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## "A Veritable Guest to Her Own Self": Mary Wilkins Freeman's Humorous Short Stories

Lucia Cherciu

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- 1 In a letter sent in 1886 to her friend Mary Louise-Booth, the editor of *Harper's Bazar*, Mary E. Wilkins expresses succinctly the apparent paradox of her short stories, according to which laughter and tears are often interchangeable:

I have just finished a story, which I do not dare send as yet. It is so very tragic. Mary Wales who always giggles at my pathetic points, has just burst into a flood of tears much to my alarm. I thought she was laughing, and there she was crying. I may change it, and marry the man instead of killing him, but I fear it won't be as artistic.  
(68)

- 2 Most of Freeman's stories of ludicrous courtship combine strategies of revolt disguised in the apparently innocuous mask of humor with often improbable evasions out of the constricting limits of reality. Interpreting the humor and pathos in Freeman's stories of courtship, I will try to bypass the popular "A New England Nun," a story that has become an icon within the increasing body of criticism on Freeman's work. Instead, I will analyze two less known stories, "Juliza" and "One Good Time."
- 3 In an attempt to enlarge the scope of her reception, Freeman took pains to disengage herself from the radical message in her enormously successful story "The Revolt of 'Mother.'" Sarah Penn, or the "Mother" in the title, decides to move her family into the barn her husband has stubbornly built instead of their long promised new house. Her brave decision scandalizes her community but convinces her husband about the power of her determination. Discussing this model of a woman's revolt in an article somewhat misleadingly called "An Autobiography," Freeman claims that the story is not true: "When I wrote that little tale I threw my New England traditions to the winds and trampled on my New England conscience" (134). By the same token, one could argue that the conflicts in "Juliza" and "One Good Time" might be improbable. Definitely, they do not correspond to a traditional definition of what women should be. However, the

delicate balance of humor manages to recuperate the truth in what might appear as an irreverent revolt against tradition.

- 4 The mixture of pathos and humor in Freeman's stories became apparent quite early. Although most early reviews signaled the presence of humor, Shirley Marchalonis and Gregg Camfield have published the only studies dedicated exclusively to Freeman's humor. Specifically, Marchalonis develops a theory of humor starting from the limitations and the benefits of the local color label. In her view, the function of humor is relevant in its connection with other modes: "Throughout Freeman's work, including those early stories described by Pattee and others as grim, there is often a core of humor--perhaps irony, perhaps the absurd, but humor nonetheless. Characters are placed, or, rather, have placed themselves, in situations that are, quite simply, funny" (229). Constructing "a conflict that is both trivial and vital," Freeman's work combines humor with other genres. Marchalonis gives priority to the value of humor that triggers "the shock of the unexpected" as a development of incongruity theory and the perception of logical distortion. The identification of incongruity as a conflict between "individual behavior and the conventions of the protagonist's society" defines, in Marchalonis's terms, the specifics of revolt in Freeman's work (232).
- 5 Freeman's own life offers examples of ludicrous courtship. Under the public surveillance imposed by the attention of the press that came with the increase of popularity, Wilkins' protracted engagement became a subject of ridicule. She had shared a house with her childhood friend, Mary Wales, from 1883 till 1902, when she was almost forty years of age. Around 1893, she met Charles Freeman. Their courtship lasted about five years, mainly because the writer had strong hesitations. Seizing the news of her engagement, the papers announced their marriage several times. *The New York Telegraph*, for example, declared, "the public is really tired of the love affairs of the literary old maid, and the sooner she marries the doctor and takes him out of the public view the more highly will the action be appreciated." Similarly, another paper worded its headline, "Please, Miss Wilkins, Marry Dr. Freeman" (qtd. in Kendrick 207). For the private Mary Wilkins, the bitter humor of this public bantering must have been painful. Indeed, the marriage was reported several times in the papers before it actually took place, and when in finally happened, it was done in secret.<sup>1</sup>
- 6 Ludicrous courtship is a common theme in Freeman's stories, whose goal, as she expressed it, was to expose the "exaggerations and deformities" in the New England character (qtd. in Martin 148). Freeman captures the main aspects of distorted courtship in "Two Old Lovers," her first story published in *Harper's Bazar* in 1883. Describing the situation of two lovers who spent all of their lives deferring reciprocal confessions, the narrator comments, "There was something laughable, and at the same time rather pathetic, about Maria's and David's courting" (279). After they have been closely observed by the community all their lives and indulgently laughed about, the two finally get to communicate openly. David's speech is precipitated only by his deathbed farewell to his lifetime friend to whom he never got the courage to propose. The other quintessential courtship story which has long been embraced by criticism is "A New England Nun," in which Louisa prefers the suspension of an indeterminate courtship of fourteen years to the actual presence of her fiancé, and ultimately to the realization of their marriage.<sup>2</sup>
- 7 Carrying over the main theme in "Two Old Lovers," the two stories "Juliza" and "One Good Time," are both laughable developments of passion. Juliza and Narcissa, the heroine of "One Good Time," spend vast amounts of energy in a distorted spectacle of the self.

