

The "Nun" as Palimpsest: Teaching Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "A New England Nun" as an Introduction to Issues of Gender, Genre, Historical, Cultural Context, and Internet Research

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Of the works of regional realism to be found in most anthologies, I find that "A New England Nun" works best for teaching in sophomore-level American literature survey courses, and does so in a way that neatly dovetails with reliable and easily available resources on the Internet. The story lends itself, simultaneously, to a New Critical reading of elements, a historical and cultural reading about middle-class, small-town life at the end of the nineteenth century, and a gender reading about the roles assigned to men, women, and, most particularly, "spinsters." In addition, the story appeals to many students because it concerns ideas to which they can connect more readily than in much other regional realist fiction: awkward dates, the expectations about (and held by) men and women in relationships, the costs and benefits of nonconformity, the changing social opinions about notions of personal honor, obligations, and marriage, and the ongoing American self-mythologizing advocating the virtues of small-town life. Many of the concerns it raises are also well-documented in terms of photographs, cartoons, and facsimile books and other ephemera from free Internet sites, making the story an ideal one for Internet-facilitated assignments. Where time allows, I cover this story using these techniques over a three-hour period, split over two or three classes, but this approach can also be pared down to emphasize only two or three aspects of the story.

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1852-1930) was, of course, a New England regional realist and self-supporting female writer who made her living selling poems and stories to magazines like *Harper's Bazaar*. Her short stories frequently revolved around the changing role of small-town women as they began to rebel against "an exhausted Puritan patriarchy" (626). In her 1891 story "A New England Nun," Louisa Ellis, engaged for 15 years to Joe Dagget, who left after their engagement to seek his fortune in Australia, finds herself struggling to adapt to the idea of marriage now that he has finally returned. During those years, they have seldom even exchanged letters and whatever mild passion Louisa may have felt at the beginning has ebbed now as she has adjusted quite happily to a life of quiet independence. Joe's return has introduced disorder into her intensely ordered life, a fact made clear by the description of one awkward evening visit by Joe to her small house. Both feel an intense sense of obligation, however, and neither plans to break the engagement, or even hints at doing so. Louisa, however, while out walking one night during the week before the wedding, hears Joe and Lily, a younger, very personable and well-liked woman in town, arguing. They are arguing, somewhat contrarily, that neither of them would be so dishonorable as to break Joe's engagement to Louisa, although Joe and Lily are clearly in love. Louisa, now aware that Joe does not truly love her, chooses to release him from their engagement so that he may wed Lily instead, and returns thankfully to her independent, "narrow" life as a sort of "New England Nun."

As one might expect, I preface our class discussion with a quick set of "bullet points" about the characteristics and techniques most associated with realism, regional realism, sentimentalism, and domestic fiction, and continue to refer back to these, left on the board or whiteboard projector, throughout our discussion. I then segue to an equally visual presentation by showing students a PowerPoint presentation with photos of small-town

American life at the end of the nineteenth-century, men and women in typical middle-class attire, and Victorian interiors like parlors and kitchens, in order to give them a vivid context for the story.<sup>1</sup> Our discussion of the men and women in these photographs, including courting lovers on bicycles built for two, leads us into a discussion of the nature of American heterosexual courtship and marriage at the end of the nineteenth century, and in particular, what social expectations were for men and women at different ages of their lives.

At this point, we turn to identifying the particular ways in which nineteenth-century Americans could leave the primary social paradigm of courtship-marriage-family, and, before bringing up the term myself, I ask students if there is any sort of special name in modern life for older, unmarried women. If no one mentions any stereotype which seems related to the "spinster," I bring up the idea of the aging "biological clock" of older women, a very common cultural obsession during the late 1990s and early 2000s, and thus come to the idea of the "spinster." We then have a brief historical exposition on the idea of the "spinster" – the economic role she actually played in many families, the historical circumstances that could produce a larger number of women than men in a given generation, the ways in which "spinster" status and "Boston marriages" allowed for some degree of individual freedom from that dominant paradigm, and the cultural anxieties that lay behind the negative stereotypes and jokes attached to the "spinster."

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<sup>1</sup> These photographs are largely taken from various volumes of the Time-Life series *This Fabulous Century*.

