# *WOMAN BETWEEN MARRIAGE AND INDEPENDENCE IN MARY E. WILKINS FREEMAN'S* "A NEW ENGLAND NUN"

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***Abstract*** *This paper treats the problem of a woman's choice between marrying a man she does not love and refusing marriage for the independent life she loves. Louisa Ellis, the protagonist of the short story, is supposed to marry Joe Dagget who comes back from Australia after making a fortune. They have been engaged for 15 years, but in the meantime Louisa has discovered she loves living her solitary domestic life more than anything else and she finally has the courage to choose this life.*

***Keywords:*** *woman, marriage, independence.*

## 1. American Women Short Story Writers

Women writers grew more and more attracted by the literary form of the short story ever since its dawn in American literature, this fact leading to the publication of short stories in magazines that aimed at women readers. Two examples in point are *Godey's Lady's Book* (Philadelphia, first published in 1830) and *The American Ladies' Magazine and Literary Gazette* (Boston, first published in 1837), which published articles, sketches and tales addressed to women and mostly written by women. In spite of Nathaniel Hawthorne's dismissal of the women writers of his time, Scofield (2006: 92) notes that "nineteenth-century women writers have recently begun to regain critical attention; republication of the main authors, together with a number of anthologies, has helped to rediscover an important strand of literary tradition."

Most women writers of the time were integrated in the group of regionalist writers (usually labeled as minor writers) considering that the setting is of utmost importance in their work and that the specific features of the region (which is mostly rural or provincial) are emphasized. Besides these characteristics, women writers introduce women characters in the context of their landscapes, thus trying "to reconstruct feminine identity in terms that defied conventional gender boundaries." (Bendixen, Nagel, 2010: 391). Bendixen and Nagel group Celia Thaxter, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman in one category of New England regionalist writers whose fiction "with its focus on women's relationships to their natural environments became a form of resistance to traditional nineteenth-century expectations for women within the "woman's sphere." " (*Ibidem*: 391-392) Being attracted to transcendentalism, women regionalist writers attempted "to extend and revise its perspective to take into account women's experiences (Littenberg 140). Thaxter, Jewett and Freeman "find a world in a pond, an emblem of society in a teacup, the power of nature in a wildflower" (139)." (in Bendixen, Nagel, *op.cit.*: 392).

We could state that there is a difference between men regionalist writers and women regionalist writers in that the latter category uses regionalism rather as a pretext to analyse women's lives, they use landscape as a background to develop feminine characters. Or, in other terms, they transpose the unity of person and place into a "unity

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of woman and nature" (Bendixen, Nagel, *op.cit.*: 405). As Celia Tichi says, "Under cover of regionalism … these women writers explored the territory of women's lives. Their essential agenda in the era of the new woman was to map the geography of their gender. The geography of America formed an important part of their work, but essentially they charted the regions of women's lives, regions both without and within the self" (Tichi 598 in *Ibidem*: 392). Or, as Fetterley and Pryse put it in *Writing Out of Place*, women regionalists "were not interested in depictions of nature for its own sake; rather, they focused on the relationship between that world and human consciousness" (4). (in *Ibidem*) So, writers such as Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Kate Chopin, Grace King, Charlotte Perkins Gilman write in their short stories about the aspirations of women and "the way women succeed or fail in a world that is largely controlled by men" (*Ibidem*: 17)

**2. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman – bio-bibliography in a nutshell**

Born in Massachusetts, Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman (1852 - 1930) covered almost all literary genres: she wrote 14 novels and 15 collections of short stories, as well as plays and poetry. Yet, she gained fame for her short stories in which she makes excellent use of atmosphere, setting and mood, equally focusing on people and character. Critics or writers such as William Dean Howells and Hamlin Garland consider her a realist for the way she presents and analyses the changing New England of her era, most or her works being set in Brattleboro, Vermont and Randolph, Massachusetts. Initially integrated into the class of local color or regionalist writers, she has recently been acknowledged as a truly psychological writer, being praised for "her profound insights into human nature and social relationships" (Westbrook, "Mary E. Wilkins Freeman" 290, apud Werlock, 2010: 259).