They become actors on a public stage dominated by the close surveillance of their community. Charles Miner Thompson, an early enthusiastic reviewer of Freeman's work, identified "a monstrous example of stubbornness" in most of Freeman's characters (665). Indeed, the two heroines excel in the adamant pursuit of their dreams to the point of exaggeration and ridicule. Thompson's interpretation of Freeman as "an idealist in masquerade" works well for both stories. The two heroines' efforts toward independence and self-determination are often distorted through an absurd evasion of reality, combined with complicated strategies of deception.<sup>3</sup> On the whole, the treatment of ludicrous courtship in Freeman's stories foregrounds the feelings of inadequacy characters experience when they leave behind the conventions of their communities.

- 8 "Juliza" (1892) is one of the emblematic cases of revolt against courtship in its rigid rituals of action and passivity, subject and object. Juliza is a talented young woman who excels as a performer of public recitations. Misunderstanding the meaning of her long friendship with Frank Williams, Juliza proceeds to propose marriage to him. Completely ignorant of her breach of gender roles, she further discovers that Frank is in love with another person, Lily Emmons. Juliza facilitates the relationship between the two and finally even offers to perform a moving recitation at Frank and Lily's wedding. However, her apparent selflessness is only a public spectacle, meant to disguise her own suffering and to protect her from the community's opprobrium. Powerful in its affirmation of women's rights and especially of women's ability to take their destiny into their own hands, "Juliza" has only recently started to receive critical attention.<sup>4</sup> The title character has been predestined through her quaint name to trace a double path and follow a double destiny. As a form of paying homage to her aunts, "Juliza had been named for both of them by a judicious combination of Julia and Eliza, and had inherited their money" (23).
- 9 The heroine's stark unconventionality results from her unusual upbringing and from her artistic talents. An only child, Juliza has been home schooled, and has not had direct contact with the other girls of her age.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, she remains ignorant of common societal norms. Her isolation makes her feel more mature, giving her "a demeanor like that of a woman of fifty" (22). Juliza's own family provided her with models likely to predestine her for a unique trajectory. Her mother, Mrs. Peck, is first described as covered in a "curious majesty," sitting "in her rocking-chair as if it were a throne" (26). It is from her mother that Juliza inherits her gift for public speaking and her special voice, "deep, with solemn inflections" (26). The arrangement of her parents' marital relations is peculiar too, in the sense that Mrs. Peck's domination is openly acknowledged, while Juliza's father "never dreamed of disobeying his impetuous wife, but covered his docility with taciturnity, which gave him a show of masculine dignity" (28). Both parents are inclined towards posing, and from them Juliza inherits her talent for theater and for controlling herself in public. Apt to imitate the spectacular voice of her mother, who also trains her to deliver speeches, and equally to withdraw into taciturnity and repress her feelings, as her father does, Juliza is presented from the outset as a masterful candidate for public simulation.
- 10 Completely in control of her qualities as a public speaker, Juliza is active as an entertainer in her community, reputed for her talent and invited to perform at sociables. Her performances are patronized by the church. Her mother denies her the right to perform for the sake of art for two reasons: first, because it is not appropriate for a woman to display herself in public, and, paradoxically, because she has sufficient resources and thus lacks the excuse of needing art for survival:

I'm willin' she should speak to accommodate as she does here in town, but I ain't willin' to have her go round speakin' in public. It ain't a woman's place. And Juliza's got enough; she don't need to". (23)

- 11 The creative impulses behind her art are demystified, suggesting a controversy between genteel values and artistic performance. Juliza's recitations offer an outlet for her singular personality and repressed passion.
- 12 Juliza's performance in public at "a sewing-circle and sociable" is marked by her peculiar ignorance of public rituals. Described as "a heavily-built girl with a back as broad as a matron's," her physical appearance sets her apart from the other young women of her age (21). Since Juliza is the center of attention during the evening entertainment, her relationship with Frank Williams is singled out as well. The narrator describes the reactions of the two friends as they see each other, emphasizing their awkward behavior: Frank blushes, avoids her eyes, and does not initiate conversation. The condoned ritual of courtship at the end of the sociable, when young men are waiting to walk home with their girlfriends, provides an occasion for the public embarrassment of the two:
- When Juliza Peck appeared, Frank Williams shrank back; several of the young men tried to push him forward, laughing, but he stood his ground. Juliza paused in the doorway, and stood looking back at him calmly, as if waiting". (23)
- 13 Although the tension is obvious for the ones present, Juliza is herself ignorant of the power structure of the scene, and thus breaks the rules of the courting ritual. She initiates conversation on the long way back, overturning the most rigid of social codes and actually proceeding to propose to Frank.
- 14 Proposing, Juliza fails to act according to expectations about feminine weakness and compulsory demure behavior. When Frank complains that his mother is sick, Juliza volunteers to help, in a manner unencumbered by any restraints, business-fashion: "There ain't but one thing to do,' said she, 'I'll come over there whenever you want me'" (25). The details she adds to her matter-of-fact proposal demystify the ritual, hitting into the core of convention: "I can come any time next week, if you say so. I haven't much to do to get ready. I've got clothes enough. I never thought I'd want to lay in a great stock when I was married. Anyway, I always thought it was foolish." Her quick dismissal of traditional romance is quite baffling for Frank, who needs time to process her information, unable to conceive of her meaning. Defying propriety, Juliza enumerates her own qualities of housewife: "I mean I'll get married to you right away, and come over to your house. That'll settle it. I'm a good cook and a good housekeeper" (25).
- 15 The painful comedy of the scene derives from the confusion of gender roles. Through her nonconformity, Juliza castigates the hypocrisy of gender distribution, questioning an oppressive power structure. Ignorant of the prescriptive ideology of romance, Juliza "steals the language" of men, trying to perform roles typically ascribed to them.<sup>6</sup> In addition to her peculiar upbringing, through which she managed to elude convention, it is her training in manipulating language that makes her take for granted her right to speak her mind. Martha J. Cutter discusses the "frontiers of language" in "The Revolt of 'Mother,'" noting that the distribution of power among gender categories is negotiated in Freeman's most famous story through a similar disputation of language. Cutter interprets Mother's attributes as a "speaking subject" who strives "to redefine a linguistic frontier" (280). Acting as a speaking subject, Juliza's peremptory attitude masquerades as masculine, signaling the inherently ridiculous aspect of rigid romantic codes. However, once she has broken the code, Juliza has given Frank power over herself, a fact that he

points out to her unflinchingly: "You mustn't think I shall say anything about this to-night, ... I shan't ever speak of it" (26).

- 16 Comedy is a contingent category, dependent on conventions that are assumed, commonly shared by a given community and familiar to the reader, but never explicitly stated. The humor of Juliza's interference with prescribed gender roles offers a productive chance for the writer to assert one of the absurd limits dictated by patriarchy. Later that night, when Juliza tells her mother about Frank's refusal, Juliza's ignorance provides an opportunity for explaining the premise that "There's something to be considered besides common-sense" (26). The repartee between mother and daughter is exemplary of their theatrical talents. Innocently, Juliza ask her mother: "[W]hat do you suppose the reason is that Frank don't want me to marry him?", and the dialogue continues in a punctuated exchange:

"Juliza Peck, you didn't ask Frank Williams to marry you?"

