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## Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's Two New England Nuns

by MARTHA J. CUTTER

OVER the past thirty years, no other short story by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman has fueled as much controversy as her "A New England Nun." The controversy centers on the title character's decision not to marry her estranged fiancé: should we interpret Louisa Ellis's decision as a rejection of life or as a valid, self-affirming choice of autonomy?<sup>1</sup> What many critics seem to have overlooked, however, is that within the volume *A New England Nun and Other Stories* (1891) there are actually **two** Louisas who decide not to marry; indeed, there are actually **two** New England nuns. Louisa Ellis, of course, of the short story titled "A New England Nun" must decide whether to marry her fiancé of fourteen years, Joe Dagget. She willingly and happily allows Joe to marry another woman, and in so doing she maintains her lifestyle. Similarly Louisa Britton, the protagonist of the short story titled simply "Louisa," must decide whether to marry a wealthy suitor, Jonathan Nye. Like Louisa Ellis, Louisa Britton happily allows her suitor to marry another woman, thereby retaining her autonomous lifestyle and her dreams. Thus both Louisas choose to remain single in order to protect the integrity and needs of the self.

By using feminist psychological and historical theories about women's self-definition and by placing these two stories in the context of Freeman's life and work as a whole, I will suggest an alternative way of reading Freeman's fictions.<sup>2</sup> Like many of Freeman's female characters, Louisa Ellis and Louisa Britton find themselves enmeshed in a "web" of relationships; their actions affect not only themselves but the people who surround them. For these women successful self-definition seems to entail achieving a balance between the selflessness prescribed by the 19th-century Cult of True Womanhood and their need for

1. Negative readings of Louisa Ellis's decision not to marry Joe Dagget can be found in David Hirsch's "Subdued Meaning in 'A New England Nun,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, 2 (Winter 1965): 124-36, and Aliki Barnstone's "Houses Within Houses: Emily Dickinson and Mary Wilkins Freeman's 'A New England Nun,'" *Centennial Review*, 28 (Spring 1984): 129-45. More positive interpretations are argued by Susan Allen Toth in "Defiant Light: A Positive View of Mary Wilkins Freeman," *New England Quarterly*, 46 (March 1973): 82-93, and by Marjorie Pryse in "An Uncloistered 'New England Nun,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, 20 (Fall 1983): 289-95.

2. Before the last ten years, of course, Freeman was seen by most critics as a chronicler of New England Puritanism in its decline or as a local colorist. It is only recently that the tools of feminism and feminist psychology have been applied to Freeman's work. See, for example, Leah Blatt Glasser's "Mary E. Wilkins Freeman; The Stranger in the Mirror," *Massachusetts Review*, 25 (Summer 1984): 323-39, or Josephine Donovan's "Silence or Capitulation: Prepatriarchal 'Mothers' Gardens" in Jewett and Freeman," *Studies in Short Fiction*, 23 (Winter 1986): 43-48. Neither Donovan nor Glasser, however, have analyzed either of the texts I will discuss from a feminist historical and psychological viewpoint.

autonomy. When Freeman's characters resolve this conflict between their responsibilities to others and the needs of the self, the text affirms their actions and decisions with supportive language, imagery, and plot resolution. But when they fail to achieve a balance between self and other, the language and imagery surrounding the central female character are contradictory. Therefore, when we contrast these two New England nuns, we can see Freeman's depiction of a paradigm for feminine psychological self-definition. For Mary Wilkins Freeman there seem to be more ways than one to reject marriage, and some versions of this decision represent an active choice of freedom rather than a passive reaction to external forces and circumstances.

ALTHOUGH these two characters—Louisa Ellis and Louisa Britton—are very different, the moral dilemma they must resolve is similar. Both women are clearly oriented toward the relational, toward the maintenance of what psychologist Carol Gilligan has called a web or relationship, and this orientation influences their marital decision. Neither of these women actually desires to marry her suitor, yet both Louisas consider marriage because they believe that individuals other than themselves would be harmed by their refusal to marry. Louisa Ellis, for example, believes that she would hurt Joe Dagget if she were to break her "troth" to him. Louisa Britton feels pressure of a different sort; poor, she is urged by family and friends to marry her wealthy suitor in order to save her family from starvation.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, historians who have studied this time period have found such an orientation to a web of relationship to be quite common. Nancy Cott, Barbara Welter, and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg have all concluded that during this time period women were encouraged to be subservient, selfless, domestic, and pious. As Cott argues, the Cult of Domesticity, of True Womanhood, "prescribed women's appropriate attitude to be selflessness. The conventional cliché 'that women were to live for others' was substantially correct, wrote the author of *Woman's Mission*. . . ."<sup>4</sup> Women, then, were encouraged to orient themselves entirely toward the needs of other individuals, to be subservient and self-denying to the last.

