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The Humanity of Women in Freeman’s “A Village Singer”

by MARJORIE PRYSE

At the hands of the critics, Candace Whitcomb has frequently received treatment similar to that which she experiences from her own congregation in Mary Wilkins Freeman’s story “A Village Singer.” The congregation dismiss her as their leading soprano of forty years and hire a younger woman to take her place. The critics, expressing the same limited sympathy for Freeman’s older female protagonists, have depicted them as “undefeated neurotics” whose “gestures of revolt are never quite conclusive, never fully satisfying”; as representative of “a type of womanhood often so individual and so peculiar in its tragic problems as to be classifiable as unique”; as “aging New England spinsters” in “minor tragicomedies”; and as “descendents of the Puritan fathers who believed in a God of pure Will, and unconsciously modelled themselves upon Him.” In an analysis of “A Village Singer,” Perry Westbrook has agreed with these critics, describing the story as one of those in which Freeman studies “overdeveloped will,” and in which “after the single emotional eruption of a lifetime, Candace would inevitably return to the personal and social norm.”

In a more positive assessment of Freeman’s protagonists, Alice Brand argues that “as Freeman becomes angrier and bolder, her women become angrier and bolder . . . female aggression is conspicuous and justifiable.” Even so, she concludes, “self-destructive tendencies permeate that aggression” and Freeman’s women are “lemmings, invariably committing some form of suicide at the hands of men.” Only Susan Allen Toth has approached complete sympathy for Candace Whitcomb, arguing that Freeman has transformed “a homely, even repellent old woman into a fiery and admirable figure,” and describing Candace’s brief afternoon’s personal rebellion as “a challenge to selfish community spirit, an individual’s refusal to be denied humanity and jus-
With this single exception, the view that unmarried older women cannot fully "satisfy" the reader, cannot move beyond being "unique" to universality, and cannot offer constructive criticism of their fictional societies because they possess some "neurotic" deficiency is implicit in Freeman criticism. Careful analysis of "A Village Singer" indicates both the inadequacy of the critics' prevailing assessment, as well as Freeman's own indictment of a society which has made such an assessment possible. In Candace Whitcomb's story, Mary Wilkins Freeman describes a village which finds aging offensive in women but acceptable in men. Candace's "song" protests the unfairness of this view of women, and in retaining her sense of personal triumph into death, Candace mirrors for her community the way they have lost but must regain their own humanity.

Candace discovers how difficult it is for her community to perceive women as fully human and as having the same feelings as men when her congregation appear to hold a surprise party in her honor but leave behind as a gift "from her many friends" a photograph album which contains her letter of dismissal — making way for the younger Alma Way to replace her in their choir. As an act of protest, on the Sunday the new soprano makes her debut, Candace disrupts the solo by playing her parlor organ and singing so loudly in her cottage close to the south side of the church that the "shrill clamor" of her voice drowns out the "piercingly sweet" tones of Alma Way (p. 19). Although the women of the congregation whisper to each other "half aghast, half smiling" (p. 19), as if they secretly sympathize with Candace's rebellion, the choir leader and the minister condemn her action.

William Emmons, the choir leader, and "the old musical dignitary of the village," is the first to raise his voice, calling Candace's action "a most outrageous proceeding." Emmons' sharp criticism amounts to a betrayal of friendship, whatever his objective view of the quality of her voice, for as Freeman writes, "People had coupled his name with Candace Whitcomb's. The old bachelor tenor and old maiden soprano had been wont to walk together to her home next door after the Saturday night rehearsals, and they had sung duets to the parlor organ. . . . They wondered if he would ever ask her to marry him." Yet Emmons tells Alma Way "that Candace Whitcomb's voice had failed utterly of late, that she sang shockingly, and ought to have had sense enough to know it" (p. 20).

More is at stake, in Emmons' criticism, than lack of sympathy for an old friend. For when the minister calls on Candace after the morning service to tell her that her singing disturbed the congregation, she
argues, "There's William Emmons, too; he's three years older'n I am, if he does lead the choir an' run all the singin' in town. If my voice has gi'en out, it stan's to reason his has. It ain't, though. William Emmons sings jest as well as he ever did. Why don't they turn him out the way they have me, an' give him a photograph album?" (p. 26). Candace objects to the inequity of her treatment, implying that the congregation has been unable to perceive an old maiden lady quite as worthy of human consideration as old bachelor men.

