Out of place : the (gender) politics of Mary Wilkins Freeman's regionalist portraits

Martin, Caroline

Out of Place: The (Gender) Politics of Mary Wilkins Freeman's Regionalist Portraits

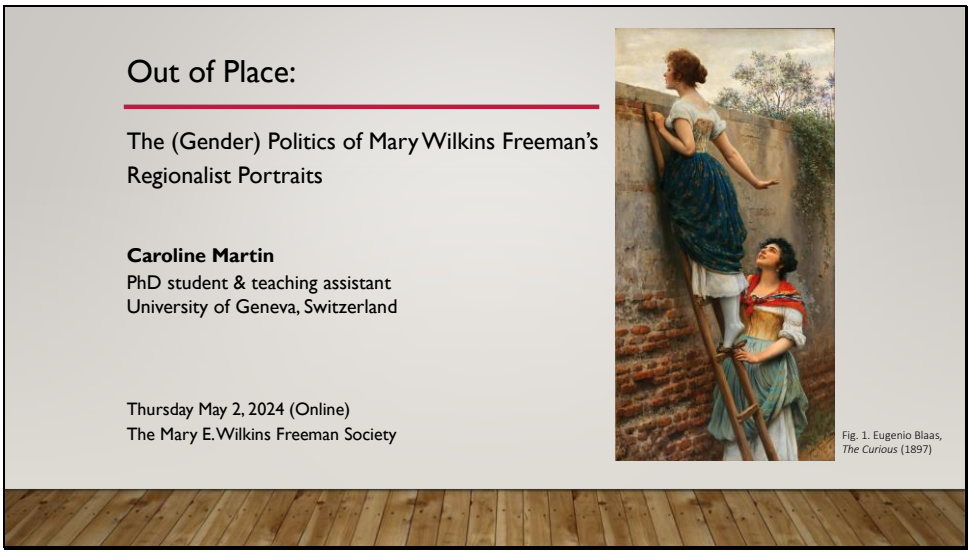
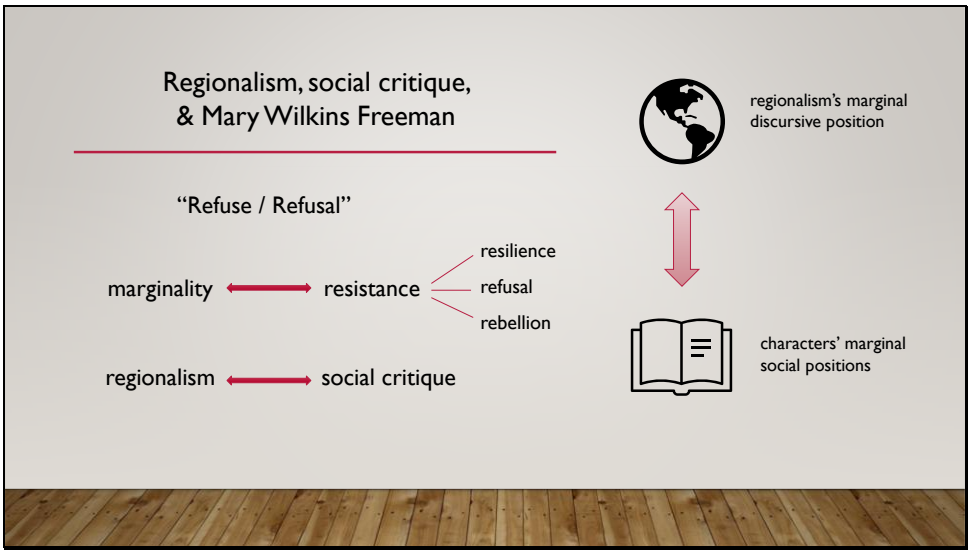


Fig. 1. Eugenio Blaas, *The Curious* (1897)

By way of introduction, some context about the genesis of this paper: I wrote a first version of this talk for the 2023 conference of the British Association of Nineteenth-Century Americanists (BrANCA), the theme of which was "refuse/refusal." This conceptual pair immediately reminded me of Mary Wilkins Freeman's short fiction, which often features marginalized protagonists resisting or rebelling against their circumstances, either passively—by displaying an almost supernatural degree of resilience—or assertively—by openly refusing to conform. In the most memorable cases, the stories culminate in rather violent outbursts, the scale of which contrasts with the seemingly trivial circumstances that precipitated the crisis.



On a broader scale, the correlation between these two cognates—on the one hand, the state of being marginal, useless, or unimportant (refuse), and on the other, the act of resisting the norms that underlie this evaluation (refusal)—recalls another correlation, that between regionalism and social critique that some scholars argue is constitutive of the genre itself. The tension between marginality and resistance thus operates both at the intra- and extratextual levels, since the characters' marginal position in the fiction thus mirror that of the text outside of the fiction.

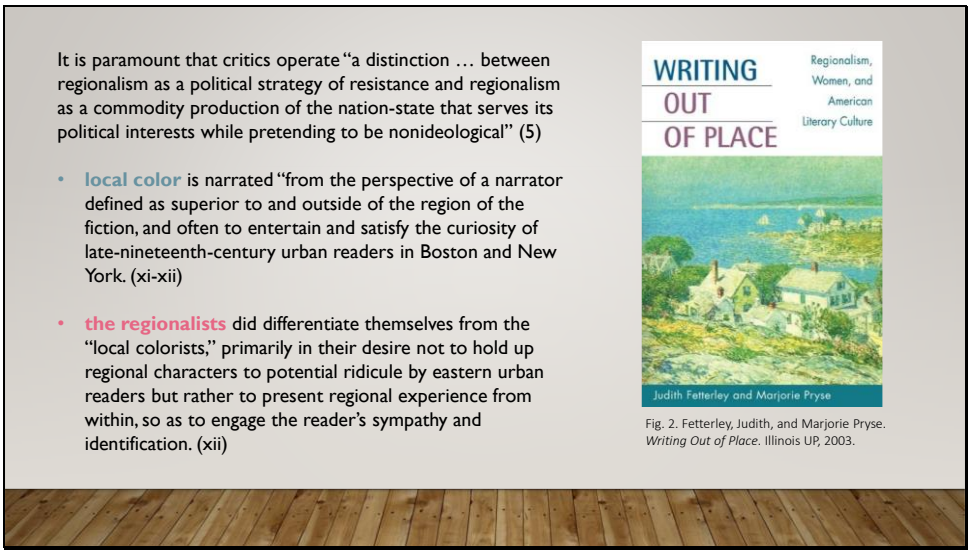


Fig. 2. Fetterley, Judith, and Marjorie Pryse. *Writing Out of Place*. Illinois UP, 2003.