Freeman started her career by publishing stories in magazines (such as *Harper's Bazaar*) and she reached success with the publication of *A Humble Romance* (1887), set in rural Vermont, and *A New England Nun and Other Stories* (1891), containing some of her best stories. Her success has resisted until now when her stories are part of various anthologies.

Her talent for creating atmosphere and the psychological depth displayed in her stories are widely recognized, but recently the feminist scholars have become interested in her stories most of which feature strong and determined women. Although Freeman did not consider herself a feminist, that was just the attitude of women writers of her own time (such as Edith Wharton, for example). Positioning Freeman's voice between the bold protesting voice of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the softer, calmer voice of Sarah Orne Jewett, Leah Glasser says that Freeman's stories "offer women strategies of subterfuge, methods of coping and surviving through seeming compromise" (1996:xx). Strong and rebellious women represent the main characters of stories such as *Louisa*, *The Revolt of Mother* and *A Church Mouse* and they rebel either against an arranged marriage or against a passive husband. Her most famous stories "usually deal with an unmarried woman who tries to stake out a meaningful independent existence on her own terms." (Bendixen, Nagel, *op.cit.*: 17)

**3. *A New England Nun* – plot and themes**

One such story, largely anthologized, is *A New England Nun,* originally published in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1887 and subsequently, in 1891 as the title story in *A*



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*New England Nun and Other Stories.* The opening scene of the story, presenting a calm pastoral New England atmosphere, totally resonates with the protagonist, Louisa Ellis, and her excessively ordered house. After the death of her mother and brother, Louisa lives alone in the house, sharing her life with two pets, a canary kept in a cage, and a dog, Caesar, chained in her yard for the sin of having once bitten a passerby. The third-person narrator tells us the story of Louisa's 15-year engagement to Joe Dagget, who went to Australia to make his fortune. Joe's return is seen as a coarse intrusion into Louisa's ordered house and life, but although they clearly will not be able to adapt to each other, they are decent and honourable people determined to keep their engagement promises. Yet, the relief comes one evening when Louisa stumbles across Joe and Lily Dyer, the pretty girl who takes care of his mother, and overhears them confessing their mutual love and promising to suppress it in order to keep their honour. So, the next day, Louisa talks to Joe in a diplomatic way (without mentioning Lily at all) and Joe agrees to breaking their engagement promises and setting each other free.

This is the whole story line, but the end is ambivalent as long as the reader is challenged to evaluate Louisa's situation. Here are some questions readers may/should ask, according to Werlock (*op.cit.*:479) "By giving up marriage and, in those days, her only possible sexual outlet, has she sacrificed too much? Why must women make such choices? Will she actually feel happier living alone, owning her house, keeping her passions chained along with Caesar? Is she a version of Freeman herself, especially in her love of extracting essences from the herbs she gathers (seen by some critics as a metaphor for the writing process)?"

The significance of the title is mostly revealed in the last lines in which Louisa Ellis "sat, prayerfully numbering her days, like an uncloistered nun" (Freeman, 1976: 94). Her resemblance to a nun is justified mainly by her rejection of marriage and motherhood and her decision to live a life of confinement in her solitary home and dedicate her life to order and routine, waiting calmly in expectation of the "... a long reach of future days strung together like pearls in a rosary, everyone like the others." (*Ibidem*).

Since the short story gravitates around the main female character, the main themes are related to her figure. One theme is that of women facing a conflict generated by their making their own decisions and observing to them. Louisa Ellis puts an end to her engagement in order to live the life she wants, but she also copes with the possible social consequences of her decision: loneliness, speculations of the town.

*A New England Nun* also presents the theme of the search of woman's identity. Louisa Ellis discovers that her identity is to live alone, she feels happy and satisfied with herself and her home, while the presence of her future fiancé makes her feel uneasy. Self-discovery induces a conflict of the individual with the community, because the traditional role of a woman in the patriarchal society, that of wife and mother, does not agree with Louisa's ideal life. So she will not follow the standard life of a 19$^{th}$ century woman, she will be an independent single woman and a personal rebel.

