December 1971

Character Types in the Fiction of Mary Wilkins Freeman

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Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 9, no.8, December 1971, p.432-439
In *Mary E. Wilkins Freeman*, Edward Foster says that Mrs. Freeman’s truth is “of a narrower and more precious kind—a superb understanding of the undefeated neurotics, occasionally men, more often women.”1 Foster’s approach is biographical. He finds that many of Mrs. Freeman’s characters correspond to actual people who lived in Randolph, Massachusetts, or Brattleboro, Vermont, the two regions where Freeman spent most of her life. Because Foster begins with the thesis that Mary Freeman is dealing with actual people in her environment, he is led to deny that there is any thematic unity in her work, though he does concede that “in the loose and popular sense of the term, Mrs. Freeman was a philosophic writer” (p. 191).

But whether real or entirely fictional, Mary Freeman’s characters fall into rather well-defined groups which give her work thematic unity. Among the character types she explores are the following:

1) The control groups who consider it their duty to maintain the status quo. They support popular religious beliefs. They control economic power. The characters comprising this group dictate the social, economic and religious standards for the lower income groups.

2) The ascetics, who have withdrawn from life in order to avoid criticism from the control group.

3) Those who rebel against the values of the status quo. Within this major classification there are various subtypes such as the sensualist and the activist, who break no laws, nevertheless exhibit atypical behavior.

4) Those who moderate the tension created between the second and third character types. These people are often housewives and young girls who are perceptive enough to prevent the destruction of the second and third character types.

In “A Pot of Gold” Mrs. Freeman examines the relationship between economic power and social mobility. Jonas Amesbury and his family must suffer because of the social standards set

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1 Edward Foster, *Mary E. Wilkins Freeman* (New York, 1950), 190.
for them by those in economic control. Jonas was to marry Rose Tenney, but at the opening of the story we find Jonas discussing with his mother the fact that Rose had broken her engagement to him. Jonas' mother later explains to her sister, Elvira Slawson that Joe Tenney, Rose's father, is responsible for the girl's breaking her engagement. "Since he's got a little money himself," she says, "everybody else that ain't got it ain't any more than dirt under his feet." Until they are able to acquire economic power, the Amesburys remain "dirt under Joe Tenney's feet." This happens through a discovery made by Elvira.

Elvira finds that Joe has buried his brother's deeds in the field that joins his property with hers. This confirms Mrs. Amesbury's suspicion that Joe stole the deeds from his brother. Elvira discusses the matter with Joe, and the following day Jonas is able to renew his engagement.

In Pembroke, economic and social power is epitomized by Silas Berry and Deborah Thayer. Silas has a monopoly on cherry parties. He has the best cherry orchards of any town nearby, or as Mrs. Freeman describes the situation, "The young people's appetite for cherries and their zeal for pleasure had overcome their indignation at his usury." Thomas Payne, who was the squire's son and the richest young man in town, rebels against Berry's exorbitant prices. "You can eat your cherries and be damned," says Payne. As a retaliation to Payne's revolt, Silas gives a "free" cherry party. The party is free, except for Payne. Toward the end of the party Silas presents him with a bill.

Silas Berry is primarily concerned with economic power; Deborah Thayer is more concerned with social power. In her household she assumes the position of a demigod. She threatens to disinherit her daughter Rebecca if she marries William Berry. As a result of Deborah's strictures on Rebecca's conduct the relationship between Rebecca and William is forced underground. When Rebecca is later discovered to be pregnant, Deborah further shows her authority by ordering the girl from her home.

Deborah rationalizes her authoritative behavior by appealing to religious motives. When her son, Barney Thayer, is dismissed

3 Pembroke (New York, 1894), 120.
from the home of Charlotte Barnard because he and Charlotte’s father had a political argument. Deborah demands an explanation from Charlotte’s father, Cephas, who is somewhat senile. He explains most human behavior in terms of dietary deficiency. His explanation of Barney’s behavior is no different: “I think if you’d kept your family on less meat, and given ’em more garden-stuff to eat Barney wouldn’t have been so up an’ comin’. It’s what he’s eat that’s made him what he is” (p. 59). Deborah, however, dismisses such an explanation on the grounds that it is a denial of original sin: “You’re tryin’ to make out, as near as I can tell,” said she, “that whatever my son has done wrong is due to what he’s eat, and not to original sin. I knew you had queer ideas, Cephus Barnard, but I didn’t know you wa’n’t sound in your faith” (p. 59).

Deborah also shows her excessive concern for religious values when she goes beyond her doctor’s orders in restricting her son’s eating habits and his playtime, but at the same time forces him to study the “Assembly’s Catechism” even when he is ill. Ironically enough, after Deborah beats her son, he dies. It is only then that her confusion about the rightful status of her power becomes most evident: “It was a strange prayer, full of remorse, of awful agony, of self-defense of her own act, and her own position as the vicar of God upon earth for her child. ‘I couldn’t let him go astray too!’ ‘I couldn’t, I couldn’t!’ O Lord, thou knowest that I couldn’t! I would — have laid him upon — the altar, as Abraham laid Isaac. O, Ephraim, my son, my son, my son!” (p. 240).

