of short stories in the decade of the war, the first of which was The Copy-Cat and Other Stories (1914). The first six stories in the volume are about the children of an unnamed New England village. After a decade or more of experimentation with various unifying devices (the ghost stories, the thematic unity, the repetitious symbol), Mrs. Freeman returned to her origins and her original source of strength, the New England regional tradition. There is a concept here and in Edgewater People (1918) that is not found in the great early collections. While the earlier collections were about New England and about the specific New England of Randolph, Massachusetts, and Brattleboro, Vermont, they did not deal with a specified New England. While the careful reader could piece together the author's judgment on rural New England, he could do so only by extracting from the many unnamed villages she used as setting, those common regional characteristics with which her many characters had to contend. It is this unspecified and undifferentiated quality that gave rise to the inaccurate critical judgment that there is no "Mary Wilkins country."

In these later works there is a change. She writes about a specific and specified place--a village in The Copy-Cat, a complex of villages in Edgewater People. As the various characters reappear in the different tales and as little bits of local history crop up in the telling of the various stories, Mrs. Freeman achieves a density of effect missing from her earlier collections. The place becomes a character; the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts. In this series of interrelated stories she shows more intricately than in any miscellaneous collection, or in any of her novels, the interaction of present and past in one place. This is not a new discovery. Cable and Harris before her wrote collections of regional short stories like this as did Mrs. Stowe and Miss Jewett in the New England tradition itself. And, of course, Sherwood Anderson (Winesburg, Ohio appeared in 1919), William Faulkner, and others were to do it later. But here, finally, she achieves what is perhaps the most successful form for conveying the interaction of classes and groups, and families and times, in a given place. This is to say that she worked out for herself the most successful of regional forms.

Nevertheless, The Copy-Cat and Other Stories is a disappointing collection. One reason is, of course, that the six village tales are all about children, and that Mrs. Freeman is sentimental and not very accurate when writing about children. Another reason for the book's

failure as a collection is that the last six stories are not about the village at all. Thus the author is guilty of violating a self-imposed principle of unity.

Three of the village stories are sentimental and minor. "The Copy-Cat" and "Little Lucy Rose," a story of puppy love which starts brightly with a description of a minister's wife who likes to go sledding with her son and other school boys, are inconsequential. "Daniel and Little Dan'l" is perhaps the most poorly conceived story. In order to achieve the sentimental union of old and young Mrs. Freeman insensitively kills off a variety of minor characters. Although this story is something of a misfortune, the central character is intelligently conceived. He is a man turned sour because he is forced from his cobbling trade by a shoe factory. He is also "a moral coward before physical conditions. He was one who suffers, not so much from agony of the flesh as from agony of the mind induced thereby."[17]

The other three village stories touch, in one way or another, themes that are both vital and inherently regional. "The Cock of the Walk" concerns a little boy who discovers his independence in a street fight. Significantly he is forced to knock down his aunt in order to win the fight. The story also touches on the relation of the present to the past in another way.

17. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, The Copy-Cat and Other Stories (New York, 1914), p. 86.

> Johnny came of the best and oldest family in the village, but it was in some respects an undesirable family for a boy. In it survived, as fossils survive in ancient nooks and crannies of the earth, old traits of race, unchanged by time and environment.[18]

"Johnny-in-the-Woods" is one of Mrs. Freeman's rare successful stories of children. It tells of the difficulties encountered by a boy enflamed by a reading of Robin Hood. Here as elsewhere Mrs. Freeman is patronizing toward children (she knew none closely), but this story is saved by humor. "Big Sister Solly" is a comic story of the confrontation of a little girl's imagination and a Calvinist minister's conscience. The girl, in her need for love, pretends she has a big sister. The minister, his consciousness of truth obscuring her need for love, tries to stop her "lying." The comic climax comes when the fashionable women of the town pay a call on the imaginary sister. The sentimental ending need not decrease one's appreciation of the comic situation.

Of the six stories in the volume which do not concern the village three can be ignored and three deserve brief comment. "The Balking of Christopher" tells of a symbolically named, Thoreau-like man who leaves his family to live alone on a mountain and wrestle with theology and teleology in an attempt to know "why." Christopher Dodd is one of Mrs. Freeman's most vivid grotesques and, like the others, twisted into the shape he's in by the pressures of en-

18. Ibid., p. 35.

vironment. "Mr. Dodd is a strange man. He ought to have been educated and led a different life."[19]

In "The Umbrella Man" Mrs. Freeman writes with sympathy of Stebbens, a recently released convict who makes a meager living as an itinerant umbrella salesman and repairman and who marries his colorless, battered ex-fiancé, seduced and abandoned by a bigamist. This is clearly a retelling of "A Humble Romance," but in the realistic character portrayal of these victims of fate Mrs. Freeman displays a greatly expanded naturalistic sympathy. The greater sordidness of the lives of these later characters and the violence below the surface and behind the plot might have been an artistic expression of a deepening sense of evil that the industrial revolution and the war brought to her as well as to so many others.

"Noblesse," the strongest story in the collection, is not a regional story at all. It is the story of Margaret, a fat woman of emotional delicacy who is responsible for the care of her younger step-sister. After the step-sister's marriage to a dissolute man, Margaret continues her lonely life with the couple. Relieving her frustrations by compulsive eating, she grows immense. Her weight becomes the torment which drives her to seek further release in food. As she gains more weight, the couple become more abusive.

