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The Haunting Will: The Ghost Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman

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MARY WILKINS FREEMAN's ghost stories do not have a good critical reputation. Critics use the ghost stories to illustrate the decline in the quality of Freeman's fiction after her 1902 marriage. Westbrook summarizes this stance in the following statement:

As early as 1903 the deterioration in . . . Freeman's art had become catastrophically noticeable in a volume of ghost stories, *The Wind in the Rose-Bush and Other Tales of the Supernatural*. Deficient in suspense and atmosphere, these tales rely on the most ludicrous devices for their interest. . . . With the exception of an occasional flash of . . . Freeman's old flair for presenting the distortion of village characters . . . these stories are without merit.¹

Freeman's strength as a writer, for Westbrook, is in her presentation of the New England village life in which people are "free to work out their own destinies by their own devices."² Freeman's ghost stories lack the impact of her earlier short fiction, according to this standard. In *The Wind in the Rose-Bush* collection, Freeman does not explore the individual struggles toward self-fulfillment that characterize her earlier stories. She develops plot more than character or setting. But she does not rely wholly on plot contrivances for her stories' interest. Each ghost story paints a picture of a character who is paralyzed, and haunted, because of her own willfulness. In her ghost stories, Freeman continues to explore the theme that is basic to all of her fiction—the operation of the individual will.

Freeman always places the will in a moral context. According to Westbrook, "one need read very few pages of Mary Wilkins to realize that to her also life is moral struggle—the struggle within the soul of two wills opposing each other, one driving the individual on to destruction, the other to salvation."³

Westbrook explains Freeman's basic theme in terms of this dual, Calvinist definition of the will, in which the will has the potential for both religious conversion and moral damnation. Freeman's ghost stories fit into this thematic structure. Freeman examines the will's destructive effect in her ghost stories. Her protagonists are self-involved, but not self-aware. Their ignorance, combined with their willfulness, produces their moral evil.

² Ibid., p. 69.
³ Ibid., pp. 116-17.
Freeman analyzes the will's positive side in her early short fiction. She analyzes the will's negative side in her ghost stories. She uses different character types, settings, and effects in each set of stories to emphasize the will's different moral possibilities. Freeman's ghost stories, viewed together with her early fiction, explain and offer a guide to the proper function of the individual will.

Freeman establishes a basic thematic pattern in her early short fiction. Most of her protagonists are individualists. They live geographically and economically restricted lives, but they do not accept social or moral restrictions. They "know their own minds." They live according to individual ideas and needs, and often defy tradition. As Susan Allen Toth states, "in Freeman's villages, each individual must battle the community in order to define his rights and responsibilities." The clash between individual vision and social convention produces the thematic tension in Freeman's early short fiction.

In "Louisa," for example, Louisa Britton refuses to follow the traditional matrimonial route to economic security. She is determined to succeed on her own. Her trip home from Solomon Mears's house is like "a pilgrimage, and the Mecca at the end of the burning, desert-like road [is] her own maiden independence" (SF, 402).

Freeman vindicates Louisa's stubbornness. Louisa gets her teaching job back. Mrs. Britton learns that Jonathan Nye would not have helped the whole family, after all. Freeman rewards Louisa's independence; she gives Louisa the security to dream her own "sweet, mysterious, girlish dreams" (SF, 403).

Louisa Ellis, in "A New England Nun," enjoys her dainty personal routine. She fears the potential disorder of a "coarse masculine presence in the midst of... this delicate harmony" (SF, 355). She breaks her engagement for her own sake, as well as Joe Daggett's, because she understands her needs as well as his. Although Louisa's celibate routine may be a perversion of nature for others, as confinement is for Caesar, it fulfills her desire for peace, beauty, and order. After she refuses Joe, Louisa feels "like a queen who, after fearing lest her domain be wrested away from her, sees it firmly insured in her possession" (SF, 359).

Freeman reverses the traditional role of marriage in these two stories. Marriage destroys, rather than increases, the protagonist's chance for fulfillment. Freeman similarly destroys other social conventions in her early fiction. She exposes the unfairness of sex and age discrimination in "A Village Singer." She exposes the unfairness of the submissive wife's


role in "The Revolt of Mother." The protagonists in these stories break social, but not moral, rules. Individual beliefs become the only standard of "rightness" in Freeman's early short fiction. Traditional religious and social rules are not appropriate to the protagonists' lives, and the characters who represent tradition often are insensitive or unobservant.

