MARY E. WILKINS FREEMAN:

HUMOR AND IRONY

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
In the Graduate College
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

1969
STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I wish to thank my advisor, Dr. Byrd Granger, of the English Department, University of Arizona, who not only inspired me when I was an undergraduate student, but has given me unstinting encouragement and help in the years since.
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ABSTRACT

There are no modern editions of the short stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman (1852-1930), one of the most popular writers of the Nineteenth Century. Even worse, Mrs. Freeman's stories have been labeled by some critics as "grim;" however, several other critics have recognized the irony and humor in her writing. This paper has tried to show then, that humor and irony do exist in her writing, and for the purposes of discussion, humor has been subdivided into four areas: comic relief, which is used to disarm the audience before a tragic occurrence; comic detail, which depends on a build-up of incidents for its effect; the grotesque character; and last, manageable faults, characteristics in an individual which can be modified.

In addition, ironic comedies and tragic ironies are also components of Mrs. Freeman's stories. When irony is comical, it is often directed at customs and institutions of the contemporary scene. When irony is tragic, it reveals the vulnerability of the Wilkinsonian people.

Mary Wilkins Freeman has aptly recorded the decaying New England scene in her stories with humor and irony that warrant her being remembered and anthologized anew.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The short stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman (1852-1930), one of the most popular writers of the nineteenth century, are often anthologized; however, there are no modern collections of her stories or any published editions of her novels. The most recent collection of stories was published in 1927.¹ The critics of her day commented on the stark reality of her stories, on the grim New England pictures that she painted. In more recent years there has been only one significant in-depth study of her.² Further analysis of Mrs. Freeman may reveal that she contributed more than grimness to American literary tradition.

In the past Mary Wilkins Freeman's work has been categorized in whatever genre an editor has chosen, whether local colorists or realists, best nineteenth century short stories or modern short stories, New England short stories or humorous short stories. Consequently, her work is often seen but it is not always well presented. Thus, a paradox

¹. The Best Stories of Mary E. Wilkins, ed. and with an introduction by Henry Wysham Lanier (New York, 1927).

². Edward Foster, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (New York, 1956).
is revealed: to wit, lack of modern editions indicates that she is unimportant, forgettable, yet she is often praised in literary histories and critical essays: "At the top of her form, she was a finer artist than any of her contemporaries;"¹ and, "She was an eminent artist, as eminent as Miss Sarah Orne Jewett, and even more so, because of the depth of feeling that informed her art;"² or "When the New England short story is mentioned, the mind naturally turns to Miss Wilkins."³

In contrast to the lack of available modern editions of Mrs. Freeman's works, Sarah Orne Jewett, a New England local colorist and contemporary of Mrs. Freeman (also long out of print), now has paperback editions of her works available,⁴ as well as several hardcover editions. Kate Chopin and George Washington Cable, two other local colorists and contemporaries, have at least one modern


4. Sarah Orne Jewett, Country of the Pointed Firs, and Other Stories (New York, 1954); White Heron (New York, 1963); Deephaven and Other Stories (New Haven, Conn., 1966).
edition or collections of their works in print. The neglect of Mary Wilkins Freeman is strange since she enjoyed great fame in the 1890's and early 1900's, and she had achieved wide esteem and reputation by 1926, when the American Academy of Letters awarded her the Howells Medal for distinction in fiction.

In recent years the terms "humor," or "grim humor," and "irony" have been added to the criticism of Mary Wilkins Freeman's work but no one as yet has shown how and when, and under what circumstances, humor and irony exist in her writing. It is the objective of this paper, then, to examine a neglected role of Mrs. Freeman, namely that of the humorous and often ironic observer of New England life.

To find this writer's place in American literary history, however, it is important to understand her background, the forces and circumstances that colored and shaped her setting and her time.

The Ebb Tide

It was the beginning of the New England ebb-tide, the decay of a once flourishing area. The end of the Civil War was bringing an end to the home industries, to the


2. Foster, p. 189.
piece-work on shoes and clothes that was the mainstay of many New England homes. For a few cents a dozen, men, women, and children stayed at home to cord pieces of boots for a distributor who, in turn, sent them off elsewhere to be soled and finished; in other homes women sewed together pieces of cheap garments which were then sent on to someone else for the finishing touches. It was a full-grown industry, differing from the more mechanized one only in that the factory was in the homes. When piece-work dwindled, the people either had to move into the larger towns and cities where the "pounding machines" provided work, or they had to find some other work. However, many times the New Englander discovered that he was a pawn in a factory town, hired and fired at the owner's whim, or that he was out of a job because of the competition of cheap Irish labor. His last resort was to move westward, to the prairies, to the Southwest, to the golden dreams of riches and a better future. Often times families left together in their "covered wagons, and their . . . trunks hung on behind."¹ Many times only the men left, with a promise to send for their wives and sweethearts.

New England also faded because it lacked opportunities. The great shipping and whaling industries had died out, and farming, never productive in the thin New England

¹ Brooks, p. 86.
soil, was poor. "Everyone remembered," says Van Wyck Brooks, "the little boy in Granville who shed bitter tears in the rock pasture because he could not find earth to bury his seeds."¹

Last of all, young men moved to cities which offered them jobs and excitement and possibly a better marriage market. Opportunities on the prairies and the frontier also caused many people to move west. In such a way, the life force of the small villages and hamlets dribbled away. What was left were dying hamlets and mountain villages, "A world of empty houses and abandoned farms."² The people left behind were restricted by the work which kept them at home, and consequently, by the low wages which provided them with so little. There was little social life, and unlike the people in Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe's vigorous society, the Wilkinsonian people read little and had no intellectual interests.

Of course, women predominated in Wilkinsonian society. Young women hoped to marry; older women waited for sweethearts to return. Very old women, the spinsters and widows, sewed for a living and tried to save enough money for their funerals. As a consequence of their restrictive environment, and "having no large matters upon

¹. Ibid.
². Ibid.
which to exercise naturally active minds, they gave importance to trifles.\textsuperscript{1} For instance, the women cleaned house relentlessly, furiously; in some cases even the floor boards \textsuperscript{were} arranged that they could be lifted from their places and cleaned on their under as well as upper sides.\textsuperscript{2} While the women cleaned, the men became obstinate and terse, and both men and women followed prescribed patterns of living. In many instances their peculiarities made them humorous characters, and their situation, isolation and poverty, encouraged their oddities. Yet, knowing the people, one senses their thin vitality, their pale joy in life.

The Rise of Local Color

While New England was in a decline, the rest of the country was throbbing with growth. Money was plentiful and investors optimistic. With a literate population flocking to the cities and needing inexpensive entertainment, the growth of magazines was encouraged. By 1865, almost 700 periodicals were being published in the United States.

\textsuperscript{1} Charles Miner Thompson, "Miss Wilkins: An Idealist in Masquerade," \textit{Atlantic Monthly}, LXXXIII (May, 1899), 667.

\textsuperscript{2} Mary E. Wilkins, \textit{Jerome, A Poor Man} (New York, 1897), p. 48.
Twenty years later this number had almost quintupled. The growth of the popular magazines and the later addition of the magazine supplement to the Sunday paper opened a steady demand for short fiction. The beat of the machines and the pace of a faster way of life meant that people who bought magazines wanted not long novels, but stories that could be quickly read and enjoyed. The voraciousness of the populace for reading matter can be shown also by the fact that in the 1880's and 90's hundreds of volumes of collected stories quickly became popular. Henry Alden, then editor of Harper's magazine, explained that people read short fiction because it was "usually very good." Harper's, Lippincott's, and Everybody's on the East Coast, and the Overland Monthly magazine on the West Coast, among many others, helped to develop the form of the short story as we know it today. The short story was different from the novelettes or sketches that had preceded it. This new form was a purely American type of fiction in language. It was short and to the point; it began at once, reached a crisis shortly, then dropped to a quick conclusion and, "fumbling and lost motions were eliminated."  

2. Henry M. Alden, Harper's, LXXIV (September, 1887), 484.
Concurrent with the development of the short story was a movement which Hamlin Garland was going to call Local Color. "What is it?" he asked. A local-color story is one that has "such quality of texture and background that it could not have been written in any other place or by any one else than a native."¹ A local-color story revealed through its texture the lay of the land and the flow of the rivers and winds, but more importantly, it revealed the way the people lived, worked, thought, and spoke. In addition to texture and background, there are two other important elements in local color. One is humor, and the other is realism.

In his book American Humorists, Willard Thorp explains that most of the local color stories "were humorous in intent."² For instance, Bret Harte's "The Luck of Roaring Camp," considered the first local-color story by some critics, tries to depict the actual life in a mining camp. It mentions types of people never before acknowledged by the "genteel" writers, people such as the mother of Luck, Cherokee Sal, who was a prostitute, and Stumpy, who had joined the camp because he was a bigamist. For its humorous effects the story uses dialect, exaggerations,


sharp contrasts, and play on words. These devices (previously used by Harriet Beecher Stowe and more recently by Mark Twain) were going to be used widely in local-color stories that followed. Most of the stories of this genre tried to portray the truth as the authors saw it; the writers strove to be specific in their use of details to reveal the ordinary, contemporary scene, using the language of the plain people to add texture. In this sense, then, the local colorists were also realists. Too frequently they were merely sentimentalists, but at their best they were realists.

Mary Wilkins Freeman has the engaging humor of the local colorist, humor that is delicately balanced with irony. She has an instinctive feel for comic relief in a story and for the comic denouement which occurs at the very end of some of her short stories. However, even in the limited sphere of village life, humor is tinted by tragedy. Many of the tragic occurrences and ironies are caused both by the limited environment and by the effect of these limitations on the people of the village. For example, Mrs. Freeman's villagers have great pride, pride that, on the one hand, makes them unable to admit their needs to others, and on the other hand, prevents their calling for help, even when they are starving.
The Career

Mary Wilkins Freeman grew up in a changing New England while local color literature was evolving in the United States. Mary Eleanor Wilkins was born in 1852 in Randolph, Massachusetts, a town less than twenty miles south of Boston. The area had been settled in the 1640's by the Lothrops and Holbrooks, her mother's family. Her father's people traced their ancestry to an early settler in Salem, about 1630. When Mary was fifteen, her family moved to Brattleboro, Vermont. They formed a small unit in the post-war New England population. In Brattleboro her father opened a dry goods store. However, the business failed, and by the time that Mary's mother died in 1880, the family had been reduced to genteel poverty. To assuage her grief, Mary began to write children's verses and stories. In 1881 a poem, "The Beggar King," was accepted for publication. A year later she entered her first adult story in a writing contest and won the fifty dollar first prize offered by The Boston Sunday Budget. By 1884, she had a budding career. In the same year, and after the death of her father, she returned to Randolph to live in the home of her childhood friend, Mary Wales. She

continued to write poems and short stories. As her fame increased, selling her stories became less difficult.

In 1902 Miss Wilkins married Dr. Charles Freeman and moved to his home in New Jersey. It was not a good marriage. Her husband, an increasingly heavy drinker, was institutionalized on at least two occasions, and Mrs. Freeman had to continue writing. For over forty years magazines published both her short stories and her serialized novels.

In 1887, her first collection, A Humble Romance and Other Stories, was published by Harper's. Four years later her second collection, A New England Nun and Other Stories, followed. Both collections were well received. "There is something like a craze in England over Mary E. Wilkins," wrote an observer for The Critic in 1890. ¹ Henry Mills Alden noted that her stories had "humor of a quaint flavorful sort" and then summed up the stories as "good through and through," ² but the stories were also called the "grim-mest, gloomiest most hopeless realism that has yet been

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2. Henry M. Alden, "Editor's Study," Harper's, LXXIV (September, 1887), 640.
produced.\textsuperscript{1} She was regarded as "morbid and depressing,\textsuperscript{2}" as rendering only the "grimmer aspects of New England life\textsuperscript{3}" in her stories. Thereafter, the critics wrote of the "grim depths" of many of her tales or of her "grim, humble New Englanders.\textsuperscript{4}" This "grim" appellation is the one most commonly found in criticism both of her early and later work. It is unfortunate that Mary Wilkins Freeman is remembered today only as a writer of the "grim" New England stories and not for her other qualities, namely those of the observer of the humorous situation and the ironic moment. This paper, then, proposes to discuss the humor and irony in her work.

\begin{enumerate}
\item Elizabeth Shelby Kinkead, "The Elements of Despair in Modern Literature," \textit{Independent}, XLVIII (April, 1896), 513.
\end{enumerate}
CHAPTER II

COMEDY

"Comedy," says Elmer Blistein, "emphasizes reality, not illusion," for it deals with what is, with what is wrong. The comic writer is forced to comment on society and on the situation in which he finds himself. He not only "holds a mirror up to nature to be sure," but in so doing he "makes value judgments." Comedy depends for its effect on the audience's ability to discriminate the ludicrous or comic instantly, by drawing relationships and finding contrasts, by catching and appreciating witty repartee, or by recognizing several levels of meaning in a pun or allusion.