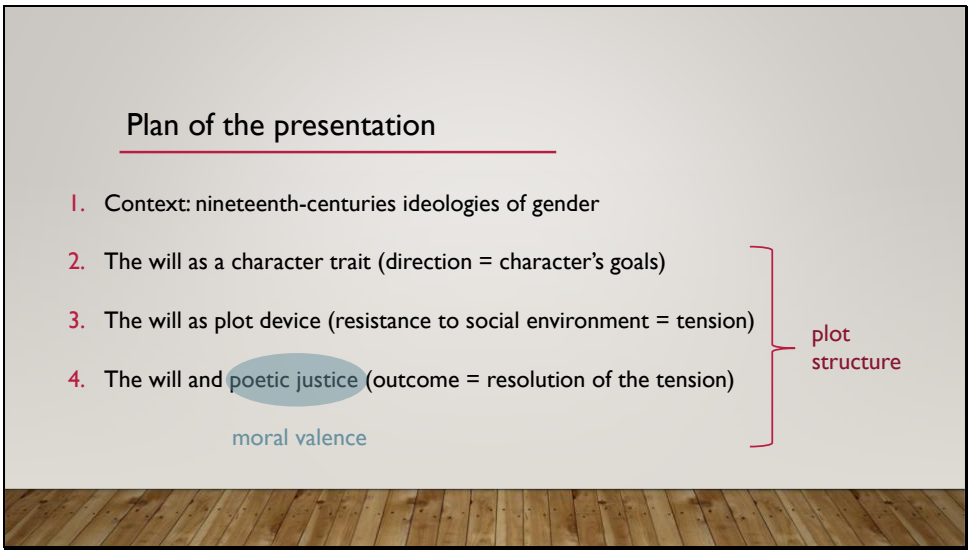
My thinking is indebted to Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse's book *Writing Out of Place* (2003), which makes a compelling case for the redefinition of regionalism as inherently implicated in social critique.[1] To summarize their argument, the concept of "region" necessarily involves a larger political unit (often the nation) against which it is defined or defines itself. This dialectical relationship between the nation and the region, often cast in spatial terms as a form of distance between a cultural "center" and its "margin," makes regionalist production a site of ideological struggle, each side competing to establish its set of cultural norms by appropriating the other discursively.

Thus, Fetterley and Pryse note, it is paramount that critics operate "a distinction … between regionalism as a political strategy of resistance and regionalism as a commodity production of the nation-state that serves its political interests while pretending to be nonideological" (5). To solve this ambiguity, they propose to distinguish between the labels "regionalism" and "local-color fiction" (often used synonymously) in order to make visible the discursive position from which these cultural productions are articulated. While local color is narrated "from the perspective of a narrator defined

[1] I should note that I did not name this paper after their book title, but only realized this coincidence later.

as superior to and outside of the region of the fiction, and often to entertain and satisfy the curiosity of late-nineteenth-century urban readers in Boston and New York" (xi-xii).

By contrast, they argue, the regionalists did differentiate themselves from the "local colorists," primarily in their desire not to hold up regional characters to potential ridicule by eastern urban readers but rather to present regional experience from within, so as to engage the reader's sympathy and identification (xii). Defined thus, regionalism not only designates a change of scale in terms of scope, but also an epistemological shift from center to margin that opens up alternative viewpoints from which the situatedness of national (or transnational) cultural imagination becomes visible. Just as the region may be instrumentalized for the naturalization of cultural norms, as in the case of local color fiction, it can also function as a site of contestation where norms can be redefined.



It is very likely that this theoretical framework would yield interesting answers if applied to all of the social issues Freeman engages with in her work. This is to say, one could consider how the vectors of class, age, or physical vulnerability intersect with her characters' regional traits, but this is of course way too broad for a 30min presentation. For this reason, I focus exclusively on the question of gender and its mapping onto New England regional psychology. Also, I should add, I restrict my scope to a selection of Freeman's early short fiction, most of which is drawn from her two most famous collections, so this is another direction in which this question could be taken: do the patterns I identify in the fifteen or so stories that I consider today also apply to a larger and/or later sample of her fiction? This I leave to specialists to figure out.

Specifically, then, I will be looking at the function of the individual will in relation to the problematic of gender. As virtually all of Freeman's studies have shown, this trait is often central to her characters, and it is particularly significant since it is associated in the American imaginary with the country's Puritan origins and therefore with New England. To summarize the substance of my argument, I believe that this motif operates on two levels in Freeman: structurally, it functions as a textual indicator of the characters' moral compass, thereby either legitimizing or satirizing their plight. Culturally, it serves to counteract dehumanizing nineteenth-century discourses about women,

especially poor, unmarried, elderly and/or disabled ones. In short, my argument is that by endowing her female characters with a strong sense of individuality and purpose, Freeman exploits the regional mode to subvert national discourses of identity in the service of her critique of separate spheres ideology.

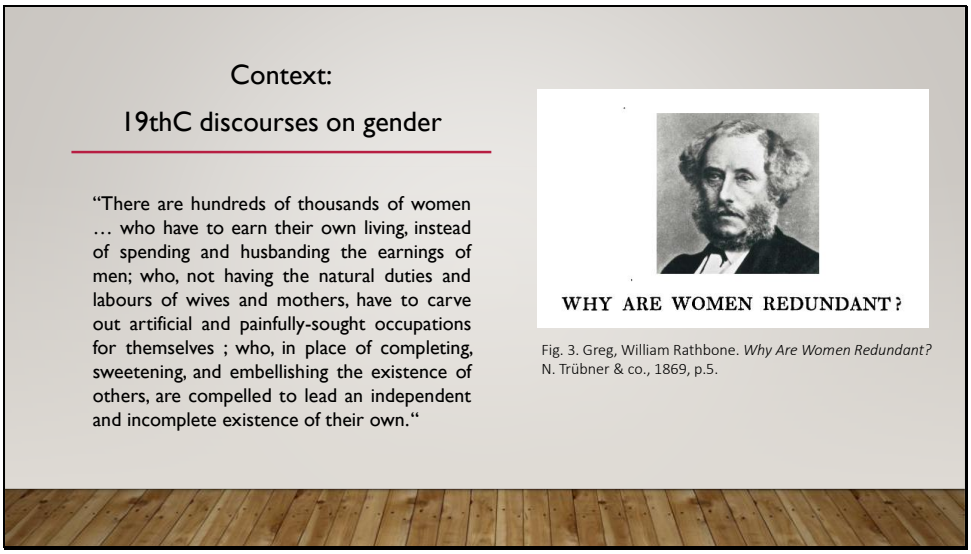


Fig. 3. Greg, William Rathbone. *Why Are Women Redundant?* N. Trübner & co., 1869, p.5.

To begin, then, some elements about the relationship between Freeman's work as a whole and her discursive context. In nineteenth-century discourses of true womanhood, the only available subject position for adult women was that of wife and/or mother. The logic of this ideology was routinely pushed to what our modern sensitivity would call extremes, exemplified for instance in William Rathbone Greg's infamous article "Why are Women Redundant?" published in the American *National Review* in 1862 and issued as a book in 1869. (Note that the question is not whether women are redundant, but *why*…) Specifically, Greg was responding to the numbers made public by the British national census, which had begun to incorporate marital status as one of their statistics indicators in the 1850s. His conclusions, as you might expect, are alarming:

> There are hundreds of thousands of women … who have to earn their own living, instead of spending and husbanding the earnings of men; who, not having the natural duties and labours of wives and mothers, have to carve out artificial and painfully-sought occupations for themselves; who, in place of completing, sweetening, and embellishing the existence of others, are compelled to lead an independent and incomplete existence of their own. (5)

This passage, which I will comment on in a minute, is particularly eloquent in its explicit characterization of unmarried women as "incomplete" beings and its depiction of female independence as the worst tragedy that could befall a woman.