> Jack roared with bitter mirth when he saw poor Margaret forced to enter her tiny room

19. Ibid., p. 251.

> sideways; Camille laughed also although she chided Jack gently.[20]

It is not their abuse, however, that becomes unbearable; it is their indifferent acceptance of her obesity as a fact. When they face financial crisis, they ask Margaret to seek employment in a side-show; and while she suffers, they speak of honor.

> "Jack has gone broke," stated Camille. He owes Bill Stark a pile of money, and he can't pay a cent of it; and Jack's sense of honor about a poker debt is about the biggest thing in his character."[21]

This story, which reminds one of an episode in The Country of the Pointed Firs, is an atypical Freeman story. It has a nightmarish quality that anticipates Nathanael West, and it depicts a world much more indifferent and unfeeling than the one she usually portrays. This indifference coupled with her own clear compassion for the victim makes this unusual little story the most naturalistic piece Mrs. Freeman ever wrote.

Edgewater People (1918) is Mrs. Freeman's last collection. It has been well spoken of. Foster states, "If some of the stories are thin and sentimental, several reach her best level."[22] Arthur Hobson Quinn has also praised it. However, they both praise it for the wrong

20. Ibid., p. 169.

21. Ibid., p. 171.

22. Edward Foster, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (New York, 1956), p. 185.

reasons. None of the stories comes up to the quality of "A Tardy Thanksgiving," "A Taste of Honey," or the more recent "Old Woman Magoun." None of the characters in this collection is as memorable as the central figures of the earlier stories. Perhaps they weren't intended to be, since the relation of character to setting is reversed. In the earlier collections the author's primary concern was with character and with the individual's response to the central situation. In Edgewater People her interest and the reader's is not so much in the character as in the place, an aspect of which is represented by the characters of the various stories. A different kind of story--one which makes its point in the context of a series of related stories--is required because the interest is in relationships which transcend the individual story. Mrs. Freeman says in her preface, "The stories in this volume relate to families living in a patriarchal fashion, although not under one roof, under one village tree."[23] And the story of the families is, of course, the story of the village--of both its present and its past. She says:

> Villages, as well as people, exist subject to laws of change, increase, final dissolution. They have character, complex, of course, still individual.[24]

It is this that is fine in the final volume. She had

23. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Edgewater People (New York, 1918), p. 2.

24. Ibid., p. 1.

worked out a method which allowed her to tell the story she wanted to tell--the story of the life of a place--without running afoul of the unsolved structural problems that weakened the novels of the New England tradition. But the device was late in coming, for Mary Wilkins Freeman was sixty-eight and the vein was thin.

Speaking of Edgewater People, A. H. Quinn says:

> She dealt more frequently with the representatives of families who had once been wealthier and more important but who retain great pride in their traditions. In other words, her material is more like that of Miss Jewett.[25]

Matthiessen complained that Miss Jewett's work smelled of rose leaves.[26] Here Mrs. Freeman is a little musty too. The stark grotesques set with firm strokes against a stark landscape are gone. In "Sarah Edgewater" we have the sentimental story of a spinster, jilted many years before, who, at the cost of some pain, maintains the family traditions and the family virtues, not the least of which is philanthropy. "The Voice of the Clock," the title of which suggests the reciprocity of present and past in the village, concerns the survivors of two old families, the Licesters and the Sylvesters. One of the families is rich and arrogant; the other is poor and sensitive. The story has great potential; but Mrs. Freeman's mechanical responses to the requirements of the market place take over, and it deter-

25. Arthur Hobson Quinn, American Fiction: An Historical and Critical Survey (New York, 1936), p. 439.

26. See p. 59.

iorates into a sentimental love story that she didn't want to tell at all.

"Value Received" is the most interesting of the Jewett-like stories. It concerns two spinster sisters, Dora and Ann Matthews, who "found themselves hopelessly stranded in a backwater of the intensely genteel and decorous past."[27] These two old ladies, living with their many treasures in a house which can no longer maintain them and which they can no longer maintain, care for and brood about those treasures which the contemporary world scorns.

> So you remember what that lady from Boston said about wax flowers? . . . . She said wax flowers had been the most decadent [ornaments] of a decadent age of household decoration. She said that she classed wax flowers and worsted mottoes and gilded spades and funeral wreaths together in an appalling list.[28]

The story has controlled sentiment and a strong sense of the passing of time; and the ladies and their treasures and their house, which is maintained only by outside support, constitute, like the old house in Miss Jewett's Deephaven, a moving symbol of New England and the relationship of present to past in New England.

"The Old Man of the Field" concerns a semi-recluse who is forced into the poor house by the good people of Edgewater when they discover that he is ill. A little boy

27. Freeman, Edgewater People, p. 76.

28. Ibid., p. 90.

who sympathizes with him raises a valid moral question.

> "Will they let him out after he has recovered?"
>
> "I don't believe they will. The town authorities think he ought to be taken care of."
>
> "I say the town authorities have no right."[29]

While the old man is ill, the friendly children of the town come to his shack and try to clean it for him. They dimly perceive that what they discard as trash has great value for him, but they realize that it must be discarded if the shack is to be saved at all. Then while boiling hot water to scrub the floor, they accidentally burn the shack down. The story is not only symbolic (the complex relation of present to past and of New England to the outside world is evident), it is also ironic. The old man cannot live on his own terms, and those who try to help him find that they cannot help because they cannot accept his terms. In trying to help, they actually destroy. In trying to aid him to live on their terms, they take from him his very motive for life. The old man, like the old region in which he lives and of which he is a symbol, dies because the world has robbed him of the conditions under which it is possible for him to live.

