

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 26
Issue 1 *March*

Article 6

March 1990

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Thomas A. Maik

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Recommended Citation

Colby Quarterly, Volume 26, no.1, March 1990, p.59-68

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*Dissent and Affirmation:
Conflicting Voices of Female Roles
in Selected Stories
by Mary Wilkins Freeman*

by THOMAS A. MAIK

FOR SOME TIME NOW we have been familiar with later nineteenth- and early twentieth-century female American writers—misunderstood, unrecognized,¹ or misperceived for various reasons in their own time—who have come to be known for their pioneer work in portraying the plight or dilemma of women in their fiction. As Annette Kolodny points out, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) perplexed her readers because her "... materials deviated radically from the accepted norms of women's fiction out of which her audience largely derived its expectations" (50). In the same sense, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) went unrecognized in its study of female entrapment because many readers thought Gilman's story to be following a genre popularized by Edgar A. Poe.² Similarly Mary Wilkins Freeman's defiant and assertive females have often been perceived as having eccentricities resulting from their New England culture. For example, Perry Westbrook, one of her biographers, comments that Freeman "... is our most truthful recorder in fiction of New England village life. In several volumes of short stories and three or four novels, she has caught the flavor of that life as no other author has; but when she writes on other subjects, she is usually undistinguished" (15). Edward Foster, another Freeman biographer, shares Westbrook's view: "Her form is the local color story. ... But *local color* need not be a pejorative label; it can be understood to denote not merely surface aspects of a story but also an impulse, a sensibility, an attitude toward a particular moment in the development of a traditional culture" (66).

Only in recent years and because of the woman's movement have we come to recognize these writers from an additional perspective. Granted, Freeman is a local colorist. As such she is a fine writer who has made significant contributions

1. In her essay, "Melodramas of Beset Manhood," Nina Baym attributes three possible reasons for the absence of literature by and about women in the American literary canon. For one, she suggests simple bias—literature has traditionally been selected by male authors and they simply have a male bias, perhaps because they don't like the idea of women as writers or because they don't believe that women can be writers. Furthermore, she suggests the reason for their absence is because women are not regarded as "excellent" as men, meaning that because traditionally women lacked the education that men had, their literature reflected that poverty in its lack of classical allusions and richness of metaphor. Finally, she indicates that the lack of literature by and about women may relate to gender restrictions; anachronistically we view literature from our current standards, and the standards have traditionally been male (64-65). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* make a similar observation: "If we return to the question we asked earlier—where does a woman writer 'fit in' to the overwhelmingly and essentially male literary history Bloom [Harold Bloom, foremost proponent of literary psychohistory] describes?—we find we have to answer that a woman writer does not 'fit in'" (48).

2. See Annette Kolodny's rather extensive discussion of Gilman's story in "A Map for Rereading: Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Text," pp. 46-62.

to the genre. But we need not limit her to that tradition. Following Kolodny's argument for a revisionist rereading of literature (59), we find Mary Wilkins Freeman to be *more* than a local colorist. In fact, long before terms such as "feminism" and "liberation" became part of our culture through consciousness raising of the 1960s and '70s, Mary Wilkins Freeman concerned herself with the status and role of women.

In her fiction Freeman is noted for portraying strong, defiant, and rather unconventional females. Without question, Mary Wilkins Freeman, on the one hand, creates as central characters independent women who challenge the traditional sex roles prescribed by their culture; on the other hand, narrators of the stories and some of her minor characters frequently display ambivalence toward the very roles portrayed by the central characters. In fact, the narrators frequently appear to prefer that these females follow more conventional behavior. What happens, then, in these stories is a dichotomy between the characters' and narrators' attitudes toward conventional sex roles.