Sarah Penn expresses Freeman's individualistic morality. She tells the minister that "there are things people hadn't ought to interfere with. I've been a member of the church for over forty years. I've got my own mind an' my own feet, an' I'm goin' to think my own thoughts an' go my own ways, an' nobody but the Lord is goin' to dictate to me unless I've a mind to have him" (SF, 430).

The minister, in contrast, "could expound the intricacies of every character study in the Scriptures, he was competent to grasp the Pilgrim Fathers and all historical innovators, but Sarah Penn was beyond him" (SF, 430).

Freeman often explains the conflict between individual and communal morality in feminine and masculine terms. Although she writes predominantly about a society of women, her men create and express standard public opinion. For example, the young minister in "A Poetess" is directly responsible for Betsey Dole's disillusionment, which intensifies her illness. He destroys Betsey's pride in her poetry, which is her only real sustenance. In "A Village Singer," Mr. Pollard and William Emmons intensify Candace Whitcomb's illness by turning her out of the church choir.

Yet Betsey Dole makes the minister promise to write a funeral verse for her. Candace Whitcomb disrupts the choir and proves that a woman's age does not limit her effectiveness. All of Freeman's women achieve moral victories on their own terms.

Eventually, the community respects their individual vision. Westbrook states that "the townspeople . . . recognize the intrinsic value of this type of struggle, and respect it even when it results in oddness." The reader also accepts each protagonist's vision because, like the protagonist and the fictional community, she understands its origin. Freeman explains the protagonists' lives in detail. She develops an emotional rationale for their behavior. The protagonists are not mere grotesques or regional aberrations. The reader recognizes the importance of any justifiable action that deviates from the commonplace, within the protagonists' restricted milieu.

Freeman emphasizes the protagonists' restricted experience in her early stories. She magnifies the commonplace details of their lives, and elevates her protagonists to a near-heroic (and sometimes tragic) level through this magnification of detail, in which small gestures become large. Betsey Dole, for example, "ate scarcely more than a bird," but "sang as assid-

6. Westbrook, p. 70.
uously. Her income was almost infinitesimal," yet she "had lived upon it for twenty years, and considered herself well-to-do. She had never received a cent for her poems," yet their "appearance [in print] was worth more to her than the words represented in as many dollars" (SF, 382).

Freeman sets her early protagonists in this specific, restricted milieu, then links them with universal experiences like rebellion, conflict, and the search for individual fulfillment. Their world is hopeful, even though it contains poverty, sickness, and death, because all the protagonists know themselves. They learn how to use their limited physical resources to the greatest emotional and spiritual advantage. They create their own moral standards. They all achieve fulfillment by asserting their individual wills.

Freeman reverses this pattern in her ghost stories. The protagonists in The Wind in the Rose-Bush stories are not self-aware. They do not assert their independence against communal tradition. The ghost stories do not support a relative, individual morality. They do not recognize the universal quest for independence, and they do not concern themselves with feminine and masculine polarities. In her ghost stories, Freeman examines the willfulness of what James H. Quina, Jr. calls the "control groups who consider it their duty to maintain the status quo."

Freeman establishes a counter-pattern in her ghost stories. She creates serene, prosperous communities whose members accept and participate in traditional social and moral practices. She introduces a past conflict into this standard existence, in the form of a ghost or ghost story told by one of the characters. The past conflict deals with an individual assertion of will against a strict moral code, which still operates in the present. Freeman’s protagonists accept this moral code without question. They also break it, without being aware of their sin. Each ghost points out a protagonist’s moral failure. The clash between moral appearance and reality produces the thematic tension in Freeman’s ghost stories.

In her early short fiction, Freeman uses a specific setting to showcase the universal, moral function of the will in its search for fulfillment. She contrasts her characters’ restricted lives with their larger visions. In her ghost stories, Freeman uses a traditional, universal setting to showcase the specific, immoral function of the will. She contrasts her characters’ narrow visions with their large, conventional settings, which the ghosts magnify. Freeman’s ghosts extend the range of everyday physical experience in order to impress their insensitive victims.