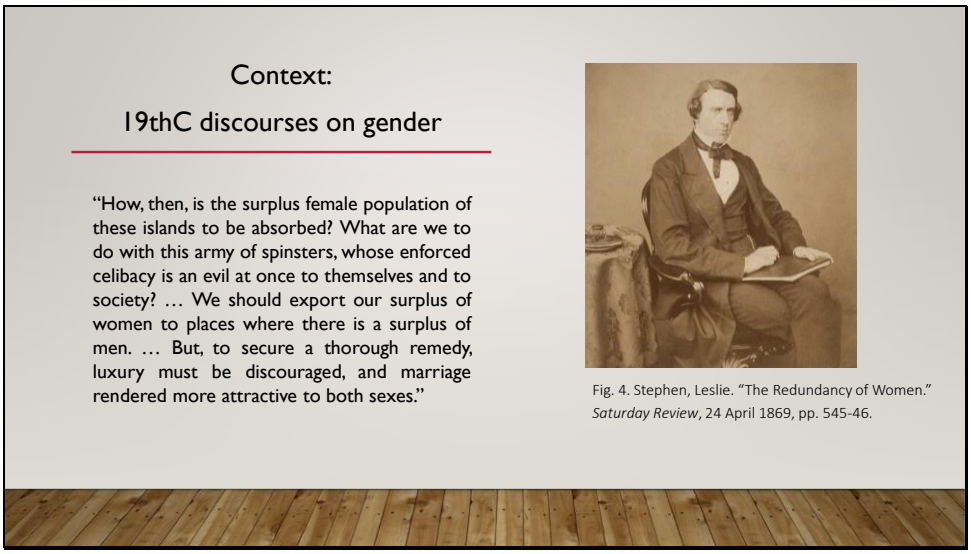


Fig. 4. Stephen, Leslie. "The Redundancy of Women." *Saturday Review*, 24 April 1869, pp. 545-46.

In a response to Greg's pamphlet published the same year under the title "The Redundancy of Women," Leslie Stephen (Virginia Woolf's father-to-be) concurs with Greg's anxious observations and asks: "How, then, is the surplus female population of these islands to be absorbed? What are we to do with this army of spinsters, whose enforced celibacy is an evil at once to themselves and to society?" His answer: "We should export our surplus of women to places where there is a surplus of men" (546). His example of such places, unsurprisingly, are Frontier states and British colonies. The mapping of social hierarchy onto geographical space that is characteristic of discourses about the "'surplus woman' problem" (Levitan 360) is, I think, particularly striking. The solution advanced by Greg and Stephen materially enacts the marginal status of unmarried women by turning them into literal *refuse* to be shipped off to imperial outposts as a way of reincorporating them into the social order. While Greg uses sentimental language to deplore the spinster's tragic fate, Stephen's military metaphor of the "army of spinsters" illustrates the symbolic threat that unmarried women posed to nineteenth-century ideologies of gender. By the time Freeman started to publish, roughly fifteen years later, eugenics and social Darwinism had added fuel to the fire and further singled out "abnormal" individuals (in the literal sense of departing from the norms) as a threat to the social order, all the while grounding white middle-class hegemony in pseudo-scientific bases.

Fig. 5. "One Good Time." *The Love of Parson Lord and Other Stories.* Harper & Brothers, 1900.

Fig. 6. "The Underling. " *The Fair Lavinia and Others.* Harper & Brothers, 1907.

As many Freeman scholars have noted, although her short fiction engages at length with the question of marriage, it rarely enters the world of matrimony and focuses instead on women's lives *before*, *after*, or *outside* of marital bonds, embodied respectively by three figures: the young maid, the spinster, and the elderly widow. In crude Victorian idiom, then, there are few "True Women" in Freeman's New England, mostly "redundant" women (or potentially redundant, in the case of young girls hesitating to marry). Although each of these types has its specificities and would deserve to be considered on its own terms, I will be discussing them jointly for the sake of my argument. My main question is, then: how does Freman's representation of unmarried women engage with the woman surplus rhetoric? Does their representation draw on, challenge, nuance, or perhaps reinforce the assumptions that underlie these discourses?

At first sight, Greg's tragic tone may seem fitting to describe their lot, struggling as they are to make a living and be accepted as full members of their community. From the homeless Hetty Fifield in "A Church Mouse" (*A New England Nun*) seeking shelter in the village church and threatened to be turned out of doors by an angry mob, to the proud Louisa in the story of the same name toiling in the fields and walking miles in the blazing sun to keep her family fed, or the frail and sickly Shattuck sisters carried off to the poorhouse against their will in "A Mistaken Charity"—pitiful images of vulnerable

women abound in Freeman. Yet, their determination to remain autonomous and the profound sense of fulfillment they find in being independent contradicts the prevailing view by which unmarried women are incomplete, residual, and therefore unhappy.

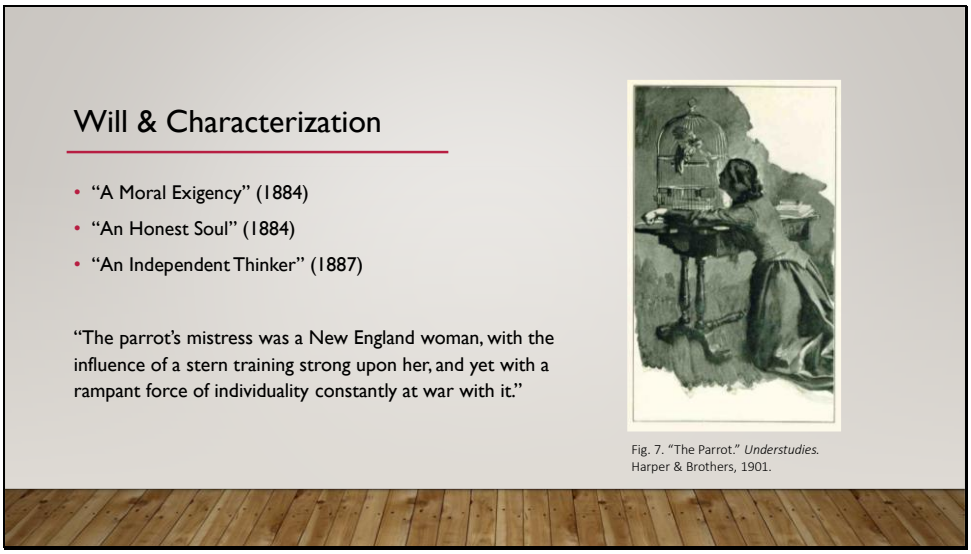
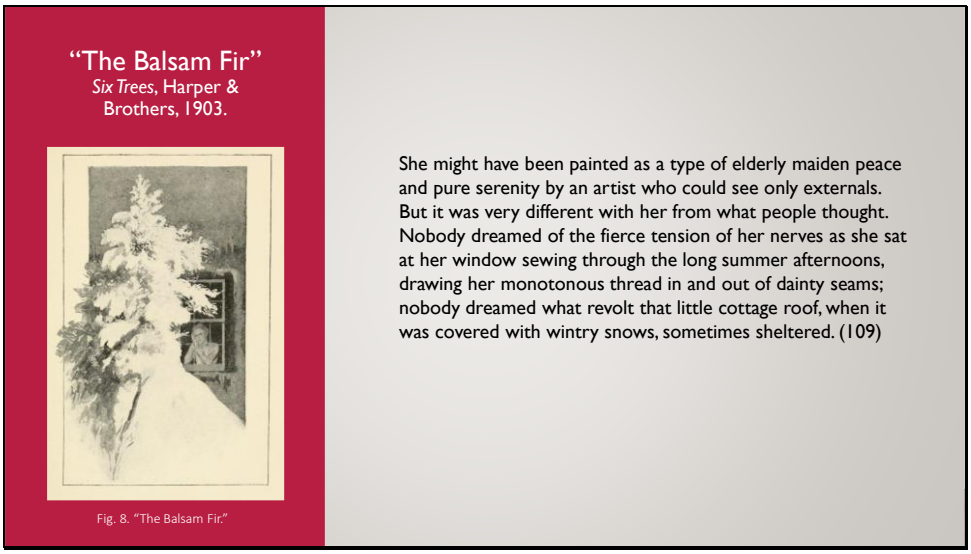


Fig. 7. "The Parrot." *Understudies.* Harper & Brothers, 1901.