Comedy arises out of the sense of the incongruous. An audience expects a certain answer or action to occur, but instead of the expected reply comes an unexpected answer or a twist of semantics so that the shock between what was expected and what is received causes a smile or laughter. The dramatist speaks of human ideals; the comic writer points to the pimple on the nose of the tragic hero. This incongruity leads to a "release of tension which is

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felt within the mind,\textsuperscript{1} and to laughter, either spontaneous laughter because the distance from the action makes the audience feel superior, or thoughtful laughter, often tinged with pain because audiences laugh at their own frailties.

In addition to the incongruous, comedy arises \textquotedblright when routine is imposed upon actions which do not require routine, or when the wrong kind of routine is established.\textquotedblright\textsuperscript{2} This is apparent in several of Mrs. Freeman's villagers: when a man sits on a church stoop every Sunday to prove a point, or when the women in their house cleaning are so extreme that they cover everything--books, chairs, pictures, and carpets--so that nothing will get dusty and, consequently, nothing can be used in the home; or when a woman regrets having a visitor because he might track in a little dirt, then routine tends to be ridiculous.

Next, \textquotedblright there is always an element of caricature in comedy,\textquotedblright\textsuperscript{3} used to render people comical. Caricature has

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been defined as "a single trait which is comic in itself,"¹ but which might have been overlooked in the general picture had the trait not been singled out and emphasized. The caricatures which occur in Mrs. Freeman's stories comprise only part of a totality of character.

Last, comedy is concerned with happiness and the "pure sense of life."² Comedy is the affirmation that people make, even under the worst circumstances, to life and the living.

The type of comedy found in Mrs. Freeman's works can be explained best under the following headings: comic relief, comic detail, the grotesque character, and manageable faults.

**Comic Relief**

In drama and literature, comic relief is advanced through (1) a humorous aside, or (2) a momentarily amusing episode that occurs after a great dramatic scene.³ Its function is to alleviate pain or to reconcile the audience to the tragedy previously wrought. However, according to


one modern critic, Robert Stephenson, the "notion of a necessary alleviation after preceding serious scenes is absurd." Comic relief "proceeds and occasions grim moments,"¹ as is exemplified from the earliest Spanish dramas of Juan del Encina to Hamlet's gravedigger scene (with the diggers' puns and jokes), a scene immediately preceding the tragic finale. Comic relief, then, may have a different function. "Instead of solacing, it disarms us,"² so that the contrast of the coming tragedy is enhanced because we are unprepared for it.

Mrs. Freeman uses comic relief instinctively. Her comic-relief interlude often appears before the tragedy that follows. One of the best examples occurs in her first novel, Jane Field (1893). Jane, a middle-aged widow, lives with her teacher daughter, who she fears is dying. Jane's sister, Esther Maxwell, has died recently, and shortly before that, the sister's husband had also died, never having paid Jane the one-thousand dollars that he owed her. Now, the two women live on the little that the daughter, Lois, earns, but the work apparently exhausts her. One day Jane receives a letter from a lawyer asking for the whereabouts of Esther Maxwell, who has inherited her estranged father-in-law's estate. Jane decides to see the lawyer,

1. Ibid., p. 326.
2. Ibid.
hoping that perhaps the estate will pay back the loan and that her daughter will then be able to stay home and regain her health. When she arrives in Elliot, the lawyer mistakes her for her sister. Jane, realizing that she cannot have her money in any other way, says nothing to dissuade him. The estate is given to her, and she remains in the town, called by her sister's name, secluded from everyone, always fearing that Lois, who does not know the truth, will innocently give her away, yet trying to buy her daughter's health through a lie.

The complications increase when three friends from her former home town decide to visit Jane. The reader imagines that mistaken identity will certainly lead to tragedy. Mrs. Freeman goes into detail about their preparation for the journey.

The most reluctant to leave the safety of her home is the spinster Amanda.

Amanda toiled all day; she swept and dusted every room in her little domicile. She put all her bureau drawers and closets in exquisite order. She did not neglect even the cellar and the garret.

Now the house is so clean that she did not go to bed that night. She had put her bedroom in perfect order, and would not disturb it. She lay down on her hard parlor sofa awhile, but she slept very little.
In the mornings as the carriage with the two others arrives, she suddenly worries that her little neighbor will not take proper care of the cat. "I do hope the cat will get along all right," she said agitatedly. "I've fed her this mornin' [sic], and I've left her enough milk till I get back--a saucerful for each day--" The other two women are amused by the plight of the old maid.

Mrs. Babcock turned around. 'Now Amanda Pratt,' said she, 'I'd like to know how in creation you've left a saucerful of milk for that cat for every day till you get back.'

'I set ten saucers full of milk down cellar,' replied Amanda still staring back anxiously at the cat--' one for each day. I got extra milk last night on purpose. She likes it jest as well if it's sour, if the saucer's clean.'

A sudden shock of silence follows.

'For the land sakes, Amanda Pratt!' gasped Mrs. Babcock, 'you don't s'pose that cat is goin' to stint herself to a saucer a day? Why, she'll eat half of it all up before night.'

Amanda stood up in the carriage. 'I've got to go back, that's all,' said she. 'I ain't goin' to have that cat starve.'

Amanda, however, does go. When the women arrive in Elliot, they do not understand why Jane should be so unhappy to see them, or why their meals should be so scanty (only berries and biscuits) now that Jane is wealthy, but poor Jane cannot spend the money that is not hers for the

food her friends require. While the visitors are there, Mrs. Field lives in constant fear that her identity will be revealed. The visit is miserable for all. On the afternoon before the guests leave, Jane comes in, dressed in her best clothes and bonnet, and announces, "I ain't Esther Maxwell." Then she rushes out. All afternoon, from house to house and person to person, the black-draped figure moves, stopping to repeat the same message, while her friends follow her and finally bring her home. Jane never regains her sanity. To the end of her days she repeats, "I ain't Esther Maxwell."

The comic relief that occurs as Amanda is getting ready to leave is caused by the snatches of dialogue, by the seriousness of Amanda's preparation, and by her belief that the cat was a rational and temperate animal. The position of this interlude disarms the reader. He expects a happy ending. He receives, instead, the shock of tragedy.

Earlier in the novel, previous to signing the receivership of the estate, Jane Field had been invited to lunch by the lawyer. As it happened, his family was totally unprepared for visitors. Only a bit of left-over stew and steak had been prepared for lunch, and not enough of either. When Mr. Tuxbury announces to his sister five minutes before mealtime that she must serve lunch to unexpected guests, behind-the-scenes frenzy develops. Every
woman who has endured similar circumstances appreciates how Mrs. Lowe feels. Hastily, pie is borrowed. The adults of the household agree to eat lightly—perhaps there will be enough food after all. Unfortunately, when two visiting granddaughters see food on the table, they demand some of everything: "They leaned forward, with their red lips parted, and watched their uncle anxiously as he carved the beefsteak. There was evidently not much of it, and their anxiety grew." The steak is cut into three portions, and when the guests receive a piece of steak but the children do not, the girls start to cry for some.

Mr. Tuxbury set his mouth hard, and pushed his plate with a jerk toward his niece (the mother of the children). Her face was very red, but she took it, . . . . divided the meat impartially, and gave each child a piece with a surreptitious thump.

Mr. Tuxbury, with a moodily knitted forehead and a smiling mouth, asked the guests miserably if they would have some veal stew. It was perfectly evident that if they accepted, there would be nothing whatever left for the family to eat. They declined in terrified haste; indeed, both Lois and her mother had been impelled to pass their portions of beefsteak over to the children, but they had not dared.

Their mother's quiet threats keep the children from asking for stew, but when the pie is cut absent-mindedly into only six pieces, the children clamor for a piece. "Flora's face was very red, and her mouth was twitching. She hastily pushed her own pie to the elder child, and gave the last piece on the plate to the younger." Then the younger
compounds their misery, "smacking her lips contemplatively," she exclaims, "I think Mis' Bennett's pie is a good deal better than grandma's." Of course every adult is very embarrassed. The children, full of steak and pie, run upstairs to nap.

In the family scene, the tone of the comic relief is much more subdued than in the description of Amanda's cat. It is not a happy misjudgment of a cat's temperance that is at stake, but rather the reputation of a house for its hospitality. The humor occurs through the incongruities. The adults are not happy to have unexpected company, but must pretend to be; the visitors did not wish to come, but were forced to; seated at the table, they realize what a disturbance their visit has caused, while the children neither care for, nor understand, the conventions of company manners. The children are realists: they want enough to eat and drink. The adults are obsessed by appearances: "What will they think of us for serving this poor meal?" We laugh at their general discomfort, yet our own laughter reveals, as Elmer Blistein suggests, that someone else's discomfiture can cause laughter.2

Another person embarrassed by the unexpected is Mr. Steele in "An Unwilling Guest." Here comic relief

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1. Ibid., pp. 111-114.
foreshadows tragic undertones in the story. The story opens with Mrs. Steele, who has come to urge the invalid Mrs. Lawson to stay with her for some time. Susan Lawson does not want to leave her house or her husband, but eventually she is taken away for two miserable months. On this opening visit, the ever-helpful Mrs. Steele, used to having her way in the town, decides to kill the dozens of cats roaming about the Lawson barn and house. "Where is that gun?" she asks. Mrs. Lawson tries to stop her by telling her that Mr. Lawson has had trouble with the gun. "Well, if I was a man, an' couldn't fire a gun, I wouldn't tell of it," Mrs. Steele says with great assurance.

"Oh, Mis' Steele don't . . . . You'll get killed. Oh, you will! You will!" cries the frightened Mrs. Lawson, but Mrs. Steele is adamant: "Get killed! I should laugh. What do you s'pose I'm goin' to do--point it at myself instead of the cat? Where is it?" She finds the old musket and charges out, her best silk gown trailing behind. In short order, there is a shot. In the house Mrs. Lawson waits for shots that will put an end to the horde of cats. Nothing happens. In silence, two minutes go by; then three. Mrs. Lawson tensely waits. The clock ticks. Mrs. Lawson waits; she envisions a terrible accident in the barn. Unable to bear the tension longer, she begins to
scream. Mrs. Steele comes in, closes the door, and puts the gun away.

"Did you kill one?" asks Mrs. Lawson. Mrs. Steele is pale and unsteady. She answers that she hurt one of the cats "pretty bad." Then she adds that she has changed her mind and has to hurry home. As Mrs. Steele prepares to leave, Mrs. Lawson notices that the entire back of Mrs. Steele's dress is covered with straw and dirt. The gun that Mrs. Steele had insisted she could handle had kicked back!

This comic episode is enjoyable. The contrast of the two women is highlighted by their actions. One is cautious and afraid; the other is obnoxiously sure of herself. The image of Mrs. Steele charging into the barn is in character (only she would go to the barn in her best silks), but the incongruity of the expected results (dozens of dead cats) and what actually occurred, arouses laughter at the thought of Mrs. Steele thrown back on the dirt and hay, stunned for a minute or two, legs and back bruised. Cautiously she rises and brushes herself off. After all that bragging she has not even one dead cat to show. She totters out of the barn. Still trying to pretend that she is in full command, she enters the house.

Comic relief occurs also in The Debtor (1905), one of Mrs. Freeman’s later novels. In it, Captain Carroll and his family arrive at a small New England village. At first, everyone is excited because he is supposedly a wealthy man, and his arrival means that local businesses will benefit from his stay. What the townspeople discover slowly is that Captain Carroll never pays his bills. As a young man he had been cheated out of his fortune by a family friend, a loss which left him emotionally blighted. Instead of trying to rebuild what he once had, he and his family developed a new pattern of survival; they settle in a community, buying nothing but the best, and live there until their credit runs out. Then, they move to where they can start all over again. The tragedy occurs because the Carrolls themselves do not understand the hardships and heartaches caused by their selfish way of living. Several townspeople are duped by Carroll into spending their life savings on worthless stock; the Carroll’s own little maid stays on in the hope that eventually she will get some of her wages, for she has no money to replace her one dress and cannot look for another job. At least one person loses a great deal: the little nervous dressmaker who had made the extensive trousseau of the eldest daughter goes bankrupt. Many other merchants in the town had at least one sizeable unpaid bill.
The reader first meets the Carrolls intimately through two ladies, Mrs. Van Dorn and Mrs. Lee, who have gone calling. According to the village code, when uninvited guests called, the hostess was always happy or pretended to be, even if the callers caught the lady of the house at an inopportune time.

As the two ladies call on Mrs. Morris and ring the bell of the residence, they primp their faces and hold out their calling cards. A maid ushers them into the best parlor to wait for Mrs. Morris. They speculate on the age and price of the furnishings. Soon Mrs. Morris comes in, "beads of perspiration glistened on her forehead, her black hair clung to it in wet strands" in her haste to change from her housedress to a company outfit; she has not noticed that she has buttoned her blouse awry, and that it does not meet her skirt in back, nor has she noticed a black smudge beside her nose which gives her "a rakish and a sinister air." Of course, she is not happy to have company on such a busy carpet-cleaning day, but she welcomes her visitors and insists that she would not have wished to miss their visit.