For example, Mrs. Simmons in “The Southwest Chamber” “was struck in her most vulnerable point. This apparent contradiction of the reasonable as manifested in such a commonplace thing as chintz of a bed-hanging affected this ordinarily unimaginative woman as no ghostly appearance could have done. Those red roses on the yellow ground [instead of peacocks on a blue ground] were to her much more ghostly than any

strange figure clad in the white robes of the grave entering the room."\(^8\)

Freeman's ghosts manifest themselves in trembling roses, tunes on the piano, shadows on the wall, lovesick people, patterned wallpaper and curtains, nightcaps and dresses, odors of cooked food, and visions of lost children. The ghosts plant seeds of self-doubt in the protagonists because they distort conventional physical experience. The protagonists plant seeds of self-doubt in the reader because they distort conventional moral experience.

In "The Wind in the Rose-Bush," Rebecca Flint encounters her niece's ghost in a trembling rose on a bush by Mrs. Dent's front porch. Rebecca also sees shadows pass the windows. She smells roses inside the house. She hears "The Maiden's Prayer" on the piano. She sees Agnes's small nightgown "laid out" on her bed, along with the rose.

Yet Rebecca is a logical person. She speaks and acts in a straightforward manner. She is not the conventional, nervous old maid. She is "tall and spare and pale, the type of a spinster, yet with rudimentary lines . . . of matronhood" in the way she holds her shawl and bag "on her left hip, as if it had been a child" \((WRB, 4)\).

Like many women, Rebecca expresses her innate nurturing instinct by "doing her duty." She cares for her mother until her mother dies. She teaches school until she receives a bequest and decides to raise Agnes. She returns home when she receives word that her cousin has broken her hip. She fulfills the narrow requirements of duty, and narrows her experience of life accordingly. Rebecca regards life "as a froward child rather than as an overwhelming fate" \((WRB, 4)\).

Rebecca equates duty with virtue. She proudly repeats that she has come to do her duty by "her own sister's daughter." Yet Rebecca encounters a situation beyond the scope of conventional duty when she enters the second Mrs. Dent's house in Ford Village.

Emeline Dent looks like a normal housewife. She is a handsome woman with a large, immaculate house. But her "china-blue eyes" have an "aggressive," secret expression of "fear and defiance" \((WRB, 11)\). Emeline deals in secrecy, evasion, and lies. She maintains a cruel charade for Rebecca.

In fact, none of the characters in the story has enough compassion to tell Rebecca the truth. No one deviates from "proper" reticent behavior. The wife on the ferry-boat wants to tell Rebecca about Agnes, but her husband prevents her. The boy in the wagon does not speak to Rebecca, even though he knows Agnes's story. Rebecca grasps the truth only through ghostly illusion.

Rebecca is sick with "anxiety," "fatigue," and "nervous strain" \((WRB, 36)\) by the time she learns that Agnes died of neglect. But Freeman does

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8. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, *The Wind in the Rose-Bush and Other Tales of the Supernatural* (1903; rpt. New York: Garrett, 1969), pp. 148–49. Subsequent citations will abbreviate the title to *WRB*, and will be included in parentheses in the text.
not absolve Rebecca from complicity in Agnes's death. Freeman implies that Rebecca has ignored the true spirit of her duty, by sticking to the letter. Rebecca postponed the trip to Ford Village for six months, even after conditions were right for Agnes's arrival. Rebecca postponed going for Agnes, just as the other characters postpone telling Rebecca the truth. Rebecca misses her chance for virtuous action. She has to live with the ghost that her own self-absorption helped to create.

Freeman examines two sides of self-absorption, each equally evil and destructive, in "The Shadows on the Wall." The first shadow appears after a supposed fratricide. The second shadow appears after the remaining brother's supposed suicide. Henry Glynn's powerful, monomaniacal willfullness causes both deaths. His sisters' aloofness also causes both deaths.

Henry Glynn has uncontrollable jealous rages. He erupts whenever something undermines his power, or makes any sort of claim on him. He once killed a cat that scratched him, and his sisters assume that he killed his brother Edward. According to Emma Glynn, Henry and Edward quarreled right before Edward died: "Henry was mad, as he always was, because Edward was living on here for nothing, when he had wasted all the money father left him... It must have looked to him as if Edward was living at his expense, but he wasn't" (WRB, 45).

Henry tries to maintain an appearance of self-control and propriety. He functions successfully as a doctor. He hides his turbulent emotions under a boyish smile, which is "bewildering from its incongruity with his general appearance" (WRB, 52). But his real nature often surfaces, and his "cold fury and calculation" distort his features (WRB, 67). Henry's face changes during his rage at the shadow on the library wall.