Given this historical psychological profile of feminine selflessness, it is no wonder that women of this time period—including Mary Wilkins Freeman—had an ambivalent attitude toward marriage. Love, marriage, and family meant a loss of self, a total submersion of identity in the role of "wife" and "mother." Consequently, as Annis Pratt notes, women's writing frequently depicts an "either-or" attitude toward selfhood and marriage; there is a "conviction that one

3. A number of critics have noted that women in Freeman's stories tend to be oriented toward the relational. See, for example, Victoria Aarons, "A Community of Women: Surviving Marriage in the Wilderness," *Portraits of Marriage in Literature* (Macomb: Western Illinois Univ. Press, 1984), 141, 144; or Julia Bader, "The Dissolving Vision: Realism in Jewett, Freeman, and Gilman," in *American Realism: New Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1982), 177.

4. Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977), 71. See also Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), and Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860," *American Quarterly*, 18 (Summer 1966): 151–74.

cannot develop fully as a woman in a love relationship and also develop as a human being. . . ."<sup>5</sup> Freeman herself manifested this "either-or" attitude toward selfhood and marriage, delaying her own marriage for nine years because she was fearful that it might interfere with her work. She also feared the loss of identity which she associated with marriage; writing to a female friend who was soon to be married, Freeman remarks: "I know how you feel. . . . I am to be married myself before long. . . . If **you** don't see the old **me**, I shall run and run until I find her. And as for you, no man shall ever swallow you up entirely. . . ."<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, when Freeman did marry in 1901 (at the age of fifty), she felt that she lost both her ability to write and her identity. Her writing suffered because she had to leave her own locale and move to New Jersey where, Freeman said, "I have not a blessed thing to write about." And as Leah Blatt Glasser suggests, Freeman's marriage did force her to part with the "old me"; she lost the sense of control over her writing and her life which she had always maintained.<sup>7</sup>

In her own life, then, Freeman acutely felt the conflict between marriage and identity, between individual autonomy and the selflessness prescribed for women by the cult of marital domesticity. Her fiction explores this conflict through numerous portraits of women inside and outside of marriage. The title character of "The Selfishness of Amelia Lamkin" (1909), for example, demonstrates the total loss of identity that can occur in "traditional" marriage; Amelia Lamkin, the perfect domestic saint, is so self-effacing that she even forgets to nourish herself, and she nearly dies of starvation and exhaustion caused by her extensive catering to her large and demanding family. Similarly, Sarah Penn of "The Revolt of 'Mother'" (1891) is a perfect domestic saint, a masterful keeper of "her box of a house" who has never spoken up to her husband; one day, however, she revolts, moving her family into a new barn in order to provide them with a more spacious home. Stories such as these explore the various alternatives possible within marriage but are ambivalent about whether women can maintain their identities, given the patriarchal structure of marriage.<sup>8</sup>

Yet another series of Freeman's stories explores the conflict between autonomy and love through a female character's decision to remain single, and these portraits help to contextualize the controversy surrounding "A New England Nun." A number of Freeman's women are given the option to marry yet do not. Jane Strong, Amelia's sister in "The Selfishness of Amelia Lamkin," is attractive and has had opportunities to marry but remains single in order to preserve her

5. See "Women and Nature in Modern Fiction," *Contemporary Literature*, 13 (Autumn 1972): 490.

6. *The Infant Sphinx: Collected Letters of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman*, ed. Brent L. Kendrick (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1985), 243. Mary Reichardt discusses these letters in her dissertation "'A web of relationship': Women in the Short Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman," Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison, 1987, 131-32. For more about the connection between Freeman's marital fiction and her own marital relations, see Glasser, "The Stranger in the Mirror," 323-24.

7. See Glasser's "Legacy Profile: Mary E. Wilkins Freeman," *Legacy*, 4 (Spring 1987): 40.

8. See "The Prism" (1901) and "Arethusa" (1901) for other stories which indicate Freeman's concern that marriage damages women's individuality. Stories such as "A Tragedy from the Trivial" (1901) and "Julius Caesar Whittemore" (1918) further depict "the emotional cruelty married life can bring to women after . . . marriage," as Mary Reichardt explains ("A web of relationship," 166). Particularly toward the end of Freeman's marriage, the view of marital relations presented in her fiction seems to have become increasingly bitter. Although at first Freeman's marriage seems to have been relatively happy, Charles Freeman eventually became a violent drug addict and alcoholic; Mary had to institutionalize him in 1921, and when he died his will left Mary only one dollar.