This dichotomy of the character and narrator toward prescribed sex roles can be noted quite clearly in "Louisa" (1891),³ one of Freeman's popular and frequently anthologized short stories. From the opening passages of the story to the very end, Louisa is consistent in her convictions. She opposes the restraints, limitations, and expectations that her New England culture has placed upon her role as a woman in that culture. Louisa is defiant, assertive, and determined. No doubt she would subscribe to Margaret Fuller's vision for women in the nineteenth century: "We would have every arbitrary barrier thrown down. We would have every path laid open to Woman as freely as to Man" (37).⁴

In a household of three—herself, her mother, and her grandfather—Louisa has no choice other than to become a survivor. Because of her mother's frail condition and deteriorating health as well as her grandfather's emerging senility, Louisa must show strength and courage; in short, Louisa must support the family. From the very beginning of the story, then, she assumes the dominant role by becoming the sole breadwinner in the household. Certainly, given the health of her mother and grandfather, such a role would not be unusual for a New England woman in the nineteenth century. In *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* in a passage with imagery strikingly similar to *The Awakening*, Margaret Fuller argued for such role flexibility:

In families that I know, some little girls like to saw wood, others to use carpenters' tools. Where these tastes are indulged, cheerfulness and good-humor are promoted. Where they are forbidden, because "such things are not proper for girls," they grow sullen and mischievous. . . . no need to clip the wings of any bird that wants to soar and sing, or finds in itself the strength of pinion for a migratory flight unusual to its kind. The difference would be that *all* need not be constrained to employments for which *some* are unfit. (174-75)

3. Mary Wilkins Freeman, "Louisa," in Mary E. Wilkins's *A New England Nun and Other Stories* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1919), pp. 384-406. All subsequent citations to Freeman's fiction are from this edition.

4. On the other hand, Margaret Fuller notes the reality for women as she comments in her journal: "I love best to be a woman; but womanhood is at present too strictly bound to give me scope" (quoted in Chevigny, *The Woman and the Myth: Margaret Fuller's Life and Writings*, p. 63).

Like Fuller, Freeman's characters seek role flexibility. Louisa is obviously a capable woman, and necessity dictates role flexibility, in this case to be the family breadwinner. What happens, however, in the course of the story is that Louisa increasingly rejects the female role established for her by society and accepts what had traditionally been a more masculine role.

Louisa early demonstrates the capabilities to meet the challenges before her. As the story opens, she is taking a break from the enervating and back-breaking labor of the annual spring task of planting seed potatoes. Now that she has lost her job as teacher in a neighboring school, the family must become self-sufficient. Her mother's, grandfather's, and her very existence are dependent upon the food produced from the family acre. As tired as she is from her labor and as frustrating as it is to have her labors "undone" by her senile grandfather's unearthing of her newly planted potatoes, Louisa persists, returns to the small field, replants the portion of unearthed potatoes, and completes the task of planting the others, all on the same day. Louisa's problem of being the breadwinner for the family could be resolved in one easy stroke, however, as her mother pointedly suggests: by marriage—the traditional role prescribed for the nineteenth-century female.⁵

As noted earlier, options for women in the nineteenth century were decidedly limited. In what he refers to as the mentality of submission, John Stuart Mill in *The Subjection of Women* comments as follows regarding the expected role of women in the nineteenth century: "All women are brought up from their earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men: not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission and yielding to the control of others" (16). Margaret Fuller similarly notes the perverse restrictions upon and limited freedom of women: "Nor, in societies where her choice is left free, would she [woman] be perverted, by the current of opinion that seizes her, in the belief that she *must marry, if it be only to find a protector, and a home of her own* [italics mine]" (71).⁶ Clearly, Louisa's mother's views for her daughter emanate from the very same traditions that Fuller wants to change but recognizes as being all too real in nineteenth-century American culture. Indeed, from her mother's perspective, Louisa could solve the family economic crisis by marrying Jonathan Nye, a well-to-do eligible bachelor who has been courting her. Through a marriage with Jonathan, Louisa's worries of providing for the family and her back-breaking manual labor would end; furthermore, her mother and grandfather would be cared for, and all the family members would have a more elegant home.

As pragmatic as such a solution is, however, Louisa bristles at the thought of

5. See Robert Lacour-Gayet's *Everyday Life in the United States before the Civil War: 1830-1860* for an extensive discussion of marriage traditions and customs in the nineteenth century. He observes: "Rich and poor married young. In the South, fifteen, or even fourteen or thirteen, was the marriageable age. It was not unusual to encounter grandmothers under thirty years old. In other regions, a girl who had not found a husband by the time she was twenty caused surprise. In general, the choice of a fiancé was up to those concerned, and the family stepped in only in hopeless cases" (67).