Henry's sisters never change. What characterizes one sister characterizes them all. "Given one common intensity of emotion and similar lines showed forth, and the three sisters of one race were evident" (WRB, 43). Like Emma, the sisters never lose "sight of [their] own importance amidst the waters of tribulation. [They are] always awake to the consciousness of [their] own stability in the midst of vicissitudes" (WRB, 42). Like Caroline (and Henry), they have the "pitiless immobility of... statues in whose marble lineaments emotions were fixed for all eternity" (WRB, 52).

Emma, Caroline, and Rebecca control themselves for the sake of self-preservation. They create a complicity of silence. They never defend Edward, although they agree privately that Edward was right, and they never confront Henry. When Emma mentions an autopsy, "Caroline turn[s] on her fiercely. 'No,' said she in a terrible voice. 'No.' The three sisters' souls seemed to meet on one common ground of terrified understanding through their eyes" (WRB, 51).

The sisters remain silent because they are self-interested. They want to preserve their own lives, and they want to preserve appearances. They do not want to provoke Henry's rage. Henry rages because he is self-
interested. Self-interest is the predominant characteristic of the Glynn family. The shadows on the wall symbolize the siblings' failure to care for one another. The shadows haunt the sisters as well as Henry; the Glynn's selfish willfulness produces each shadow.

Freeman expands the theme of the selfish use of others in "Luella Miller." Luella is a lovely, vampiristic woman who gets others to work for her, then drains the life out of them. Luella effaces herself, and controls others through this pose. She is a "slight, pliant sort of creature, as ready with a strong yielding to fate and as unbreakable as a willow" (WRB, 78). Luella says that she is not fit for work. She makes others teach, cook, clean, and sew for her. She blooms physically when others take care of her; she wilts when she has to take care of herself. She accumulates a list of people who die in her service.

Lottie Henderson teaches Luella's classes for her, and dies. One of the big boys, who helps her after Lottie's death, goes crazy when Luella marries Erastus Miller. Erastus dies from consumption a year after their marriage. Lily Miller helps Luella, and dies. Aunt Abby Minter, Maria Brown, Sarah Jones, and Doctor Malcolm all care for Luella. They all die. A vagrant dies when she lives in Luella's house after Luella's death. Luella dies when everyone deserts her, but she even has help in death. Lydia Anderson sees the ghosts of the people Luella "killed" “all helpin' [Luella] along till she seemed to fairly fly in the midst of them” (WRB, 102).

Lydia Anderson tells Luella's tale to the narrator. Lydia is "well over eighty but a marvel of vitality and unextinct youth. . . . She always went to church, rain or shine. She had never married, and had lived alone in a house across the road from Luella Miller's" (WRB, 77). Lydia sets herself up as a model of righteousness. She says that her version of Luella's story is "the truth" (WRB, 77), but Lydia is not an impartial observer or storyteller.

Lydia is jealous of Luella because she lost Erastus to her. Lydia's memory of Erastus controls her feelings, although she denies that Erastus was interested in her. "Folks used to say he was waitin' on me, but he wa'n't. I never thought he was except once or twice when he said things that some girls might have suspected meant somethin' " (WRB, 78). Yet Lydia speaks harshly to Luella about the doctor's probable death because "[she feels it] on account of Erastus" (WRB, 96). Lydia helps Luella because Luella "had been Erastus's wife and . . . he had set his eyes by her" (WRB, 99). Lydia helps Luella carry packages during Luella's final illness because she wants to do "right by Erastus's wife" (WRB, 101). And Lydia maligns Luella, because of Erastus, every chance she gets. During Aunt Abby's illness, Lydia observes that all the time Luella was sick, "she was keepin' a sharp lookout as to how we took it out of the corner of one eye. I see her. You could never cheat me about Luella Miller" (WRB, 86).

Only Lydia mentions Luella's duplicity. Only Lydia's version of the
story exists. Lydia is a master storyteller. She imposes her will on others, and makes them accept her version of Luella’s story. Even the narrator states that Lydia “never in all her life . . . held her tongue for any will save her own” (WRB, 77).