The talk veers to the new family in town, the Carrolls, while the maid tramps about upstairs, trying to manage the carpet by herself. The visitors rise to go. 

"'Must you go?' said Mrs. Morris, with an undertone of joy,
thinking of her carpet upstairs, and rising with thinly veiled alacrity." The ladies go toward the door.

Both ladies looked fascinatedly to the last at the black smooch on her cheek as they backed out.

'I thought I should burst right out laughing every time I looked at her, in spite of myself,' whispered Mrs. Lee, as they passed down the walk.

'So did I.'

'And no collar on!'

'Yes. She must have been house-cleaning.'

'Yes. Well, I don't want to say disagreeable things, but really it doesn't seem to me that I would have been house-cleaning such an afternoon as this, when people were likely to be out calling.'

'Well, [sic] I know I would not,' said Mrs. Van Dorn, decidedly. 'I should have done what I could in the morning, and left what I couldn't do till next day.'

'So should I.'

When they are back in their carriage, the women decide there is still time to call at the Carroll home. Since no one in the town has called on the family, these two shall have the singular honor of welcoming them. When they arrive, they ring the bell and wait, but there is no answer. They ring again and again. Suddenly they notice that the door is not only unlocked but a little ajar. An overwhelming curiosity to see the house makes them bold.

1. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, The Debtor (New York, 1905), pp. 11-12.
and they walk in. As they look about, they test for dust by running a finger across the back of a chair, and they are clearly delighted to find that the furniture is very dusty; instantly they feel superior for being better housekeepers. Mrs. Lee folded her silk skirts tightly around her and lifted them high above her starched white petticoat lest she contaminate them in such an untidy house. Mrs. Van Dorn followed her example, and they tip toed into the double parlors. They notice the fine furniture, the knicknacks, the little tea table set for tea, the tea stain on the tablecloth. They move on through the other rooms. "They made a long halt in the dining-room," and observed the silver service on the sideboard. "The idea of going away and leaving all that silver and the doors unlocked!" said Mrs. Lee. Then, they make their way upstairs and through the bedrooms. They see the fine clothes, the abundant lace on the garments and the many petticoats strewn everywhere, and finally conclude that the Carrolls must, indeed, be very wealthy. They do have some scruples, for much as they long to, they do not pry into closets or drawers, but everything else is fair game.

Suddenly, they hear heavy footsteps downstairs; they smell cigar smoke. Mr. Carroll must have arrived! Trembling with fear, the two women drag themselves across

1. Ibid., p. 30.
the hall and down the back stairs. What will he think if he finds them in his house? They are looking frantically about for the back door, the thought of a mad dash out to the carriage uppermost in their minds, when suddenly, they hear Captain Carroll's voice say, "Good afternoon, ladies." Mrs. Van Dorn opened her mouth, she tried to speak, but she only made a strange croaking sound. Her face was now flaming. But Mrs. Lee was pale, and she stood rather unsteadily." For a moment he does not understand the situation.

The spectacle of two elderly, well-dressed females of Banbridge quaking before him in this wise, and of their sudden appearance in his house, was a mystery too great to be grasped at once even by a clever man, and he was certainly a clever man. So he stared for a second, while the two remained standing before him holding their cardcases in their shaking, white-gloved fingers, then suddenly an expression of the most delighted comprehension and amusement overspread his face.

He invites them to sit down, but

Mrs. Van Dorn gained voice enough to gasp that she thought they must go. Captain Carroll stood back, and the two women, pressing closely together, tottered through the hall towards the front door. Captain Carroll followed, beaming with delighted malice. 'I hope you will call again, when the ladies are home,' he said to Mrs. Van Dorn,

He assures them that he easily forgets names and faces and that he most certainly will not know them, should he meet them on the street sometime.

1. Ibid., pp. 30-35.
Much is revealed in an embarrassing moment; perhaps that is why it lends itself well to comic relief. In this last scene Mrs. Freeman reveals not only the characters of the two ladies, but she uses them as a means of (1) exposing the Carroll home and (2) proving whether the Carrolls are wealthy. They apparently are. The ladies, in turn, are seemingly good women. Their flaw is that they are grossly curious. In the first instance their curiosity caused someone embarrassment; in the second, they themselves are embarrassed.

The Carrolls, too, are flawed. They have many clothes, but there is no money for food. In truth, there is no money at all. They rely on their appearance for a living because the merchants accept their seeming to be wealthy for the actuality. The flaw has led to their corruption (they don't think of any other way to live), and in a much larger sense, to a near destruction of the best part of the family, the two younger children. This comic episode is the prelude to the Carrolls and, in many ways, to the town's small tragedy.

**Comic Detail**

Comic detail is a series of events, descriptions, or movements, which, by their number, create a comic moment. When Mrs. Anderson, a minor character in *The Debtor* whom the reader regards as a sensible woman, eyes the sky with a
worried look because a thundershower is about to start, there is little to suggest the humorous. Then she calls her maid, and together they hurry to lock the house tightly. Afterwards Mrs. Anderson hurries upstairs and changes into her best summer dress, then adds her wrap, her bonnet and an umbrella. Subsequently, she gathers together all the small, portable treasures of her lifetime (we can guess what these are: a few photos, a lock of hair, a ring, and the family Bible). Next, she hurries down to the sitting room, sits down and prays, first for her own, then her son's safety, "and incidentally for the maid," then for the safety of her home, and of her son's store. Finally, her thoughts rivet on her son's activities during the shower, on the open door of the store, on the draft he might be in. Meanwhile, she is dressed and ready should the worst "happen and she be forced to flee."¹

Comic detail here shows the incongruity between the seemingly mature, almost dominating woman, and the fearful, almost ridiculous figure cowed much as a child would be by a thunderstorm. What makes us laugh is the build-up of comic detail and the picture of Mrs. Anderson, sitting amidst her treasures and waiting in her best dress for the end.

¹. Ibid., p. 172.
Sometimes comic detail is brief. Jerome's world, which at age twelve years was hard enough, becomes even harder with this realization: "My father is dead," Jerome told himself; "he jumped into the pond and drowned himself, and here's mother, and Elmira and the mortgage, and me." This little speech is full of pathos, as well as humor, because of the child's personification of the mortgage and because of its incongruity of position in the sentence.

After the death of his father by drowning, Jerome, his crippled mother Ann, and his sister do everything imaginable to make a living and to pay off their mortgage. When the regular installment is paid, Squire Merritt asks Mrs. Edwards how she has managed to save the money. Mrs. Edwards' answer is not only pathetic, but also interesting for what it reveals of the different worlds of a man and a woman, and cumulatively funny because of Mrs. Edwards' excessive pride.

We've bound shoes, Elmira an' me, for one thing. We've took all they would give us. That wa'n't many, for the regular customers had to come first, and I didn't do any in Abel's lifetime—that is, not after I was sick. I used to a while before that. Abel wouldn't let me when we were first married, but he had to come to it. Men can't do all they're willin to; I shouldn't have done anything but dress in silk, set and rock, an' work scallops an' eyelets in cambric pocket-handkerchiefs, if Abel had had his say.

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1. Mary Wilkins, Jerome, A Poor Man (New York, 1897), p. 50.
Then she becomes specific again about the work they did:

Elmira and me bound, and Jerome closed, and we took our pay in groceries. The shoes have fed us, with what we got out of the garden. Then Elmira and me have braided mats and pieced quilts and sewed three rag carpets, and Elmira picked huckleberries and blackberries in season, and sold them. Elmira did a good deal of the weeding in your sister's garden, so's to leave Jerome's time clear. Then once when the doctor's wife had company she went over to wash dishes and she give her three an' sixpence for that. She give her a red merino dress of hers, too. But this dress she give Elmira wasn't give away, for I sent her back next day to do some extra work to pay for it. I ain't beholden to nobody. Elmira swept and dusted the settin' room and the spare chamber and washed the breakfast an' dinner dishes, and I guess she paid for that old dress ample.¹

That is not all that Elmira can do; she also spins, weaves, and sews. Of course, Jerome does his share too. "He's wed weeded and dug potatoes everywhere he could git a chance; he's helped 'bout hayin', an' he's split wood. He's sold some herbs and roots, too, . . ."² He has done that plus kept their own fields planted, and he has picked up, worked on and delivered the shoes. This scene takes on poignancy when one realizes that Elmira is only ten years old and Jerome, two years older.

The only one who enjoys childhood in Jerome is Lucina, the Squire's little daughter; she is so certain that the poplar trees on her aunt's lawn are alive that she

¹ Ibid., pp. 168-169.
² Ibid., p. 170.
often "dug surreptitiously around the roots with a pointed stick"1 trying to prove or disprove her theory, but always fearful that she might cause a tree to topple on herself, her aunt Camilla, and the house. On her visits to her aunt, Liza the maid admits her. Then "with a stiff wobble of black bonbazined hips, like some old domestic fowl,"2 Liza leads her into the sitting room. Lucina, with her doll and her work-bag held primly in her hands, sat down to wait for her aunt to come downstairs. After a while, she smelled her aunt's lavender fragrance permeating the air; she heard the soft whisper of her silks moving into the room. Quickly, Lucina straightened up, toed out her little feet, smoothed down her own petticoats, then her doll's; she made herself ready to rise and curtsey. The lavender sweetness grew stronger; the whisper of silk flounces grew louder, but there was no sound of footsteps, for Aunt Camilla "moved only with the odor and rustle of a flower." Finally, there is a "cumulative whisper" of faded lilac and grey skirts; the old flower enters. The child rises and curtseys; the aunt glides toward her. She "drooped" down to kiss her niece, then stopped to ask about the health of each member of the family.

"How do you do?" asked Aunt Camilla.

1. Ibid., p. 102.
2. Ibid., p. 103.
"Pretty well, I thank you," replied Lucina.

"How is your mother?"

"Pretty well, I thank you."

"Is your father well?"

"Yes, ma'am; I thank you." 1

The two then retire to the shady arbor of the garden.

Such details provide a fine contrast in tone and attitude to the previous episode. The earlier scene is marked with harsh reality and pride; the second scene has the charm of a fairy tale. In the first example, Mrs. Edwards is obviously very proud of what her family has accomplished, but her New England conscience does not allow her to admit her pleasure. She must catalogue the facts so that the Squire will "get the picture," and he does. He is embarrassed; he tells her that he does not want her money; she turns on him. It is obvious to her that it is a trick on his part so that she will lose her house. In bafflement he tries another tack. The two birds that he has brought for her will make a fine supper. She refuses, then accepts them when he tells her that he has also given the lawyer two birds. Her pride is mollified; she is not the recipient of charity. Her extreme pride, the catalogue of details, the Squire's perplexity when she refuses both his offers, as well as the young age of the children (which

1. Ibid., p. 106.
makes their activities difficult to believe) all conspire to make the reader smile.

The tone is more subdued in the Lucina episode. There is no loud chatter to disturb the scene, nor is there great action. The dreaminess of the warm day and of the imaginative child is sustained by the occurrences inside the house. Aunt Camilla is truly a flower. Her name, her "fragrances," her dress, and her home proclaim that she is. Like the ostentatious camellias, she must flaunt her loveliness. She wears not one or two, but several rings: some "large amethysts," a "great yellow pearl," a "mourning ring of hair," and if that were not enough, "some diamond bands in silver." The excesses of Camilla's walking with a glide and a "tilt," her "drooping" down for a kiss, and her many rings make one smile.

Comic detail does not necessarily occur all in one section. The descriptions can build so subtly that the total picture, often in retrospect, is comical. This is true not only in Jerome, but also in one of Mrs. Freeman's earliest and best stories, "A New England Nun." The accumulative descriptions result in the enrichment of the story, for the details tell exactly why Louisa will not marry Joe Dagget. As she readied herself for his visit, Louisa "took off her gingham apron, disclosing a shorter

1. Ibid., p. 110.
one of pink and white print . . . . Under that was still another—white linen with a little cambric edging on the bottom; that was Louisa's company apron." When Joe moved the books about on the table as they sat and talked, "she rose and changed the position of the books, putting the album underneath. That was the way they had been arranged in the first place."1 When he leaves, she takes the lamp and gets down on her hands and knees to examine the carpet. She even rubs her fingers over it, until her suspicions are confirmed: "He's tracked in . . . dust. I thought he must have."2 Louisa got a dust-pan and brush, and carefully erased Joe Dagget's track.

Louisa, who has waited fourteen years for Joe's return from Australia, has begun to realize that she relishes her spinsterhood. When she marries, she will have to give up her home. She will not be able to sew the fine seams or distill the "sweet aromatic essences" of the flowers in her garden, for her new life will be busy and demanding, with a husband and a mother-in-law to keep happy. However, not only does the thought of marriage upset her, but even Joe's visits upset her and her household. The little yellow canary flutters and beats his

2. Ibid., p. 5.
wings wildly when Joe enters. While he is there, Joe accidently knocks Louisa's sewing basket off the table and as he leaves trips on the carpet. He has also stated that once Louisa and he are married, Caesar, the great yellow and white dog which has been chained for fourteen years for a puppy misdemeanor, living on an ascetic fare of corn mush and cakes lest his temper be aroused, will be let loose to ravage the neighborhood. Everything will change. Caesar will be let loose, the canary will suffer constant nervousness, Louisa's household—the neat drawers, the sparkling windows, the dainty meals, the fine seams—will give way to mainly coarse things.