6. Alice Glarden Brand in her article, "Mary Wilkins Freeman: Misanthropy as Propaganda," echoes the Mill and Fuller observations. For the woman, Brand commented, the nineteenth century "... placed a premium on marriage, self-control, and impassiveness" (84).

it. In her quest for flexibility of roles, Louisa defies the prescribed role of marriage. Although she doesn't know Jonathan well, she doesn't care to know him. Perhaps because of her mother's involvement in her romantic life and her mother's persistent reminders of Jonathan's eligibility, Louisa becomes adamant in her opposition to such a proposal. In fact, she determinedly asserts her independence. What develops in the course of the story is the emergence of a strong New England woman.

In almost imperceptible stages, Louisa's behavior changes. From a combination of circumstances—the death of her father, the senility of her grandfather, the frail health of her mother, the loss of her teaching position, and the family's rapidly deteriorating financial situation—Louisa is forced to assume caretaker and provider roles or both the traditional female and male roles. Early in the story it's apparent that Louisa's independence, strong will, and determination make her unsuited for the standard female role of domesticity. Furthermore, that same opening—Louisa's pride in having completed the outdoor physical work of planting potatoes—confirms her competence in doing work often associated with men. Her deepening tan as the weeks pass lends additional credence to her unconventional side.

In almost infinitesimal degrees, then, her quest for independence combined with her own strong will and determination leads her to unorthodox (at least to her immediate family) and masculine behavior. Because her family will need firewood for the winter months, Louisa herself chops the wood on a neighbor's woodlot and then pays for it by doing household chores for the neighbor's wife. The woodchopping episode provides a nice balance of what must be established and rather well-defined New England sex roles. On the one hand, chopping wood is clearly a man's job, a job that Louisa demonstrates she can do; on the other hand, working for a neighbor's wife to pay for the wood she cut exemplifies clearly the traditional female role. At this point, the roles are rather sharply delineated and Louisa successfully plays both. Moreover, her dual roles at this point appear to be tolerated. Later in the story, however, as Louisa assumes an even greater masculine role, her mother becomes increasingly intolerant of such behavior.

Late in the summer and much to the chagrin of her mother, Louisa does haying for a neighbor. Her mother's outrage is apparent when Louisa returns from the field, face burning and her dress, wet from perspiration, clinging to her arms and shoulders: "‘Rakin’ hay with the men?’ . . . Mrs. Britton had turned white. She sank into a chair. ‘I can’t stan’ it nohow,’ she moaned. ‘All the *daughter* [italics mine] I’ve got’" (398). In response, Louisa acknowledges her behavior change: "‘Why can’t I rake hay as well as a man? Lots of women do such things, *if nobody round here does* [again, italics mine]’" (398).

At this point, Louisa acknowledges her changed gender role and admits as well that by community standards her behavior is unconventional. If planting potatoes, chopping wood, raking hay, and doing other rugged outdoor labor mean sweat and grime at the close of day, Louisa doesn't care. If such work means an obvious tan line on Sundays when she changes from her grubby work

clothes to Sunday finery, so be it. Nonetheless, the obvious “farmer-like” (masculine?) appearance of Louisa, the only daughter, does matter to her mother who, in seeking to keep a “daughter” and to camouflage the unconventional behavior, takes some old wide lace from the bureau drawer and proudly announces: “‘There, I’m goin’ to sew this in your neck an’ sleeves before you put your dress on. It’ll cover up a little; it’s wider than the ruffle’” (397).

Despite her personal determination and her masculine behavior, Louisa’s physical efforts, nonetheless, are obviously inadequate. Just when the potato crop shows promise of providing a good harvest and adequate food for the months ahead, her grandfather once again destroys that potential, this time by mischievously plucking all the blossoms. Later, he does the same with the blossoming squash plants. Indeed, now their plight is desperate.

With the family in this desperate situation and on one of the hottest days of the summer, Louisa decides to seek help by walking to her mother’s brother who lives seven miles away. Although Louisa gets food from her uncle—meal, eggs, ham, and flour—and carries all of it back to her home seven miles away, she must carry as much as she can as far as she can, then return for the rest and continue the process. Because of the backtracking involved, the fourteen mile round-trip journey to her uncle’s easily exceeds twenty miles. Obviously, her actions demonstrate her determination. However, from a perspective of a culture embedded with established gender roles, Louisa’s actions on this hot August day are surely unusual, to say the least. Furthermore, her determination and physical stamina are simply out of character with the cultural expectations of the nineteenth-century woman. As Lacour-Gayet notes:

They [women] lacked spirit. . . . Pallor was compulsory. To acquire it, experts recommended drinking very strong vinegar and eating large amounts of chalk. Above all, women were fragile and of delicate health. Their bone structure and constitution seemed less solid than those of European women, one observer remarked. They lost consciousness at every opportunity, since one of the signs of good breeding was knowing how to faint. (70-71)

Obviously, Louisa doesn’t fit the mold of the nineteenth-century woman described by Lacour-Gayet, nor does she lack spirit. To some observers, in fact, Louisa’s lengthy journey to and from her uncle’s on the same day borders on sheer lunacy; such a trip on one of the summer’s hottest days was simply inappropriate for a woman. Had a man done the same thing, however, and risked health and life, he’d be a hero. Right to the end Louisa clearly challenges the established sex roles. Furthermore, she feels quite comfortable in this masculine role and doesn’t care what her mother or the community thinks. Certainly the traditional roles assigned to women—housekeeping, marriage, and other domestic concerns—are too confining for the independent Louisa. Louisa’s actions echo sentiments expressed earlier by Margaret Fuller regarding sex roles: “. . . no need to clip the wings of any bird that wants to soar and sing, or finds in itself the strength of pinion for a migratory flight unusual to its kind. The difference would be that *all* need not be constrained to employments for which *some* are unfit” (175).

Clearly Louisa's desire to break from the restrictions of prescribed sex roles is at odds with Louisa's mother's vision of her.⁷ The mother wants her daughter to be a daughter and to do traditional daughter things—stay in the house, avoid rugged outdoor work, avoid the bright sun and a conspicuous tan line. Above all, she wants a daughter who will marry. And according to prevailing community norms, Louisa's mother's vision of a woman's role is quite standard. For example, Jonathan Nye wants a woman he can care for and provide for, as his giving her honey suggests. And Louisa's friend, whom she meets on the day of her excessively long journey to her uncle's, cannot understand how Louisa would reject a chance at marriage.

The other girl, who was larger and stouter than Louisa, with a sallow, unhealthy face, looked at her curiously. "I don't see why you wouldn't have him [Jonathan Nye]," said she. "I should have thought you'd jump at the chance."

"Should you if you didn't like him, I'd like to know?"

"I'd like him if he had such a nice house and as much money as Jonathan Nye," returned the other girl. (402)

From community and family standards, then, Louisa's behavior is definitely eccentric.

Apart from these last-mentioned characters who view Louisa's behavior askance, the narrator of the story regards Louisa with ambivalence. Freeman's narration of the lengthy trip to and from her uncle's conveys comparable skepticism of Louisa's actions:

Her head was swimming, but she kept on. Her resolution was as immovable under the power of the sun as a rock. Once in a while she rested for a moment under a tree, but she soon arose and went on. It was like a pilgrimage, and the Mecca at the end of the burning, desert-like road was her own maiden independence. (404-05)

On the one hand, the narrator portrays Louisa as independent and self-assured. On the other hand, the language of this passage conveys an unflattering commentary. Louisa carries her "rock-like" resolution to the point of being stubborn, bullheaded, and irrational. Furthermore, her ideals of determination, perseverance, and independence have become obsessions in and for themselves. Seemingly, her quest for independence has turned fanatical. Surely the quest exemplifies what for her becomes a culminating, but futile, gesture of male-like strength, independence, and superiority (in short, the "monster woman" as Gilbert and Gubar discuss this concept [67-71]). Instead of a religion of caring and giving as her mother and community standards would dictate, Louisa's Mecca is a self-serving shrine of her own strong will and independence.

Louisa's quest not just for independence but "maiden independence" has

7. See *The Madwoman in the Attic* regarding Gilbert and Gubar's discussion of the monster woman/angel woman syndrome imposed upon women in the nineteenth century. The patriarchal society idealized the angel woman—fair, soft, passive, and submissive. In contrast, "... assertiveness, aggressiveness—all characteristics of a male life of 'significant action'—are 'monstrous' in women precisely because 'unfeminine' and therefore unsuited to a gentle life of 'contemplative purity' " (28). Louisa's defiant and independent actions throughout the story make her a "monster" woman and a threat to the patriarchal society. On the other hand, Louisa's mother reflects the traditional cultural values; her choice of roles for Louisa is the nonthreatening, traditional one—that of the "angel" woman.

driven her from a sense of community with her family and those around her to isolation. In the process of the story, as she becomes increasingly determined in her independence, her behavior becomes more eccentric. Clearly, her last actions demonstrate her desperation. However, in looking back to the beginning, it seems rather easy to trace the path of Louisa's actions from apparently normal behavior to aberration. And as her family's desperation becomes greater, she loses sight of her mother and grandfather and their condition to focus fanatically, selfishly, and obsessively on maintaining her own independence and her maid-hood.