Moreover, it could be said that women's rights are outspoken in this short story in that Freeman "vindicates the women's right of being independent and the right of choosing the kind of life they want to live without being considered promiscuous or unmoral." (http://html.rincondelvago.com/a-new-england-nun_the-revolt-of-mother_mary-eleanor-wilkins-freeman.html).



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**4. Louisa Ellis and Marriage**

Louisa's marriage is a typically arranged marriage in which the future wife's will or love do not matter. It was Louisa's mother who decided upon this marriage and Louisa, being "docile" and "faithful", simply obeyed and accepted it. The perspective of marriage is two-folded for Louisa. On the one hand, she complies with tradition according to which marriage represents a social duty for women and defines their role in society as wives and mothers. Fifteen year ago, she behaved as a typical 19th century girl, with "calm docility" (Freeman, *op.cit.*:87), and "accepted him with no hesitation" (*Ibidem*). In spite of her fiancé's long absence which has never made her feel "discontented nor impatient", "she had always looked forward to his return and their marriage as the inevitable conclusion of things" (*Ibidem*).

On the other hand, the feminist perspective takes root in Louisa's mind and grows little by little. During Joe's long absence, Louisa has started to taste independence: after her mother and brother died, she is all alone in the world. It is this solitary life that opens "a path, smooth maybe under a calm, serene sky, but so straight and unswerving that it could only meet a check at her grave, and so narrow that there was no room for anyone at her side." (*Ibidem*) It was actually an initiatory path of self-discovery and the revelation of a so-called self-sufficiency. She discovers a passion for sewing which defines her own self: "these little feminine appurtenances [i.e. the needle, the basket with her thimble and thread and scissors] […] had become, from long use and constant association, a very part of her personality." (*Ibidem*: 83). She also performs a tea ritual resembling the Chinese one; each detail is important from picking the currants and stemming them to preparing the tea with "slow and still […] movements" (*Ibidem*) and serving it to herself "as if she had been a veritable guest to her own self" (*Ibidem*), that is using china every day, unlike her neighbours. The respect and love for her own self, as well as her (artist-like) passion for detail become obvious in the tea arrangement in her kitchen: "The little square table stood exactly in the centre of the kitchen, and was covered with a starched linen cloth whose border pattern of flowers glistened. Louisa had a damask napkin on her tea-tray, where were arranged a cut-glass tumbler full of teaspoons, a silver cream-pitcher, a china sugar-bowl, and one pink china cup and saucer. Louisa used china every day – something which none of her neighbors did." (*Ibidem*)

Besides sewing and the tea ritual, her personality is also defined by her passion for distilling aromatic essences and preparing perfume (*Ibidem*:88) as well as by "enthusiasm […] over the mere order and cleanliness of her solitary home" (*Ibidem*:89). Moreover, her life develops outside the house, too, offering her the chance to integrate into nature by simply controlling it. She has lettuce in her little garden which she "raised to perfection" (*Ibidem*:83), but also roses, peppermint and spearmint. Then she has animals to care for: Caesar, "a veritable hermit of a dog", who has lived "at the end of a chain" for 14 years for the sin of biting a neighbour; he lives the life of a prisoner, is "fat and sleepy", "seldom lifted up his voice in a growl or a bark" but has a public mask of "monster of ferocity" (*Ibidem*:89). The other animal she has is "a little yellow canary […] in his green cage" (*Ibidem*:84).

From this double perspective, marriage generates a conflict for Louisa: she is obedient enough to serve society, but she also loves her self-gained independence. Moreover, Joe Dagget's presence into her house always turns into a coarse intrusion. During the visit described in the short story, he arranges the two books on the little table in a different order, which upsets Louisa. Then he feels so embarrassed that he hits her



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work-basket and knocks it on the floor, thus being compared by the narrator to a bear in a china shop. The dialogue they have is superficial and artificial, with no emotional involvement at all, and what they feel during this visit is uneasiness; Joe "drew in the sweet evening air with a sigh" (*Ibidem*:85) when he was out of Louisa's house, while she, in turn, had to repair the "disastrous" effects of his visit: to replace the fallen objects and even to "sweep Joe Dagget's track carefully" (*Ibidem*:86) when she realized he had left a lot of dust on the carpet.