In the character of Silas Berry, Mary Freeman portrays the search for material power; in the character of Deborah, she portrays the search for social power. In some of Mrs. Freeman’s works she demonstrates that the search for material power and the search for social power function as dual motives in the same character. Such is the case of Mrs. Ayres in “A Modern Dragon.” Like Deborah, Mrs. Ayres uses religion to help her achieve social and monetary ends.

Mrs. Ayres refuses to allow her son to marry Elvira King. Her pretended motive for disapproving of her son’s proposed marriage is that since the girl’s mother is a spiritualist, the girl’s moral character must be damaged.

To counter Mrs. Ayres’s disapproval, Mrs. King gives up her spiritualism, starts attending services at the local church, and
lets out the hems on her short dresses. When she and her
daughter are still ignored by Mrs. Ayres, she decides to visit
the wealthy woman. She surrenders her last rights as an indi­
vidual in her speech to Mrs. Ayres: “‘I’ve done the best I could,’
said Mrs. King, humbling herself unshrinkingly. ‘I know I ain’t
looked an’ dressed jest like other folks; but now I’m a-doin
different. I’ve got a switch, an’ done up my hair like other
women, an’ I’ve let down my dress. I’ve been to meetin’ too,
an’ I’m goin’ right along. I ain’t ever been much of a Spiritualist.
I got led into it a leetle after Samuel died, an’ I’ve took some
papers. But I ain’t goin’ to any more!’”4

Betsy Dole, in the short story “A Poetess,” is an example of
the second major character type in Mrs. Freeman’s writing. She
is characterized by ascetic tendencies. For instance, she ate
very little, “scarcely more than her canary-bird, and sang assidu­
ously.”5 Moreover, she has been forced into her state of asceti­
cism through economic necessity. Her income, we are told,
“was almost infinitesimal.” Her economic status is not so im­
portant, however, as her attitude toward it.

Betsy constructs her own world of values. She works in her
flower gardens, she cares for her canary, and she writes amateur
poetry. She never competes with the outside world until Mrs.
Caston asks her to write a poem for her deceased son. Betsy
complies with the request and the poem is widely circulated.
But the poem receives harsh criticism from the town minister.
Since Betsy knows that the minister has published some of his
own verses, she takes his criticism seriously and burns the rest
of hers. Mrs. Freeman’s ascetic is apparently too tender for
criticism.

The most representative ascetic in Mrs. Freeman’s work is
Barney Thayer of Pembroke. Having been reared under the
religious indoctrination of Deborah Thayer, he has come to view
reality in Calvinistic terms. As a result of Barney’s theological
training, he resigns himself to the fate of a single man. The
irony implicit in his choice is revealed by Mrs. Freeman when
she says: “The possibility that his misery might not be final
never occurred to him. It never occurred to him that he could
enter Cephas Barnard’s house again, ask his pardon, and marry
Charlotte. It seemed to him settled and inevitable; he could not

4 A Humble Romance and Other Stories (New York, 1903), 75.
5 A New England Nun, 151.
grasp any choice in the matter” (p. 19). He loves Charlotte Barnard but is not able to bring himself to propose to her until ten years later. His main problem is that he interprets his political argument with her father, Cephas, as a providential decree that he and Charlotte are not to be married.

Thus, he withdraws from life, devotes himself to hard work, but continues to yearn for Charlotte. Living the life of a hermit, he develops a hunched back, a symbol of his inner torment. He is, on the whole, characteristic of that class of people who have been crushed by those in economic and social power.

Mary Freeman presents further examples of the ascetic in other short stories. In “A Taste of Honey,” Inez Morse postpones her plans to marry Willy Linfield until she can pay the mortgage left by her father, who is dead. Inez and her mother deny themselves the right to eat the very honey that they produce on their farm until the mortgage is paid. In “A Lover of Flowers,” Silas Vinton is so non-assertive that he must rely on his girl friend’s mother to suggest their marriage; and in “Two Old Lovers,” David Emmons, a vegetarian, postpones his proposal to Maria Brewster until just before he is about to die of old age. Louisa Ellis and Joe Dagget of “A New England Nun” postpone their marriage in order to plan for financial security. After fourteen years of waiting Joe falls in love with another girl and Louisa becomes comfortably habituated to spinsterhood.

The problem always facing the ascetic is to make a choice between continued isolation and the possibility of re-entering the world. In Mrs. Freeman’s work, those who remain ascetics do so by structuring their own system of values. In “A Solitary,” Nicholas Gunn is an example of a person, who, once having entered the ascetic life, discovers that it is only an escape. He discovers that people other than himself are threatened by economic and social problems. He is then able to affirm that “men’s tracks cover the whole world, and there ain’t standin’-room outside of ’em.” When the ascetic returns to the world of action he need not compete with those in economic power by conforming to their rules; he can rebel against social restrictions recommended by those in power. Rebellion against the status quo is best illustrated by Mrs. Freeman’s third character type, the social rebel.