autonomy. Evelina, of "Evelina's Garden" (1898), is also attractive but does not pursue marriage; instead she remains single all her life, investing her creativity and energy in her garden. On the other hand, Eunice Fairweather of "A Moral Exigency" (1887) and Inez Moore of "A Taste of Honey" (1887) both refuse to marry because of personal obligations and principles; as Barbara Johns says, "Aware of their sexuality and alive to the possibility of romance, these women regard personal integrity as an essential value that marriage ought not to violate."<sup>9</sup>

It is certainly not true, then, as Perry Westbrook states, that all of Freeman's young women "have one main goal in life: to find a husband in a scarce market."<sup>10</sup> Many of Freeman's female characters demonstrate a desire and an ability to resist strong social pressures which replicate the institution of marriage and motherhood. Yet these women do so with varying degrees of consciousness, with varying awareness of what they are gaining and losing. As Emily Toth notes, the choice of celibacy by a female character can be either a repressive renunciation or "a strong, authentic choice leading to Freedom," "a fulfillment of greater desires."<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in a study of the spinster in New England literature, Barbara Johns argues that some of Freeman's characters choose spinsterhood as an act of moral heroism because they "regard personal integrity as an essential value that marriage ought not to violate." Yet there is another set of female characters whose spinsterhood is not "a clear-cut choice made on their own behalves" but rather a negative reaction to the pressure of circumstances.<sup>12</sup> In other words, certain of Freeman's characters opt to remain single as a reaction to forces *outside* themselves: coincidences, rejections, the demands of others. But another group of Freeman's characters opt to remain single as a reaction to forces *within* themselves; determined to heed their inner voices, they actively choose celibacy and autonomy.

The recent descriptions of feminine development provided by the self-in-relation school of psychology may offer insight into how 19th-century women like Louisa Ellis and Louisa Britton could heed their inner voices and actively choose freedom and self-definition.<sup>13</sup> Relational psychologists like Carol Gilligan argue that women view the world from a framework of connectivity, in terms

9. "Some Reflections on the Spinster in New England Literature," *Regionalism and the Female Imagination: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Emily Toth (New York: Human Sciences, 1985), 36.

10. See *Mary Wilkins Freeman* (New York: Twayne, 1967), 51.

11. Emily Toth, "The Independent Woman and 'Free' Love," *The Massachusetts Review*, 16 (Autumn 1975): 656 and 657.

12. Johns, "Some Reflections," 36.

13. Sandra Zagarell has suggested that the theories of Carol Gilligan may have special relevance to 19th-century women since Gilligan articulates, perhaps unconsciously, "values that were prominent in nineteenth-century women's culture. . . ." See "Narrative of Community: The Identification of a Genre," *Signs*, 13 (Spring 1988): 508. Gilligan's findings have not gone unchallenged; Judy Auerbach, Linda Blum, Vicki Smith, and Christine Williams's "Commentary on Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*," *Feminist Studies*, 11 (Spring 1985): 149-61, for example, faults Gilligan for being ahistoric and essentialistic and for promulgating a highly idealized conception of "woman." However, I believe that a limited use of Gilligan's findings can help us understand the psychology of 19th-century women since Gilligan describes a developmental framework which is geared toward understanding female selflessness. Nonetheless, I do not see this essay's conclusion as being based on Gilligan's theories; rather, Gilligan's theories merely help to clarify the psychological profile and development which is already present in Freeman's fiction.

of a web of relationship.<sup>14</sup> For women, the pressure to marry, to continue to expand one's network of connectivity, and to heed the demands of others is particularly strong. Women's psychological development, therefore, involves moving from a "conventional" phase where responsiveness to others is the sole concern to a "post-conventional" phase where responsiveness to others, as well as to the self, is balanced; women must learn to include themselves "in an expanding network of connection."<sup>15</sup> With Louisa Ellis, Freeman portrays a woman who is unable to move beyond the selflessness and subservience to others prescribed by the cult of femininity; Louisa Ellis remains trapped in the "conventional" stage of subordinating the needs of the self to the needs of others. With Louisa Britton, on the other hand, Freeman portrays a character who operates from a "post-conventional" moral paradigm that incorporates the self into the weighing and balancing of needs. Rather than subscribing to a cult of true womanhood, Louisa Britton validates the needs of the individual self, apart from this constricting image, and actively chooses to remain single because she knows that this decision is right for herself.