"No, I didn't ask him; I told him I would."

"Do you know what you've done?"

"What?"

"What? You've made yourself a laughin' stock all over Stony Brook."

"I don't see why I have, I'm sure."

"Don't you know girls don't tell young men they'll marry'em unless they're asked."

"I don't see why they don't." (27)

- 17 The dialogue between the two includes references to a social code Juliza does not perceive. Instead, she confesses her blindness --which emphasizes the ludicrous in the scene, quite disconcerting for her mother-- by admitting, "I don't see what I've done to be laughed at" (27).
- 18 Playing the role of the fool, Juliza is apt to speak her mind and endanger her image in the community through an innocent lack of "modesty" and of conventional femininity. In training her for recitations, her mother once accuses her of not being sufficiently fragile and sophisticated for a woman, lacking intuition and insight into what goes beyond common-sense. In her mother's view, Juliza's physical appearance precludes her from playing the part of a feminine, gracious woman. Her mother claims that Juliza is too strong to play a feminine woman convincingly: "You plank your arm up an' down like a pump-handle... your arm ain't put in with a hinge, it's put in with your feelin's, when you're speakin... I s'pose it's because you're built so solid" (28). Juliza would not masquerade femininity, and in so doing, she acts out her own vision of herself truthfully. The dark humor of the training scene emphasizes the mother's violence towards her daughter: although she trains her to speak in public, the mother does not comprehend that the success as a speaking subject will trigger Juliza's failure.
- 19 Juliza once more overrules her mother's code of demure behavior by challenging Frank to talk over his refusal. The scene in which Juliza invites him in is striking in its distribution of gender roles. Embarrassed when dared to explain his feelings, Frank finds refuge in the trivial, noticing details and using them as a source of violence:
- Frank was blushing; he looked down at his snowy boots, saw the snow melting on the carpet, and thought fiercely to himself that he did not care if it was spoiled". (29)
- 20 Asked why he doesn't want to marry her, he responds,
- [Y]ou may not know it, but you're doing a dreadful thing. How do you suppose I can answer you a question like that if I'm a man". (31)

- 21 Social limits are thus working on both sides, restricting the possibilities of their behavior. Caught in the routine, Frank is incapable of dealing with new situations, unable to respond to Juliza's alternative solutions.
- 22 Given the courage of her invention of new roles, Juliza could be considered an exponent of the New Woman, whose most important features are creativity in devising new images for the self and especially outstanding linguistic endowment. Articulate, Juliza acts through language. Analyzing the negotiation of stereotypes between the cult of the True Woman and the development of the New Woman, Martha Cutter concludes, "Much of what characterized the independence of the New Woman was linguistic" (389). In this respect, Juliza excels in a skillful manipulation of language, convincing Frank to confess his infatuation with another young woman, and proceeding to help him.
- 23 Juliza's apparent altruism may be meant to prevent the development of a possible blackmail on Frank's part. Divining the object behind Frank's obsession, Juliza acts as an intermediary, providing him with a much-needed language. His confusion and lack of decision are solved through Juliza's intrepid linguistic resourcefulness aided by a beneficial literal-mindedness. When Frank hesitates, admitting, "I have written fifty letters, an' torn 'em up. I don't even know how to begin 'em," Juliza responds with a placid, "I should say, 'Dear Friend'" (32-33). Her aggressive, adept language and her ability to take quick decisions help her secure another bride for Frank.
- 24 Contributing to a complicated act of deception, Juliza's violent manipulation of denotative language becomes a source of irony.<sup>7</sup> Granted her talent for terse expressions, Juliza devises a ploy to restore her reputation. As she explains to her mother, "If--I go over there to stay while he's gone, he won't think, an' nobody else will think, I want him" (33). Simulating impenetrability and heroic indifference to public scrutiny, Juliza engages in a painful performance, worthy of her theatrical talent. Repressing her feelings, she pretends to be motivated by a concern for others, thus winning Frank's gratitude: "Oh, Juliza! you've been the best friend to me I ever had in my life, comin' over here. I'll never forget it" (35). Juliza performs a false script in front of her mother, her friend, and her community, simultaneously affecting concern for public opinion.
- 25 In the last pseudo-celebratory scene, comedy masks violence. Juliza's mother dares her to give a recitation at Frank's wedding to the other woman, making a public display of herself, and thereby acting out her indifference. Her appearance is appropriately staged by her mother, who buys her "a garnet breastpin," with the ambiguous remark, "You might just as well have things" (36). Public display is crucial for the constricting stage of a close community, in which the limits of intimacy are renegotiated. Juliza's breach of rituals is threatened to be punished by public opprobrium and violent laughter.
- 26 Juliza's recitation at the wedding is a manifestation of her power of self-control. Since everyone present is aware of the play of tension, her artistic recitation becomes both a form of self-expression and defiance of public opinion:
- She began to speak, and she spoke as she had never done before. Her gestures were full of fire; every line of her form and face seemed to conform to the exigencies of the situation; her voice rang out with a truth that was deeper than her own personality". (36)
- 27 In this comedic celebration, the presence of the crowd has the power to confirm Juliza's perception of her own identity as a speaking voice. Furthermore, her spectacle makes her a successful director, able to control others. While reciting her piece, Juliza also engages