The fact that these two entities, the male and the female, are totally opposed and "unmarriageable" is suggested by the parallel opposition between the two. During the visit, "He sat bolt-upright, toeing out his heavy feet squarely, glancing with a good-humored uneasiness around the room. She sat gently erect, folding her slender hands in her white-linen lap." (*Ibidem*:84). Their looks are also in opposition, since Louisa seems more mature than she is: "He was not very young, but there was a boyish look about his large face. Louisa was not quite as old as he, her face was fairer and smoother, but she gave people the impression of being older." (*Ibidem*:85) The comparison with the bear in the china shop offers another pretext for a perfect opposition between the two: he "felt much as an innocent and perfectly well-intentioned bear might after his exit from a china shop. Louisa, on her part, felt much as the kind-hearted, long-suffering owner of the china shop might have done after the exit of the bear." (*Ibidem*:85-86).

The totally opposed natures of the man and woman represent one series of reasons why this marriage will represent an error for both of them: neither will feel free in this marriage, free to be themselves, free to behave as they wish. This opposition translates more generally in "coarse masculine presence" versus feminine "delicate harmony" (*Ibidem*:89). Moreover, the perspective of marriage means renunciation for Louisa, as she sees in her visions of future married life. She will have to leave her house, and although her belongings could be taken with her, they will "cease to be themselves" (*Ibidem*:88) in the new environment. On the other hand, she will have "a large house to care for […], company to entertain, […] Joe's … mother to wait upon" (*Ibidem*:88) which will fill her time and so she will have to give up her everyday pleasures of distilling essences and sewing for pleasure. More powerfully, the presence of the man will destroy her perfect order and cleanliness: "She had visions […] of coarse masculine belongings strewn about in endless litter; of dust and disorder arising necessarily from a coarse masculine presence in the midst of all this delicate harmony." (*Ibidem*:89).

Even her control of nature will be lost after marriage, as she is sure that Joe will set Caesar free, and the canary's reaction at Joe's visits suggests freedom, too: it "woke up and fluttered wildly, beating his little yellow wings against the wires. He always did so when Joe Dagget came into the room." (*Ibidem*:84) The two animals are metaphors for Louisa and Joe: "His hearty sexuality echoes that of Caesar, doomed to be forever chained because he once bit a passerby. Louisa herself seems like the canary, comfortable within the boundaries of her enclosure." (Werlock, *op.cit.*: 479)

As a conclusion, marriage will mean a total change in Louisa's ways, involving renunciation and sacrifice. "Then there were some peculiar features of her happy solitary life which she would probably be obliged to relinquish altogether". (Freeman, *op.cit.*: 89).



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**5. Louisa Ellis and Independence**

Louisa gains her independence thanks to a happy chance: that of overhearing a private conversation between Joe and Lily. But it is enough for her to decide against marrying Joe and to go on with her simple "cloistered" life. The comparison to a nun accounts for her refusing marriage, but her devotion to God is in her case replaced by her devotion to domestic life out of which she makes an art. She is the artist of her own home, of her own life. She mirrors God as a creator in that she also creates beauty, like a genuine artist: she sews beautiful things, she creates perfumes. Even in the way she controls her animals she resembles God.

The rituals of the church that a nun is supposed to share are replaced in the short story by the very exact ritual of serving tea to herself. Just like in church, where the objects used in rituals are valuable, Louisa uses her china and a silver cream-pitcher, a damask napkin for the tray and a starched linen cloth on the little table.

The idea of innocence related to nuns is preserved in Louisa's case, too. Sexually speaking, she is and will remain a maiden, but the idea of innocence widens so as to apply to the whole house, which is kept in perfect order and harmony: "She gloated gently over her *orderly* bureau-drawers, with their exquisitely folded contents redolent with lavender and sweet clover and very *purity*." (*Ibidem*, our italics).