"The Outside of the House" is a comic story, the effect of which is dissipated by unnecessary melodramatic complications. Dealing with the humbler people of Edgewater, Mrs. Freeman is able to indulge in passages of

29. Ibid., p. 37.

superior regional dialog.

> "Just see that red-geranium bed, Martha."
> "Them ain't geraniums; them is begonias," said Martha haughtily.
> "It always seems to me as if all the flowers was geraniums," said Joe. He laughed. Martha did not smile. "They ain't," she said.[30]

In terms of the plot this passage is almost a non-sequitur, but its quiet humor, its revelation of character and character relationships, and its regional flavor make it and other passages like it relevant to the author's main purpose: the portrait of a township. This story is also interesting because of the long introductory passage concerning the history of the various hamlets of the township, a passage which reveals as clearly as the preface Mrs. Freeman's purpose in writing Edgewater People.

In a collection like Edgewater People, one would expect to see a display of interest in the effect of environment and heredity on character. The stories reveal less of this than expected. However, two of them concern men who are imprisoned by the past. In each case the hero is dominated by his mother. In "Sour Sweetings" a son allows his marriage to be ruined by his mother's malignant pride--a pride without any very firm foundation.

> "What have the Whittemores ever done?"
> "I really don't know, except be Whittemores."[31]

30. Ibid., pp. 144-145.

31. Ibid., p. 187.

Only when he can break his mother's hold over him, only when socially he breaks the hold of the past and psychologically he breaks the hold of pride can he save his marriage. "Sour Sweetings" is an effective, short retelling of Pembroke.

"The Soldier Man" deals with the same theme. Its hero, Henry Ludd, tries to break free of his mother's domination but finds that he is unable to do so. Mrs. Freeman also makes it clear that Henry is the victim of hereditary forces. He is the product of a marriage between a man from an exhausted, played-out family and a woman from a crudely dynamic family of lower social standing. From his mother he inherits nervous vitality but from his father an exhausted will that has no power of resistance. This conflict of old and new anticipates a theme with which so many Southern writers were to deal later.

The remaining stories are inferior. "A Retreat to the Goal" is a sentimental tale of a returned prodigal. "The Ring with the Green Stone," the worst story in the collection, is a structurally complicated tale of "a love past all logic and reason."[32] Two other stories, "The Liar," and "Both Cheeks," are not only bad; they are sadly significant. They reveal that the lady who, for all her faults, had always been able to look at the diversity of life and tell what she saw was no longer able to react to changing con-

32. Ibid., p. 283.

ditions. She had written about rural, urban, and suburban life, about New England, New Jersey, and New York. She had dealt with agrarian and industrial themes and with Calvinism and the Gilded Age. But the war came too late in her life and career to become the stuff of her art. Both of these stories are war stories. "The Liar" is a sentimental tale of a mother who lies to make her son seem a war hero and who finds fulfillment when he finally goes off to fight. "Both Cheeks" is a jingoistic tale of the conversion of a pacifist. Whatever her personal feelings, as an artist Mrs. Freeman was too old to react to the war.

Her productivity during the decade after 1910 was not confined to the two novels and the stories in the collections. Mrs. Freeman also wrote sixteen stories for various magazines including Colliers, Century, The Saturday Evening Post and The Woman's Home Companion. These stories were never collected. For the most part, they deserve to exist only in the limbo of old magazine volumes. Many of them are holiday stories. Either "Prop," a story about the war, or "Honorable Tommy," a Christmas story, is possibly the worst thing she ever wrote. Occasionally the insights are there, however, and the stories seem to have possibilities. "The Blue Butterfly" concerns Marcia Keyes, a forlorn dressmaker who "belonged to the large class whom the triumph of others subdues."[33] "Criss-Cross" tells of two old

33. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "The Blue Butterfly," Woman's Home Companion, XL (January, 1913), 4.

maids who exchange houses for a week because they feel the change will do them good. One of them, in the house where her lover died thirty-five years before, winces as her imagination conjures up "the peace which she had seen on the faces of the aging and married women who had been girls with her."[34] "Mother Wings" deals with a girl whose life is very nearly ruined by her mother's misguided zeal.

> All Ann is fit for is to marry and settle down. But mother wanted her to be in the front rank of the advance women movement, and she simply can't.[35]

This is one of Mrs. Freeman's not infrequent slaps at the feminist movement. But these and others, in spite of their possibilities and their moments, come to little. One story, interesting in conception and very inferior in execution is "Friend of My Heart." It is subtitled "A love story of old New England--When men went west to make money and came back to win love."[36]

The uncollected stories are not all devoid of merit. "A Guest in Sodom" (1912) is a superior comic piece with tragic overtones and ironic symbolism. It is the story of a virtuous family man named Benjamin who has lived a life of probity and limited achievement when, in his middle

34. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "Criss-Cross," Harper's Bazaar, CXXIX (August, 1914), 365.

35. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "Mother Wings," Harper's Bazaar, CXLIV (December, 1921), 90.

36. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "Friend of My Heart," Good Housekeeping, LVII (December, 1913), p. 733.

years, he gives in to the blandishments of the Gilded Age. He sells a nine acre lot which had been in the family for many years. With the money he buys an automobile made by the Variable Tea Kettle Company. When it arrives, he finds he can't crank it without injury to his back. He also discovers that it will run neither often nor long. "Once is a while after Sammy Emerson had done an extra lot of tinkerin', the car would run real nice a day and a half or two days, but she never ran over two."[37] When the "transgression" bends, he takes action and is promised a new car. However he gets his own car back, and after many trials "he just stood up in the car, and he damned for the first time in his life."[38] "A Guest in Sodom" is really a tall tale in the best tradition of frontier humor. Told by a first-person narrator in a laconic tone which contrasts sharply with the content of the story, it is one of Mrs. Freeman's most Twain-like tales. It might also be noted that fellow New Englanders Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robert Frost achieved many effects by this same device of juxtaposing tone and content.

Two other stories of merit are "The Boomerang" and "Cloak Also." The first is, like "A Guest in Sodom," a tall tale. It concerns the trials of a self-righteous couple in their attempts to give away a phonograph. The

37. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "A Guest in Sodom," Century, LXXXIII (January, 1912), p. 348.

38. Ibid., p. 349.

second is a bitter story of a guilty town. In this tale Joel buys a dry-goods store in rural New England. Selling his merchandise on credit, he is soon in need of cash not only to replenish his supplies but simply to live. When he tries to force payment, the town turns against him and accuses him of being a bad business man among other things. Joel's death in the end sentimentalizes and weakens the story a little, but his deathbed accusation is simple and effective. "I never thought I was any better than other people. Now I know I am."[39]

When "Mother Wings" appeared in Harper's in 1921 Mary Wilkins Freeman was sixty-nine years old. Her writing days were over for all practical purposes. She published two more stories in the twenties, but neither one had any merit. In her own mind, of course, she never quit. As late as 1928 she was negotiating with publishers.[40] And there are at least four stories in manuscript dating from the twenties: "The Brother," "One," "The Witch's Daughter," and one that exists in two forms under the titles, "One Old Lady" and "The Rocket." In the last story one version ends with the death of the central character and one ends with her recovery from serious illness. Neither version is very good; but the central figure, a salty, shrewd,

39. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "Cloak Also," Harper's Bazaar, CXXXIV (March, 1917), p. 545.

40. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, letter to Mr. Briggs, February 1, 1928 (Pierpont Morgan Library, New York).

profane old lady, is delightful. Foster claims that at the very end she was planning a sequel to Pembroke.[41] She was never to write it, but it had been a long career. One sign of its duration was a letter she wrote to Harper's in 1927 asking to be "advised of the approach to public domain of my work since I am willing to renew copyright myself."[42]

The previous year she had written a revealing letter to an aspiring young writer named Miss O'Brien. In it she confessed to a bewilderment with the times that contributed as much as did ill health and advancing years to the falling off of her work.

> Everything is different since the war and since even pre-war days for I think the change antedated the war. As nearly as I can understand the situation there is in arts and letters a sort of frantic impulse for something erratic, out of the common.[43]

In the same letter she admitted that she no longer had her former influence in the market place, a fact that can be detected in the lessening frequency of her stories in Harper's through the decade of the war.

Throughout the years after her husband's death in 1923 she continued to live in Metuchen. In the autumn of 1929

41. Foster, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, p. 193.

she interrupted her literary labors with plans for a trip to Brattleboro and Randolph. At the end of the following winter she suffered a severe heart attack. She died on March 15, 1930. The newspapers devoted columns to her obituary. They got her age wrong, a custom dating from 1902 when she allowed the press to think her a younger bride than she was. Had she lived till fall, she would have been seventy-eight.

CHAPTER IX

REPRISE: AESTHETIC AND REPUTATION

As the previous chapters have shown, Mrs. Freeman never developed a subtle and integrated theory of composition; neither did she develop a mature world-view, or adhere to an intellectual system which could provide a common foundation for all of her work. This is not to say that she developed no attitudes toward or judgments about her craft. These attitudes were, however, rules of thumb more than anything else; and they seemed to develop as a result of the combined pressure of her experience as an artist and her desire to please various outsiders who, taking an interest in her work, were willing to advise her. Among those who advised her and helped her to articulate her own position were the various editors with whom she corresponded during the first two decades of her career.

Running all through Mrs. Freeman's comments on literature is a tension between her instinctive realism and her urgent economic need to succeed in the market place. When the two conflicted, she tended to abandon principle in favor of market value. Her editors tried to guide her in these matters, and she accepted their guidance in aesthetics as she did in money matters during the early years. As the years passed, she grew increasingly independent of her editors, not because she developed an aesthetic independent of their judgments and values but because she became

more confident of her ability to meet market demands and more sure of her own worth in the magazine world.

Her first mentor was Mary Booth, an editor of Harper's Bazaar. In many letters to Miss Booth, Mrs. Freeman signs herself "Pussy Willow." Whether this intimacy indicates artistic dependence is open to question, but the eagerness with which she listened to Miss Booth's criticism is not. Early in 1885, she assured Miss Booth, "I think I do like criticism and am grateful for it, when I can truly feel that it is a just one."[1] Her negative response to criticism elsewhere[2] would suggest that this attitude was reserved for those few in whom she had confidence and on whom she came to depend. It is unfortunate that Miss Booth and the confidants who followed her were all professional journalists--albeit of the highest kind--and custodians of the genteel. Miss Booth tried to make her work more marketable. Mrs. Freeman responded:

> I will certainly try to polish my style, as you advise . . . I wish, if it is not too much trouble, that you would mention to me any like mistakes of which I may be guilty.[3]

In several letters written in 1885 and 1886, the years immediately preceeding the appearance of A Humble Romance, Mrs. Freeman wrote apologetically to Miss Booth lamenting

1. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, letter to Mary L. Booth, February 17, 1885 (Columbia University Library, New York).