When she discovers that Joe is in love with another but would have married her out of honor, Louisa extricates herself pleasantly before the wedding date. Now Caesar will never "go on a rampage through the unguarded village. Now the little canary might turn itself into a peaceful yellow ball night after night,"¹ and never be awakened in terror; and Louisa, serene and peacefully, can enjoy her routine to the end of her solitary yet unceloistered days.

The idea that a young woman can be so set in her ways that the thought of an uneventful life can be pleasing is a little humorous. She could have refused to marry because she was no longer in love with Joe (in truth she

1. Ibid., p. 16.
was not) or because she did not wish to marry. In any case, we laugh at the innocence of her fears: that Caesar could be dangerous, that Joe Daggett was too clumsy, that marriage would deprive her of every pleasure. Cumulatively, her caution, her fears, her actions are humorous. The parallel use of the three, Louisa, Caesar, and the canary, adds contrast to the story, as does the fact that humans and animals have been put on the same level. All three are chained or enclosed. All three would benefit from Joe’s attention, but instead of accepting the freedom that he offers, all three remain imprisoned. The stock use of Joe as the bull in the china shop during his visits at Louisa’s house precipitates a ready response, a horrified smile. Thus comic detail adds to one’s enjoyment of the story.

In “A Mistaken Charity,” the volume of details creates humor; the details themselves are not humorous. Old deaf and rheumatic Harriet Shattuck and her blind sister, Charlotte, barely keep themselves alive by living on dandelion green and on gifts of food their neighbors give them. At one time the sisters had been able to support themselves by sewing for neighbors. Charlotte mended and did plain sewing, while Harriet had been known for her tailoring work, but now both sisters are so aged and infirm that neither can sew.
Although the sisters can no longer pay their rent, their landlord allows them to remain in their old cottage. The house itself is as defective as the two old sisters. "Rain and snow had filtered through its roof, mosses had grown over it, worms had eaten it, and birds built their nests under its eaves," so that what is left of the house appears to be only a "natural ruin."¹ When it rains, the sisters are forced to put pails and pans in their bedroom under the leaks to catch the rain. Nor are they more successful in keeping out wind, for the house is a veritable sieve. In fact, the cottage is in worse shape than could be expected: "There ain't any fix to it; the old ruff ain't fit to nail new shingles onto; the hammerin' would bring the whole thing down on our heads."²

Between storms the two old ladies spend time outside their mouldering cottage. Charlotte sits on the stoop as Harriet bends her aching joints to dig greens for their supper. The one delight of their lives is a tiny garden patch behind their home with two old apple trees, currant vines, and pumpkins. It seems to the sickly old ladies that the few vegetables and fruits from their garden taste better than anything that their neighbors bring them, for

¹ Wilkins, A Humble Romance, p. 236.
² Ibid., p. 239.
the garden is their own secret share of God's very small bounty.

Their uneventful lives are changed when a neighborly philanthropist pays their entry fee to a rest home in a nearby town. Harriet is reluctant to leave her home, but her friends plead and cajole her into believing that it isn't fair to remain among ruins when Charlotte would be more comfortable in better surroundings. Finally convinced, but with many regrets, Harriet locks up the house for the last time.

Life at the rest home is very comfortable. The food is good and wholesome, and Harriet no longer needs to hobble stiffly down the front path to search for dandelions. In fact, the rest home is renowned for its nourishing soups and for the tender care it gives its occupants. In addition, the home tries to change the two ordinary women into two nice old ladies by introducing them to improved habits of cleanliness as well as to lace caps and black cashmere dresses and neckerchiefs. Two unhappy old women they remain, for nothing reconciles them to their new surroundings. They long for greens instead of soups, for their old calico dresses instead of the cashmeres, for the freedom of bare heads instead of white caps; indeed, they long for freedom to live in their accustomed way.
Early one morning the two escape, leaving the white caps hanging from the posts of their bed. A compassionate farmer, seeing the sisters on the road, offers them a ride, which they are only too happy to accept. When he questions them about traveling in their feeble condition, Harriet, fearful that he will return them to the home if she tells him the truth, invents a story about having visited a married daughter in town.

Well after noon the two "crept slowly up the footpath across the field to their old home." Their absence has made them very sensitive to their former home. "The clover is up to our knees . . . an' the sorrel and the whiteweed; an' there's lots of yaller butterflies."¹ The crowning moment occurs when Harriet looks out of their window and sees the garden where the currents are ripe and "them pumpkins hev run all over everything."²

In this story comic detail has two functions. One is to show the tottering establishment of the two sisters. The cottage is not really functional, for it does not protect the women from the elements. On one level, then, it does not provide comfort or security; it is a tree stump of a house "mouldering into the grass." Not one thing about the cottage is worth anything; even the sisters attest to

1. Ibid., p. 248.
2. Ibid., p. 249.
its frailty, a frailty which they share. They too are merely "tree stumps," for they are both aged and in poor health. Charlotte is not "strong in her mind." She is more infirm than her sister and she cries pitifully when they leave their cottage. Harriet is not only almost deaf; her joints creak, and she hobbles when she walks. Her condition does not prevent her from being independent enough to criticize a neighbor's gift of doughnuts as being "tough--terrible tough."

What is not so obvious is the sisters' inner strength, a strength which the house also shares, for it too continues to weather and survive. Consequently, on a symbolic level the house represents the sisters' independence, an independence which is far dearer to them than security and luxuries, for they risk their lives trying to return home.

The humor in this story arises from the repeated descriptions of the cottage ("so ancient was the little habitation, so wavering and mouldering") and from the juxtaposition of the old home with the aged sisters.

The second function of comic details here is to illuminate human nature and its inconsistency. The sisters should have been happy living in enforced comfort. They were not, just as Louisa was not happy at the prospect of having to change her way of living should she marry. The
element of surprise that leads to smiles is the scene of the two frail fugitives running away. One does not run away from comfort, but Mrs. Freeman's people do. Perhaps comfort without freedom is valueless. The many details of the house, the women, and the situation create several humorous moments for the reader because Mrs. Freeman treats the two sisters with a light touch that precludes a sentimental response and leads to a smile instead.

The Grotesque Character

A literary caricature results from the selection of "a single trait which is comic in itself," but which might otherwise have easily been overlooked. A grotesque character differs from the caricature by displaying several traits, not just one, that cause the character to act in an exaggerated manner. Mrs. Freeman's stories reveal a people who are prideful, stubborn, selfish, curious, and often malicious. The character traits stiffen her people's reactions. Instead of doing and saying the expected, often the stereotyped, her villagers will either revolt or they will turn inward, for the middle-of-the-road reaction is not for them. It appears as if "something mechanical were

encrusted on the living so that they do not act normally. Whole lifetimes are wasted because a word was or was not said. Because her characters go to extremes, one is reminded of the term grotesque; the total effect is ludicrous rather than idiosyncratic, when an unusual action is not intended to be humorous.

The grotesque character in the New England village probably arose from the Puritan ethic of hard work (industry, thrift, and introspection). Village life with its narrow ways and opportunities tended to sharpen the traits that already existed.

One critic has remarked that the villagers were not interested in having intellectual pursuits or in going to church for any reason other than habit. Intellectual issues are unimportant when food and shelter are uncertain. Next to physical well-being, the dominating desire of many of Mrs. Freeman's people is for independence. They would much rather live on fruit, tea, and toast, as the two old sisters do in "A Mistaken Charity," than lose their independence by having to go to a work house. Even though the environment at the work house might be an improvement, it

would not seem so to the aged villagers. Like the old sisters, they would walk back in their decrepitude to seek the familiarity of their own rotting walls, abandoning by preference the warm but dependent life of a work house.

Allied to their desire for independence is the villager's overpowering pride. Nothing will make them admit that life has defeated them, or that they are starving, or that they are in need. This reticence has its tragic consequences because pride causes them to lose out on life, much as Hepzibah's pride in *The House of the Seven Gables* immobilizes her and prevents her from living in the mainstream of her community. Pride causes isolation that prevents the people from experiencing the joy of graceful giving and receiving. Mrs. Freeman's villagers share Hepzibah's uncertainty and naivete. Just as she knew little about the life outside her home, these New England villagers are equally ignorant and innocent about city life. Such situations can lead to humor, as they do in "The Revolt of Sophia Lane," when she does not know what to do with finger bowls.

The sharp reactions to life, as well as the outlandish character traits, seem laughable to the reader who, of course, feels superior to the situations and responses in many of Mrs. Freeman's stories. Although the characters

are humorous, their very grotesqueness may also make them admirable.

One of the most grotesque people in Mrs. Freeman's works is Paulina Maria, Jerome's aunt. She is extreme in almost every way. Where others are pious, she is austere; while others are inflexible, she is rigid; while others can be firm, she is severe. More important, if the others are clean, Paulina Maria is truly immaculate. Critics ridicule her because she is so thorough that she cleans both the undersides as well as the upper surfaces of her floor boards. As a matter of fact, "could Paulina have cleaned the inner as well as the outer surface of her own skin" she would have been happier. The explanation for her cleanliness and her rigidity is that she lacked natural channels for her energy. So poor were she and her husband that their only son remained blind because they could not save the few hundred dollars for his operation. Noting that these people were intelligent and energetic, Van Wyck Brooks says, "The temperament that cleaned the underside of floorboards would have cleaned the underside of a government also" if it had been given the chance. No such chances, however, ever occurred. There were no natural outlets for

1. Wilkins, Jerome, p. 48.
2. Ibid., p. 49.
temper and intellect—no trips to Boston or to the theater, no intriguing jobs, and no hope.

When things worsen for her family, Paulina doesn't scream, or cry, or talk. "She saved herself from the despair of utter futility by taking soap and water and sand"¹ and attacking the paint on the exterior of the house. Her only other release would have been insanity. When Mrs. Edwards needs her, though, Paulina is there to comfort and succor the family. She cleans their house, plans the funeral arrangements, and sees the family through their crisis. Though helpful, she can never totally unbend. Her pride and rigidity force her to refuse the money that Jerome later offers to lend her, even though she knows that to refuse it will mean that her son must remain blind. Her pride, too, makes her keep working after a long day's work has clearly worn her out. It is her in-bred sense of duty that forces her to be Christian in action, if not in feeling. She does what she thinks must be done, but there is no warmth in what she does. Paulina's grotesqueness is a direct result of the circumstances in which she lives, and her grotesqueness causes us to laugh, not necessarily because we think that she is funny, but because we are horrified by something that we hope will not happen to us. The grotesque character "simultaneously arouses

¹ Wilkins, Jerome, p. 401.
reactions of fear and amusement in the observer," because he is an "anti-norm" of what we deem life should be.

If Paulina is cold, Fidelia of "A Patient Waiter" is warm and funny. If Paulina Maria cleans her house, so does Fidelia, but she covers everything so that nothing will wear out; chairs, pictures, lamps, even "the chiner card-basket an! Mrs. Hemans's Poems" are covered by pillow slips. If guests arrive, they are quickly instructed to remove their shoes. The cleanliness has a more specific reason in this story: Fidelia lives for the letter that Mr. Lennox, her former lover, will send. Each day for over thirty years she has gone down to the post office twice a day, her sick little bobbing head "nodding like a flower in the wind." Each day she and her young niece clean and bake and wait for him, but he never writes and he never comes. In summer and spring Fidelia and her niece Lily steal outside early in the morning to bathe their faces in dew as a beauty potion. "It works better on me than it does on you, don't it?" says Lily with the honesty of a child when she notices that Fidelia's face does not get

3. Ibid., p. 400.
4. Ibid., p. 407.
rosy and smooth again. Nor does the blue quart bottle of medicine which Fidelia regularly prepares from roots and herbs, and regularly takes, stop her head from bobbing. The sage tea does not return the gold color to Fidelia's hair, though of course time does yellow the little trousseau kept neatly ready upstairs.

When Lily grows up and has her own lover, Fidelia warns Lily, when he stops writing, not to write to him because it is immodest. "You'd better live the way I've done," she counsels.

As her aunt gets older and goes to the post office even on Saturdays and Sundays when it is closed, Lily realizes what is happening: "Now she's getting near the end of the road, she's pointed and she's going faster." Fidelia is no longer entirely human; something mechanical has encrusted her reason. When Lily's lover does return, Fidelia is on her death bed. Even after forty years of waiting, she still remains undaunted. She whispers to her niece that it's time for the evening mail.

"He--promised he'd write," she says as she is about to die, and "I ain't goin' to give it up yet." 