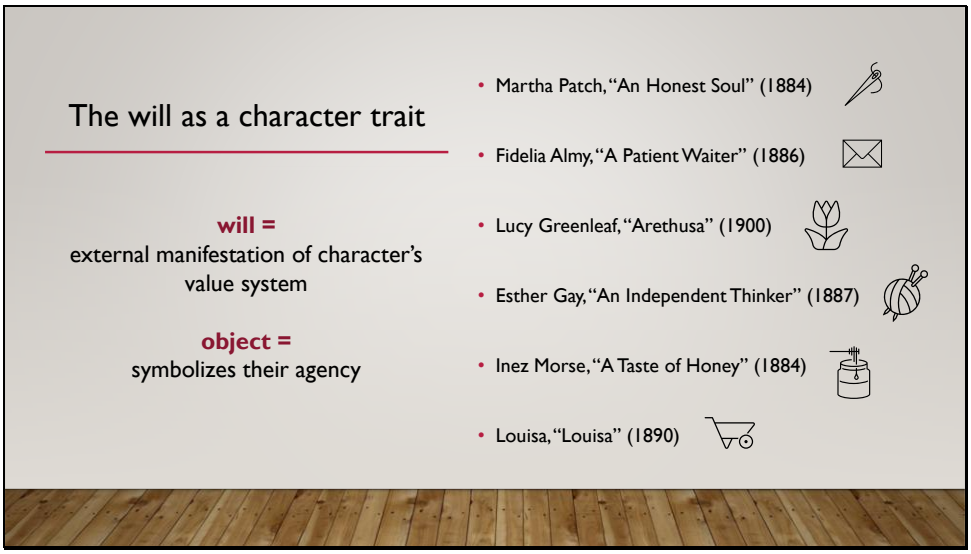
As I hinted in my introduction, Freeman's re-subjectification of unmarried women is contingent on their characterization as strong-willed and possessing a firm, if not rigid, moral sense, two attributes firmly grounded in the New England regional imaginary. The centrality of this trait is sometimes encapsulated in the titles of the stories, such as in "A Moral Exigency," "An Honest Soul," or "An Independent Thinker" for instance. The description of Martha, the protagonist of the short story "The Parrot," is an excellent summary of the typical Freeman heroine and her usual predicament: "The parrot's mistress was a New England woman, with the influence of a stern training strong upon her, and yet with a rampant force of individuality constantly at war with it" (*Understudies* 65). In fact, this short sentence could be applied word for word to all of the stories I consider in this paper (with the exception of the parrot of course) and aptly illustrate their basic plot structure which, as I mentioned earlier, hinges on the tension that is established between the pressure to conform, on the one hand, and the pull of the character's will, on the other, which is directed towards self-assertion.



Few passages illustrate this latent structure better than the exposition of the short story "A Balsam Fir" and the presentation of its protagonist, Martha Elder:

> She might have been painted as a type of elderly maiden peace and pure serenity by an artist who could see only externals. But it was very different with her from what people thought. Nobody dreamed of the fierce tension of her nerves as she sat at her window sewing through the long summer afternoons, drawing her monotonous thread in and out of dainty seams; nobody dreamed what revolt that little cottage roof, when it was covered with wintry snows, sometimes sheltered. (*Six Trees* 108-109)

In this story as in many others, the humdrum of everyday life and the triviality of the incidents represented mask much more "serious" issues, which go to the heart of social life and its exacting demands on the individuals that comprise it. By foregrounding the fragility of collective peace in apparently quiet New England villages, Freeman's short fiction dramatizes the precarious balance of interests and needs on which the collective status quo depends.



As the passage from "The Parrot" makes clear (by referring to Martha's "rampant force of individuality"), the protagonists' will functions as an external manifestation of the value system which makes up their individuality. Most of the time, it is represented through an object, often trivial in appearance, on which the protagonist fixates, which eventually takes on a symbolic dimension and represents their agency. In the most extreme cases, the correlation between the characters' will and their identity is made explicit in their very names, which epitomize their obsession. Hence Martha Patch, in "An Honest Soul" (*A Humble Romance*) is a spinster who nearly exhausts herself to death stitching quilts for a living, obstinately refusing to rely on charity.

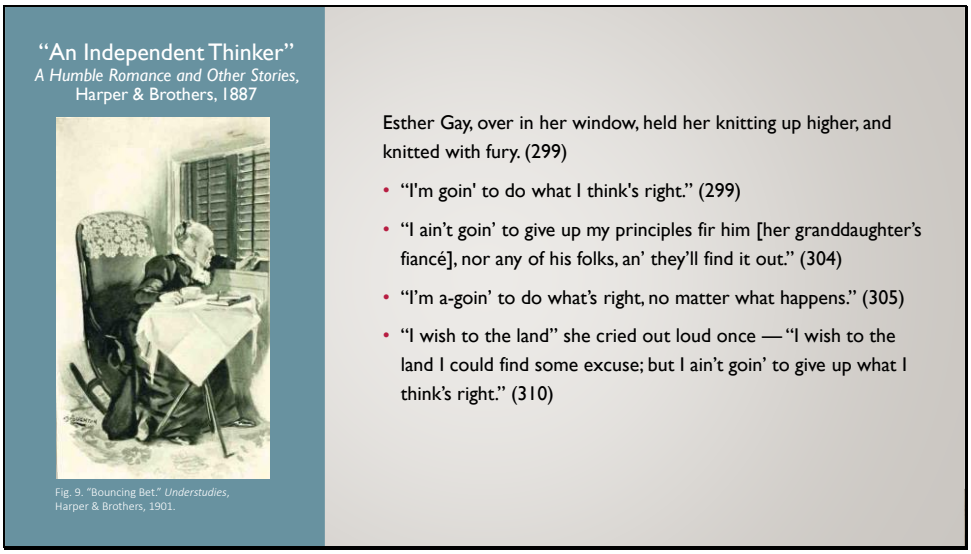
In "A Patient Waiter," Fidelia Almy is an old maid who spends her life walking two miles a day to the post office hoping to hear from a suitor who jilted her thirty years ago and dies claiming, with "triumphant resolution", "I ain't going to give it up yet" (*A Humble Romance* 414). In "Arethusa" (*Understudies*) the analogy between Lucy, the main character, and the flower which she persists on visiting every spring is signified by her last name, Greenleaf. In that respect, it is significant that her future husband's last name is Abbott, and that her marriage implies losing her maiden name, thereby symbolizing the partial loss of identity that occurs in the process. Other examples of characters whose obstinacy functions as a marker of their value system (yet without being explicit in their names)

include Esther Gay, in "An Independent Thinker" (*A Humble Romance)*, a deaf widow who refuses to go to church out of mere conformity, since she is unable to hear the minister's preaching and deems it a better use of her time to stay home knitting to support her neighbors. In "A Taste of Honey" (*A Humble Romance*), Inez Morse refuses to get married before paying back her family's mortgage and ends up single as a consequence. In "Louisa" (*A New England Nun*), lastly, the eponymous protagonist refuses to marry a slightly better-off neighbor even though her family is nearly starving and insists that she is able to provide for them should she be allowed to work like men do. The list goes on...

