June 1985

"Unusual" People in a "Usual Place": "The Balking of Christopher" By Mary Wilkins Freeman

Beth Wynne Fisken

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 21, no.2, June 1985, p.99-103

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
"Unusual" People in a "Usual Place":
"The Balking of Christopher"
by Mary Wilkins Freeman

by BETH WYNNE FISKEN

Published in the 1914 volume of short stories by Mary Wilkins Freeman entitled The Copy-Cat & Other Stories, "The Balking of Christopher" successfully combines two forms, the extended parable and the realistic sketch. Freeman expresses the heightened spiritual insights of her main character in the everyday laconic and understated dialogue of rural New England. The people in her story are presented both as full and complex characters and as representations of certain stages of spiritual enlightenment, as Freeman's artistry renders her characters convincing on both the realistic and symbolic levels. The subtle balance maintained between humor and intensity, narration and inspiration, depiction and instruction, makes "The Balking of Christopher" one of Freeman's most technically impressive as well as emotionally compelling stories.

The title, itself, exemplifies the two dominant modes of the story, in particular, the two interpretations offered for the startling behavior of Christopher, the main character. According to the narrow pragmatism of the community, the Christopher who refuses to plow and work has simply "balked" like a stubborn mule at an obstacle. His name, however, with its sacred meaning, "bearing Christ," reflects the point of view of Reverend Stephen Wheaton in the story, who enters sympathetically into Christopher's quest, his solitary communion with nature on the mountain, and his search for answers to his questions about the purpose behind his existence.

Christopher's unconventional behavior is first presented to the reader indirectly from the point of view of others, as we are permitted to eavesdrop on the good-humored gossip of his mother and sister. Then we are asked to share his rebellious doubts as he reveals them in an anguished confession to Wheaton. Finally, we interpret Christopher through the bewildered loyalty of his wife, Myrtle, and Wheaton's enthusiastic identification with Christopher's retreat to Silver Mountain. These successive versions of Christopher emphasize how difficult it is to know and understand another person. Indeed, the

1. This beautifully crafted, poignant story has been unaccountably neglected by scholars and readers of Freeman's work, perhaps because it was written relatively late in her career and was included in a collection which focused on children's stories. Perry D. Westbrook alludes to it in Mary Wilkins Freeman (New York: Twayne, 1967), pp. 169-70, and briefly summarizes its main theme: "Christopher's revolt has turned into acquiescence... won through a grappling with problems—not in blindly, doggedly forcing oneself into duty, simply because it is the will of God" (p. 170). My essay is the first extended analysis of the technical artistry of "The Balking of Christopher," noting its confident movement between realism and allegory and smooth shifts in point of view, and it is the first discussion of the Emersonian echoes in this story.
highest praise that can be given is that one "can see with the eyes of other people," as Christopher says about Wheaton at the end of the story. The imaginative intelligence required for such empathy is rare, however, and most of us are likely to find ourselves groping in the dark when presented with the anomalous behavior of those close to us. It would be enough, perhaps, if we could simply "understand not understanding" (284), a faculty for which Christopher praises his wife. Such an understanding is as genuine an act of love as total comprehension and far more likely to occur in the relationships between men and women, not only in the rural New England world of Freeman's fiction, but in our own world as well.

The affectionate grumblings of Christopher's mother and sister that begin the story serve two purposes. First, they recall the mundane and trivial considerations that generally occupy our minds, repressing the deeper questions that torture Christopher, but second, they anchor the story in the real world, seasoning the intensity of Christopher's spiritual quest with the salt of everyday conversation, the affectionate teasing that keeps us from forgetting that we are human. According to his mother and sister, Christopher, because of his uncommon sensitivity and intelligence, was spoiled by his father and allowed to have his way too much. It is obvious that his mother's criticism arises from a secret pride in his special qualities, a pride that can only find expression in criticism, perhaps as a way of warding off bad fortune or conforming with the expectations of the community. It is also equally obvious that Christopher's sister, Abby, criticizes him to his wife, Myrtle, so she can condescend to her and justify the advantages of her own unmarried state. With skillful economy, Freeman suggests the politics of the family underlying their casual conversation, revealing the snares we lay for those close to us, either in the name of our own anxieties or in the interests of our own self-esteem.