1. Ibid., p. 411.
2. Ibid., p. 410.
3. Ibid., p. 414.
Self-delusion and pride are not the bitter things in Fidelia's life that they are in Paulina Maria's. Though Fidelia wastes her entire life believing a will-o-the-wisp, she never gives up. Her unremitting faith and her very innocence of expectation, while ludicrous, are charming. They lead to smiling sympathy, a tender touch of humor.

Many men as well as women become encrusted with "something" which does not allow them to act spontaneously. In "Gentian" Alfred Tollet disowns his wife because she has fed him gentian without his knowledge. The wife grows sick with anxiety because she has deceived him for the first time in her life. He builds up this insignificant incident to such proportions that for almost a year she is banished from their home. Of course, he felt better for the medication, but his overwhelming New England pride, his stubbornness, and his selfishness demand complete autocracy in his household, and he really does not care if he hurts his wife, so long as his pride and conscience do not suffer.

If one man cannot forgive a small slight, another—Jonas Carey in "A Christmas Jenny"—will get back at nature, which has allowed him to slip and fall on the ice three times. He sits down and throws a tantrum, as he usually does whenever life is inconvenient to him. Another response of a masculine grotesque character is shown by Lawson in "An Unwilling Guest." He has heard a gun go off near the
house, and he is concerned. Perhaps his invalid wife has been killed. Yet he leans down again to finish planting a row of peas! It is a half hour before he shuffles home. When he opens the door of his house he finds Mrs. Lawson sitting, anxiously waiting. He says: "I heard the gun, an' I thought I'd come up as soon as I got that row of pease [sic] planted, an' see if there was anythin' the matter. I knew you couldn't do nothin' to help yourself, if anybody was to kill you." Of course, had she been shot, Mrs. Lawson would have bled to death before Lawson arrived! The humor here is grim, but humorous the whole affair is.

Lawson was not as late, however, as Mr. Penn in "The Revolt of 'Mother.'" For forty years Mrs. Penn has lived in a tiny house while Father has built barn after barn to house his animals. When Mother finally complains that she cannot and will no longer tolerate the situation, he doesn't believe her. His reply to everything she has ever asked for is, "I ain't got nothin' to say." He has never considered that his family is worthy of, or even needs, a decent place to live in. (Mrs. Freeman was later going to explain her error in writing this story, for a New England mother would never have considered her own needs

1. Ibid., p. 335.
before the economic needs of the farm. In other words, cows came first.) While Father is gone on a trip, Mother and the children move into the new barn. Of course, the entire neighborhood, while aghast at mother's behavior, is delighted. Knots of curious people collect at the side of the road as Father rides in on his new horse. He tries the doors of his house, but they are locked; going to the shed he discovers that a cow is now domiciled where his tools were once kept. When he tries the new barn doors, he discovers that, inside, is his new home. After supper, his remark to mother is, "'Why, mother, . . . . I hadn't no idee you was so set on't as all this comes to,"-a true understatement.

Because these people cannot cry out in anger and need, they seek other ways to express their frustrations. Mother had to "revolt" against father; Paulina Maria revolts against the circumstances of her life; Fidelia turns inward to a special world filled with the expectation of a letter. The grotesque character is both humorous and pathetic.

Manageable Faults

In an article entitled "The Subject Matter of Comedy," L. J. Potts writes that "curable or manageable" faults or maladjustments are the subjects of comedy. A

1. Ibid., p. 468.
"manageable fault" is a person's attitude, idea, or belief which causes him to act in a certain way, much as the unmanageable faults of the grotesque character do, but unlike the grotesque character, the person possessed of these maladjustments can modify them, so that he either overcomes them or can adjust his mode of living to them. Thus, the disturbances are not always curable, but they do not prevent the people in whom they occur from operating efficiently.¹

Benjamin Rice, the father in "A Guest in Sodom," demonstrates that his faults can be properly modified. He has never done anything to enjoy life, he tells his family one day, and now he proposes to cure the situation by buying a car. The sale of some of his land makes the car his. When the car is delivered, Father is first delighted, then bewildered by its performance. The car is, frankly, a "lemon." Too often the car refuses to run, or else the monster waits until it has taken him way out of town before it collapses with exhaustion; then father must fumble ineptly, trying to correct the mechanical wrongs. The trouble with the car, as the town doctor diagnoses it, is "an instance of congenital malformation."²

¹ L. J. Potts, p. 201.
² Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "A Guest in Sodom," Century, LXXXIII (January, 1912), 349.
Mr. Rice returns the car to the factory and eventually he receives another. Although the manufacturer assures him that this time the car is a new model, Father knows better: behind one of the cushions of the supposedly new car is the broach that his daughter has lost some weeks before. Once more he takes to the road, and once again at a distance from home the car stops and has to be towed back to town. When his friends advise him to sell the car, Father assures them that he would not think of passing on such a car to an unsuspecting buyer. Instead, the car is parked permanently in the family's back yard. His wife and his daughter make a "waterproof cover for the thing in wet weather, and it's just as good as it ever was, which ain't sayin' much." The family also sees that father's car is kept dusted and painted. Furthermore, eventually the house is painted. The paint left over is put on the car. "That's the reason why it's white with green stripes." Father goes out every day to "ride" in his car. He climbs in and roars off in his imagination. Mr. Rice reconciles himself, in other words, to live down the fact that he's "been taken." He will probably be duped again in some other ways, but he is flexible, and as Elmer Blistein explains, destruction is not for the flexible.¹ People like Alfred

¹. Ibid., p. 351.
Doolittle, or Mrs. Malaprop, and in a sense, Hawthorne's Hepzibah, survive because when a change occurs, they adapt to their new circumstances. Like prehistoric lizards, the grotesque character dies out, but the "manageable" character lives on.

Sometimes a character in the village must make others aware of their faults. Sophia Lane returns the useless wedding gifts that her niece has received and asks the givers to put themselves in the young couple's place. They have almost nothing with which to start a household; yet they have received ivory chess sets and finger bowls. Hetty Fifield of "A Church Mouse" makes the community aware of her presence when she moves into the church. Her old employer has died, and since no one in the town offers her a home or a job, Hetty has no choice. She settles in the church gallery and begins to take care of the meeting house. She rings the bell, although weakly at times; she cleans and dusts the church and garnishes the walls "with her treasures of worsted work." One of the worsted mottoes includes a waxed cross entwined with ivy and silver threads; this she hangs over the pulpit. The people feel uneasy. "They wondered if it savored of popery."

1. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "The Revolt of Sophia Lane," Harpers, CVIII (December, 1903), 20.
cross remained, and the minister was mindful not to jostle it in his gestures."

One day Hetty cooks turnips and cabbage on her little stove, and the next day during the service all the parishioners know what she has had for supper. Arrangements are made at once to remove her from the premises, but Hetty stands her ground: she locks everyone out. Eventually, the townsfolk capitulate, and Hetty is given a little apartment in the church. Thus they come to realize that Hetty, too, has a right to live, and that they must modify their attitudes and accept her as their joint responsibility; they are reminded to practice what they never hesitate to preach.

Hetty was far more cautious than Mrs. Jameson (The Jamesons, 1901), who tried almost forcibly to change the ways of an entire village. As the story opens Mrs. Jameson, early one summer day, has just arrived in Linnfield. The family has come, not only to get away from its New York life, but also to find a new summer home. Linnfield becomes the lucky recipient of Mrs. Jameson's interest and unrestrained attentions. The townspeople soon find out what it is to have her amongst them, for nothing ever blocks her intentions. At the very first outing that the family attends, a town picnic, Mrs. Jameson charges up to

the hampers of food left on the tables and, without asking for permission, goes through each one. She is dismayed to find that all the hampers have cakes, pies, or some other sweets. "These are enough to poison the whole village," she tells the startled picnickers. She then launches herself on a lecture about proper diets by offering them some boxed "thick, hard-looking biscuits" and some "hygienic coffee." That is only the start. Soon she tries to convince the town women that they should cut their skirts and wear gaiters, that they should improve their minds by forming a Browning Society, and that their children should be allowed to run barefoot. She also begins a civic beautification program with ivy which turns out to be poisonous. The town is soon reeling from her attacks, and the people aren't sure whether to be angry or amused. Some villagers are even afraid of her. Eventually all of them are delighted when she buys a small farm and tries to run it. She buys some cows on approval, but sends them back when she discovers that they have no upper teeth. She plants her garden late in the fall despite the fact that Jonas, her hired man, tries to warn her the timing is wrong. Later he tells a friend what he told her: "'The frost'll be a-nippin' of 'em, marm,' says I, 'as soon as they come up, "

marm.' 'I wish you to leave that to me my good man,' says she. Law, she ain't a-goin' to hev any frost a-nippin' her garden unless she's ready for it." And Jonas adds that her chickens are "the fust fowls I ever see that a woman could stop scratching,"¹ for when Mrs. Jameson discovers that the hens won't stay out of her garden, she makes shoes of thick pieces of cloth for each bird, tying them firmly to the legs of the hens. Jonas spends the better part of his time replacing "the cloth buskins" of the hens, laughing hysterically as he works at it.

When her daughter falls in love with one of the village boys, Mrs. Jameson learns, however, that the teacher is sometimes taught. Because she hopes that her daughter will marry a wealthy city man, she will not approve the match. When she discovers that the boy's mother, Mrs. Liscom, objects to the match because her prospective daughter-in-law doesn't know how to keep house, Mrs. Jameson is astonished. Mrs. Liscom tells her that a pretty face is not enough for a village wife. "He'll find out there's comfort to be considered as well as love."²

In time, Mrs. Jameson is forced to examine her own values and to admit that her daughter's happiness is more important than the prestige of having a wealthy son-in-law.

¹. Ibid., pp. 228-230.
². Ibid., p. 278.
She gives her consent to the marriage and encourages Harriet to learn how to cook and keep house. Later the townspeople recognize that there is some value in being receptive to new ideas. For both the town and Mrs. Jameson, the two summers have been an experience in adjustment.

In "The Apple-Tree" appear both the character with manageable faults and the one with grotesque characteristics. The grotesque character is Sarah Blake, old, "small and weak muscled in spite of her life of strenuous toil."¹ Like many of the villagers, she lives in a tiny house kept immaculately clean. Her frenzied cleaning on a fine May morning is interrupted when her husband, an unwilling assistant and window washer, falls through a chair. When she cannot extricate him from the cane chair, she runs directly across the street to the Maddox home.

"Sam Maddox's house was like a glaring blot on the tidy New England landscape."² Sam, the character with the manageable faults, is a young blonde giant who lives with his wife and several children amidst poverty and squalor. The one beautiful spot on their property is the huge apple tree in front of their house. This tree gives the family much of their nourishment, for Sam does not work. Occasionally

¹. Mary Wilkins Freeman, Six Trees (New York, 1903), p. 176.
². Ibid., p. 171.
he will hunt or fish, but he much prefers to sit on his porch in the warm sun and to watch his children playing in the dirt like little animals. They are scantily dressed, their faces and bodies earth-stained.

They had become in a certain sense a part of the soil, as much as the weeds and flowers of the spring. Their bare toes clung to the warm, kindly earth with caressing instinct; they grubbed in it with little, clinging hands; they fairly burrowed in it, in soft, sunny nests, like the hens.

Sam's wife, Adeline, is no better. She spends much of her time rocking the newest baby, reading novels or sitting on the porch near Sam. When Mrs. Blake comes for help, the entire family, having nothing better to do, trails her back across the street. With Sam's help, Mr. Blake is soon extricated, but the old man is too dizzy to continue his work; he must lie down. Soon after, Mrs. Blake returns to her housework, and Sam and his brood shuffle back to their porch. With a great effort Mrs. Blake wins a battle with the feather bed, but the braided mat is too heavy for her. She tries to lift it; then she tries to shake it or drag it into the house, but the mat does not budge. She notices that Sam Maddox has observed her war with the mat. When he does not offer to help her, she marches across the street and returns with him in tow.

1. Ibid., p. 175.
As he helps her shake the mat, Sam comments on the little stunted fruit tree which grows on the Blake lawn. His own is a "pretty handsome tree," he says innocently, with its bounteous supply of apples which the children quickly eat. "I don't care nothing about the looks of a tree," Sarah retorts, "as long as it has good apples." When Sam croons over the blossoms on his own tree, Sarah reminds him again, "I don't care nothin' about blooms; it's apples I'm arter."

Later on that morning Sam speaks to old Edison, Sarah's husband, who is still lying on the couch. "Don't you git up. You jist lay low. It's durned hard work, house cleanin'; you're too old. You lay low. I'll stay round and help." For the first time in fifty years of married life, Edison Blake sleeps all day.