As these very short summaries suggest, self-affirmation almost systematically takes the form of a refusal to conform, and the characters must resist external pressure to stay true to their convictions and thereby assert their individuality. The extent to which these convictions are presented as legitimate, in other words, whether or not the characters' defiance of social norms is identified as righteous (hence constructive) or immoral (hence destructive) depends on two things: the values that motivate their actions, and their ability to react proportionately to their circumstances by balancing their own needs and those of the community. Both criteria must be met for the characters to be rewarded by poetic justice, and any excess in either direction is usually condemned as such and corrected.

The closing scenes almost systematically serve to clarify the moral framework of the story. In "A Taste of Honey," Inez realizes that her honey tastes just as better in the company of her mother as it would have with her ex-lover. In "Louisa," she succeeds to secure food for her family and looks out into the sunset, thinking about her "sweet, mysterious girlish dreams." However, Fidelia Almy ("A Patient Waiter"), for instance, meets neither of these two conditions: her refusal to accept her lover's desertion is pointless, and her obstinacy is a sign of delusion rather than moral probity. Her life,

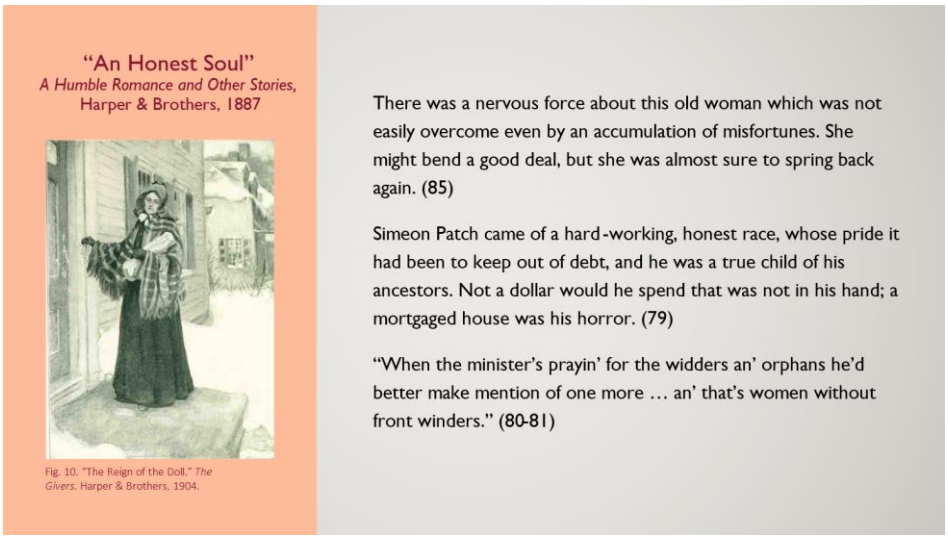
labeled a "sad, foolish destiny," as well as her death scene both confirm the absurdity of her course of action (*A Humble Romance* 403).



Conversely, Esther Gay, the "independent thinker" in the story of the same title, is a perfect example of righteous rebellion and the fault is shown to lie in the community's legalist mindset. At first, her decision to work on Sundays, which the villagers interpret as a sign of immorality, remains mysterious. Her only response to their disapproval is to "h[o]ld her knitting up higher" for all the neighbors to see, "and kni[t] with fury." The only insight into her motives consists in a couple of private exclamations:

> "I ain't goin' to give up my principles fir him [her granddaughter's fiancé], nor any of his folks, an' they'll find it out." … "I'm a-goin' to do what's right, no matter what happens." … "I wish to the land" she cried out loud once — "I wish to the land I could find some excuse; but I ain't goin' to give up what I think's right." (*A Humble Romance* 299)

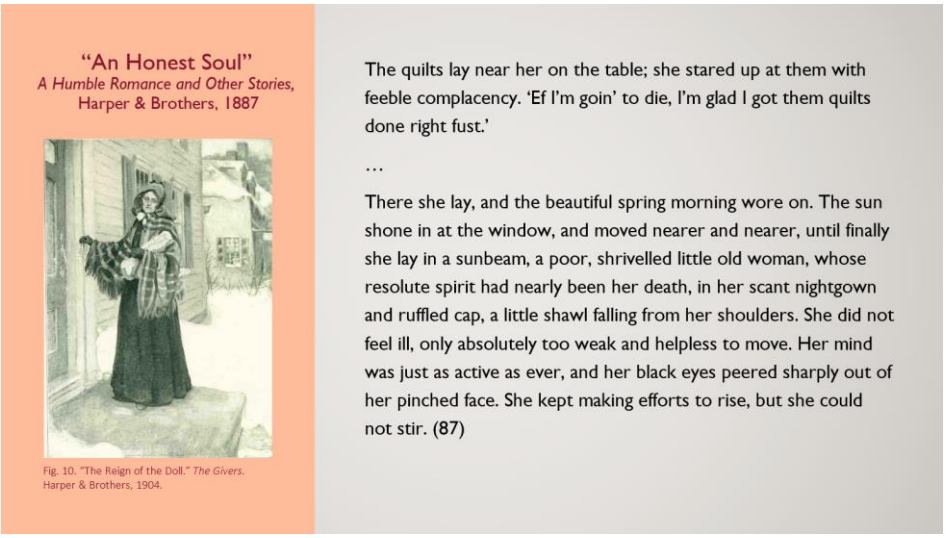
Later, it turns out that her knitting is in fact the means by which she secretly supports the poorest members of the community. When Laviny Dodge, her next-door neighbor, is taken to the poorhouse and falls sick, Esther takes her in and rescues her from an imminent death, thereby restoring her reputation in the village. The resolution thus establishes the superiority of her ethical system over the rigid sense of morality that characterizes the village's attitude.



The situation in "An Honest Soul" is more complex and deserves closer attention. Martha Patch, another sewing spinster, is described as possessing "a nervous force … which was not easily overcome even by an accumulation of misfortunes. She might bend a good deal, but she was almost sure to spring back again." She inherited this trait from her father, a typical New Englander:

> Simeon Patch came of a hard-working, honest race, whose pride it had been to keep out of debt, and he was a true child of his ancestors. Not a dollar would he spend that was not in his hand; a mortgaged house was his horror. (*A Humble Romance* 79)