AS THE STORY "A New England Nun" opens, we learn that "It was late in the afternoon, and the light was waning" (1).<sup>16</sup> This opening statement about the time of day is one of the many metaphors in the story which illustrate Louisa's state and which hint at a certain ambiguity in her portrayal. Although Louisa was engaged when she was just a young girl, she has awaited the return of her fiancé for fourteen years. During these years, Louisa has grown accustomed to being alone: "Louisa's feet had turned into a path, smooth maybe under a calm, serene sky, but so straight and unswerving that it could only meet a check at her grave, and so narrow that there was no room for any one at her side" (7). However, after fourteen years of earning his fortune in Australia, Louisa's fiancé Joe Dagget does return, and the couple goes forward with their wedding plans, although neither Joe nor Louisa really wishes to be married and although neither one is very comfortable in the other's presence.

Both Louisa and Joe are willing to honor their fourteen-year-old pledges to each other, although both have much to lose in doing so. Joe is in love with another woman—Lily Dyer—and, by marrying Louisa, Joe will lose something that he clearly values—his relationship with Lily. Yet Louisa's losses from the marriage are much greater and, indeed, in many ways, they are the focus of the story. Joe may feel like a clumsy intruder in Louisa's house, but it is not in Louisa's house that Joe will live: "Joe had made some extensive and quite magnificent alterations in his house. It was the old homestead; the newly-married

14. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982). "A web of relationship" is Gilligan's phrase; but it is also the title of Mary Reichardt's 1987 dissertation. However, Reichardt does not apply Gilligan's theories to "Louisa" or "A New England Nun," nor does she see these stories as warranting a feminist interpretation.

15. *In a Different Voice*, 39.

16. Mary E. Wilkins, *A New England Nun and Other Stories* (New York: Harper, 1891). All page references to Freeman's stories are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically within the text.

couple would live there, for Joe could not desert his mother, who refused to leave her old home. So Louisa must leave hers" (8). And over the past fourteen years, Louisa has grown accustomed to her home, to her "neat maidenly possessions" (8) and to her "senseless old maiden ways" of distilling essences and sewing her linen seams, over and over (9).

Indeed, these activities and possessions constitute, for Louisa, a genuine lifestyle.<sup>17</sup> Through her home, Louisa defines herself as a domestic artist and achieves a source of fulfillment:

Louisa had almost the enthusiasm of an artist over the mere order and cleanliness of her solitary home. She had throbs of genuine triumph at the sight of the window-panes which she had polished until they shone like jewels. She gloated gently over her orderly bureau-drawers, with their exquisitely folded contents redolent with lavender and sweet clover and very purity. Could she be sure of the endurance of even this? (9-10)

In fact, Louisa knows that in marriage she will have to give up her "ways": "Joe's mother, domineering, shrewd old matron that she was . . . and very likely even Joe himself . . . would laugh and frown down all these pretty but senseless old maiden ways" (9). Louisa thus fears the loss of her domestic art, of her very lifestyle, in a marriage to Joe: "She had visions, so startling that she half repudiated them as indelicate, 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" (10).

Louisa has defined a lifestyle for herself, a "delicate harmony," an autonomous and fulfilling existence. Yet Louisa is willing to give up this harmony in order not to hurt Joe: she thinks "of her approaching marriage and tremble[s]" but honors her pledge none the less:

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 hair's-breadth. Joe Dagget had been fond of her and working for her all these years. It was not for her, whatever came to pass, to prove untrue and break his heart. (12)

Louisa may be obsessive, she may be repressed, but in a certain clear way she is also amazingly brave, for her sacrifice is extreme.<sup>18</sup> In faintly veiled hints, the text suggests that Louisa may not survive such an uprooting. For example, Louisa associates her marriage with "the boundaries of another life" (8) so that "going about among her neat maidenly possessions, she felt as one looking her last upon the faces of dear friends" (8).<sup>19</sup> The vision she has of mangled "innocent children" (12) may well be her vision of herself after her marriage to Joe. Of course, it has been argued that the bloody imagery suggests Louisa's fear of the

17. A recent article by Lorne Fienberg analyzes women's work in Freeman's fiction and argues that Louisa Ellis "has translated the work process into a ritual that manifests her self-mastery and her mastery of her environment." See *The New England Quarterly*, 62 (1989): 485. It is true that through her work Louisa has found an "alternative pattern of living," but once Joe returns she is willing to sacrifice it. Louisa therefore allows chance and coincidence to determine her course of action rather than acting assertively to preserve her self-mastery.

18. Marjorie Pryse has also a positive reading of Louisa Ellis's bravery; see "An Uncloistered 'New England Nun,'" 289.

19. Not coincidentally, in Freeman's short stories marriage is often associated, literally, with the death of fragile female characters. See, for example, "Old Woman Magoun" (1909) or "The Selfishness of Amelia Lamkin" (1909).

loss of her virginity, but in a much larger sense Louisa fears the loss of herself when she and Joe's "interests and possessions should be more completely fused in one" (11). Louisa fears that in this fusion she will lose not only the essences she distills but the "essence" of herself; the delicate harmony she has achieved over the years. Her personality and lifestyle—and perhaps her life itself—will be erased.