At the end of the story, the narrator's ambivalence regarding Louisa's conduct is again apparent. Now, as Louisa relaxes and recovers from her exhausting trip to her uncle's, she ponders her environment and herself:

A dewy coolness was spreading over everything. The air was full of bird calls and children's voices. Now and then there was a shout of laughter. Louisa leaned her head against the door-post.

The house was quiet near the road. Some one passed—a man carrying a basket. Louisa glanced at him, and recognized Jonathan Nye by his gait. He kept on down the road toward the Moselys', and Louisa turned again from him to her sweet, mysterious, girlish dreams. (403)

The narrator's final portrayal of Louisa is anything but flattering. To have Louisa turn to "sweet, mysterious, girlish dreams" is certainly secure and non-threatening, but it isn't reality.⁸ Furthermore, Louisa is no longer a girl. At this point, in fact, she is a woman more than twenty-four years old.⁹

In creating the defiant Louisa, Freeman is obviously attracted to this strong character, yet through the ending, through the earlier episodes involving Louisa, and through other commentary, Freeman also shows her ambivalence as well as skepticism of such behavior. Such ambivalence is also apparent in another Freeman story, "A New England Nun." In that story Louisa Ellis has waited patiently and remained loyal for more than fourteen years while her betrothed, Joe Dagget, made his fortune in Australia so that he could provide for her in marriage. In the course of waiting fourteen long years, the unexpected happens:

8. Contrary to Perry Westbrook who argues that the ending to this story in no way violates verisimilitude, Louisa's retreat to "girlish dreams" is not in character with her actions and determination throughout the rest of the story. In fact, her pride and determination seem pathological and not wholesome, as he contends (68).

9. The closing scene in the *fictional* "Louisa" with Louisa's adult reversion to that of a child is reminiscent of observations made by Thomas Wentworth Higginson of the *real* Emily Dickinson whom he first met after having corresponded with her for eight years. In the summer of 1870, when Higginson did finally meet Dickinson, she was 40 years old, scarcely a child; however, he reported their meeting as follows:

After a little delay, I heard an extremely faint and pattering footstep like that of a child, in the hall, and in glided, almost noiselessly, a plain, shy little person. . . . She came toward me with two day-lilies, which she put in a childlike way into my hand, saying softly, under her breath, in childlike fashion, "Forgive me if I am frightened; I never see strangers, and hardly know what I say" (18).

In many respects, the salvation for nineteenth-century women—both fictionally and realistically—is similar. For both Louisa and Emily Dickinson, retreat from the adult world to the nonthreatening world of the child is the ideal—docile, passive, and submissive—in a patriarchal society. Harmless, the child at least can be creative. Furthermore, the child epitomizes the "angel" woman. The ending of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is also similar to the ending of Freeman's "Louisa." In Gilman's story the central character is confined to an upstairs bedroom, a room previously used as a nursery, by her doctor-husband as prescribed medical treatment for his wife. By the end of the story, the central character, too, reverts to the world of the child and becomes, in fact, the child-woman previously perceived as trapped within the yellow wallpaper but freed when the central character peels off the wallpaper. In assuming the identity of the woman freed from the wallpaper, the central character reverts to the role of the child—a harmless being, much like the girl Louisa at the end of Freeman's story—by monotonously creeping along the four walls of the attic bedroom on the floor.

Louisa discovers how accustomed she has become to independence. Furthermore, she discovers while entertaining him on his return that his farmer ways are not her ways. Whereas he comes calling in his working clothes and leaves dust tracks in her immaculate house, she has grown refined. She enjoys her fine china, which she uses for everyday, her clean house, her linen tablecloth and damask napkins, and the thought of marriage and moving strike Louisa as incompatible with her rather elegant life-style.