Lydia calculates the effects of her actions, while Luella is “like a baby with scissors in its hand cuttin’ everybody without knowin’ what it was doin’ ” (WRB, 97). Lydia believes that she does her duty and acts morally, but she never really helps Luella. Lydia hides her selfish interest under her smug morality. Lydia is the only character who sees Luella’s ghosts because she is the only character who is willful and obsessed enough to see them. Lydia is so obsessed with Luella, she even dies “stretched on the ground before the door of Luella Miller’s deserted house” (WRB, 103). The story of Lydia’s death appropriately becomes the real ghost story in the village’s folklore.

Freeman warns the reader about Lydia’s type of self-interest and pride in “The Southwest Chamber” and “The Vacant Lot.” In “The Southwest Chamber,” proud characters doubt themselves when they see unusual things in the bedroom where Sophia Gill’s Aunt Harriet died. Each of these characters is stubborn as well as proud. Each thinks she can control her own life in the natural world, and none believe in the supernatural. Each character learns to doubt her self-sufficiency, and is haunted with this doubt, but only Sophia Gill moves beyond self-doubt to self-awareness.

Louisa Stark sleeps in the southwest chamber first. She is self-possessed and defiant. “She was a masterly woman inured to command from years of school-teaching. She carried her swelling bulk with majesty; even her face, moist and red with the heat, lost nothing of its dignity of expression” (WRB, 125).

Louisa’s clothes disappear and reappear in the room. Her pearl and onyx pin turns into a hair pin in the room’s mirror. Louisa remembers the insanity in her family when she sees these things. She becomes nervous, and starts to doubt her own sanity. She becomes “more credulous as to her own possible failings than she had ever been in her whole life. She was cold with horror and terror, and yet not so much horror and terror of the supernatural as of her own self” (WRB, 137). Louisa loses her self-possession. She is afraid to confront her conscience. She runs away from the house, and keeps her pride.

Mrs. Elvira Simmons also yields to the supernatural presence in the room. Mrs. Simmons is a complacent widow who fears the heat “more than spooks” (WRB, 134). She is proud of her common sense. She initially brags that “if I saw things or heard things I’d think the fault must be with my own guilty conscience” (WRB, 133). She fights the ghost until it upsets her equilibrium, but she never examines her own conscience. She flees, like Louisa Stark.

John Dunn, the young minister, also yields to the ghost. He initially
believes that religious faith deters the supernatural. He tells Eliza Lippincott that "a higher power would [not] allow any manifestation on the part of a disembodied spirit—who we trust is in her heavenly home—to harm one of His servants" (WRB, 132).

But John Dunn experiences the ghost despite his religious beliefs. The ghost blocks the doorway to the room, and the minister cannot enter to sleep there and prove his faith. He rages "for half an hour . . . overwhelmed with spiritual agony as to the state of his own soul rather than fear . . . . Finally a great horror as of evil itself came over him . . . . He fairly fled to his own chamber and locked himself in like a terror-stricken girl" (WRB, 158). John Dunn does not pursue his self-appraisal. He is afraid to confront his spiritual inadequacy. This is his real evil.

Sophia Gill is stronger than her boarders. She is proud, vain, and stubborn, but she is strong enough to realize the evil in her character. Sophia has a well-developed sense of justice.

Sophia also has an "enormous family pride" (WRB, 118). She moved into her family's old house from her own comfortable home to reclaim her place in the family. The family disowned her mother because she married a poor man, and Sophia "had always held her head high when she had walked past that fine old mansion, the cradle of her race, which she was forbidden to enter" (WRB, 118).

Sophia is as vain about her own willfulness as she is about her family heritage. For example, she "loved to hear two other women covertly condemned by [the minister] and she herself thereby exalted" (WRB, 157). But when she enters the southwest room, her aunt's ghost overpowers her own strong will.

Sophia experiences her aunt's terrible hatred, stubbornness, and resentment. She sees her aunt's face on her own body when she looks in the mirror. She is shocked into self-awareness, and she does not run away from the truth about herself. Sophia learns that her determination and self-pride are the same as her aunt's. She learns that willfulness is evil, when it is excessive and obsessive.

Sophia lets go of her pride, reverses her decisions, and decides to sell the house. She does not perpetuate her aunt's sin, which is part of her inheritance. Instead, she develops her "inherited strength for good and righteous self-assertion, from the evil strength of her ancestors" (WRB, 161).