2. See p. 124.

3. Freeman, letter to Mary L. Booth, February 17, 1885.

the fact that some of her stories were "too tragic" and expressing the fear that they would not be wanted on that account. Market value was, of course, important to a young, single woman with a living to make. Yet she was aware of the conflict between market values and her own talent. She said in defense of her realism of the significant detail, "I suppose the trouble is, the uncomfortable feeling I have, that I am not telling things exactly as they are and making everything clear, if I don't mention everything."[4]

She relied on other editorial consultants as well as on Miss Booth. The most important of them was H. M. Alden, the editor of Harper's. Because of her friendship with Alden's second wife and his daughter and in later years because of the nearness of the Alden house to her own in Metuchen, Mrs. Freeman saw him frequently; consequently she did not often write to him. Although the written evidence of his influence is not ample, there can be little doubt of it. He was the final judge of her stories and the one who saw them into print. She expressed her gratitude to him in various letters and comments and in a bad, sentimental poem of praise she wrote in honor of his seventieth birthday. That his influence was on the side of gentility can be seen in his critical comments which emphasize her "im-

4. Ibid.

pressionism,"[5] and her "affection for the material."[6] His views were shared by the genteel critic, Charles Minor Thompson.

Another editor with whom she was friendly and in whose judgment she had confidence was Richard Watson Gilder. She sought out his critical opinions about her infrequent and ineffective poetry. He was able to draw from her comments on a variety of subjects. In an undated letter written around the turn of the century, she said, "I should be very pleased to give you my opinion on the subject of literary agents."[7] This is certainly a gesture of friendly confidence from a woman who was always loath to express her opinion on any subject other than women writers. When Gilder tried to lure her away from Harper's, she remained loyal, although she did send him a short story in 1900, followed by a letter asking for more money. The two pressures that to a great extent shaped Mrs. Freeman's aesthetic are revealed in a letter she wrote to Gilder in 1899. She asked:

> Do you think you could use in "The Century" a play: a realistic New England, a modern New England play, a tragedy? . . . The play is as realistic as Ibsen's. I wish it were

5. Edward Foster, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (New York, 1956), p. 90.

6. H. M. Alden, "Editor's Study," Harper's, LXXV September, 1887), 640.

7. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, letter to Richard Watson Gilder (New York Public Library).

as good.[8]

Here is the confrontation of the realism of her talent and, represented by Gilder, the sentimentality and gentility of the market for which she felt compelled to write.

From 1885 to 1900, Mrs. Freeman's one vital contact with the world of the realism that had kicked itself free of the genteel and was evolving new values was Hamlin Garland. Although fate could have provided her with a more useful confidant, Garland did give her a chance to express her own instinctive literary values. The things she told him appear strikingly like the statements he was to make himself a few years later.

For ten years from 1887 to 1896 Mrs. Freeman maintained a correspondence with Garland. This exchange of letters reveals an interesting parallel in the thinking of the two writers--in their critical and aesthetic opinions and in their own work. The correspondence is especially valuable because it came at a time when they were both doing their best work. The principles on which they agreed were put forth by Garland in Crumbling Idols (1894). In that book Garland uses the terms "veritism" and "local color" to define and defend his realism. "Local color in fiction," he claims, "is demonstrably the life of fiction."[9]

8. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, letter to Richard Watson Gilder, August 4, 1899 (New York Public Library).

9. Hamlin Garland, Crumbling Idols, ed. Jane Johnson (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1960), p. 49.

Local color he defines as "such quality of texture and background that it could not have been written in any other place or by anyone else than a native."[10] The local colorist, the veritist, of course, writes about the present. "To the veritist, therefore, the present is the vital theme."[11] Judging by these criteria, he considers Mrs. Freeman a success.[12]

Her letters to Garland are full of enthusiasm and of the confidence one would expect of a writer rapidly coming to the peak of her powers. In an undated letter (probably written in the early '90's) sent from South Braintree instead of Randolph, Mrs. Freeman lightheartedly praises Garland, promising to defend him from attack and asking that he do the same. The letters also show that she was being subjected to flattering impositions by Garland, who could be a relentless friend. In a letter dated January 27, 1891, she acknowledges the receipt of a play and a story which Garland sent to her for criticism. In the same letter she thanks him for trying to arrange a meeting between herself and Howells. Garland's unsolicited efforts indicate that the shy woman who loved privacy was fighting a losing battle against the literary and journalistic world that Garland represented. That she was the subject of six

10. Ibid., pp. 53-54.

11. Ibid., p. 65.

12. Ibid., p. 29.

interview articles in 1891-92 indicates the completeness of her defeat.

When the correspondence began, Garland had published nothing. From Mrs. Freeman's responses one can almost feel that Garland was working out his manifesto in their correspondence and that her replies helped put his own views in focus. Serving willingly enough as his sounding board in a letter dated November 23, most probably in 1887, she said:

> You ask me whether I am trying to depict characters and incidents of the present time or of any particular region or whether I wish to deal with the past New England life. Well, I suppose I do not know, I have a fancy that I can myself discover my own aims better from my own work than in any other way. I have never thought of it before, but I suppose I should as soon write about one time and one class of people as another, provided they appeal to my artistic sense and I knew enough about them.[13]

Garland was not content with this incipient new criticism, and two weeks later he got the response that his veritist's heart was seeking.