Christopher, in his ensuing confession to Reverend Stephen Wheaton, seems to agree with the consensus of the family that because he is different he is spoiled, as he punctuates his observations with defensive apologies for their unconventionality: "I don't mean to blaspheme, Mr. Wheaton, but it is the truth" (275); "I know I ain't talking in exactly what you might call an orthodox strain" (275). This story is a tribute to what Freeman calls "unusual" people in a "usual place" (281), and she emphasizes how each of her four major characters does not conform to stereotyped expectations. In addition to Christopher's unorthodox rebellion "against the greatest odds on earth and in all creation—the odds of fate itself" (274), there are rebellions on a smaller scale staged by the three others against their roles in life. Myrtle, in her quiet dignity, refuses to condemn what she does not understand; she will not be the nagging wife urged by Christopher's mother and sister at the beginning of the story. Stephen Wheaton is an unexpected clergyman; he is a hot-tempered man of athletic build "with an extraordinary width of shoulders and a strong-featured

2. Mary Wilkins Freeman, "The Balkine of Christopher," in The Copy-Cat & Other Stories (New York: Harper, 1914), p. 290. All other references to this story will be to this edition, and will be indicated by page numbers in parentheses in the text.
and ugly face, still indicative of goodness and a strange power of sympathy" (274). He agrees that "I have heard men swear when it did not seem blasphemous to me" (274), and follows Christopher's quest sympathetically in his imagination with such an eagerness that it is as if his own salvation were at stake. Finally, Christopher's favorite niece, Ellen, who takes over the management of Christopher's farm while he is on retreat in the mountains, is an uncommon woman: "a tall girl, shaped like a boy, with a fearless face of great beauty crowned with compact gold braids and lit by unswerving blue eyes" (287). She seems a living embodiment of the meaning of her name—a torch.

After learning of the hardships of Christopher's past life during his confession to Stephen, we can only conclude that these characters define "spoiled" differently than we do. Yet there were hidden advantages in some of those hardships, of which Christopher himself is unaware, but which become clear during the course of the story. His niece, whom he cared for and loved like a daughter, returns to take up his burden on the farm—he past love and kindness bear him delayed but compounded interest. Although he married Myrtle out of compassion rather than love, we soon realize (and Christopher comes to appreciate) that although he did not get the wife he thought he wanted, he got the wife he needed. No ordinary woman would have supported his decision to drop his obligations on the farm in order to physic his soul on the mountain, nor would she have done so with the quiet dignity and generosity of spirit shown by Myrtle. As Christopher later praises her, "She wouldn't think anybody ought to go just her way to have it the right way" (289). There is one other blessing that Christopher does not realize he has, and that is the disguised blessing of hardship itself. As Myrtle wisely observes, "His bad luck may turn out the best thing for him in the end" (282). If Christopher's farm had been successful, he would have been as much a slave to dull routine and work as he had been in failure, but far less likely to rebel or to search for a deeper spiritual dimension to his life. The possibility of salvation is rooted in his dissatisfaction and frustration.

What Christopher searches for on the mountain is an answer to that fundamental question: "Why did I have to come into the world without any choice?" He describes himself as a "slave of life," and when Stephen adds "so are we all" agrees that we are a "whole world of slaves" (275). Echoing the essence of Christ's message in the Sermon on the Mount, he exclaims: "I have never been able to think of work as anything but a way to get money. . . . I have never in my life had enough of the bread of life to keep my soul nourished. I have tried to do my duties, but I believe sometimes duties act on the soul like weeds on a flower. They crowd it out. I am going up on Silver Mountain to get once, on this earth, my fill of the breath of life" (278, 280). What Christopher wants, simply, is a "chance" at the beauty of the spring and the summer.