That evening Sam and Adeline sit on the porch and discuss the day's events. "Old Edison, he's had one day off," chuckles Sam, and adds that it is "dreadful clean" at the Blakes. The young couple sit happily on their porch, the children near-by in a little "cluster like a bunch of flowers in the yard," the scent of the apple blossoms symbolizing the sweetness of their lives. From their vantage point they can see lights in the sitting room across the

1. Ibid., p. 199.
street and the "small figure [which] bustled back and forth incessantly past the window."¹

This story contains two interesting ideas. On the one hand is the philosophy of Mrs. Blake, the compulsive cleaner, the thrifty housewife of many of Mrs. Freeman's stories. She is concerned with things and is upset that her husband has broken a chair that once belonged to her mother. Sarah has no time to enjoy her house because she is kept so busy cleaning it. She is much like Maria, the compulsive cleaner of Jerome, although Maria has a reason for cleaning: it is a form of therapy to her. Mrs. Blake does it much out of habit. She "spring cleans" her house thoroughly once a month, a fact which scandalizes Adeline ("What's the use? It gits dirty again."). Over-cleaning deprives Sarah of the time she needed to be considerate of her husband. She is snappish and bossy with him. He feels trapped. Additionally, Sarah has no time for aesthetics. The apple tree was meant to bear fruit, not to be enjoyed for its beauty. Then, too, the fruits are not to be devoured. Fruits are saved for pies or sauces. The worst sin of all, as far as Sarah is concerned, is having to watch a healthy man without the gumption to work.

The other side is represented by Sam Maddox, the enigma of the neighborhood. Out of choice, he and his

¹. Ibid., p. 204.
family live in dilapidated surroundings. His wife, Adeline, seldom cleans house or even worries about cooking meals. His children are ragged, yet strangely happy. The entire Maddox family is satisfied with the little that they do have. The symbol of their happiness is the apple tree, which offers them not only food and shade, but aesthetic pleasure as well, a pleasure of which they are cognizant and which they have time to enjoy.

At the end of the day Mrs. Blake is still cleaning; the Maddoxes are sitting on their porch and talking lovingly to each other: "'Yo ain't tired, be you?' 'No; aint' done nothin' all day.' Sam can live with his quirks. He accepts his laziness, and his wife demands very little of him. He and his family enjoy the way they live, with its time to be happy and time to observe the seasons. The other extreme, the grotesque character, cannot enjoy life, for she is too busy cleaning. This is the sad indictment of the grotesque characters: they are usually unhappy people.

There is a strange reversal in this story because it is the young who are lazy and the old who work; the young who have compassion and not the old; the young who are generously happy and not the old. The fact that the young woman has done nothing and declares that she is not

1. Ibid., p. 203.
tired somehow strikes the reader as amusing because usually people are only too happy to catalogue the many reasons for their exhaustion. Equally interesting and amusing is the gentleness of the children, (they are like a covey of quail instead of children), Sam's shock and indignation when Sarah offers to pay him for his services, and his fright of the tiny woman with the sharp tongue. The paradox is that although Sam has learned the quiet life of survival, there is something fascinating in Sarah, who defies a universe that is perverse with her own perversity.

L. J. Potts has said that one of the purposes of comedy, and hence humor, is "the desire to understand the behavior of men and women" as they respond to the society in which they live. This chapter has shown the conditions of the society represented in some of Mrs. Freeman's works and the often humorous responses that the people make to it. In some instances the responses to life are flexible; her people are able to compromise or to change their point of view, and, therefore, life does not seriously hurt them. In other cases, because village life has offered them so little, the people have become warped and twisted; their response is warped and twisted.

If the world which Mary Wilkins Freeman has mirrored seems sometimes exaggerated, it is because comedy

1. Potts, p. 207.
magnifies people and situations. Yet her stories can still serve not only as reminders of the diversity within the human condition, but also as a history of a time when people found great value in independence and self-respect. The funny characters, the humorous moments, help us to be "content with man's nature as it seems to be," whether he be normal, idiosyncratic, or grotesque. Amidst difficulties now far beyond our time and understanding, in a cramped atmosphere, these people lived and toiled and still had time to pause and smile. Their bittersweet humor provided them, and now offers us, a "mediocre kind of sanity," that for a few moments makes us forget the inherent tragedy that the winds of our time contain.

CHAPTER III

IRONY

Irony is often used to achieve a comical effect through the use of contrast. Its distinguishing feature is a discrepancy or incongruity between expression and meaning, appearance and reality, or expectation and event.¹ When these incongruities "jump to the eyes,"² we call them ironies.

If comedy depends for its effect on a sudden contrast, then irony does, too, but if the reaction to comedy is "often no more than a smile,"³ then the reaction to irony is a smile plus a wince of pain. Irony is a paradox: it is two concurrent ideas, a comic effect coupled to a seemingly apposite emotion. Since irony is a part of comedy,⁴ it not only recognizes laughter, but it also bows to the tragic, the horrible, or the sentimental. Therefore, we can have ironic tragedy or horrible irony, sentimental irony or ironic comedy.

¹. Alan Reynolds Thompson, The Dry Mock (Berkeley, 1948), p. 10.
². Ibid.
When irony is comical, it is often directed at customs and institutions of the contemporary scene. In one of Mrs. Freeman's earliest stories, "Two Old Lovers," the scene is set in the small manufacturing village of Leyden. Although there was still work enough in Leyden, conditions had begun to stagnate. "As slow as Leyden" was soon the description given to its inhabitants, and the slowest amongst them was David Emmons. The joke among the villagers was that one day as David walked down the street, the meeting-house passed him by.

David worked in a factory and at night came home to tend his little cottage and to putter around his annual fine vegetable garden. Once a week he courted Maria Brewster. Although the neighbors expected David and Maria soon would be engaged, years passed and the engagement never became a fact. Year after year, each Sunday David sat in the Brewster's living room, saying little until time to leave.

When Maria was almost forty, she thought that David was ready to propose, so she bought some lovely pearl colored silk and put it away. Ten years later, when she thought that David was once again ready to "pop the question," she had the silk cut and sewn, but David never proposed. At sixty she gave the gown to a niece who was in no
doubt of being married. The elderly Mrs. Brewster, Maria's mother, confided to a neighbor that if David and Maria ever planned to marry, they should do it soon, for she "was afraid she should never live to see the wedding if they wasn't spry."

Some time after Maria gave the dress away, she noticed that David had begun to cough, that he grew increasingly weaker. The town wags commented that it didn't seem as if David would get to Maria's house until Monday evening. Maria, always thoughtful and concerned about David, was even more tender with him in his later years. She tried to make his home comfortable, and she made sure that he always had some of her baked bread and cakes. Early one morning she was called to his house by a neighbor child. David was dying. In a thin voice he tells her, "I'm dyin', an' I allers meant to--have asked you--to--marry me."

The irony here, though brief, lies in the expectation and the event. At one time Maria expected to be asked to marry, but time and time again she was disappointed. David always meant to ask her, but he did not. When he finally speaks of his intentions, the irony is, of course, that it is too late. The other irony is bound in the years


2. Ibid., p. 36.
that both Maria and David wasted waiting for the question and the answer that would have changed their lives. Maria could have made a fine wife; instead, she dies having fulfilled part of the role of wife, but never been called wife. David dies alone, whereas he always wanted to marry Maria and have a wife. To the comedy of the basic situation, a too slow lover, is added the pain of what was expected versus what really happened.

In "A Village Singer," the discrepancy that occurs is two-fold: what Candace expected (to continue to be the leading soprano in the choir) and what actually occurred (being told by the congregation that she was fired).

After singing with the choir for over thirty years, Candace Whitcomb does not understand that her voice is no longer sweet and true. When the congregation decides that they do not want her "shrill clamor" ringing in their ears another Sunday, they send her a letter telling her that she has been retired. Candace does not realize (1) that she has lost her voice and (2) that the church members do not know how tactfully to tell her their feelings. The members of the congregation hurt Candace's feelings by sending her a letter instead of gently discussing the truth with her:

"If they'd gone about it any decent way, told me right out honest that they'd got tired of me, an' wanted Alma Way to..."
to sing instead of me, I wouldn't minded so much.¹ Candace is so hurt and angered that she sits in her house, next door to the church, and sings as loudly as she can whenever her replacement, Alma Way, begins to sing. Of course, she disrupts the choir.

Candace's wound is mortal and she soon dies. First, however, she tries to make amends to Alma by asking her to come and sing for her. Alma sings "sweetly and clearly," but when the song ends, Candace's remark is critical: "You flatted a little on--soul,"² she says.

The humor in this story is created by her failure to hear her own bad singing and by Candace's reaction to being fired: she tries to "get even" with the congregation. Most people would have swallowed their pride and accepted retirement, but comedy exists here because Candace refuses to be fired. Instead, she fights back in the only way that she can, by singing during the services in what she believes is still a magnificent voice.

When she asks Alma to sing for her, we expect a reconciliation. Candace remains in character by not complimenting Alma's singing. The ironies "jump to our eyes." The congregation expected Alma to accept the situation quietly; she did not; she fought back. Alma believed that

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1. Wilkins, A New England Nun, p. 27.
2. Ibid., p. 36.
her voice was as melodious as ever; the church members knew that her voice was too shrill. Alma said that she had never felt better; that she could sing for another thirty years; yet, she quickly broke down under her disappointment. The last irony is on us: Candace longs to apologize. The reader expects her to do so, but she does not.

Similarly, the difficulties of appearances haunt Esther Gay in "An Independent Thinker." They are the focal point of the story. While her neighbors and friends go off to Sunday services, Esther stays home, knitting. Her rationale is that since she is deaf and cannot hear the service, it is foolish to waste two precious hours in church when she can put the time to better use. With the money that she earns, Esther secretly supports two old neighbors, Lavinia Dodge and her mother.

Often in scenes between parent and child the reader glimpses the humorous yet ironic qualities of a blood relationship, for mothers seldom release the silver chord on their children without interminable advice, and long after adulthood has been reached, the apron strings may still be strongly tied. The scene that follows is not atypical. The daughter, Lavinia, is a meek and rheumatic sixtyish. The mother is an inflexible ninety. On a wintry morning Lavinia is about to cross the street to talk to Esther.
"Laviny, Laviny, where be you goin'? Come back here." calls a tremulous voice from within.

"I wa'n't goin' anywhere, Mother," she called out. "What's the matter?"

"You can't pull the wool over my eyes. I seed you a-goin' out the gate." Lavinia retreats homeward. Her mother's face, which had passed through the stages of beauty, commonplaceness, and hideousness and now arrived at that of the fine grotesqueness . . . peered out from the great feather pillows. The daughter tries to explain her absence.

"She just wanted me to come over an' tell her how you was."

"How I was?"

"Yes."

"Did you tell her I was miser'ble?"

"I didn't go, mother."

"I seed you a-goin' out the gate."

"I came back. She couldn't hear 'thout I went way over."

"Hey?"

"It's all right, mother," screamed Lavinia. Then she went about putting the flowers in water."

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1. Wilkins, _A Humble Romance_, p. 298.
"The old woman's little eyes followed her, with a sharp light like steel."

"I ain't goin' to hev you goin' over to Esther Gay's . . . ." she went on, her thin voice rasping out from her pillows like a file. "She ain't no kind of a girl."

If the actors of this scene had been fifty of sixty years younger, this scene would not be comical. It is funny because of the age of the celebrants. Surely a daughter in her sixties is expected to have the ability to choose suitable friends, having presumably done so for decades. Surely too, a mother bred to thriftiness and neatness will have allowed her daughter to mature, but this is not the case; Lavinia is as restricted as if she were a prisoner. This realization causes a reader to wince with pain. The humor exists, but it is grim because an adult woman is presented in a child's role.

The ironies abound. In her misguided way Mrs. Dodge has read Esther incorrectly. She labels her a "girl" whereas Mrs. Gay is grandmotherly. She also labels her a heretic because the younger woman does not go to church, little realizing that it is Esther's knitting that has kept the two neighbor women out of the poor house. Yet the reader marvels at the independence of the old lady, the power and vitality that she still exudes in her waning

1. Ibid., p. 299.
days. More complex and difficult to understand is the
greatness of spirit that Esther reveals, for not only does
she give, but she gives in secret, never expecting grati­
tude for her good deeds—and she is a strong enough charac­
ter to ignore the town’s dissent.

When the old lady dies, Lavinia, recalling her
mother’s antipathy to the neighbor who knitted on Sunday,
refuses Esther’s offer of a home. As in most of Mrs.
Freeman’s contrived plots, Mrs. Gay suffers additionally
when her own granddaughter, Hatty, is unable to marry
because the boy’s family refuses to associate with a family
of non-church goers. Eventually Esther capitulates, but
only to a certain extent. She stops knitting and Lavinia
moves in, yet she remains victorious for now she is too
busy taking care of Lavinia to even think of going to
Sunday meeting. The irony is that the town accepts that
excuse. They could not accept her when she did not appear
to be Christian, while in actual deed she was. They can
accept her once she appears to be Christian, but not abso­
lutely so in deed, for the town mistakes the appearance for
the reality.

In Mrs. Freeman’s stories death sometimes creates
an irony. Primary is the irony of death itself--the joke,
so to speak, of life. Second is the irony caused by a
specific death, the accommodation that a dying person does
or does not make just before he dies. In Doc Gordon, a delightful episode occurs when the country doctor takes his new partner to visit an old patient.