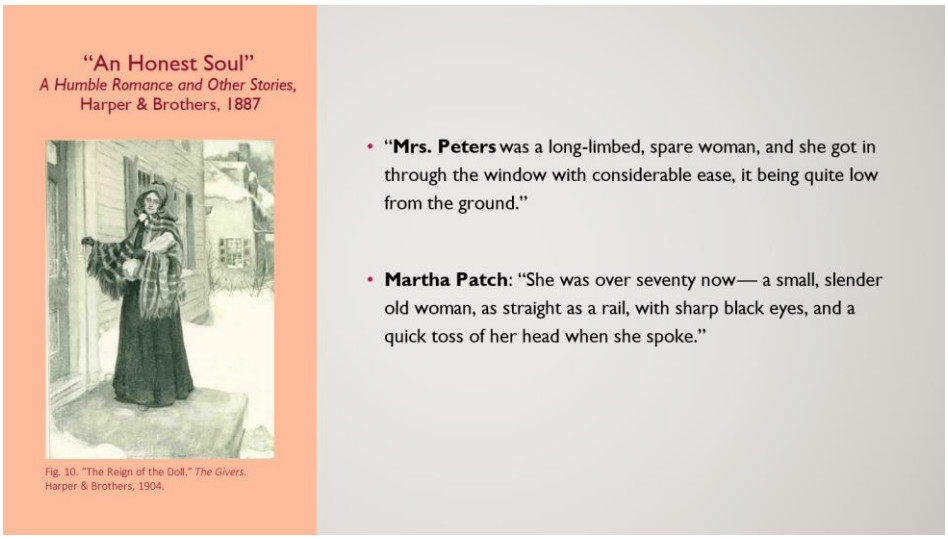
Because of her father's decisions, Martha's house lacks a front window, which increases her loneliness and interferes with her sewing, as she barely sees what she is doing. She feels sorely about her condition, saying one day: "When the minister's prayin' for the widders an' orphans he'd better make mention of one more … an' that's women without front winders" (81). However, as her Biblical name implies, Martha's determination to maintain the rigid course set up by her father is misguided, and a near-death experience teaches her the lesson that refusing to be helped is a sign of pride, not of independence.



One day, she collapses on her kitchen floor, but even that is not enough to shake her grit: "The quilts lay near her on the table; she stared up at them with feeble complacency. 'Ef I'm goin' to die, I'm glad I got them quilts done right fust'" (87). A strong will, we are made to understand, is no use to a starved and worn-out body:

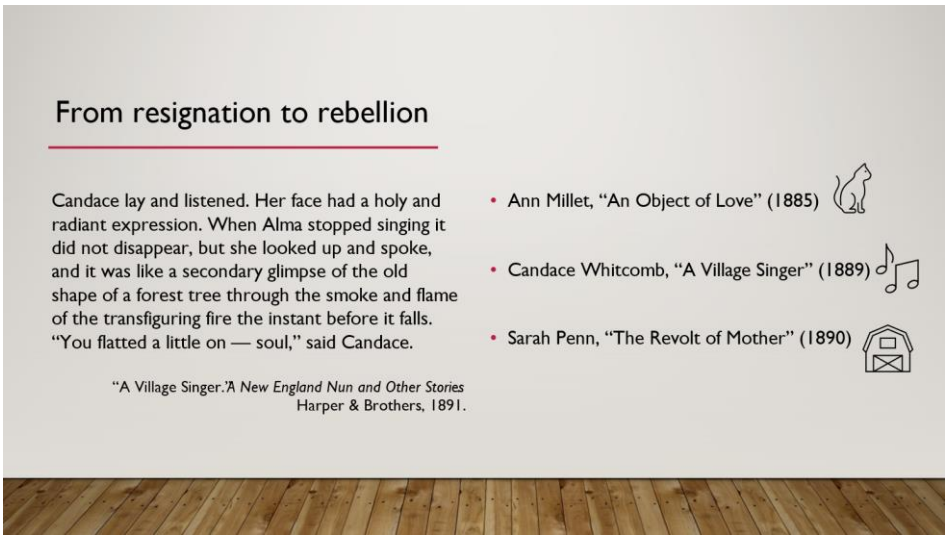
> There she lay, and the beautiful spring morning wore on. The sun shone in at the window, and moved nearer and nearer, until finally she lay in a sunbeam, a poor, shrivelled little old woman, whose resolute spirit had nearly been her death, in her scant nightgown and ruffled cap, a little shawl falling from her shoulders. She did not feel ill, only absolutely too weak and helpless to move. Her mind was just as active as ever, and her black eyes peered sharply out of her pinched face. She kept making efforts to rise, but she could not stir. (87)

Paradoxically, her resolve to not become a burden is precisely what threatens to turn her into one. Although, like in the Biblical episode, her motives might be righteous, struggling as she is to play her part in the community by serving others and depending on no one, her stubbornness generates the very problem she is trying to avoid. Ironically, her failure is exposed in plain sight through the very object of her frustration, her uncomfortable back window, but it is also the means of her salvation.



Her neighbor, "a long-limbed, spare woman" finds her and "[gets] in through the window with considerable ease, it being quite low from the ground" (88). The contrast with Martha, "a small, slender old woman, as straight as a rail" (79) could not be more striking and her stiffness physically signifies her moral atrophy. After much negotiation, she finally accepts help from her neighbor, and gains a front window in the process.

As the preceding example had shown, obstinacy in itself is not a sign of immorality, since it sometimes bears fruit and allows for the community to grow out of its prejudices as in the case of Esther Gay. Sometimes, however, it is the individual who has ossified into excessively rigid morals, and their rapid physical degeneration symbolizes how they have lost their agency in the process.



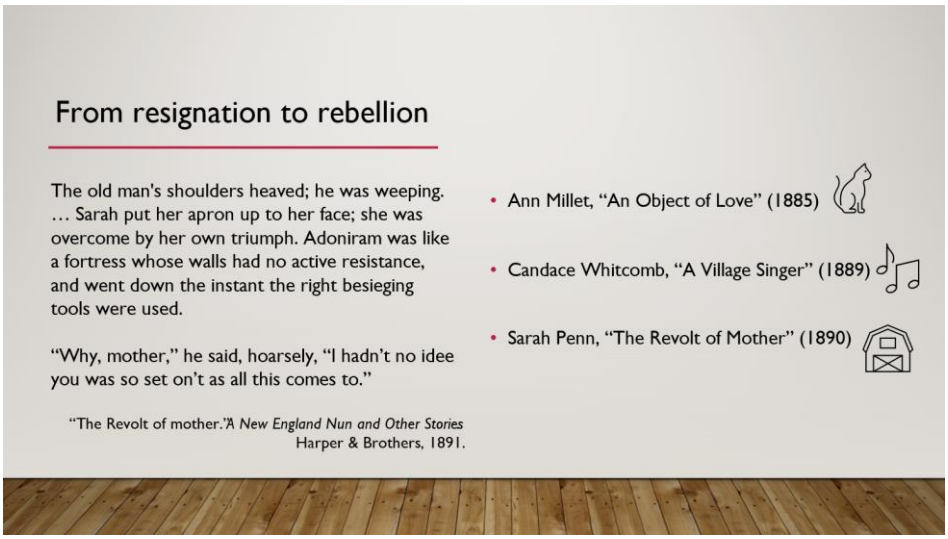
I want to turn to one last set of stories before concluding. While all of the stories mentioned so far depict rather quiet forms of resistance, some feature more violent outbursts in which the protagonists openly rebel against the pressure they are under when it reaches unbearable levels. Seemingly minor incidents suffice to tip the balance from quiet resignation to revolt: the loss of a cat in "An Object of Love" (*A Humble Romance*), the hiring of a new Church soloist in "A Village Singer" (*A New England Nun*), or the construction of a new barn in "The Revolt of Mother" (ibid), to cite some of the most famous examples. In the first, elderly Ann Millet refuses to go to Church after her cat goes missing, saying that she has lost any cause "to thank the Lord for blessin's" (273); in the second, Sarah Penn moves out her entire household into a newly constructed barn and sets up the family's cows in their old house in sign of protest against her husband's priorities; in the last, Candace Whitcomb stays home during service after being replaced in the church's choir and sings as loud as she can to drown out the voice of her rival in the adjoining building.