When Christopher follows the teachings of Christ, divests himself of material responsibilities, and foregoes the elusive and stultifying goal of security to climb that mountain and seek the answers to his questions, he gains, ironically, the very things he neglects, as Ellen and Stephen take up his burden on
the farm. Christ's paradox comes true: "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well," a miracle that is rendered natural and believable in the world Freeman creates in her story. What Christopher finds on the mountain is a type of transcendental communion with nature which reveals the bounty of the Lord. The beauty of the flowering spring discloses to Christopher the possibility of a joy surpassing the common lot of man: "Lord! Mr. Wheaton, smell the trees, and there are blooms hidden somewhere that smell sweet. Think of having the common food of man sweetened this way! First time I fully sensed I was something more than just a man" (284). Rather than wishing he had never been born, Christopher learns to give thanks for each new day and learns with the trees the secret of "how to grow young every spring" (289) in his own childlike delight in their blossoming. He begins to identify with the trees: "... the trees shall keep their sugar this season. This week is the first time I've had a chance to get acquainted with them and sort of enter into their feelings" (288–89). And out of this identification emerges a growing ability to read the language of nature as symbolic of spiritual stages: "I have found that all the good things and all the bad things that come to a man who tries to do right are just to prove to him that he is on the right path. They are just the flowers and sunbeams, and the rocks and snakes, too, that mark the way" (291). He has discovered for himself what Emerson asserts, that "Nature is the symbol of spirit," a "discipline" in which "every property of matter is a school for the understanding" (36–37). Ultimately, "It is the organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual and strives to lead back the individual to it" (49). Christopher is newly reconciled to his lot, newly awakened to the beauty, promise, and love all around him, reflecting God's will working through the ordinary stuff of life.

At the end of the story, when Christopher comes down off the mountain, his face shines like that of Moses after he talked with God and received the Ten Commandments (Exodus xxxiv. 29). Then he sees his niece, Ellen, for the first time, who seems transfigured in the moonlight. We are at first encouraged to believe with him that she is an "angel of the Lord, come to take up the burden I had dropped while I went to learn of Him" (290); yet immediately we are reminded that these are mere mortals, not angels and prophets, by the bewildered reaction of Myrtle, who assures herself that her husband's odd talk is to be expected "simply because he . . . [is] a man" (290). The gossip between Christopher's mother and sister at the beginning of the story, and Myrtle's comment to herself at the end, punctuate the solemnity of Christopher's quest with ironic brackets. Freeman is careful to bring her readers, as well as
Christopher, back down from that mountain. No epiphany is authentic unless it can be translated back into the ordinary human terms of affection and endeavor and obligation, the everyday routine of life that Christopher rejects at the beginning of the story. What Christopher has learned is that it was not the circumstances of his life that enslaved him but rather his own circumscribed vision of that life, his inability to perceive the astonishing beauty of the world surrounding him.

This story moves us so deeply because Mary Wilkins Freeman anchors the spiritual message of her parable in the ordinary and possible events of real life. Her characters are fully realized human beings, although they are uncommon people, who, at times, shine with an inner light reflecting a higher spiritual plane. The story begins with the casual gossip of women and ends with the announcement of the impending marriage between Ellen and Stephen, a deliberately conventional ending to an unconventional pilgrimage. This is a wise story according to Emerson’s definition of wisdom as the ability “to see the miraculous in the common” (55). In her skillful blending of realistic narration and rich character development with the symbolic elements of the parable, Mary Wilkins Freeman enacts stylistically the moral of her story as voiced by Christopher at the end: “I have found that the only way to heaven for the children of men is through the earth” (291).

_Rutgers University_
New Brunswick, New Jersey