'I had a terrible night, doctor,' said one old woman, and a smirk of self-conceit was over her ancient face.

'Yes, mother did have an awful night,' said her married daughter with a triumphant expression.¹

With the two doctors present, other people in the house seem to be "positively hilarious." They drink and laugh, and even the old lady "kept calling out a feeble joke in her crackling old voice."²

As the two men are on their way home, the older doctor explains to the younger that, indeed, the old lady knows she is about to die. "Look at the way these people live here, grubbing away at the soil like ants . . . . Most of them have . . . just three ways of attracting notice, . . . birth, marriage, sickness and death."³ He adds that most people receive very little active distinction from the first two, "The sick person and the corpse have a certain state and dignity which they have never attained before."⁴

2. Ibid., p. 63.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
It seems ironic that at death a human being must achieve his distinction when he can least appreciate it, for at such a time the appearance of death is more important than the reality of life. The internal irony of the situation is that the reader expects the family and the old lady to be sad, but they are not. This scene underscores the nervousness, the desperate excitement which occurs in times of stress and leads to hilarity of a non-thinking kind.

An additional irony in *Doc Gordon* exists in the figure of Doctor Gordon himself. He is the rational yet compassionate old country doctor of American legend who drove miles in all weather to visit patients. Those old doctors were truly a different breed because they expected little comfort from their profession. "It's a dog's life. Neither your body nor your soul are your own," Doc Gordon confides to his young assistant. Nor is the renumeration any better than the wintry nights on the road, for "the last bill any of them will pay is the doctor's." Still, the town doctor he has remained, unstinting in his labors, offering whatever comfort and help he can give.

As far as the world knows, Doc Gordon lives quietly with his sister, Mrs. Ewing, and her daughter. Mrs. Ewing is so beautiful that visitors often stare at her. Yet

1. Ibid., p. 32.
young Dr. James Elliot in meeting her for the first time also notices that she has changed somehow from her huge portrait. It hangs on a wall of the ornate living room, with silver, gold and amber colors, wall hangings, Persian rugs and draperies, skins and ivories. The extravagance of the room does not excite Dr. Elliot's imagination as much as the dull lighting and shutters, closed securely even in daylight. The room appears to want to shut off the outside world and to forbid its entrance even in a glimmer of sunlight.

At dinner James observes that Mrs. Ewing has a poor appetite, that she eats only when Doctor Gordon scolds her. Once they have finished, the older doctor invites the younger to the local pub. There they spend the evening drinking, playing cards and gustily enjoying the company of some of Gordon's friends. On the way home, well after midnight, Doc Gordon continues the hilarity of the evening by "telling story after story, and shouting with laughter." Once within sight of his house, however, he stops, leaning against a great tree while staring at his house. He groans almost to himself that "the race is at a finish, and I am caught as I always am . . . .", but he does not elaborate.

As they enter the house, James hears a moan from upstairs. He is certain that he has heard a noise when he

1. Ibid., p. 56.
notices that doctor Gordon's face assumes a "gloomy, almost fierce expression." Other strange events make Dr. Elliot uneasy in the house. Clemency, Mrs. Ewing's daughter, is almost kidnapped by a stranger. Further, although Gordon had told his assistant that "secrecy is the one shield I have," very soon Elliot learns the secrets of the household.

Arriving home unexpectedly one day, James finds Mrs. Ewing in the drawing room divan weeping for herself and apparently in unremitting pain. When he tries to help her by promising to cure her, she tells him the truth. She has terminal cancer. She does not weep for herself,

I could bear the pain for myself, but for the others, too! Oh, I wish there was some little back door of life out of which one could slip, and no blame to anybody, in a case like this. But there is nothing but the horrible front door, which means such agony to everybody who is left.¹

As the weeks pass the beautiful woman becomes a shrieking animal wracked by the most excruciating pain.

When a skulking stranger is shot on the Gordon property, James discovers the rest of the secret. The vandal is in reality Clemency's father, "a monstrosity of perverted morality,"² who had deserted Clemency's real mother, Dr. Gordon's younger sister. She had died in

¹. Ibid., p. 82.
². Ibid., p. 222.
childbirth after being deserted by her husband. Because Dr. Gordon always feared that her real father would claim her someday, he never revealed her identity to anyone. After his marriage his wife masqueraded as the girl's mother and also as his sister, to provide their niece with a sense of security.

Once Mrs. Ewing is dead, Dr. Gordon reveals part of his secret to the town. "I had not realized what that would mean: to never acknowledge her as my wife, dead or alive." Nevertheless, the old doctor sinks into apathy and guilt, certain that the morphine he prescribed caused his wife's death.

Although Doc Gordon is not one of Mrs. Freeman's best works, comic interludes are well used to lead the reader from one crucial moment to another. There is, for instance, an incident when Dr. Gordon buys what he thinks is a handsome horse, but the horse proves to have a false tail. Further, he crib bites his stall. Another time the doctor gets revenge against a local game shark when the doctor substitutes wooden pigeons in a shooting match. To the consternation of the other contestant, shooting the pigeons makes them bounce in the air and come down unbroken.

The books is ironic in its larger theme that a physician can least help himself and those in his household.

1. Ibid., p. 271.
Doctor Gordon can help the townspeople when they are ill; he is totally unable to ease the terrible pain of the woman he loves. Therefore in moments of conviviality he tries to forget her suffering. It is even more ironic that what he thought would be only one lie leads to another and to tragedy. He wished "above all things to lead a life with its windows open and shade up, but I have been forced into the reverse. My life has been as closely shuttered and curtained as my house,"¹ he says symbolically. It is too true.

The comment that Mrs. Freeman makes in these examples is that her scene, with its rigidity, with its special customs, with the few outlets that cause her people to become idiosyncratic and grotesque—and therefore comical—also causes ironic moments. The village nurtured David's slowness and caused him to postpone a life-enriching change. The village, too, forgot that the truth plainly told is preferable to a nicely expressed lie. Last, a community that offers distinction only in death, in truth offers no distinction whatever.

**Tragic Ironies**

The scenes that Mrs. Freeman records are not tragic in the Aristotelian sense. No great men walk her country

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lanes, no great illusions shatter, and no great recognition of evil or of hamartia arises. Her scenes reveal people whose routine lives are altered by marriage or death. Marriage is so important as a source of change and of happiness that in allowing their one chance of marriage to pass, both Louisa (in "Louisa") and Inez (in "A Taste of Honey") commit themselves to spinsterhood. The importance of marriage as the main source of fulfillment for women exposes the weakness of New England society, and, consequently, of the need of the women to revolt or "to jump my wall," as Narcissa says in "One Good Time."

If . . . I had to settle down in your house as I have done in father's, and see the years stretching ahead like a long road without any turn, and nothing but the same old dog trot of washing, and ironing, and scrubbing and cooking and sewing and washing dishes till I drop into my grave, I should hate you, . . .

she tells the middle-aged lover who has waited twenty years for her. The alternative to routine is a sudden, convulsive turnabout, a final grasp at what may yet be.

In an otherwise ordered existence, the personal tragedies are small ripples in the life of the village, ripples which are ironic or tragic because in them a reader sees his own vulnerability and the ease with which he, too,

can lose opportunities or can become the victim of misfortune.

One reason why these people are vulnerable is that they are so obviously naive, so unwise in the ways of the world. Narcissa thought that it would take her one, maybe even three, years to spend the $1,500 that she had received after her father's death. It took five days.

Narcissa's tragedy was caused by her father's refusal to allow her to marry. Well into middle-age she lived a spinster, an unpaid drudge on her father's farm. His repressive control of the household extended even to the clothes that mother and daughter wore; in almost forty years neither had owned a new dress. After his death, the two women, parched for gaiety and experiences, did what no one in the memory of the village had ever done: they left. Six days later they returned with new clothes, jewelry, and the memory of five unforgettable days in New York. The two women also had not one cent in their pockets.

Narcissa's experience may have been unique, but Rebecca's in "On the Walpole Road" is almost universal in theme. As a young woman, Rebecca was in love with Abner Lyons. Her mother, Mrs. Wilson, was so opposed to the match and so "dreadful nervous an' feeble" and insistent that Rebecca marry Enos Fairweather, that the daughter finally consented. At the wedding, "Aunt Rebecca got
kinder des'rate, an' a realizin' sense of what she was
doin' come over her, an' she thought she'd make one more
effort to escape.\(^1\) When the minister asks whether anyone
knows any reason why they should not marry, Rebecca speaks
up. "I don't love this man I'm standin' beside of, an' I
love another man."\(^2\) The stillness in the church is dread­
ful, but the ceremony continues.

For more than twenty years Rebecca is a model wife
and housekeeper. When Enos dies, her friends wonder
whether she will now marry Abner Lyons, who has remained a
bachelor, doing his own housework as well as running his
farm.

Two years later she and Abner do marry, but the
happiness that Rebecca has not experienced in her first
marriage eludes her also in the second. "Abner Lyons was
awful fussy. I s'pose his livin' alone so long made him
so,"\(^3\) for he follows Rebecca about the kitchen commenting
on and improving whatever she does. Not too long after­
wards, Rebecca dies. If anything, this ending is the very
opposite of what is expected. Sentimentally the reader
longs for a happy ending for Rebecca. When she isn't
happy, the irony becomes clear: a second chance may not be
\begin{enumerate}
\item Mary E. Wilkins, *A Humble Romance*, p. 143.
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid., p. 146.
\end{enumerate}
a change for the better. What is ironic about both Rebecca and Narcissa is that they lost a chance for youthful happiness through the intervention of a parent. Such intervention is common in Mrs. Freeman's environment.

In one of the best of her later stories ("Old Woman Magoun") tragic irony is shown most clearly. In it converge the differences in appearance and reality, expression and meaning, expectation and event.

The story of Mrs. Magoun takes place in Barry's Ford, "situated in a high valley among the mountains." A little river which divides the village is easily forded in places, but not close to the Magoun house. Mrs. Magoun precipitates the action of the story when she prods the "shiftless" men of the town to build a rude bridge so that she and her near neighbors can go to town without getting wet. The men agree to work on the bridge if she will provide food and drink as they work. On the day appointed, Mrs. Magoun and her neighbors spend all morning cooking. When Mrs. Magoun runs out of salt, she sends her granddaughter, Lily, to the store.

Dressed in her little girl's clothes and carrying her doll, Lily, walks to the store by herself for the first time in her life. Her grandmother warns her not to speak

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1. Mary Wilkins Freeman, "Old Woman Magoun," Harper's, CXI (June-November, 1905), 734.
to strangers, but to do her errand and return home quickly. A friend of her father's, Jim Willis, catches up with her, and as they walk to the store together and talk, he slowly understands that this must be his crony's daughter, a girl of almost fourteen years. Lily returns home. Later that afternoon when the men have finished working, her grandmother points to the slovenly bridge:

"'Jest see that,' said she. 'That's the way men work.'

'Men ain't very nice, be they?' said Lily in her sweet voice.

'No, they ain't take them all together,' replied her grandmother. ¹¹

That evening Mrs. Magoun receives a caller, Nelson Barry, her daughter's widower, and Lily's father--the last dissolute link of a once-good family. He tells her what he wants--Lily. He will use her to pay off a debt he owes to Jim Willis. Mrs. Magoun remonstrates; he had run off with her daughter and left her alone to die; she will not allow that to happen to Lily. The father leaves, telling her that he will return for Lily within a week.

The next day Mrs. Magoun avoids the bridge as she takes Lily to see a lawyer in a distant town. She asks him to adopt Lily, but he refuses. Lily has "Barry blood in

¹¹. Ibid., p. 734.
her veins, and he wants none of it. On the way home, Lily is tired and rests near a wall; nearby are berries which she idly picks and eats. Her grandmother says nothing as she watches the child consume the "nice berries." By the time they arrive home, Lily is deathly ill. She dies that night. The berries were of the nightshade plant.

The ironies of the story again "jump to our eyes."

First is the irony of expectation and event. Mrs. Magoun expected the bridge to bring comfort to her life; it did not. It brought tragedy. In addition, she has raised Lily in the expectation that the young girl will live a happy life. Instead, Lily is to serve the evil purpose of a dissolute man. The irony of expression and meaning occur when we recall that Lily said that "men aren't very nice." The words recoil ironically because what she says lightly echoes tragically in recollection. The men in this story are not nice. They sit in the store, drinking and carousing while the women work. Instead of building the bridge themselves out of courtesy or civic need, they must be cajoled into building it. The men think of Lily as chattel to be bartered or sold, totally ignoring her needs or her youth or that she has any right to her own life.

Last, the story has ironies of appearance and reality. Barry's Ford seems a pastoral village, but it is not.

1. Ibid., p. 735.
It is affected by much that is evil in humanity, as much as any other section of land. Lily, wearing her bonnet and carrying a doll, looks like a little girl to her grandmother. The coarse men see her as a woman. The lawyer does not see Lily as a child in need; his reality focuses on a prejudice against blood tainted by the Barry strain. Lastly, Lily eats what she thinks are "good" berries; they are fatally poisonous.