in an affirmation of the self in her successful disguise of her feelings. Frank's final response translates as recognition of her power, where his wedding becomes one of her scripts. Acknowledging that he feels "as if it's all due to" Juliza, he ends by restating the existence of the threat of the secret, and the bondage of a possible disclosure that cannot be erased: "I want you to forgive me for--that night. I haven't told a soul, not even Lily, an' I never shall. I know you just meant to be kind, that was all" (36). His reminder has a paradoxical effect in that it reinforces the promise, in its suspension, since it can always be broken through the suggested interdiction.

- 28 This final scene is a complicated performance in which Juliza plays her role as if she were someone else, in complete alienation. The masquerade of the self guarantees her temporary success on the public stage. Mary R. Reichardt interprets the last scene as "a strong statement about artistic sublimation." Discussing Juliza's form of art, Reichardt comments on the symbolic meaning of the recitation: "[H]er art is of necessity compensatory, as well as being a means of channeling her feelings into acceptable forms. Juliza's art consists of repeating what others have written, just as her life is bound by what others decide. She does resist, however, and does so successfully, within the limits of her options" (*A Web of Relationships* 82). In her more recent book, *Mary Wilkins Freeman*, Reichardt resumes her work on "Juliza." Here, she elaborates on her previous interpretation of Juliza's recitations. Reichardt demonstrates that, in addition to simply rendering a preexisting text, Juliza also mimics her mother in the process, since "she has evolved her skill by copying her mother's voice and gestures" and thus she ends by "fully aping Mrs. Peck" (30).
- 29 Juliza simultaneously performs a text, imitates her mother, and deceives Frank and her community about her feelings. Juliza manages to steal the show, turning people's attention from the wedding itself: "Everybody listened. The bridal couple were forgotten." While talking to Frank, Juliza is still performing, as the narrator's precise stage directions clearly indicate: "She had the same proud lift to her head, that she had when reciting" (36). Instead of reducing her performance to mere repetition of texts, I would argue that through recitation, Juliza experiments with various voices. Representing herself as someone else, Juliza becomes a comedian, playing the wise fool at the same time as she stages the mimicry of feminine stereotypes, and trying to invent alternative images for the self. In the limelight of an invisible stage, Juliza performs in front of her community, improvising as she goes along, and striving to manipulate her image. Her training in public speaking provided her with a form of survival. Ultimately, notwithstanding her audience, Juliza performs her recitation for herself.
- 30 In addition to the script and the difficult art of speaking, costumes and props are elements necessary in directing the spectacle of the self whereby women behave as actors on a stage, controlled by public surveillance as a structural mechanism of patriarchy and reinforced by the self-inflicted control of women's gossip. In this respect, "One Good Time" (1900) is a paradigmatic example of an exacerbated interest in costume and props as a means of liberation of the self and open revolt against public opinion. One of Freeman's less-known stories, it deserves attention given the multiple levels with which it operates, molded together by humor. Upon Richard Stone's death, Narcissa and her mother, Jane, refuse to dress in mourning as a form of protest. Despite the fact that they expect to receive fifteen hundred dollars in insurance money, they decide to wear their everyday shabby clothes. Moreover, once they do receive this money, they plan a one-year trip to New York. To the general astonishment of their community, they return from

New York only one week later. Although they have spent all the insurance money, Narcissa is satisfied that she had a break from her life of privation and hard work. After years of waiting, she finally accepts William Crane's proposal, a marriage that her father had strongly opposed.