And she includes the minister himself in her argument, asking "where the Christianity comes in" in the congregation's turning her out "without a word of warnin' " (p. 25). "I'd like to know if it wouldn't be more to the credit of folks in a church to keep an old singer an' an old minister, if they didn't sing an' hold forth quite so smart as they used to, rather than turn 'em off an' hurt their feelin's. . . . S'pose they should turn you off, Mr. Pollard, come an' give you a photograph album, an' tell you to clear out, how'd you like it? I ain't findin' any fault with your preachin'; it was always good enough to suit me; but it don't stand to reason folks'll be as took up with your sermons as when you was a young man. You can't expect it. S'pose they should turn you out in your old age, an' call in some young bob squirt, how'd you feel?" (p. 26). She tries unsuccessfully to show him that the two of them are in the same position in the congregation ("Salvation don't hang on anybody's hittin' a high note, that I ever heard of," p. 26), except that he is a man. She objects to the fact that even though both the minister's and the singer's performances have altered with age, the congregation will tolerate and even reverence in the minister what they have dismissed as "outrageous" in Candace.

Candace is unsuccessful in explaining the meaning of her action to the minister, and Freeman contrasts him, with his "look of helpless solidity, like a block of granite" (p. 27), with the singer, "a tall woman, but very slender and full of pliable motions, like a blade of grass" (p. 23). The minister, "treading with heavy precision his one track for over forty years, having nothing new in his life except the new sameness of the seasons, and desiring nothing new, was incapable of understanding a woman like this, who had lived as quietly as he, and all the time held within herself the elements of revolution" (p. 28). He fails to understand either those "elements of revolution" which Freeman describes as a "tropical outbreak" in Candace, or her need to have held them "within herself" her entire life.

Candace has contributed to the minister's perception of her as a conventional, rather than a rebellious, woman. She has lived quietly, "so delicately resolute that the quality had been scarcely noticed in her, and her ambition had been unsuspected." The instinct in an ambitious woman to hide that ambition as a way of ensuring her own survival may have led Candace, as well, to treat Mr. Pollard "with the utmost defer-
ence." She has had "an inborn reverence for clergymen," no doubt because nineteenth-century New Englanders viewed ministers with even greater deference than they did other men. "Indeed, her manner toward all men had been marked by a certain delicate stiffness and dignity" (p. 28). Candace has deferred to men and revered ministers out of a sense of her own personal humility. She has treated them as if they merited more human dignity than herself. Significantly, however, in light of his blatant failure to understand and sympathize with her, she becomes defiant: "I'd like to see anybody stop me. If I ain't got a right to play a psalm tune on my organ an' sing, I'd like to know. If you don't like it, you can move the meetin'-house" (p. 28). In that defiance, she finds herself "talking to the old minister with the homely freedom with which she might have addressed a female gossip over the back fence" (pp. 28-29).

In view of Candace's behavior as a "revolutionary parishioner" (p. 29), her treatment of the photograph album assumes a larger significance. She tells the minister that she has been using it as a footstool, "An' I ain't been particular to get the dust off my shoes before I used it neither" (p. 27). By interrupting the meeting with her singing, and then symbolically by turning her congregation's photo album into her footstool, Candace behaves in a way which the church leaders interpret as arrogance. Echoing the imprecation which recurs frequently in the Bible, she has tried to transform her enemies into her footstool—an action which they perceive as outrageous because even though their theology taught them to humble themselves, they object to receiving their humiliation at her hands. Therefore, in spite of her awareness that they misunderstand her, she continues her protest during the afternoon service. Unsuccessful in showing the minister that he is as humble a creature as she, 10 she has tried, alternatively, to elevate her own stature ("If you don't like it, you can move the meetin'-house"). In ceasing to view men and ministers as worthy of deference, she has broken her lifelong habit of humility. Her perception of the minister's human deficiency, his inability to perceive her as fully human, increases the vehemence with which she tries to express her sense of personal injury.

When Candace repeats her singing during Alma Way's solo at the afternoon service, Freeman gives the reader an objective view of both women and begins to explain why Candace addresses her fury against the minister, the choir leader, and later her own nephew, Alma Way's lover, instead of against Alma herself. We discover, first, that the con-


10. According to the OED, in nineteenth-century New England the word "footstool" became a colloquial term for the earth itself (as God's footstool) and the place upon which his humble beings crept (IV, p. 406; also Supplement, p. 387). Candace's transformation of the photo album into a footstool therefore also evokes the humility inherent in the human condition.
gregation has allowed its preference for younger over older women to affect its hearing. "When the first notes of Alma’s solo began, Candace sang. She had really possessed a fine voice, and it was wonderful how little she had lost it. Straining her throat with jealous fury, her notes were still for the main part true." Candace "sang with wonderful fire and expression," which "mild little Alma Way could never emulate. She was full of steadfastness and unquestioning constancy, but there were in her no smouldering fires of ambition and resolution. Music was not to her what it had been to her older rival. To this obscure woman, kept relentlessly by circumstances in a narrow track, singing in the village choir had been as much as Italy was to Napoleon—and now on her island of exile she was still showing fight" (p. 30). Freeman implies a deeper contrast than that of the two women’s voices: the younger woman is "unquestioning," while Candace possesses "smouldering fires of ambition."