More than innocence, it is the idea of peace that also supports this comparison. The peace given by the love of God in the case of nuns appears in this short story as the peace of living her solitary life as she wants. The word "peace" and its derivatives are used several times in the short story. At the very beginning, it describes the way Louisa feels when she accomplishes one of her passions: "She had been *peacefully* sewing at her sitting-room window all the afternoon." (*Ibidem*:83, our italics) Then, the word qualifies the pleasure of solitary life she has discovered: "Her life, especially for the last seven years, had been full of a pleasant *peace*." (*Ibidem*:87, our italics) Thirdly, she totally identifies with the concept of peace, again when she is sewing: "Sitting at her window during long sweet afternoons, drawing her needle gently through the dainty fabric, she was *peace* itself." (*Ibidem*:88, our italics) Further on, the word appears in direct opposition to other words that describe the vision of the future marriage: "Still no anticipation of disorder and confusion in lieu of sweet *peace* and harmony, no forebodings of Caesar on the rampage, no wild fluttering of her little yellow canary, were sufficient to turn her a hairsbreadth." (*Ibidem*:90, our italics) In the end, the word "peace" associates both to Louisa and her metaphorical counterpart, the canary, in order to describe what their future life will look like: "Now the little canary might turn itself into a *peaceful* yellow ball night after night, and have no need to wake and flutter with wild terror against its bars. Louisa could sew linen seams, and distil roses, and dust and polish and fold away in lavender, as long as she listed. That afternoon she sat with her needle-work at the window, and felt fairly steeped in *peace*." (*Ibidem*:94, our italics)

Other religious-bound words appear in the text: "hermit" describing the dog, "sin" referring to the mistake committed by the dog, "rosary" metaphorically suggesting the chain of days to come for Louisa after her election of living the life she loves, "uncloistered nun", the simile that ends the short story.

Last but not least, the comparison with the nun also develops as regards the specific clothes. If nuns are easily recognized by their black and white clothes, so is Louisa defined by her three aprons she wears function of the situation. Each apron describes a side of her personality. She puts on her green apron when she goes out to pick currants or to feed Caesar, so the green apron defines her relation to nature, to



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plants and animals, green being the cliché colour for nature and ecology. She wears only the white linen apron when she has company, when she receives the visits of her fiancé, for example, so in relation to others she has the appearance of a nun. The last apron she has, a pink-and-white one, is the sewing apron that she uses when she performs one of her favourite activities, so we could speculate this is the apron defining her relation to her own creative self. An interesting fact about the aprons is that she wears them one over the other, thus defining herself like a Russian matryoshka doll: she wears the white apron all the time, the pink-and-white apron is put over the white one and, finally, the green one is worn over the other two, when necessary. So we could see that her most inner (or hidden) self is defined by her relation to others, next comes her relation to herself and to her creative skills and finally her relation to nature. Even the sizes of the aprons mirror a matryoshka doll: the shortest is the one "inside" – the white linen one, then comes the sewing one and finally the green one.

## 6. Conclusions

Built on the opposition between male and female, the male seen as "heavy" and "coarse", as an intruder into the feminine world, while the feminine reunites whatever is "delicate", "harmony", "calm", "serene", "orderly", "clean" and "peaceful", *A New England Nun* takes a step towards feminism by presenting a woman who rebels against tradition and chooses not to marry her long-waited-for fiancé in favour of living a solitary domestic life filled with pleasant activities: sewing, serving tea, feeding the two pets, distilling essences for perfumes, keeping the house perfectly clean and orderly.

"The world Freeman depicts here is delicate and 'feminine', but in the restricted sense of that term which tended to prevail at the time. In other stories, however, Freeman shows a more problematic sense of women's identity in mid-nineteenth-century America, and a more general preoccupation with what became of the tradition of Puritanism in its heartlands of Massachusetts and Vermont. One of her critics has strikingly called her 'the anatomist of the latter-day Puritan will', that strong sense of individual relation to God, with its strenuous Calvinistic responsibilities and its frequent contortions into wilfulness and eccentricity, particularly in a society which had dwindled economically since colonial times." (Scofield, *op.cit.*: 92)

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