At this point, we return to a visual presentation, and consider a set of "spinster" cartoons from the late nineteenth century, as well as a range of cartoons from the 20<sup>th</sup> century (shown through a browser project via a "spinster" keyword search at [www.cartoonstock.com](http://www.cartoonstock.com), that demonstrate the remarkable persistence of the "spinster" stereotype.<sup>2</sup> The remarkably mean-spirited nature of these cartoons emphasizes the power of the stereotype that Freeman is attempting to overturn in her revaluing of "spinster" into "nun." Richard Lingeman's *Small Town America: A Narrative History 1620-The Present* (1980) offers a succinct one-page summary of the pressure put on unmarried but marriageable women in small towns, and I offer them his anecdote about the woman so desperate to avoid a spinster's fate that when her fiancé fled before their wedding that she "nevertheless took his name, moved to a far-off town in the West, and lived as his widow for the remaining forty years of her life" (277). As Lingeman notes, the spinster was "tacitly released from her duty to marry and selflessly serve her husband on the condition that she selflessly serve others," thus making Louisa's self-centered life something of a revolutionary act in itself (277).

Freeman begins her story by describing the bucolic quality of the small-town setting. I contextualize this for them with quotations from the "Apotheosis of the Small Town" chapter of Lingeman's *Small Town America*, and suggest that such American self-mythologizing lends a universal quality to Freeman's revaluation of the spinster image.<sup>3</sup> We then

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<sup>2</sup> Note that Cartoonstock's FAQ allows for this educational use of cartoons only within US classrooms, unfortunately.

<sup>3</sup> "[The small town was the urban place where people met, gossiped, bought, sold, bartered, exchanged, learned. Next to the individual farm, it was the irreducible social and governmental unit of American society, the economic and political center that was closest at hand to most of the people. Down all those Main Streets flowed the quiet main stream of American life . . . or so its boosters thought" (Lingeman 262).

move to the immediately following paragraphs in which Freeman details the fastidious rituals of Louisa's daily life. At this point, I ask them which details seem to stand out to them as an example of Louisa being *excessively* concerned with cleanliness and order in this moment before Joe's arrival. Our discussion of Louisa's careful disposal of currant-stems then moves to her careful rearrangement of her albums and gift books after Joe slightly disturbs them during his awkward visit to her house, and then her studied self-restraint when he knocks over spools of thread ("'Never mind,' said she; 'I'll pick them up after you're gone'") (628). We then look at her actions after he finally exits, as she puts the lamp on the floor so she can carefully examine the carpet and then sweep up the dust she thinks he's tracked in (629). Freeman's note that Louisa's use of "china every day" is something that none of her neighbors do, and accordingly becomes a reason for their "whispered" gossip, which allows us to talk about the room allowed (or not allowed) for individualism and eccentricity in a small town, as well as how very little difference it requires to excite such gossip in such a setting.

In cases where the students have access to computers during class, or for out-of-class assignments, I sometimes ask them to do a Google Books search of Mrs. Farrar's immensely popular social conduct manual for young women, reprinted throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *The Young Lady's Friend*, looking for insights into the issues raised by this story. Accessing Google Books in class also allows us to discuss the difference between using a credible facsimile source like this versus the occasional student tendency to harvest inferior Internet facsimiles. In cases where time or circumstances do not allow them to conduct this search of *The Young Lady's Friend* themselves, I lead them directly to this passage: "Cleanliness and order are indispensable in a house; but I would not have a lady so bent on removing dust, as to jump up in the

middle of an interesting conversation, to wipe away a few particles that have settled on a piece of furniture in the room . . . Some housekeepers are so nice, that the whole comfort of the family is sacrificed to a perpetual warfare against dust" (22). Even Louisa's sewing indicates her lack of compatibility with a potential family life: "She would have been loath to confess how more than once she had ripped a seam for the mere delight of sewing it together again" (630) can be usefully juxtaposed with Farrar's "[Much time] may also be wasted in finical nicety. While it is important to do everything well, it is equally so not to bestow more pains and time on anything than it is worth. In needle-work, for instance, there is often a useless sacrifice of time, labor, and eyesight, and twice as many stitches are put into a garment as are requisite for durability or appearance" (22).