> Yes I do consider that I am writing about the New England of the present day, and the dialect is that which is daily in my ears. I have however a fancy that my characters belong to a present that is rapidly becoming past, and that a few generations will cause them to disappear.[14]

13. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, letter to Hamlin Garland, November 23, 1887? (University of Southern California Library, Los Angeles).

14. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, letter to Hamlin Garland, December 8, 1887 (University of Southern California Library, Los Angeles).

This immediacy of time and place is an essential ingredient of veritism as is the awareness of the pressures of change.

She had already, in the previous letter, defined veritism for him before he invented the word.

> Next you ask if the idea of being true is always present with me. I can answer quite positively to that, and I think it is possibly the only question concerning which I could be quite positive. Yes. I do think more of making my characters true and having them say and do just the things they would say and do; than of anything else, and that is the only aim in literature of which I have been really conscious myself.[15]

Garland himself was never more precise in his definition.

Garland was convinced that realism--veritism--was a higher, nobler form of literature than man had previously employed. Disturbed by the genteel critics who treated it as an unhappy fad, he was consoled by Mrs. Freeman.

> I may be realistic in spite of myself because I am in a realistic age. A few centuries or a half a century ago I might have been romantic for the same reason. But I do certainly not believe that realism is due to a deliberate following of the fashion in any genuine author. One does not look into new novels as one looks into milliners [sic] windows. . . . I think you are right in assuming that realism is not a fashion. I do not think I would be realistic because it is fashionable. I do not think I knew it was fashionable when I began.[16]

Here is Mrs. Freeman thoughtfully helping Garland fashion

15. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, letter to Hamlin Garland, November 23, 1887?

16. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, letter to Hamlin Garland, March 1, 1889 (University of Southern California Library, Los Angeles).

his doctrine of veritism. The next ten years were to reveal their inability to follow that doctrine. This inability in Mrs. Freeman was compounded of several failures: the failure to solve the problem of form and the failure of the critical intelligence to perceive the "veritable" when and where it existed. She did work out, in Pembroke, a viable regional form; but, failing to recognize the nature of her own achievement, she abandoned it only to return gropingly toward it in such later works as The Butterfly House and Edgewater People. Garland was not so fortunate; he never came close to producing a successful realistic novel. Rose of Dutcher's Cooly, which starts with the strength of Sister Carrie, fails at the end. Their mutual failure to perceive veritism when it confronted them is seen in Garland's praise of the unfortunate Madelon and in Mrs. Freeman's statement about her novel Jerome, "I hope people will like Jerome better than I do. I never got so heartily bored with a character in my life."[17] By 1900 they both had travelled so far from these early declarations of realism that she had completed The Heart's Highway and Garland was at work on The Captain of the Gray-Horse Troop.

In 1899 Mrs. Freeman wrote about the world of the lady writer in a volume called What Women Can Earn. In it she

17. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, letter to Hamlin Garland, October 4, 1896 (University of Southern California Library, Los Angeles).

speaks as a realist and passes on to all the world the advice that Miss Jewett was to give Willa Cather a few years later.

> The simplest road to success is the best. There is really little to do except to provide oneself with good pens, good ink and paper, a liberal supply of patience, sharpen one's eyes and ears to see everything in the whole creation likely to be of the slightest assistance. . . .
>
> A young writer should follow the safe course of writing only about those subjects she knows thoroughly and concerning which she trusts her own convictions. Above all, she must write in her own way. (italics mine)[18]

Here is the realist who wants to see everything. A year later in a Harper's Bazaar interview she explained her career in terms almost of divine aflatus.

> I like my work, yes; and I have, too, in performing it, a sense of duty because it is my work and I can do it. Fame and money are acceptable to me, but if I had plenty of each I would still write. Not that I put a moral purpose in my books, except the underlying one of fidelity to my art, but because, as I have already said, this is my talent, the thing that I can do, and I must do it.[19]

There is certainly no reason to doubt either the realism or the dedication to craft revealed by these two statements, but there was always the pressure of the market place. Two statements made early in the 1900's provide a clear insight into the pressures that caused the

18. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "Good Wits, Pen, and Paper," in Grace H. Dodge, et al., What Women Can Earn (New York, 1898), pp. 28-29.

19. M. H. Welch, "Mary E. Wilkins," Harper's Bazaar, XXXIII (January 27, 1900), 69.

decline in her work, especially in her short stories. Writing to Elizabeth Jordan of Harper's Bazaar she asked, "Can you pay me $300 as usual? It is just as easy for me to write a $300 as a $200 story."[20] This is the attitude that permitted her to write those horrible historical stories and the melodrama of The Wind in the Rose Bush. And in spite of her denial, she was willing to add sentiment and morality to her stories like sugar to a cake recipe.

> I do see that sentiments and uplifting ones are in demand, and I cannot be quite sure of meeting your needs in that direction. . . . but I will be more than glad to do anything I am able.[21]

Note that she admits that she cannot be sure of success. As a realist she always felt the tension of the genteel market place.

In 1913 Mrs. Freeman wrote an article called "The Girl Who Wants to Write: Things to Do and Avoid." In it she is careful to distinguish between motive and achievement, aware, perhaps, of her own strong economic motives. She says, "In reality a man may write something which will live for the sake of something rather ignoble, and a woman may write something for money with which to buy a French

20. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, letter to Elizabeth Jordan, May 19, 1903 (New York Public Library).

21. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, letter to Elizabeth Jordan, July 12, 1904 (New York Public Library).

hat."[22] Here is the market place's legitimate answer to the aesthetes; it is permissable to write with an eye toward money and the things it buys, but one should not sell his birthright. There is more than a hint of chauvanism in her comment, "Look upon the scene with American eyes and write from American viewpoints."[23]

In discussing the artists and critics associated with The Atlantic during Mrs. Freeman's lifetime, Helen McMahon said, "For some realists 'the sacredness of the real' meant, as for Howells, an increased social responsibility."[24] Mrs. Freeman shared this view. In one significant passage she shows herself to be a realist and to be aware of her social responsibility within a genteel context. She says of the woman writer: "She must write, above all things, the truth as far as she can see the truth, as clearly as she can see it, and even the truth must be held back unless it is of a nature to benefit and not to poison."[25] A little further on she says, "Write about the things which interest you."[26] However, she adds this caution elsewhere: "I think, first of all, that the writer ought to leave herself

22. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "The Girl Who Wants to Write: Things to Do and Avoid," Harper's Bazaar, XLVII (June 1913), 272.

23. Ibid.

24. Helen McMahon, Criticism of Fiction: A Study of Trends in the Atlantic Monthly (New York, 1952) p. 81.

25. Freeman, Harper's Bazaar.

26. Ibid.

out of the whole proposition."[27] One is tempted to see in this last statement a deliberate false trail. Remembering the storm raised by The Debtor, and wishing to disguise the autobiographical elements in By the Light of the Soul and The Butterfly House, she might have been willing to say something that was not true, strictly speaking. Her soundest bit of advice was stylistic, and the New England ladies who preceded her would have agreed with her when she wrote, "Above all things, in the matter of style strive for clarity. . . . The mystic style is never the best style."[28]

This Harper's Bazaar article is her most succinct statement about writing. Her later comments are scattered and indirect. One very late letter throws light on her ambivalent position:

> I forgot to tell you that if Mr. Hartman [Lee Foster Hartman, a Harper's editor] wishes my story changed I am able to change it radically and am willing to do so. If he does not like it, I will send it to a woman's magazine, then if returned destroy. I am trying to eliminate worthless work if I can identify it. I do not wish a lot of trash to appear after me.[29]

Here are all those things that held her back: her need to succeed in the market, her willingness to abide by editorial judgment, her inability to make critical judgments about her own work. These attitudes, coupled with her

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, letter to Mr. Briggs, February 1, 1928 (Pierpont Morgan Library, New York).

artistic pride and concern for future judgments reveal the stance with which Mary Wilkins Freeman confronted the world of Letters. Coming, as they do, from a childless and lonely woman of seventy-six trying to tidy up her reputation two years before her death, they also exhibit a kind of controlled pathos which was so important an element in her best fiction. So does her comment elsewhere in the same letter.

> Aside from the financial aspect is more: the life of my work. I feel that is all I came into the world for, and have failed dismally if it is not a success.[30]

Mrs. Freeman's writing career stretched over forty-five years from 1882 until 1928. In that long period of time the press and public were kind--if not always accurate or beneficial in their judgments. When her first volume came out, her editor gave it the following praise:

> They [the stories in A Humble Romance] are somewhat in the direction of Miss Jewett's more delicate work, but the fun is opener and less demure, the literature is less refined, the poetry is a little cruder; but there is the same affectionate feeling for the material, a great apparent intimacy with the facts, and a like skill in rendering Yankee parlance.[31]

This is a favorable notice if one considers the talent with which she is compared, but it is an inaccurate and damaging comment if one considers Mrs. Freeman's own skills. The remarkable gifts of observation on which her

30. Ibid.

31. Alden, Harper's, p. 640.

symbolism of significant detail is based is dismissed merely as "apparent intimacy with the facts." The toughness of her realism is treated as a series of flaws in a genteel façade. She is "less demure," "less refined," "a little cruder;" Miss Jewett's work is "more delicate." When one considers this kind of critical perversity together with Alden's statement that Mrs. Freeman is a subjective writer, one can only speculate at the kind of damage the kindly Mr. Alden may have done. He was not alone, of course; others, like Charles Minor Thompson, praised her idealism and her gentility.

It was not only the critics who praised her work--often for the wrong reasons. Readers, too, showed their enthusiasm. Around 1890, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote to convey her enthusiasm and that of her brother Henry for Mrs. Freeman's work. In 1888 Lowell sent a letter praising her short stories. In 1907 she received the following tribute of which she was especially proud.

> I should think it would be a very pleasant feeling, that of knowing that as a writer one has been able to help so many, many people. We felt that we would like to thank you for just having existed and written![32]

It was written on White House stationery and signed by Theodore Roosevelt. It makes one wonder at her comment the following year: "It is the poor rank and file who

32. Theodore Roosevelt, letter to Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, June 6, 1907 (Pierpont Morgan Library, New York).

cast votes for me,"[33] a reflection on her popularity in general and about her widely publicized novel-writing contest with the Englishman Max Pemberton.[34] These were the parts of her audience that she tried so hard to please: the genteel editors and the melodrama-loving public. Between them her native gift for realism had to get on as best it could.

Criticism was working itself free of gentility during the first decade of this century. An indication that this attempt was successful on some levels at least is the following passage from H. S. Canby's study of the short story.