David Townsend also inherits his ancestors' willful pride, as well as the moral responsibility for their sins. During the last ghost scene in "The Vacant Lot," the hysterical maid "quote[s] Scripture in a burst of sobs and laughter. 'Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me. . . . If I ain't done wrong, mebbe them that's come before me did, and when the Evil One and the Powers of Darkness is abroad I'm liable, I'm liable!' " (WRB, 195). David Townsend learns the truth of this moral precept.
Townsend seems different from his ancestors at first. They owned a tavern. He owns a general store. They had a “fiery spirit and eager grasp at advantage” (WRB, 169). He is “rather pugnaciously satisfied with what he has, and not easily disposed to change” (WRB, 169). They, “though prominent and respected . . . had reputations not above suspicions” (WRB, 169). He gets his “little competence from his store by honest methods” (WRB, 170). The narrator states that David Townsend has “either retrograded or advanced, as one might look at it” (WRB, 169).

Townsend’s character may have moved forward or backward, but it remains on his ancestors’ track. He likes to manage money. He grasps at advantage when he buys the Boston house, and he is proud of his shrewdness. He is gratified by the community’s pride in him, and he anticipates making other beneficial deals, to increase his already “intense self-respect” (WRB, 170).

Townsend inherits his willfulness from the original “imperious Townsends,” and he is proud of his inheritance (WRB, 169). He hangs the Blue Leopard sign in Townsend Centre, and he takes the sign with him to Boston. The sign attracts the ghosts.

In Boston, Townsend and his family see laundry shadows and smell food in the vacant lot next to their new house. Their house shakes, all the mirrors crack, and they see a group of white-faced people, dressed in black, pass the house. They find a mourning veil in Mrs. Townsend’s room. Townsend’s son sees lights on the vacant lot, where house windows would be. Ghosts enter the house and disappear in the dining room, through the Blue Leopard sign.

Townsend reasons away these occurrences. He believes in “courage” and “actualities” (WRB, 178) up until the last ghostly visit. Townsend’s face changes, however, when he sees the last group of ghosts walk to the sign. His face becomes the face in the portrait of his worst ancestor, who founded the Blue Leopard. Townsend realizes that he is responsible for, and has perpetuated, his ancestors’ sins.

The real estate agent confirms Townsend’s idea. The agent tells Townsend that a man named Gaston owned the vacant lot. Townsend knows that a man named Gaston was murdered, long ago, at the Blue Leopard. Townsend overreaches himself when he goes to Boston. His inherited pride and willfulness blossom when he acts within a larger range, and his human compassion diminishes. But he realizes his mistake and his moral blame. He loses money on his house and moves back to the safer atmosphere of Townsend Centre.

Freeman exposes the same wasteful self-concern in “The Lost Ghost” story that Rhoda Meserve tells Mrs. Emerson. Rhoda says that she boarded in a haunted house owned by two widowed sisters, Mrs. Dennison and Mrs. Bird. A small girl ghost of a neglected child haunted the house. The child’s mother loved herself more than her child. The mother overworked the child, ran off with a married man, and left the child alone.
in the house, where it starved and froze to death. The child's ghost ap­
pears at intervals to do small chores and ask for its mother. Mrs. Bird dies
in order to comfort the child's ghost.

Rhoda calls Mrs. Bird a "good woman, and one that couldn't do things
enough for other folks . . . . She was 'most heartbroken because she
couldn't do anything for [the ghost], as she could have done for a live
child" (WRB, 235). Mrs. Dennison calls her sister a "real motherly sort of
woman . . . . She had coddled her husband within an inch of his life. 'It's
lucky Abby never had any children,' she said, 'for she would have spoilt
them!'" (WRB, 212).

The selfish mother in Rhoda's story killed her child, while the selfless
widow kills herself. Each death could have been avoided. Each death is
the result of misguided, unthinking willfulness. Rhoda implies that Mrs.
Bird is as selfish as the wicked mother. Mrs. Bird fulfills her own maternal
needs, like Amelia Lamkin, at her sister's expense. Her death benefits no
one but a ghost who, by its nature, is beyond help.

Rhoda Meserve also is as selfish and foolish as the characters in her own
story. She uses the ghost to come to terms with her own family loss, just
as Mrs. Bird uses it to fulfill her maternal needs. We learn that Rhoda lost
her family just before she moved into the haunted house.