The mild, oddly stilted, and seemingly passionless engagement of Joe and Louisa also offers fertile ground for discussion. Although most students have some idea about the central idea that social values change over time, they often persist in misreading a romanticized notion of greater passion into what the story actually says about Louisa's mild and ambivalent feelings about Joe even at the very moment of their engagement: "Fifteen years ago she had been in love with him—at least she considered herself to be . . . she had seen marriage ahead as a reasonable feature and a probable desirability of life" (629). At this point, we typically discuss the problems that seem as if they might reasonably be associated with a "long-range" or "long-term" relationship for a couple, and of course, students of both traditional and nontraditional ages often offer anecdotal examples of these problems from their own personal experience. Discussing the issue through the lens of their personal experience also offers me the chance to discuss the exact nature of a "close reading" of the text rather than a less focused skimming for content: although students are inclined to argue that "Louisa seems to be motivated by her love for Joe and anxiously awaiting his return," to quote

one online student, Freeman actually presents exactly the opposite perspective: "she had never felt discontented nor impatient over her lover's absence" (630). Many members of a generation of students shaped by *Titanic* can read words like those and simply gloss right past them in favor of the dominant paradigm of "romance" as presented in popular media: intense, sexualized, and emotional. Louisa's acceptance of Joe in fact seems to be largely predicated by her mother's favoring his suit: "She had listened with calm docility to her mother's views upon the subject" (630).

Indeed, the story's celebration of *mildness* often eludes student readers on every level throughout the story. When Joe slightly rearranges the things in her house and tracks a bit of dust onto Louisa's spotless floors, Freeman characterizes Louisa's response as moving from "solemn cordiality" to "mild stiffness" to the feelings "the kind-hearted, long-suffering owner of the china shop might have [felt] after the exit of the bear" (628-629). One online student mischaracterized this range of responses as consisting of bitterness and sore feelings. Even during Freeman's account of Louisa's "enthusiasm of an artist over the mere order and cleanliness of her solitary home, she merely "almost" had this enthusiasm. She has "throbs of genuine triumph" at the sight of her clean window panes, not a wave of triumph, and her gloating "over her orderly bureau drawers, with their exquisitely folded contents redolent of lavender and sweet clover and very purity" is only done "gently" (631). We often debate whether or not all this represents Louisa's lack of genuine passion or merely her immense self-control, and this discussion of course serves to reiterate the way in which "passion" as an emotion is evoked throughout this story.

The degree to which these discrepancies between Freeman's actual words and the passionate *Titanic* lens of romance and relationships through which many students persist in viewing them offers a splendid

opportunity for discussing the nature of a close reading, and I usually begin this discussion by asking them to write down their impression of how both Joe and Louisa feel about their relationship both at the beginning and here at the end. Moving on from this discussion about the dangers in skimming the text, a lively discussion often ensues about the proper role of intense passion in relationships, particularly in a relationship seemingly fated to continue into a lifetime of marriage. Students invariably persist in arguing that an engagement should be motivated by passion rather than social expectation and obligation, which leads us to a discussion of 19<sup>th</sup> century notions about male and female passion and sexuality, as well as the idea that such interpretations of "natural reality" are culturally, not biologically, constructed.

This same "flashback" passage about Joe and Louisa's engagement also yields the information that rather than moving directly into marriage, Louisa and Joe do get engaged only to have Joe leave immediately for Australia to "secure a competency before they should be married" (629). Although students, and particularly older, non-traditional students, are aware of the demands of the "domestic economy" in a marriage, they are decidedly less familiar with the old stereotypical scene in which a father would take a young man aside and ask him "how are you going to be able to take care of my daughter" when consulted on an engagement. A discussion of this point leads us into the question of what constituted proper middle-class behavior for men wishing to retain their honor and self-image as "gentlemen."

At the same, I caution students that the nineteenth-century was no different from their own in offering a range of political and social opinion, heterogeneous rather than monolithic, and I either direct them to search or lead them directly to this passage from the Rev. George W. Hudson's *The Marriage Guide for Young Men* (1883, also available via Google Books): "It is a mistake for a young man to wait (for marriage) until he has a

fortune" (54). Hudson also offers us an interesting insight with regards to the general 1883 thinking on the dangers of long bachelor- (and by inference, spinster-) hood: "The young man ought to marry by thirty, at the furthest; because, if he defers it longer, he begins to take on the habits of the disagreeable old bachelor; his nature begins to assume a fixedness and rigidity which will not permit it to blend with another" (54). At this point, we shift our discussion to the question of whether Joe or Louisa seems more interested and better suited for marriage, and, not infrequently, some discussion of rigid and inflexible dorm or apartment roommates ensues.