Fortunately Louisa discovers that Joe is in love with Lily and ends her engagement. But Louisa is only able to take a self-preserving act *after* she has been assured that her actions will not harm anyone else; it is only *after* she overhears a conversation and learns of Joe's love for Lily that she feels free to end her engagement. Not coincidentally, it is at this point that the text becomes particularly ambivalent. Louisa feels "like a queen" (16)—surely an image which suggests feminine empowerment. Yet the following images suggest passivity, futility, even death:

Now the tall weeds and grasses might cluster around Caesar's little hermit hut, the snow might fall on its roof year in and year out. . . . Now the little canary might turn itself into a peaceful yellow ball night after night. . . . Louisa could sew linen seams, and distill roses, and dust and polish and fold away in lavender, as long as she listed. . . . (16)

These images, in and of themselves, gently hint that Louisa has folded herself away, locked herself into a repetitive and meaningless existence, but the following images suggest Louisa's isolation even more strongly: "Outside was the fervid summer afternoon; the air was filled with the sounds of the busy harvest of 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" (17). Louisa has resisted the "compulsory heterosexuality" (to use Adrienne Rich's phrase) of the world around her; she has refused to become a part of the world of men and birds and bees.<sup>20</sup> But hers is a passive resistance; rather than heeding her inner voice, Louisa has allowed chance, circumstances, coincidences, and the needs of others to dictate her fate.

Furthermore, after carefully going to great lengths to establish that Louisa will lose a great part of herself in a marriage to Joe Dagget (Joe Dagger?), Freeman undercuts Louisa's choice of spinsterhood by suggesting that Louisa is not fully conscious of what she has chosen. The story ends in a series of complicated, unresolvable paradoxes and of sentences that hinge on conditional, contorted allusions: "*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" (17, emphasis mine). The text suggests a blocking of consciousness wherein "placid narrowness" becomes Louisa's birthright. As Barnstone has pointed out, Louisa does not know what she has chosen; she does not know if she has sold her birthright; she does not know why she weeps; she is, in a very real way,

20. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 177–205.



senseless.<sup>21</sup> The underlying biblical metaphor—the story of Jacob and Esau—further suggests Louisa's shortsightedness. Like Esau, Louisa only sees a small part of the picture: she can only be relieved that her lifestyle has been preserved. But she cannot see the larger picture in which she might have actively chosen to preserve her lifestyle; in which she herself might have chosen to make celibacy and freedom—rather than “placid narrowness”—her birthright.

Louisa is satisfied with the outcome of events, with her “placid narrowness”—but is Freeman? Louisa has only acted in a way that validates the needs of the self when they do not conflict with the needs of others. She has reached Gilligan's “conventional” stage of moral development in which the demands of the self are subordinated to the demands of others, but she cannot reach Gilligan's post-conventional level in which she would realize, like Gilligan's subject Sarah, that she must make “a choice to include herself, not to rule herself out from consideration but to consider her own needs as well as those of others in deciding what was the best thing to do.”<sup>22</sup> Rather than heeding her inner voice, Louisa ignores the needs of the self: “Louisa . . . thought of her approaching marriage and trembled. Still no anticipation of disorder and confusion in lieu of sweet peace and harmony . . . were sufficient to turn her a hair's-breadth” (12). Louisa has achieved an autonomous lifestyle, but she is willing to sacrifice it for the sake of others. Fortunately, Louisa's lifestyle is preserved; chance and an overheard conversation intervene. But fortune is not always so kind, and Freeman seeks to indicate that women must be more active participants in their own self-construction.<sup>23</sup>

ALTHOUGH few critics have analyzed Freeman's short story “Louisa,” it does provide an example of how women can be active participants in their self-constructions, despite the limits imposed by a patriarchal society.<sup>24</sup> Like Louisa Ellis, Louisa Britton chooses not to marry, not to subscribe to “The Cult of True Womanhood” and become a domestic saint. But Louisa Britton chooses celibacy actively, because it is right for herself. Although she does care for others, she is not willing to sacrifice her “essence,” the essential part of herself, for others. Like Louisa Ellis, she chooses to remain a New England nun, but she chooses rationally and actively, and the text affirms her decision emphatically.

The conflict of “Louisa” centers on the protagonist's attempt to support her family through means other than marriage. Louisa Britton is the sole breadwinner for a very poor family that consists of her ailing mother and her senile old

21. According to Barnstone, it is Louisa's “blocking of knowledge that makes her feel like a queen. . . . She has ordered her house of consciousness so as to be senseless—without senses—and foolish—without thought” (“Houses Within Houses,” 134).