Every morning, rising and going about among her neat maidenly possessions, she felt as one looking her last upon the faces of dear friends. It was true that in a measure she could take them with her, but, robbed of her old environments, they would appear in such new guises that they would almost cease to be themselves. Then there were some peculiar features of her happy solitary life which she would probably be obliged to relinquish altogether. Sterner tasks than these graceful but half-needless ones would probably devolve upon her. (354)

In the case of “A New England Nun,” the central character obviously does not take on any traditionally masculine traits; rather, over the course of the years she has grown increasingly self-sufficient and independent to the point where she becomes too refined for both Joe Dagget and marriage. In the process of time, Louisa Ellis has created an *artificial world* in which her china and other possessions have taken on a life of their own and would, as the narrator says, “cease to be themselves” in a new environment. Freeman’s criticism is also apparent in the narrator’s reference to Louisa’s elegant and happy solitary life as being “half-needless.”

The long-awaited marriage of Louisa and Joe never does take place, and Louisa maintains her independence. She obviously, too, is a strong New England female. Again, in this story, however, the narrator’s ambivalence toward that strength appears in the final commentary of Louisa:

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. Lily Dyer, tall and erect and blooming, went past; but she felt no qualm. If Louisa Ellis had sold her birthright she did not know it, the taste of the pottage was so delicious, and had been her sole satisfaction for so long. Serenity and placid narrowness had become to her as the birthright itself. She gazed ahead through a long reach of future days strung together like pearls in a rosary, every one like the others, and all smooth and flawless and innocent, and her heart went up in thankfulness. Outside was the fervid summer afternoon; the air was filled with the sounds of the busy harvest of the men and birds and bees; there were halloos, metallic clatterings, sweet calls, and long hummings. Louisa sat, prayerfully, numbering her days, like an uncloistered nun. (359-60)

The contrast in this passage between the internal and external worlds is apparent. Despite the attractiveness of Louisa’s convictions, her elegant life, and her independence, the narrator clearly indicates that by choosing the life she has chosen Louisa has surrendered her birthright to *life* itself. “Narrowness,” as the narrator refers to it, has replaced independence. Before Louisa lies an endless string of rather elegant, but sterile and eternally monotonous days. In contrast is the fecundity of the richly varied external world—sounds of the busy harvest, halloos, metallic clatterings, sweet calls, and long hummings—which she has chosen to shut out. In short, in her pursuit of independence and a life of elegant

serenity, Louisa creates for herself a safe but unnatural life comparable to the one she has imposed on her caged canary and her tethered dog.

Caesar was a veritable hermit of a dog. For the greater part of his life he had dwelt in his secluded hut, shut out from the society of his kind and all innocent canine joys. Never had Caesar since his early youth watched at a woodchuck's hole; never had he known the delights of a stray bone at a neighbor's kitchen door. (10)

Equivalent to a human lifetime, these fourteen long years of confinement for Caesar are symbolic of Louisa's future—what the narrator calls years “like pearls in a rosary, every one like the others.”

Freeman's women are liberated. Without question, they are strong, defiant, and assertive. Although characters in both stories are “. . . manifestations of the Puritan will at its best” (68) as Westbrook suggests, these stories and their characters clearly belong to more than the local color tradition. Certainly Freeman's “Louisa” depicts more than the central character's “. . . pride among the rural poor” as Westbrook also suggests (68). Both stories transcend the local color genre and depict the dilemma of gender roles prescribed for women by their cultures.

In many respects, the Louisas of both stories are attractive and positive figures. However, for all that they meet the world head-on and on their terms, their actions appear out of sync with their communities. Furthermore, the narrators of the stories are ambivalent as well as skeptical of their characters' behavior. In these and other stories, Freeman creates a disjunction between what is shown and what is said. Clearly she *shows* us independent, strong, and defiant female characters who challenge the traditional roles prescribed for them by their society. On the other hand, through what other characters and the narrator say and through her story endings, Freeman *seems* to support the conventional social mores. And that's not surprising in American literature for the late nineteenth century. As Gilbert and Gubar point out in *The Madwoman in the Attic*:

Western literary history is overwhelmingly male—or, more accurately, patriarchal—and Bloom [Harold Bloom] analyzes and explains this fact, while other theorists have ignored it, precisely one supposes, because they assumed literature had to be male. (47)

Given the status of women in late nineteenth-century society, Freeman's stories are most remarkable, then, not for what they say but for what they show.

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