In a formalist reading of literary elements, it's notable that the story has no clearly personified antagonist as such, in part because all three main characters are presented as people of intense personal honor and an inflexible code of ethics. Offering students a standard definition of antagonist as "the most significant character or force that opposes the protagonist in a narrative," however, often evokes some interesting responses, with some students pegging the protagonist as society with its gender roles and expectations, and some arguing that Louisa herself becomes the antagonist to Joe and Lily, and in some ways to herself – that the younger Louisa, with her promises to Joe, has become her own worst enemy. Two points of classic symbolism also stand out: Louisa's pet canary, which flutters frantically when Joe enters her house, and her elderly dog Caesar, "a veritable hermit of a dog," always chained or leashed because of her fears that he will turn savage (having bitten one person fourteen years ago), and which Joe plans to unchain once they are married (631).

The canary discussion is fairly straightforward for any teacher accustomed to the usual elements of formalist criticism, but Caesar offers a more interesting complexity: a male dog who threatens disorder, but who has been kept under tight control, even to the extent of being fed bland food like thin corn-cakes and corn-mush, and never any "flesh and

bones" (627, 631). For the village, and clearly for Louisa, "his reputation overshadowed him, so that he lost his own proper outlines and looked darkly vague and enormous," language that closely echoes the entrance of Joe Dagget into Louisa's house where he "seemed to fill up the whole room" (627). Students frequently want to equate Caesar with Louisa only, because both live restricted lives "on a chain," but considering the possibility that Caesar's masculine qualities reflect something about masculinity itself, as imagined in nineteenth-century American culture, leads us into the question of what qualities defined "masculinity" then versus what define it now, a question that I usually contextualize with the overview offered by E. Anthony Rotundo's *American Manhood: Transformations In Masculinity From The Revolution To The Modern Era* (1994). Again, where time and technology allows, we sometimes do a individual or group Internet search for advertisements or magazine photos which seem to illustrate the individual virtues attributed to "masculinity" (sports ads, fashion ads, liquor ads, and so on).

The story's rising action comes to its climax when Louisa overhears the conversation between Joe and Lily, a conversation that reminds us of the obligations attached to the idea of an engagement, as well as illustrating that Lily herself would be a worthy wife to Joe since she is both passionately attached to him and too honorable to allow him to break his engagement even if he wished to do so (633). The somewhat contrived nature of the "eavesdropping" mechanic in this sequence often leads us to a discussion of the ways in which "accidental disclosure" of information has affected their own lives, and from that, referring back to our elements of realistic and sentimental fiction, to the question of whether or not we would classify this as a "realist" element or a more "sentimental" or

"melodramatic" one, since its presence alone enables the story's larger "spinster-as-nun" reconfiguration.<sup>4</sup>

As our class discussion of the story comes to a conclusion, we turn naturally to the story's own closing passages, which describe Louisa as "a queen who, after fearing lest her domain be wrested away from her, sees it firmly insured in her possession" and embraces her "birthright" and future of "serenity and placid narrowness," and we consider once again the question of Freeman's apparent purpose in writing the story (634). To what extent has she reconfigured the negative stereotype of "spinster" into a positive notion of a "New England nun"? Careful student readers often note here, if they have not noted before, that "narrowness" as a word choice itself conveys the idea of a non-normative or transgressive lifestyle choice: does the story thus imply that if Louisa is not a "spinster," she is also not entirely "wide," as it were, or partaking of the full range of human life? We discuss this idea in some detail, a debate which again encourages students to return to close reading of passages and indeed the implications of single words in order to support their positions. After bringing this discussion to a close, we briefly recap the different ways in which we have considered the story, and I encourage them to consider our future readings over the course of the semester with a similarly wide range of interpretations. Discussing "A New England Nun" in this fashion also allows for a smooth thematic (if not always chronological) segue into Henry James's "Daisy Miller: A Study," Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron," Charles W. Chesnutt's "The Wife of His Youth," Kate Chopin's

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<sup>4</sup> Although I agree that one has to guide discussions where "real-life" examples are used in order to keep them from losing focus on literary works, like many other teachers I have found that judiciously arranging such moments through the course of a lengthy discussion of a work serves to revive flagging interest in the classroom.

"The Awakening," and other frequently anthologized works of realism and regionalism.

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