In effect, then, in hiring Alma Way to sing, and dismissing Candace, the congregation have expressed their preference for a woman who is genuinely quiet and conventional instead of one who may only appear so—by implication, Candace’s ability to control her own "smouldering fires" may have degenerated with age like her old face ("on which the blushes of youth sat pitifully, when William Emmons entered the singing-seats," p. 20). Alma’s "performance" is simply more convincing—and she displays traits men have conventionally admired in women: she sings with a mixture of "self-distrust and timidity" (p. 19); she bears uncomplainingly her lover’s decision to postpone marriage rather than bring a wife into his mother’s house; and despite her own admission of guilt to be "taking [Candace’s] place" (p. 22), she accepts the position of lead soprano, expressing in her action her willingness to supplant older women in order to achieve the community’s approval. For Alma, humility is more than habitual; it expresses her state of mind.

Yet Candace’s own tragedy may touch Alma sooner than she knows. During the ten years which Alma has waited to marry Wilson, "her delicate blond features grew sharper, and her blue eyes more hollow. She had had a certain fine prettiness, but now she was losing it, and beginning to look old, and there was a prim, angular, old maiden carriage about her narrow shoulders. Wilson never noticed it, and never thought of Alma as not possessed of eternal youth, or capable of losing or regretting it" (p. 23). Wilson may not have noticed, but Candace has. When she sees Alma walking to the afternoon service with Wilson Ford, she thinks to herself, "She’s thin as a rail...; guess there won’t be much left of her by the time Wilson gets her. Little soft-spoken nippin’ thing, she wouldn’t make him no kind of a wife, anyway. Guess it’s jest as well" (p. 29).

In viewing Alma as weak and frail, Candace partly excuses in advance her own threat to disinherit her nephew. When he says he will destroy
her organ and board up the window on the church side of her house if she sings again, she replies, "But I'll tell you one thing, Wilson Ford, after the way you've spoke to-day, you sha'n't never have one cent of my money, an' you can't never marry that Way girl if you don't have it. You can't never take her home to live with your mother, an' this house would have been mighty nice an' convenient for you some day. Now you won't get it. I'm goin' to make another will" (p. 31). But she is also revealing her awareness that Alma Way's potential dismissal is inherent in her own. The discovery of ambition, Freeman implies, may sometimes come with age; it is not yet possible for Alma to discover her own, caught as she remains in her patient waiting for Wilson Ford to marry her, and in her blind acceptance of values which assert the superiority of young over old women. The older woman, remembering youth's illusions of immortality, forgiving the younger one.

Therefore, when Candace's single afternoon of rebellion brings on the illness which, in a week's time, puts her on her death bed, she refuses to carry out her threat. She tells her nephew, "I ain't altered that—will. You an' Alma can—come here an'—live—when I'm—gone" (p. 35). And she asks Alma to sing for her. Perry Westbrook interprets the story's ending as sentimental. On the contrary, Candace Whitcomb leaves Alma Way with what the reader can only interpret as a warning. When Alma finishes, and when Candace's own life has come to an end, the older woman yet insists that Alma face the truth of her own singing. "You flatted a little on—soul" (p. 36), she tells her, reminding Alma not only of the inevitable decline of her voice, and therefore the congregation's potential dissatisfaction, but also of her own mortality.

However, even though Candace Whitcomb's rebellious singing has appeared to kill her at the end of the story, it has actually led her to comprehend the nature of her life's ambition and simultaneously to fulfill it. The "red spots on her cheeks," which appear for the first time after she disrupts Alma's singing (p. 30), signal the burning of an intense inner fire which, climactically in the moment of her final generosity in asking Alma Way to sing, marks Candace's transcendence of human limitations and identifies her capacity for vision.

Freeman links Candace's burgeoning vision with her apparent illness. After she has threatened to disinherit Wilson Ford and he has left her house, Candace goes into her kitchen to start a fire in the stove. She has not eaten anything all day and intends to make some tea. Yet while the fire in the kitchen stove roars, she remains in her sitting-room until the fire burns out and does not put on the kettle. As she sits, her head begins to ache "harder and harder, and she shivered more" (p. 32). When she goes about locking her house in preparation for bed, she stands a minute at the back door, "looking over the fields to the woods."

There was a red light over there. 'The woods are on fire,' said Candace. She watched with a dull interest the flames roll up, withering and destroying the tender green spring foliage' (pp. 32-33). The fire is linked so intimately to the roar of her own "intenser fire," by which "the growths of all her springs and the delicate wontedness of her whole life were going down" (p. 33), that the fire she thinks she sees may in fact reflect her hallucination. When in the morning she calls to a passing boy to find a doctor and the spring wind blows in her face, it only seems to fan the twin fires of her physical decline but increasing spiritual illumination. Her gray hair contrasts here again with her "red cheeks," themselves the embers of her own revolution.