Here again, the moral valence of these acts of protest is retrospectively established through their outcome: Ann Millet realizes that she herself, rather than God, was to blame for the disappearance of her cat, since she had locked it in her basement by accident. Humbled at the realization, she meekly returns to church and learns her lesson. By contrast, Candace, the retired

singer, resists until her very last breath. In what is perhaps the most hilarious death scene in all of Freeman's fiction, she invites her rival to sing to her on her deathbed:

> Candace lay and listened. 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. "You flatted a little on — soul," said Candace. (36)

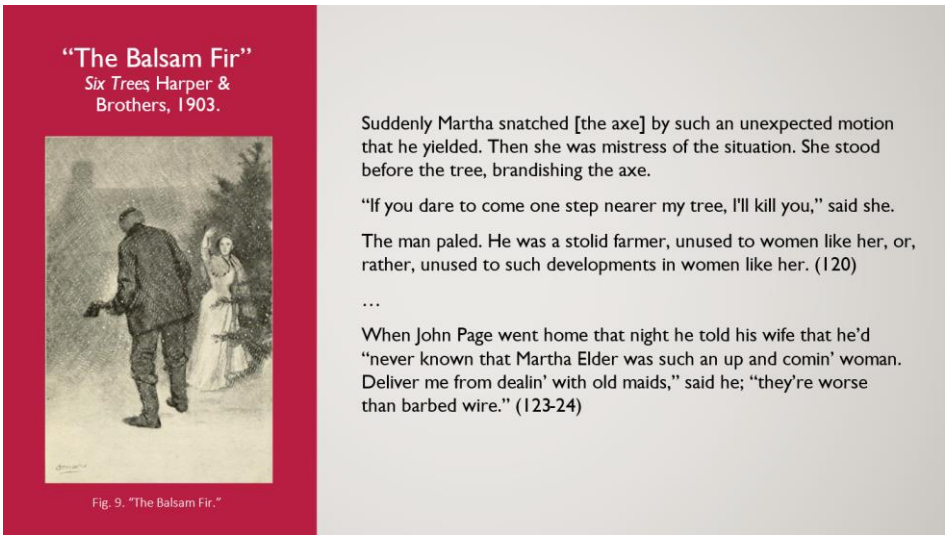
The story ends thus, with the ambivalent image of Candace's intractability flaring up one last time even as she is finally achieving redemption for her apparently sinful behavior. This is perhaps one of the most ambivalent endings in my opinion, as the image of a tree collapsing in a forest fire hardly evokes heavenly bliss and deliverance and leaves one, or at least me, with a bittersweet impression.



Finally, in "The Revolt of Mother," Sarah Penn's victory over her husband is transcribed in metaphorical terms:

> The old man's shoulders heaved; he was weeping. … Sarah put her apron up to her face; she was overcome by her own triumph. Adoniram was like a fortress whose walls had no active resistance, and went down the instant the right besieging tools were used. "Why, mother," he said, hoarsely, "I hadn't no idee you was so set on't as all this comes to." (468)

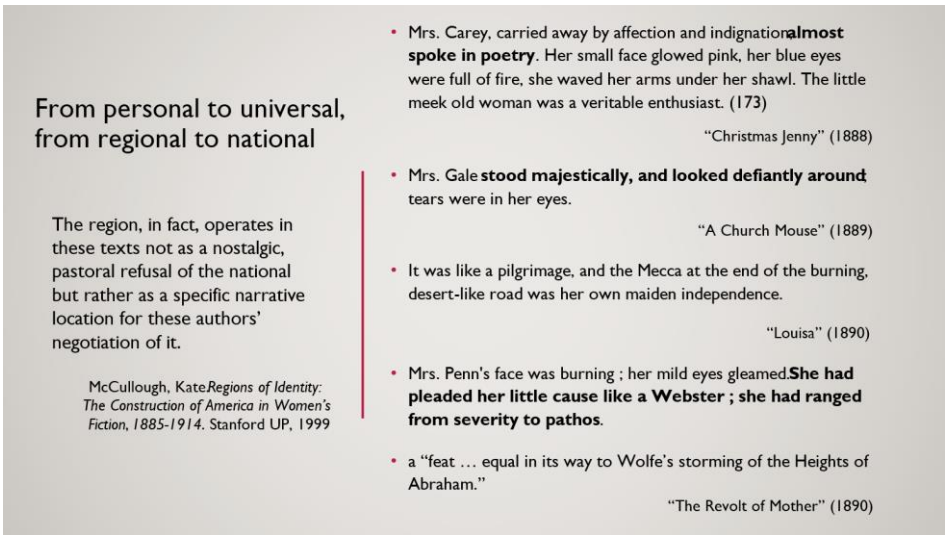
Her husband, like many of the witnesses in other similar scenes, functions as an inscribed reader, suddenly realizing the larger significance of the event that just unfolded. Just like he takes in the depth of his wife's frustration and resilience, the reader is expected to read the scene as standing for more than mere domestic squabble, but as epitomizing the wife's struggle to preserve the little amount of agency she has.



"A Balsam Fir" contains a similar scene, except that here, the male character is unable to grasp the true meaning of the incident: Martha Elder, the quiet but tense spinster is said to have long "aroused in [her] a … strong, though unexpressed, spirit of rebellion against the smallness of her dole of the good things of life" but it is not until a neighbor threatens to cut down her favorite tree that her resilience erupts into open rebellion. "Snatch[ing] away [his axe] by such an unexpected motion that he yielded," she becomes "the mistress of the situation":

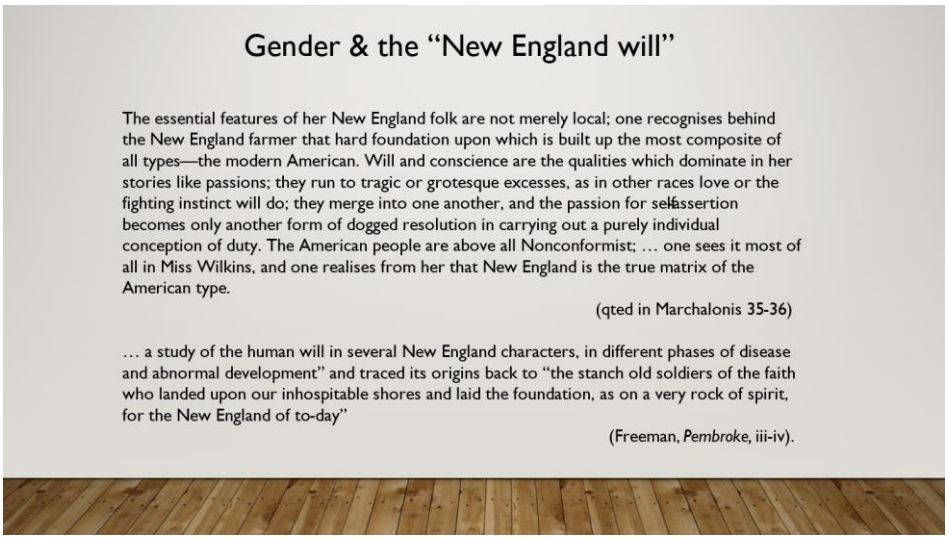
> She stood before the tree, brandishing the axe. "If you dare to come one step nearer my tree, I'll kill you," said she. The man paled. He was a stolid farmer, unused to women like her, or, rather, unused to such developments in women like her. … When John Page went home that night he told his wife that he'd "never known that Martha Elder was such an up and comin' woman. Deliver me from dealin' with old maids," said he; "they're worse than barbed wire." (120)

Because the neighbor is completely ignorant of the "revolt [Martha's] little cottage roof … sometimes shelter[s]" (109), to quote the story's opening, he is unable to make sense of what just happened. However, since the readers have been made privy to Martha's long, quiet struggle, they are positioned in a way that enables them to read the scene's powerful critique.