22. *In a Different Voice*, 122.

23. I would note a similarity between Louisa Ellis's choice of celibacy and Evelina's in “Evelina's Garden.” Evelina refuses to acknowledge the glance of a young man who is attracted to her, and he marries someone else. As with Louisa Ellis, it is not clear whether Evelina understands what she has chosen and what she has renounced. Josephine Donovan also notes the similarity between these two stories; see “Silence or Capitulation,” 46.

24. Although “Louisa” has been frequently anthologized and admired, to my knowledge no extended critical analysis of it exists. Barbara Johns does comment on Louisa Britton's unwillingness to compromise herself but sees this as a decision to “hold out for romantic love” (“Some Reflections,” 35).

grandfather. Louisa once had a job as a schoolteacher through which she supported her family, but she lost this job to the daughter of a more influential family. Still, Louisa is selfless in her attempts to feed her family—working in the fields, hiring herself out to other farmers for pay—doing anything just to obtain food for her family. The one thing Louisa is unwilling to do for her family, however, is to marry Jonathan Nye, her wealthy suitor.

Although both Louisas are considered attractive and indeed marriageable, a number of economic and social differences set these two characters apart; where Louisa Ellis is economically independent, for Louisa Britton marriage seems an economic necessity. Furthermore, there are also important chronological or developmental differences. Louisa Ellis's personality and character are already formed; she has a placid serenity and mild sweetness that rarely fail her. Louisa Britton, on the other hand, is much less placid; her demeanor and appearance are variable, her personality still evolving, still malleable: "Louisa was very pretty when pleased and animated, at other times she had a look like a closed flower. One could see no prettiness in her" (392). Louisa Ellis has learned, in T.S. Eliot's phrase, to "prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet," and this face never changes. Louisa Britton has yet to define what this face will be. It is integral to our understanding of the story to see that Louisa Britton (and Freeman herself) hold out for the right to be self-defined; women should not be forced to define themselves solely through marriage, solely through patriarchal inscriptions of the proper role of a "True Woman."

In terms of personality formation and class, then, these two stories portray their central characters in very different ways. I am not claiming that these two Louisas are the same character, although they may be doubles.<sup>25</sup> What I am claiming, however, is that these two very different women must deal with a very similar issue. In fact, the "marriage plots" of both stories are remarkably similar. In both stories marriage is less an issue of true emotion and more an issue of social propriety, of subscribing to a cult-like notion of femininity in which "The true woman's place was unquestionably by her own fireside—as daughter, sister, but most of all as wife and mother."<sup>26</sup> The idea that marriage is women's only true fulfillment is apparent in Louisa Ellis's recollection of Joe Dagget's courtship: "Fifteen years ago she had been in love with him—at least she considered herself to be. Just at that time, gently acquiescing with and falling into the natural drift of girlhood, she had seen marriage ahead as a reasonable feature and a probable desirability of life" (7). What impels Louisa to marry Joe is a combination of social and familial pressure, and Freeman points out that Louisa had to be talked into marriage: "She had listened with calm docility to her mother's views upon the subject. Her mother was remarkable for her cool sense and sweet, even temperament. She talked wisely to her daughter when Joe Dagget presented himself, and Louisa accepted him with no hesitation" (7). Louisa's mother, it

25. Glasser has suggested that Freeman's fiction often expresses the conflict between repression and rebellion through the use of doubles. Thus Freeman's "rebellious heroines are shadowed by passive, socially acceptable characters . . ." ("Stranger in the Mirror," 323). Louisa Ellis could be the "passive, socially acceptable" double for the rebel, Louisa Britton.

26. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860," 162.

seems, was a domestic saint, remarkable for her "cool sense and sweet, even temperament," and she pressured her daughter to take on this role. Her daughter did not resist.

A similar pattern of social and familial pressure seems to be at work in "Louisa"; Louisa Britton's mother pressures Louisa to marry Jonathan Nye, just as Louisa Ellis's mother pressured Louisa to accept Joe. Although the Brittons are very poor, Mrs. Britton's attraction to the marriage seems, at first, less a matter of economic necessity and more a matter of social pride and distinction. Mrs. Britton covets Jonathan Nye's social status and believes it will be hers if Louisa marries him: "The projected marriage with Jonathan Nye was like a royal alliance for the good of the state. Jonathan Nye . . . was the largest land-owner; he had the best house . . . [Mrs. Britton] saw herself installed in that large white house as reigning dowager" (394-95). But the marriage to Jonathan Nye is actually necessary for the family's physical survival. When Louisa refuses to respond to any of Jonathan's romantic overtures, Mrs. Britton informs Louisa: "'Then me an' your grandfather'll starve . . . that's all there is about it. We can't neither of us stan' it much longer'" (400).