Even though no one else believes she will die, and the doctor calls her illness "merely a light run of fever," she gives up from the first. "She did not seem to suffer much physical pain; she only grew weaker and weaker, but she was distressed mentally" (p. 33). In her rebellion she established herself as the church's "revolutionary parishioner," its pariah, its old maiden lady now doubly stigmatized. In her mental distress, she discovers the possibility of her own redemption as well as her identity as classical scapegoat. For she achieves a vision of humanity denied those more apparently pious Christians in her congregation and simultaneously takes on a Christ-like martyrdom, becoming living proof to her society that in rejecting the humanity of women, they have denied their own. Therefore, when she tells Alma, "You flatted a little on—soul," the statement acts as Candace's gentle reprimand both to Alma—and to the men of the church. In asking her rival to sing she takes a humble position relative to her earlier rebellion, and the action gives her community an emblem of humility. Her illness has therefore offered her the power of redeeming her community's "disease." In forgiving her rival, her nephew, and her congregation, and in asking forgiveness for her own actions (p. 30), she exemplifies the humanity they must learn to emulate.

At the same time she shows them the consequence of their actions. While she listens to Alma singing at her bedside, "her face had a holy and radiant expression. When Alma stopped singing it did not disappear, but she looked up and spoke, and it was like a secondary glimpse of the old shape of a forest tree through the smoke and flame of the transfiguring fire the instant before it falls" (p. 36). The radiance of Candace's face expresses the completeness with which she achieves her vision. When she speaks, those watching receive a "secondary glimpse" of her rebellion through the new "transfiguring fire" of her illumination. And in her brightness, they have the opportunity of perceiving that they have lighted the flames of her end no less than the early Christians set the torch to their own martyrs. Candace asks Alma to sing "Jesus, lover of my soul" but she proves herself to be Alma's—the soul's—true lover. Candace, the old woman "turned out" by a congregation of
Christians who deemed her less than human, shows herself as the true Christian, indeed a type of Christ in female form.

When she confronted the minister with the similarity between his position and hers, Candace had bitterly proposed, "I dun know but it would be a good idea to send everybody, as soon as they get a little old an' gone by, an' young folks begin to push, onto some desert island, an' give 'em each a photograph album. Then they can sit down an' look at pictures the rest of their days. Mebbe government 'll take it up" (p. 26).

The religion which enshrines old men while it pushes old women onto desert islands with nothing but photographs to look at "the rest of their days" ironically manifests the malaise it purports to redeem. "A Village Singer" demonstrates that a society which negates the humanity of women actually limits its potential for spiritual vision. In the "homely freedom" with which Candace Whitcomb sings, solo, at her own parlor organ—turning away as she has been turned away from humanity—she forces her congregation to hear what they have refused to see. In breaking her own habit of humility, then in consciously humbling herself by asking her rival to sing for her—becoming Alma's symbolic "footstool"—she leads her community to the possibility of achieving a meek sense of their own human insignificance, whether born women or men.

Yet "A Village Singer" finally offers little hope that Candace's society will be able to comprehend the significance of her death for them. Candace Whitcomb takes her place among other rebellious women protagonists in Freeman, in stories like "A Modern Dragon," "A Mistaken Charity," and "An Independent Thinker" from A Humble Romance (1887), and "A Poetess," "Christmas Jenny," "Louisa," "A Church Mouse," and "The Revolt of 'Mother' " from A New England Nun (1891). Freeman's adherence to realism prevents her from depicting a society in which the rebellious women end in anything but tragedy, death, separatism—or at best a symbolic victory—because they live in a world which views any evidence of eccentricity or social deviance as yet another female illness. Candace Whitcomb's eyes follow everyone "with an agonized expression" (p. 33) because she fears being misunderstood even in her death.

Our reconsideration of this and other fiction by Mary Wilkins Freeman yields new insights into the nature of Candace's fear—and the position of women in nineteenth century New England. "A Village Singer" expresses the tragedy rather than the redemption of Candace Whitcomb's society, but it need not predetermine that of our own. Her community's view of the essential inhumanity of old women prevents them from perceiving themselves in her. In accepting the idea that women in possession of will represent society's anomalies, Freeman's critics, like

12. For a fuller discussion of these and other stories, see Marjorie Pryse, ed., Selected Stories of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (New York: Norton, 1983), especially "Critical Afterword: The Stories."
the members of Candace's congregation, have cut themselves off from participating in her literary transfiguration. Like Alma Way, they have "flatted a little—on soul." As we more fully comprehend the vision of women protagonists like Candace Whitcomb, we will find our literary history less haunted by its dismissal of her "agonized expression."

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