The last irony is that, seemingly, Lily suffered most, but the reality is that for the rest of her life, every time Mrs. Magoun "went over the log bridge" on her way to market, "she carried with her, as one might have carried an infant, Lily's old rag doll." 1

Other ironies, both comic and tragic, occur in Mrs. Freeman's stories. Often her people strive to reach a goal, as Inez Morse does in "A Taste of Honey," but the goal once achieved is empty because of some ephemeral something lost on the way. Their only chance for happiness goes by, is lost. Inez had promised her father that she would pay off the mortgage. She and her mother scrimp to free their farm. The daughter imposes such strict measures on the household that neither mother nor daughter ever tastes the honey they produce on the farm. All honey goes to market. The two women live for the day when the

1. Ibid., p. 737.
mortgage will be paid. They plan to celebrate by sitting down to a meal of biscuits and honey.

Inez's life is brightened when Willy Linfield begins to court her. Only then does she allow herself to buy the one extravagance of her life, a red ribbon to tie around her neck. When Willy proposes marriage, Inez accepts on the condition that they wait the three years required to cancel her debt. Mrs. Morse tries to convince Inez to marry Willy without waiting. "You'll lose your beau as sure as preachin," she counsels, but Inez is adamant.

"If I marry Willy now, I shall never pay off that mortgage that I promised poor father I would, and I ain't going to do it."¹

The years pass while Inez strains every resource and every muscle to pay her debts. "She denied herself even more than she had formerly. Sometimes she used to think her clothes were hardly fit for her to appear in beside Willy, . . . ."² On the day that she pays off her mortgage she discovers how sour her life can be, for Willy has deserted her to marry another. "I'll never eat my honey," she says symbolically, and even though she goes home to ready the biscuits and honey that she had promised to share with her mother, we know that she is right.

¹ Mary E. Wilkins, A Humble Romance, p. 102.
² Ibid., p. 103.
At dinnertime the daughter sits cheerfully at the table pretending that nothing is amiss. The mother cannot understand her daughter's cheerfulness, "I should think losin' your beau would take all the sweetness out of the honey," she says tartly. Only the reader recognizes the irony. Though deeply hurt, Inez cannot betray her anguish nor admit that she was foolish to wait. It is, however, this very pride that will enable her to survive, but she will never know the taste of honey without Willy. What adds tragic overtones to a story like this is that Inez will not have a second chance at love. The village has too few eligible men.

At other times the irony occurs because the spectator knows how important appearances are to these people. In Jerome, Ann Edwards, Jerome's mother, gives her husband a funeral, complete with mourners, minister, angry relatives, and food enough for those who come, but there is no corpse to bury because supposedly Mr. Edwards has drowned. The irony is that he has not. Only when the worst years are over for her and the children does he return home. The other irony is that although she has a decorous funeral for her husband and has given the mourners "sufficient tea and

1. Ibid., p. 106.
cake,"¹ in reality the family is destitute, hungry. The idea that the mourners have come to help her "bear up" is also ironic because some have come for the conviviality of the occasion or for the food, or to pick a quarrel with Ann because she had not invited them properly. Mourning was not their intention.

Mrs. Freeman wisely detaches herself from these situations by allowing her characters to appraise their own predicaments. Maria doesn't say that she is deeply disappointed. The fact becomes clear when she wipes away the salt drops and puts her wedding dress away. Mrs. Magoun does not seem to be hurt, but the statement that she continues to go to market clutching Lily's rag doll is so pitiful that the reader is pained for her.

Alan Thompson, in The Dry Mock, explains that irony is predicated on the amount of sympathy aroused: "With little sympathy there is little irony,"² and, conversely, with much sympathy there is much irony. Because the reader is quickly and easily drawn into Mrs. Freeman's stories, and because character delineations are believable, he responds sympathetically to the situations. In turn, the reader is made aware of the ironies, not only in the lives

². Thompson, p. 43.
of the village folk, but also in his own. The bits of ironies that pervade many of the stories will motivate the reader's return again and again to Mrs. Freeman's stories. She has mirrored life as it was in a decaying society: village lives quietly and bravely endured, tinged with humor, but made bearable as well as unbearable by the discrepancies of life.
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

The Artistic Achievement

One of Mary Wilkins Freeman's earliest and most thoughtful critics, Charles Miner Thompson, tried to explain why she wrote stories of the homely New England scene rather than ones with a more catholic view. "Had she been a boy," he says, "she would have had the freedom of fields and streams; she would have been in the company of men at the village store or at the street corner and would have been exposed to the larger points of view of the men, which is theirs by 'virtue of the undeniably larger, freer lives they are permitted to live.'"1 As she was a girl and confined to the household, she was limited in the sources of her stories. She relied on her observation and on the gossip of the women for her information, and, subsequently, for the subjects of her stories.

Mrs. Freeman was also going to be limited by the conditions of her life. She was left alone, without money or a profession, in a society that strictly prescribed what its women could or could not do. In spite of these restrictions, she recorded "the decay of an entire

1. Thompson, p. 668.
civilization, a complicated social regime in many ways the richest America has yet produced." What she observed was not the excitement of new frontiers or the vitality that was infusing a region of the country. She noted instead the caging environment that was New England, the customs and traditions that were so deeply rooted in the old and the conservative that they chose to remain farming, even starving, on the thin New England soil. The more daring, the ones who had left for the west, looked back contemptuously at the east and its mode of life. To value tradition above opportunity and wealth was something that the Western pioneers could not understand and is not understood by most westerners even today. This is what causes "the breach of mental sympathy and understanding" which divides East and West.

Wilkinsonian society does reveal the values of tradition. First, it was a closely knit, secure society in which the old were an important part of the family. Grandparents worked well into old age, often raising orphaned grandchildren and actively participating in the decisions of the household or the village. The gentle cycle of

1. Fattee, p. 323.


3. Ibid.
birth, maturity, and old age were daily evident in the village. Because of their age, the old were neither separated from the village nor ostracized by the community, except in the rarest occurrences. Rather, age gave the old the right to interfere and to direct the lives of the family. Not only did the old appear in the village, but their taciturnity and independence set an example for the young which was surely noticed and accepted. The family was thus a large, cohesive, and often beneficial force in the village. Mrs. Freeman's stories reveal these social viewpoints.

Second, Wilkinsonian society had little of the restlessness or rootlessness of modern society. It provided the individual with stability. Many times neighbors were truly compassionate and considerate, willing to help build a neighbor's barn or tend to the sick and the dying. Another positive value of Mrs. Freeman's stories lies in the way they reveal the position of women in New England village society in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The double standard under which women lived caused them to be the actual prisoners as well as unpaid servants of a system that offered them few rewards. If a woman did not marry, few jobs or opportunities were open to her. A woman seldom had a career or travelled. The paradox was that were her husband to die and she be left penniless,
society expected her to support herself—but only by doing needlework or teaching. A few women tried to assert themselves as Narcissa does in "One Good Time" or Catherine in "The Secret" (Harper's Magazine, CXV [June-November, 1907], 392-405), who postpones her marriage rather than submit to her fiancee's cross-examination when she has kept him waiting for forty-five minutes. "John suspected me of going somewhere or doing something I should not," she tells her mother. "He questioned me like a slave owner. If he does so before I am married, what will he do after?" Still, marriage for most women was a happy occurrence. As Rollin Lynde Hart so humorously put it, "We approve of marriage—of early marriage, of hasty marriage, of marriage without a bank account."

Beyond the depiction of the New England scene and society, Mrs. Freeman did not go. In a career that spanned over forty years she made "no attempt to classify herself, uttered no literary dictum, formulated no rules and followed no laws." She was to add that, "As a matter of fact, I would read nothing which I thought might influence me." This last statement may explain why she did not mature as a

3. Ibid., p. 318.
writer and why her material did not evolve, for most writers need exposure to other writers and to society in order to revitalize themselves.

Had she been willing to live in a garret, as Pattee suggests, while she worked to perfect her style, apprenticing herself as other writers have done, she might well have become a notable writer. That she did not is too apparent.

Yet her contribution to American short stories lies not only in her regionalism, but in a timeless quality of her stories: "being so very definite as to character and place, they have absolutely no date."1 Universality marks the problems of her people. They long for new dresses, a good marriage, love or a secure old age. Framing their society and their dreams and needs are the changing New England seasons. Sometimes awareness of changing nature enlarges their horizons. Falling snow brings old Nicholas Gunn to a realization of a man's responsibility to others.2

Mrs. Freeman's additional power as a descriptive writer is evident in almost all of her early short stories. With an unerrring eye she painted details that bluntly set the scene: Sally's scanty hair pulled back into a knot,

1. Moss, p. 22.

her raw, bony fingers, her quavering voice reveal her as the overworked hired help on a farm. When she runs off with an itinerant tin peddler she worries that she will arrive in town without her bonnet. Then she must be assured that what the tin peddler proposes is marriage. Seeing her thin form from behind, Jake mentally notes that he must buy his wife-to-be a gown "with puckers in the back." These details are a mixture of humor and irony. Sally is running away, yet she must give the appearance of propriety as she enters the town. Jake, a shrewd businessman, is so sorry for Sally that he makes up his mind to marry her within five minutes of meeting her. Mrs. Freeman's characters are very human, very much like someone we know. Unexpected events and incongruities and the awkwardness of her people catch us unaware, and we smile or laugh in recognition of ourselves.

Sometime later when it becomes clear that Jake is already married, the story turns ironic. Any woman in the village could have told Sally that Jake was probably a poor risk. She should have been properly wooed and won, and then, in her best dress, married in the parlor of her employer's home—but not to a man already married. Mrs. Freeman's stories show that she knows life isn't always

predictable, that it is a mixture of the ludicrous and the tragic, the logical and the illogical. She says in her stories that one must not underestimate the human heart nor the strange workings of the mind.

To earn a living, Mrs. Freeman had to write voluminously year after year. Not surprisingly, the quality of her work suffered. The first two collections (A New England Nun and A Humble Romance) are usually considered her best works, but even in these the themes or the situations are repetitious. Perhaps only four or five stories from each collection are outstanding. In addition, a few of her later works, such as "The Selfishness of Amelia Lamkin," "The Apple Tree," and "Old Woman Magoun," are also very good fiction.

Her Place Today

Mary Wilkins Freeman has only a negligible place in American literature today. In literary histories, she is almost forgotten, save for a brief mention, here and there. She does survive in some of the original volumes of her stories, still extant in libraries. For the average reader of short stories, the only other place where her stories can be read is in anthologies. Since the same stories are printed over and over, readers have the idea that she wrote only a few stories or only stories that belonged to the local-color movement; or, more specifically, that she wrote
only two collections of "grim" stories. The critics, meanwhile, have commented obliquely on the setting, the style, or the people presented in the stories. Other than that, little notice has been given to her other qualities. Humor and irony have been noted in colorists before but not specifically probed, or if mentioned, usually only the exaggeration of the tall tale has been demonstrated.

Mrs. Freeman deserves better treatment, greater understanding, a larger place in American literature. Therefore, this thesis has shown how humor, as well as irony—the step beyond laughter—exist in her writings. This thesis has also tried to explain why Mrs. Freeman's unforgettable vignettes do not deserve the "grim" appellation. She does not deserve that term. The light handling of most of her material, the wide gamut of humor from laughable details to grotesqueries to irony reveals that she was at her best a capable writer, well aware of human disparities.

A more objective view by which to judge Mrs. Freeman would be provided if readers were furnished with a wide selection of her writing. This could be done by arranging a new collection of her stories that would include her early as well as her later writing, her local color as well as her mystery stories. Excerpts from some of her longer works and from her short novel, *The Jamesons*, would, along
with the stories already mentioned, make a satisfactory and representative volume of her work. A collection so conceived would show the controlled style of her early stories -- the short terse sentences, the skillful use of details, the sense of immediacy achieved through the groping speech of her people. It would also contain her mature style as well -- the longer sentences and smoother transitions, the symbols sparingly and specifically used, as well as "the naïf quality ... which ... gives her the charm of something greater than skill, the touching sincerity of the primitives."¹ Such a collection does not, however, exist. The best fiction by Mrs. Freeman must be individually searched for. In other words, a truly representative selection of her work would be well suited for publication at this time. She deserves to be in print; she has observed uniquely a phase of society in an era that has passed.

No one will again see New England in quite the same way as Mary Wilkins Freeman did, a world peopled by stoical and independent men and women, eager to survive and to do so with humor. The specific details of their lives and aspirations, the words they used, the routines they followed, the frustrations they endured, all of these things

¹. Moss, p. 28.
Mary Wilkins Freeman described in her New England stories.
The period that she observed, the decay of New England, was far more interesting psychologically than one might imagine, for it reveals keen insight on a people's character and fiber, when achievement came not from overcoming large frontiers as in the west, but from overcoming the discrepancies of mind and time in a dying society.
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