One of the more obvious examples of social rebellion is exhibited by Hannah Redman in “Calla-Lillies and Hannah.” In
this story Hannah is unjustly accused by the townspeople of theft. As gossip concerning Hannah spreads, she is not able to secure a job. Ironically, she resorts to sealing in order to maintain a livelihood. In *Pembroke* Rebecca Thayer also violates the social mores. She derides her mother's demand that she should not see William Berry by getting pregnant by him. In the same novel Ephraim Thayer kills himself by disregarding his mother's orders that he should not play in the snow. It is obvious from these examples that the social rebel too often identifies with negative values by attempting to react against rigid mores.

Some of Mrs. Freeman's nonconformists do not violate laws, however. In *Pembroke* Rose Berry, Charlotte Barnard's cousin, believes that the female should assume an aggressive role. When Barney Thayer does not return to see Charlotte after his argument with Cephas, Rose tries to persuade Charlotte to go in search of him. When Charlotte refuses to do so, Rose goes instead. In "A Tardy Thanksgiving," Mrs. Muzzy is able to gain a degree of independence by rebelling against the religious tradition of eating Thanksgiving dinner: "I s'pose ef I could go to meetin' Thanksgivin' mornin', an' hear the sermon, an' then set down to turkey and plum-puddin' an' be a-thankin' the Lord in my heart for lettin' my husband fall off the scaffold in the barn an' git killed last summer, an' for lettin' my daughter Charlotte die of a quick consumption last spring, an' my son, John two years ago this fall, I might keep Thanksgivin' as well as other folks. But I can't, an' I ain't a-goin' to purtend I do." Mrs. Muzzy has an advantage over most rebels because she can verbalize her condemnation of the status quo. While Mrs. Muzzy's rebellion is primarily theological, it is suggestive of the social rebellion of Mrs. Carey, who, in the short story "Christmas Jenny," chastizes the town deacon for breaking into a woman's house because he thought the woman's behavior strange and she needed investigating.

The character types examined thus far are those in the control group, the ascetic, and the rebel. The control group is composed of those in economic and social power. They do whatever is necessary to maintain and increase their power. The ascetic is characterized by his withdrawal from life and his rejection of material values, which operate in a world outside his own, but

6 *A Humble Romance*, 50.
nevertheless affect him. He must choose between living a mythical life or adopting a more active role. The rebel's role is a bit too active. He is characterized by a tendency to identify with values antithetical to those he is rebelling against. As a result he goes to extremes in attempting to initiate social reform. The tension created between the first three character types is to some extent resolved by a fourth character type, the moderator.

The moderator is characterized by his acute awareness of other people's suffering. In *Pembroke* Charlotte Barnard is an example of this fourth character type. Charlotte shows sympathy for her father's behavior, even though he is partially responsible for ruining her engagement to Barney. She is sympathetic with Rose's activist philosophy, for though she does not immediately follow Rose's suggestion to go in search of Barney, she does so later. She does not, however, repeat the actions of Rebecca Thayer. Abstractly, she suggests a mean between activism and conformism.

In *Pembroke*, Mrs. Barnard, too, is an example of the moderator. She tries to reconcile the tension created between the Barnard family and the Thayer family by having sympathetic conversations with members of both families. When her husband, Cephas, makes sorrel pies she does not wholly disapprove of his action. She simply waits until the pies prove to be un­eatable and uses them for heating fuel. Mrs. Barnard is not alone in functioning as a moderator. Many of the wives in Mrs. Freeman's work function in this capacity.

In "A Humble Romance," Sally, a young girl who runs away with a tin peddler, first acts in an ascetic capacity; she is subordinate to her husband. Later, her husband has to leave her for several years. During his period of absence she is able to assume the role of an activist. She thus functions in both capacities, and by doing so is able to save her marriage.

The most striking example of the social moderator in Mrs. Freeman's work is conveyed in the character of Christine in "The Twelfth Guest." By mistake, Paulina Childs sets twelve plates for a Thanksgiving dinner in which only eleven people are to participate. During the dinner, Christine, a young, unidentified child, knocks at the door. Christine is allowed to enter and to take the twelfth place. During her stay, Christine discovers that Cyrus Morris, a local business man has stolen a valuable note from Mr. Childs. Christine turns out to be a
Christ symbol with a pragmatic twist. She steals the note from Morris and returns it to Mr. Childs.

By observing how man uses his freedom Mrs. Freeman is able to depict several character types which serve to define human reaction to social and economic behavior. Among the character types she explores are those in social and economic control, the ascetic, the activist or rebel, and the social moderator. The control-group's drive to amass more and more power results in gradual self destruction, leading to the kind of isolation represented by Deborah Thayer. Isolation is, of course, the major problem for the ascetic. The activist must beware that he does not destroy those very values which he is attempting to protect when he violates rigid customs and mores. It is perhaps in the fourth character type — the moderator — that Mrs. Freeman conveys her deepest insight into human compassion, but it is through the employment of all four character types that she achieves thematic unity.