> She [Mary Wilkins Freeman] is a conscientious realist, who constructs her little stories as carefully as Maupassant himself. . . . With her the local color story in English reaches its highest point of finesse.[35]

A. B. Maurice's comments in The Mentor in August, 1919, reveal the survival of the genteel aesthetic and of the genteel image of Mrs. Freeman and her work. So does Grant Overton's The Women Who Make Our Novels published in the same year. Maurice's article treats women novelists in general. That it begins with a full page picture of Mrs. Freeman indicates her stature at the end of the war decade.

33. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, note without salutation or address, February 23, 1908 (Newberry Library, Chicago).

34. Through 1908 novels by Mrs. Freeman and Mr. Pemberton were serialized in the New York Herald. The reading public was asked to vote either for the American Realist or the English Romancer. Mrs. Freeman won the $5,000 prize.

35. Henry Seidel Canby, A Study of the Short Story (New York, 1913), p. 58.

Another indication that her reputation was paramount among women novelists is a letter from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1917 informing her that, with her permission, they were going to place her name in nomination for membership. No woman had ever been nominated or admitted before. She was warned that she might be discriminated against on the basis of sex. Never a feminist or in any way militant about women's rights, Mrs. Freeman replied, "Please be very sure that I shall not be in the least disturbed if women are not admitted. I can very readily see that many would object."[36] She was not admitted, and she hid whatever disappointment she may have felt behind her realization that the nomination itself was a singular honor.

Seven years later the Academy atoned for its lack of gallantry when it decided to give her a medal for her contribution to American letters. At the ceremony the huge, bronze outer doors of the Academy opening onto 156th Street were dedicated to her and through her to the women writers of America. It was a fine gesture, and the old lady appreciated it. She also enjoyed the added pleasure of "renewing an old friendship to my great delight."[37] The friendship she referred to was that with Hamlin Garland, who presided

36. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, letter to Mr. Thorndyke, October 25, 1917 (American Academy of Arts and Letters Library, New York).

37. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, letter to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, April, 1926 (American Academy of Arts and Letters Library, New York).

at the ceremony. In his speech of praise he said:

> Book after book flowed from her pen, each containing unfaltering portraits of lorn widowhood, crabbed old age, wistful youth, cheerful drudgery, patient poverty, defiant spinsterhood, and many other related and individual types of character, each with proper background of hill, town, or village street; all making an unparallelled record of New England life.[38]

Even in this finest moment, her behavior was characteristic. After an exchange of several letters with Garland, Mrs. Freeman, who never read in public, finally agreed to speak; but all she was willing to say was "thank you."

In Roadside Meetings, which came out in 1930, Garland said substantially the same things about her. He said,

> As a student of minute forms of conduct, she had no superior. The amazing part of her genius lay in her ability to see the near-by life of her neighborhood in artistic perspective.[39]

But the genteel image persisted. In 1927 Henry W. Lanier edited a volume called The Best Stories of Mary E. Wilkins. It contained some very fine things--it would have to--, but many of the sterner stories are missing. He does not include "Sister Liddy," "A Village Lear," "A Tardy Thanksgiving," or "A Taste of Honey." In their place he offers "The Wind in the Rose Bush," "The Butterfly" and a number of other sentimental pieces.

38. Hamlin Garland, Speech made at the American Academy of Arts and Letters, quoted in The New York Times, April 24, 1926, Sec. 1, p. 7.

39. Hamlin Garland, Roadside Meetings (New York, 1930), p. 34.

On March 18, 1930, The New York Times ran a fairly lengthy obituary on Mrs. Freeman. In it she is praised for her realistic mastery of detail. "The surprising part of it was the variety of experience and incident imparted to every story of these outwardly uninteresting personalities." However, to preserve the genteel image the comment is added, "The touch of kindly humor was invariable."[40]

Since her death, her reputation has steadily diminished. Since World War II "The Revolt of Mother" has been dropped from many high school anthologies. Her only biographer says in summation,

> Her truth is of a narrower and more precious kind--a superb understanding of the undefeated neurotics, occasionally men, more often women. . . . They are all--these striving neurotics--seeking a wholeness of spirit and a fullness of life almost impossible of attainment in the village.[41]

A few lines previous to this, he says, "It is pleasant to return to her stories because they distill the flavor of life in a New England village."[42] This last comment is consistent with the genteel image but inconsistent with his own comments about neurotics. "Pleasant" is not the word for a "sordid Aeschylus;" nor should the "impossibility of attainment" be allowed to stand. Through love a

40. Obituary, New York Times, March 18, 1930, Sec. 1, p. 7.

41. Foster, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, pp. 190-191.

42. Ibid., p. 190.

number of her characters do attain a fullness of life.

Mrs. Freeman was not always a successful artist, but in her best moments she was a serious one. Perhaps Brooks' assessment is the fairest. "In some of her early tales, perhaps twenty or thirty, she was an eminent artist, as eminent as Miss Jewett, and even more so, because of the depth of feeling that informed her art."[43] And that deepest feeling was tragic as her finest art was realistic. That this is not always clearly seen is the result not only of the critical conventions of the day but also of her own frequent failure to perform in her best manner and truest vein while pursuing, as she did, both popular acclaim and financial success. Garland's memory of their first meeting in the '80's may serve as a literary epitaph. "Her succinct, low-voiced comment was often lost in the joyous clamor of less important voices."[44] It was--partially--her own fault.

43. Van Wyck Brooks, New England: Indian Summer (New York, 1950), p. 465.

44. Garland, Roadside Meetings, p. 34.

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