Marriage, then, in both plots, is a social and economic institution replicated through mothers who have been conditioned to believe that it is the only alternative for "true" women. It is small wonder, then, that Louisa Britton's mother cannot understand Louisa's refusal to marry Jonathan Nye: "All the obstacle was Louisa's obstinacy, which her mother could not understand. . . . There was no more sense, to her mind, in Louisa's refusing him than there would have been in a princess refusing the fairy prince and spoiling the story" (395). But Louisa does "spoil" the story; she refuses to marry Jonathan, and he marries Ida Mosely instead. The fairy tale ending—in which the "princess" marries her "prince" and lives happily ever after—is ruined; yet another more realistic ending concludes this "tale." Jonathan's runner-up choice for a spouse, Ida Mosely, is the schoolteacher who has taken Louisa's job away from her. When it seems that Jonathan will propose to Ida, the townspeople ask Louisa to return to her job. So the story concludes with Jonathan's prospective marriage to another woman, just as "A New England Nun" ends with Joe's prospective marriage to Lily Dyer.

These stories' endings, therefore, both contain an unexpected reversal of the traditional marriage plot, an unexpected inversion which involves the "prince" marrying someone else and the "princess" going back to her own life. Even specific actions within the final descriptions of these two inversions recur. At the end of "A New England Nun," Louisa sits with her needlework at her window, feeling fairly "steeped in peace" (16). She sees Lily Dyer go by but is not disturbed: "Lily Dyer, tall and erect and blooming, went past; but she felt no qualm. . . . She gazed ahead through a long reach of future days . . . and her heart went up in thankfulness" (16-17). At the end of "Louisa," Louisa Britton, similarly, sits looking outside and sees someone go by—someone who represents the loss of marriage: "Louisa . . . opened the front door and sat down on the step. . . . Some one passed—a man carrying a basket. Louisa glanced at him, and

recognized Jonathan Nye by his gait." But Louisa Britton, like Louisa Ellis, feels no qualms: "[Jonathan] kept on down the road toward the Moselys', and Louisa turned again from him to her sweet, mysterious, girlish dreams" (406). Louisa Britton, like Louisa Ellis, returns prayerfully to her own dreams.

Despite this similarity of action, the conclusions of these stories are interpreted very differently by Freeman. As I have mentioned, there is a great deal of ambiguity in the imagery surrounding Louisa Ellis at the end of "A New England Nun," and Louisa Ellis is cut off from "the fervid summer afternoon; the air. . . filled with the sounds of the busy harvest of men and birds and bees" (17). Louisa Britton, on the other hand, sits on the steps of her house—literally and symbolically on the threshold. She has not cut herself off from the outside world; she has merely chosen to bide her time and to maintain her own dreams:

Louisa . . . crept into the sitting-room. It was warm and close there, so she opened the front door and sat down on the step. The twilight was deep, but there was a clear yellow glow in the west. One great star had come out in the midst of it. 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. (406)

Louisa is a part of this scene, but she is also apart. In fact, she is (a)part: both inside and outside, on the border between the world of marriage and of children's voices, and of the "close" atmosphere of her self-supported home. She has retained her right to choose between these two realms—the realm of autonomous, self-supporting existence and the realm of marriage, fertility, and heterosexual love. And the text validates her right to choose by portraying her as being at peace with her environment and by providing an environmental symbol of her blessing in the "clear yellow glow in the west" and the "one great star" which has come out in the midst of it.

Unlike the conclusion of "A New England Nun," then, the setting which concludes "Louisa" portrays a heroine at peace with the natural setting. In fact, the descriptions of natural settings which conclude Freeman's stories often contain crucial clues about the story's interpretation as a whole. This is particularly true of the volume *A New England Nun and Other Stories*. "The Revolt of 'Mother,'" for example, concludes with a setting which suggests the possibility of peaceful coexistence between man and woman: "The twilight was deepening. There was a clear green glow in the sky. Before them stretched the smooth level of field; in the distance was a cluster of hay-stacks like the huts of a village; the air was very cool and calm and sweet. The landscape might have been an ideal one of peace" (468). Similarly, at the conclusion of "Christmas Jenny"—another tale from this collection—Freeman blesses her female character with a peaceful setting and a rising star.<sup>27</sup> Louisa Britton, Jenny Wraye, and Sarah Penn have all taken active steps to control their destinies and have all—in one way or another—revolted against the patriarchal structures which confine them. It is no coinci-

27. See Sarah Sherman's article "The Great Goddess in New England: Mary Wilkins Freeman's 'Christmas Jenny,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, 17 (Spring 1980): 157–64. Of course, the rising star at the end of "Christmas Jenny" is much more overtly religious in its symbolism.

dence that Freeman blesses each of these characters with environmental harmony and portrays them as being at peace with their settings.