Rhoda is an unreliable storyteller because her interest in the story is
subjective. She also is a gossip who lies about her age and exaggerates her
stories. Rhoda tells the ghost story to take Mrs. Emerson's attention away
from the town's newcomers. She is oblivious to the story's moral. Rhoda
typifies Freeman's ghost story protagonists, whose wills limit their
awareness of the moral world.

Freeman creates a world of traditional, biblical morality in her ghost
stories. It is a world in which children inherit their family's sins, and pride
leads to a fall. It is a world in which the sin of willfulness is overcome only
by the virtue of awareness. And it is a world whose inhabitants have
problems with perception.

Freeman's protagonists believe that they fulfill their obligations toward
themselves and others. Rebecca Flint does her duty. The Glynns maintain
their family's good name. Lydia Anderson does her duty toward Erastus's
wife. Sophia Gill reclaims her family's position. David Townsend ad­
vances his family's position. Rhoda Meserve relays and creates the com­
nunity's news.

The protagonists are not aware of the motivation behind their "dutiful"
actions. They do not have true compassion for others, and they cannot
recognize, justify, or remedy their own willfulness. Their willfulness does
not grow out of a need for individual fulfillment. It grows from pride,
jealousy, and stubbornness. It is often inherited. It becomes obsessive. It
masquerades as charity and social conformity. It narrows the pro­
tagonists' physical as well as moral perception. The ghosts shock the
protagonists' perception and point out the will's immorality. But the
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ghosts merely haunt the protagonists; they do not make the protagonists more aware of their world.

Only two out of six protagonists realize that their willfulness is evil, and promise to change. Sophia Gill and David Townsend try to get rid of their ghosts. The other protagonists remain haunted. Freeman creates a pessimistic world in the ghost stories. In general, neither natural nor supernatural experience expands the self's moral awareness in this world. Most of the characters, like Mrs. Bird, "don't know what this means" (WRB, 219).

However, the reader knows what the stories mean. The reader links motivation, action, and effect when Freeman presents the climax at the end of each story. Freeman makes the reader realize the moral impact of her protagonists' actions. The reader uncovers Freeman's moral framework as each story progresses, and judges the protagonists according to this traditional code, in which right develops from self-awareness and compassion for others, and wrong develops from unjustified willfulness. The reader recognizes evil self-interest and moral immobility in apparently good characters, who live in conventional situations and have conventional moral beliefs.

Freeman uses conventional protagonists because she wants the reader to identify with them. She wants the reader to realize that immorality exists beneath surface conventionality, and calls forth ghosts. Whether or not the reader accepts the stories' supernatural incidents, she realizes that Freeman intends to haunt her with moral self-doubt.

Woolf's statement about the effect of Henry James's ghost stories is relevant to Freeman's stories. According to Woolf, the ghosts "have their origin within us. They are present whenever the significant overflows our powers of expressing it; whenever the ordinary appears ringed by the strange. . . . Can it be that we are afraid? . . . We are afraid of something unnamed, of something, perhaps, in ourselves."9 Freeman names this element in her ghost stories. She attributes her ghosts to the evil potential of the individual will.

Freeman presents two different views of the will in her early short fiction and her ghost stories. Both views support her moral, dualistic concept of the will. Freeman illustrates one basic theme in all of her stories. She shows that the individual should not assert her will unless she is aware of, and can justify, her actions, emotionally and morally. Self-assertion should fulfill an individual need; the struggle to conform to convention for convention's sake is immoral. Willfulness without awareness is evil.

Westbrook rephrases Freeman's theme according to Calvinist and transcendental theory, which both emphasize the function of the will. He states that the individual should be "true, in all endeavors involving effort of the will, to the best in one's own nature. Doing so is the equivalent of

being true to God, Who is the best in men's natures. It involves sloughing off the encrustations of convention that coat spirits and impede their movement. To achieve release from convention and shallow conformity is the most difficult task the soul can undertake, requiring as much effort and struggle as a Puritan conversion.¹⁰

Freeman illustrates this theme directly in her early short fiction. In her ghost stories, Freeman shows what happens when the will is not true to the best in the individual's nature. The ghost stories illustrate the "decadence" of the will "into mere whim and stubbornness."¹¹ They give some dimension to Freeman's examination of the will. The ghost of immorality always lurks in Freeman's fiction to haunt characters who slip from self-expression into selfish willfulness.

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¹⁰. Westbrook, p. 80.
¹¹. Ibid., p. 81.