Freeman's fiction abounds with powerful images such as this one, of frail-looking women standing proud and triumphant in front of dumbfounded masculine figures of authority: Mrs. Carey in front of the deacon in "Christmas Jenny" (*A New England Nun*) Ann Millet in front of the church minister in "An Object of Love" (*A Humble Romance*) Sarah Penn in front of her husband in "The Revolt of Mother," Louisa Britton in front of her wealthy uncle in "Louisa," etc. The inflated diction in which these scenes are described gestures towards their larger significance. Thus Mrs. Carey, "carried away by affection and indignation, almost sp[eaks] in poetry" (173). Mrs. Gale, in "A Church Mouse," "st[ands] majestically, and look[s] defiantly around; [with] tears … in her eyes" (424). Louisa Britton's journey to bring back supplies to her starving family is compared to "a pilgrimage," and "the Mecca at the end of the burning, desert-like road" stands for "her own maiden independence" (405). Sarah Penn, in turn, "plead[s] her little cause like a Webster, rang[ing] from severity to pathos" and is said to perform a "feat … equal in its way to Wolfe's storming of the Heights of Abraham" (457). The historical reference to a famous battle from the Seven Years War, which marked a turning point for the British Troops fighting against the French army illustrates the dialectical relationship between the regional and the national that Kate McCullough describes in *Regions of Identity:* "The region, in fact, operates in these

texts not as a nostalgic, pastoral refusal of the national but rather as a specific narrative location for these authors’ negotiation of it” (6-7).



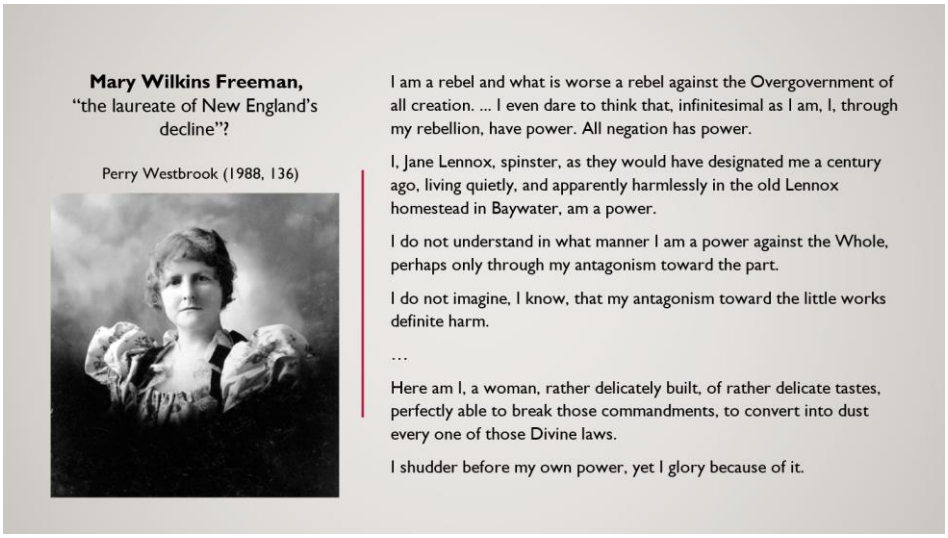
As I hope to have shown, the cultural work performed by Freeman's sketches was all but insignificant. In fact, the wider relevance of her work did not escape her contemporaries who were prompt to read it metonymically as epitomizing some kind of truth about the American character or American society as a whole. As a reviewer of her 1894 novel *Pembroke* puts it,

> the essential features of her New England folk are not merely local; one recognises behind the New England farmer that hard foundation upon which is built up the most composite of all types—the modern American. Will and conscience are the qualities which dominate in her stories like passions; they run to tragic or grotesque excesses, as in other races love or the fighting instinct will do; they merge into one another, and the passion for self-assertion becomes only another form of dogged resolution in carrying out a purely individual conception of duty. The American people are above all Nonconformist; … one sees it most of all in Miss Wilkins, and one realises from her that New England is the true matrix of the American type. (Marchalonis 35-36)

In an unusually outspoken preface to the 1899 edition of *Pembroke*, Freeman herself confirmed that the novel was "a study of the human will in several New England characters, in different phases of disease and abnormal development" and traced its origins back to "the stanch old soldiers of the faith who landed upon our inhospitable shores and laid the foundation, as on a very rock of spirit, for the New England of to-day" (iii-iv). The similarities between Freeman's language and that of her reviewer are striking, especially their almost identical phrasing describing the New England character as the metaphorical "rock" on which the national project is built. This underlying analogy between

individual psychological traits and large-scale social developments is also visible in their use of pseudo-scientific vocabulary: here and elsewhere, Freeman's work is recurringly described as a "study" of the New England "type" in its different "phases" and "abnormal development[s]," in the manner of a catalogue laying out the phylogenetic tree of the American "race." The traditionally masculine images of productive strength and visionary power that pervade both statements also echo dominant discourses on national identity and their concomitant anxiety of social "degeneration" and "decadence," which, as many critics have shown, were often framed as the result of a gender imbalance characterized by excessive femininity, left unchecked by male proportion and reason.

This is, however, precisely where Freeman's subversion operates. Although her rhetoric about the New England will is rather conventional and subscribes to prevailing cultural tropes, the texts themselves tell a very different story. The New England farmers that populate her stories are far from the reliable and visionary figure that these excerpts refer to. On the contrary, they stand confounded in front of bold and determined women, fiercely negotiating their agency in a world that ignores their most essential needs. The motives that animate them turn out to be the same humanist values that inform national ideals: the right to self-reliance, self-determination, and happiness.



Read in this light, Freeman ceases to appear as "the recorder of the last gasp of the old theocracy, the laureate of New England's decline" (133), to quote one of her early critics, Perry Westbrook, a reputation which she could never really shake off and stuck even after her death, but a timely writer, responding with great rhetorical force to the dominant discourses of her day. I take as proof of this, and as a fitting conclusion to this paper, an unpublished fragment retrieved by Mary Reichardt, written towards the end of her life.

> I am a rebel and what is worse a rebel against the Overgovernment of all creation.
>
> ...
>
> I even dare to think that, infinitesimal as I am, I, through my rebellion, have power. All negation has power. I, Jane Lennox, spinster, as they would have designated me a century ago, living quietly, and apparently harmlessly in the old Lennox homestead in Baywater, am a power. I do not understand in what manner I am a power against the Whole, perhaps only through my antagonism toward the part. I do not imagine, I know, that my antagonism toward the little works definite harm.
>
> ...
>
> Here am I, a woman, rather delicately built, of rather delicate tastes, perfectly able to break those commandments, to convert into dust every one of those Divine laws. I shudder before my own power, yet I glory because of it. (125-127)

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