- 31 "One Good Time" has much in common with "Juliza": they both share the presence of a heroine articulated as a speaking subject, able to express herself and moreover engage in direct revolt against norms. Structurally another twisted story of courtship centered on an unpredictably stated proposal, "One Good Time" is also a poignant account of escape, staged as a temporary release from the constraints of community and of a tyrannical home in its domestic corollary, and a story of mourning turned into celebration.
- 32 Unlike Juliza, however, who is characterized by restraint and the capacity to plan out her actions, Narcissa, the protagonist of "One Good Time" lacks the ability to draw up her plans convincingly, and that is why her escape is excessive. The unexpected turn of events creates a fantasy of consumerism common to many of Freeman's female characters. Planning an escape of excessive proportions, Narcissa combines her craving for money with a denouncement of its worthlessness. The courtship structure serves here as a means to measure the distance between William Crane's expectations and his complete lack of knowledge about his long-awaited lover.
- 33 The story's inception is defined in terms of control, where gossip is a form of surveillance within the community, dictating the "common-sense" of external behavior. Narcissa Stone and her mother, Jane, show their contempt for public opinion by refusing to dress up in mourning for the death of Richard Stone, a tyrannical husband and father. Granted, in the words of a gossip, "They ain't got a thing that's fit to wear" (82), public opprobrium decides that "They'd ought to be ashamed of themselves" (83). While the same raconteur agrees that the women's behavior "ain't showing proper respect to the poor man" (83), Narcissa and Jane defy their community by refusing to express their feelings in public. From the outset, the two women contradict everyone's expectations in terms of physical appearance, where clothes as a form of display become an overdetermined signifier. Wearing their shabby clothes at the funeral, they engage in an active process of revolt, carefully planned out by the daughter. The narrator describes the general reaction: "In truth, all the village was scandalized at the strange attire of the widow and daughter of Richard Stone, at his funeral, except William Crane" (84). Narcissa's lover is the only one not taken by external appearance, completely ignorant of the show she is planning: "[H]e could not see her robes at all in such a dazzlement of vision" (84). It is in fact his acceptance all through Narcissa's detailed adventure that makes the escape more excessive, verging on the absurd.
- 34 The heroine's carefully mapped-out strategy of escape could be taken as a feminist statement of individualism, except that her obsession with luxurious clothes renders her a gullible victim of consumerism, thereby making her escape questionable. Narcissa explains the complicated reasons of her yearning for escape in an elaborate discourse, the obvious result of extensive rehearsal. After the funeral, the Stones' house still bears the traces of a tyrannical father, in a gloomy atmosphere that even the thought of an impending insurance payment cannot enlighten. Narcissa explains her decision to spend the insurance money in New York as a form of revolt and escape: "I ain't never done anything my whole life that I thought I ought not to do, but now I'm going to. I'm going to if it's wicked. I've made up my mind. I ain't never had one good time in my whole life, and now I'm going to even if I have to suffer for it afterward" (88). Undeterred by the

consequences of her decision, Narcissa withstands the pressure of common-sense and thus formulates an explicit statement of internalized oppression.

- 35 Narcissa's denunciation of her life in the house of a tyrannical father gives meaning to her gesture of escape, despite the absurdity of its means. She sees the pressure of domestic labor as a form of alienation, deadening in its confinement:

I ain't never had anything like other women. I've never had any clothes nor gone anywhere. I've just stayed at home here and drudged.