Louisa Britton has other resemblances to strong female characters depicted by Freeman. Louisa appears to be fully conscious of her own needs and desires like Jane Strong of "The Selfishness of Amelia Lamkin" and Eunice Fairweather of "A Moral Exigency." Also, like Jenny Wraye of "Christmas Jenny," Louisa seems willing to question her society's gender restrictions. Louisa is strong enough to rake hay like a man, and she is also somewhat androgynous in appearance; working in the fields all summer, her "face grew as sunburnt as a boy's, her hands were hard and brown" (396). Louisa Britton seems to exhibit a psychological profile described by Sarah Sherman: she is "Woman before the Fall, before the consciousness of her weakness was imposed on her. . . ." <sup>28</sup>

Characters such as Louisa Britton, Jenny Wraye, and Jane Strong may be moving toward the profile of the "New Woman" which began to appear in the 1890s; "New Women" were more autonomous—both professionally and personally—than "True Women." Yet even "New Women" like Louisa Britton still retain vestiges of the domestic saint's mentality. Louisa Britton, like Louisa Ellis, sees the world as a web of relationship; she struggles to support her family, even traveling fourteen miles to beg for food from a stingy uncle. The Herculean effort of this task is clear, but Louisa's resolution does not waver: "Her head was swimming, but she kept on. Her resolution was as immovable under the power of the sun as a rock. . . . It was like a pilgrimage, and the Mecca at the end of the burning, desert-like road was her own maiden independence" (404–05). Louisa genuinely cares for her family, and she will toil endlessly for them. She will give up anything—except the essential, herself, her maiden independence.

Louisa Britton, therefore, exhibits Gilligan's "post-conventional" stage of moral reasoning. She sees and acknowledges a web of connectivity between individuals, but she also allows herself to be a valid part of the picture. Against the demands of her mother and her grandfather, she balances the demands of her self and chooses not to marry. And the story validates her decision, both through its imagery and its plot resolution. Upon returning from her heroic pilgrimage, Louisa learns that her suitor has decided to marry Ida Mosely and that she will therefore get her job back. Furthermore, while Louisa's mother and all of their neighbors have assumed that by marrying Jonathan, Louisa could have provided her family with a more secure existence, upon her return Louisa learns that Jonathan had no intention of providing for her family. As Louisa's mother tells her daughter at the end of the story: "'if Jonathan had you, he wa'n't goin' to have me an' father hitched on to him; he'd look out for that'" (405–06). In the end Louisa's mother and friends approve of her decision not to marry Jonathan. But, unlike Louisa Ellis, Louisa Britton makes the right decision for her own self, because it is the right decision for herself—not for others. That it turns out to be the right decision for her family is important and not coincidental in terms of Freeman's overall aims. Louisa Britton has validated her right to her dreams, to

28. "The Great Goddess in New England," 160.

her soul; she has retained the right to define her still malleable personality, and Freeman approves most strongly of Louisa's self-creation.

"Strong, indeed, is the girl who can decide within herself where duty lies, and follow that decision against the combined forces which hold her back. She must claim the right of every individual soul to its own path in life, its own true line of work and growth," states Charlotte Perkins Gilman in *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (1903).<sup>29</sup> A developmental framework such as Gilligan's clarifies the unique psychological and moral dilemma which is clearly present in Freeman's depiction of 19th-century women, as well as indicating how women can claim "the right of every individual soul to its own path in life." With Louisa Ellis, Freeman portrays a woman who cannot mediate the conflict between self and other; she portrays a woman who will not actively "decide within herself where duty lies." With Louisa Britton, on the other hand, Freeman portrays a woman who not only decides "within herself where duty lies" but also follows "that decision against the combined forces which hold her back." Therefore, when these two stories are read together and placed in the context of Freeman's other marital fictions, we can see Freeman theorizing a way that women of this time period can achieve self-definition. When women are active participants in their self-construction rather than the passive victims of external circumstances and the demands of others, the choice of celibacy and autonomy can be construed positively and unambiguously. And when women heed their inner voices rather than merely reacting to external forces, they may be freed from choosing between the equally limited and limiting alternatives offered by a patriarchal society to women of this time period. Woman's birthright, after all, is not marriage, per se, but the right to understand and define her own options.

29. *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1903), 268.