- 36 After an inventory of her daily routine of work, she exposes the limitations of her experience:

I've just drudged, drudged, ever since I can remember. I don't know anything about the world nor life. I don't know anything but my old tracks". (88)

- 37 Breaking the rules about expressing affection, Narcissa gets to explain her feelings to Richard without falling into a conventional pattern of sentimentalism. Freeman constructs here an unglamorous portrait of marriage, in which romantic passion is replaced by the stark realism of domestic work, and love is stripped of its idealism. Narcissa's response to her lover could be read as a manifesto against the cult of domesticity: "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, William Crane" (90). In the articulation of her feminist discourse, Narcissa develops one of the most explicit statements of the New Woman. Claiming her right to escape, she admits, "I've got to have a break; I've got to have one good time. I--like you, and--I like father; but love ain't enough sometimes when it ties anybody" (90). At last, Narcissa unleashes her fantasies about her pressing need for change, the more effective if improbable.

- 38 In spite of Narcissa's liberating discourse of escape from the domestic world, her fantasy of consumerism changes the focus of the story. Gregg Camfield has defined humor as a combination of "extravagant fantasy, caricature, exaggeration, and absurd implausibilities" (137). In terms of his definition, Freeman's story departs from realism, embracing the improbable realm of fantasy, turning into a consumer's fairy-tale. The incongruence between the clarity of Narcissa's political discourse, her well-planned escape, and its outcome, is a source of scathing irony. Intending to stay in New York for a whole year in order to spend all the insurance money of fifteen hundred dollars, Narcissa and her mother prepare themselves for a long journey, letting the community enjoy the spectacle of their unexpected trip. Ultimately, humor derives from the clash between Narcissa's logical language, which makes her a candidate for feminist activism in Freeman's work, and the absurdity of her form of revolt, given her fixation on consumerism.

- 39 Narcissa has a clothes fetish. To her, luxurious clothes become signifiers of power and independence in the constricting spectacle of the self within an inquisitive community. Her gratuitous and indecent craving for ornaments equates hollow glamour with a form of revolt against the utilitarianism and functionalism of everyday life: "I'm going to buy us some jewelry, too; I ain't never had a good breastpin even; and as for mother, father never even bought her a ring when they were married." The inventory of items Narcissa confesses to have been craving—"I've got a list of things written down on paper"—reflects a long deliberation, in which her lifelong deprivation projected an equally exaggerated

release (91). In this respect, Narcissa's strategy of revolt is unique in its absurd proportions.<sup>8</sup>

- 40 Many fantasies of courtship, escape, and revolt in Freeman's stories take the form of consumerism. Monika M. Elbert reveals the apparently paradoxical fact that, although most of Freeman's characters are "unglamorous country women" (254), they are all influenced by consumerism, to the extent that "the domestic prop of fashionable dress item becomes the icon for both the Freeman heroine and the *Harper's Bazar* peruser of ads" (253). Elbert analyzes the types of advertisement found in the periodicals where Freeman published her work most often, noticing that the poverty in most of Freeman's stories contrasts with the lavish descriptions of the most recent trends of fashion described in the same pages of the magazine. Elbert's concept of a "love affair with a commodity" (254) could be identified in a paroxysmal form in "One Good Time," with the difference that the passion for objects resulting from deprivation is here carried to an extreme. The humor in Narcissa's excess is the result of the peculiar juxtaposition of poverty and luxury. Although Narcissa is not directly influenced by advertising, she explains the various sources of her craving for objects which are completely unnecessary.
- 41 The two women's momentous departure to New York is witnessed by a community avid for entertainment, amazed by their unheard of extravagance. While "all the windows were set with furtively peering faces," most members of the community are denied direct access to Narcissa's story, with the exception of her lover. After general anticipation and rumors, prepared for an absence of at least a year, the community is shocked when the two women return six days later. William Crane listens with consternation to Narcissa's account of her adventures in New York. Freeman's opulent description of the journey lavishes Narcissa and Jane in absurd attire, as impressive and expensive as it is unnecessary. The gratuitous aspect of Narcissa's purchases is rendered through the inventory that contradicts their low social origin. Wrapped in silk and fur, the two women buy themselves gold watches and diamonds, go to the theater and the opera. Narcissa's story sounds like an excessive fantasy, as exaggerated as the economic scarcity that triggers it.
- 42 Their ludicrous situation is enhanced by the two women's lack of knowledge about the value of things, so that they manage to spend in six days the amount of money they had estimated to suffice for a whole year. Moreover, they are ignorant of the moment when they run out of money, incurring further debts. In a succinct analysis of "One Good Time," Perry Westbrook argues that the account of their mishaps weakens the general message: "[T]he story itself is seriously blemished by Miss Wilkins' descent into slapstick as she describes the adventures of the two countrywomen in the big city" (146). The painful humor of their adventures seems, I suggest, to reveal more convincingly the confinement of their world, making the escape more effective. The gap between the two women's real status and their exorbitant posing and spending is made clear in the scene of their break-down when they discover that they have spent all the money. In an indecent public scene, Narcissa remembers, "Folks came crowding around." The two women turn into fools, sharing their predicament:

Mother, she broke right down an' cried, an' said it was all we had in the world besides the farm, an' it was poor father's insurance money, an' we couldn't get home, an' we'd have to go to prison" (100).

43 Narcissa's dream of a rich life, as a "quest of the consumer-woman," to use Elbert's phrase (263), takes the form of a satisfying break with norms and an excessive release from everyday routine. The inventory of Narcissa's trespassing has carnivalesque features, resplendent in abundance and deceiving glamour. Cyclical-end-of-the-season release, Narcissa's escape from her dull life involves both exorbitant shopping and possible romance. She prides herself on the scale of her adventure:

I've been wasteful an' extravagant an'--There was a gentleman beautifully dressed who sat at our table, an' he talked real pleasant about weather, an'--I got to thinking about him a little". (101)

44 The proportions of her flashy spending create a seasonal dream, according to which deprivation is counterpoised in the absurdity of a temporary release. Laughter itself in this context becomes a form of liberation, allowing Freeman to express a woman's anger at the restraints of her limited experiences. Narcissa's denunciation of women's hardships and her demystification of domesticity is counterbalanced by her gratuitous and ludicrous form of release, whereby humor offsets anger and pain.

45 The final scene between Narcissa and her lover falls back into the convention of ludicrous courtship, when the heroine rehearses her proposal, recounting with delight, "I've been and wasted fifteen hundred dollars; I've let my thoughts wonder from you... I've had one good time, an'-- I ain't sorry." She dares him to make his decision, "You--can just do what you think best, William, an'--I won't blame you" (101). Breaking with convention, Narcissa manipulates language, boasting her new experience. William Crane's response reaffirms the boundaries of the old order, making her choose between her domestic role and her recent glimpse of liberty: "Do you think you can be contented to--stay on my side of the wall now, Narcissa?" (101). An initiator of action, like most comedic figures in women's humorous work, Narcissa defies the norms of her New England code of restraint through her escape. However, in a truly comedic pose, she reinforces the existence of an imaginary cage of convention at the very moment she breaks it, stating, "I wouldn't go out again if the bars were down" (101).

46 The double message of "One Good Time" is powerful in its incongruity. A rebellious figure throughout the story, Narcissa returns to William Crane. She is willing to marry him while at the same time affirming her loss of independence. Leah Blatt Glasser has read the conclusion of "One Good Time" as a case of "undecidability." To her, the appeal of Freeman's story stands in its doubleness: "Freeman manages to express both the voice that longs for sheer self-indulgent and excessive pleasure and the voice that accepts the expectations of conventional womanly submission and self-denial" (80-81). Humor allows for these apparently incongruous messages to abide in the same space without destroying the unity and the credibility of the story.

47 The manipulation of humor in "Juliza" and "One Good Time" provides a complex language for expressing the contradictions in women's lives. Although both heroines are powerful, they use their extraordinary linguistic endowment to fight false wars. While Juliza exhausts her artistic energy in disguising a willful mistake in the courtship game, Narcissa projects her frustrations, both sexual and economic, in an overindulgent shopping spree, thus fulfilling a consumer's dream of escape. As Shirley Marchalonis has observed, in Freeman's stories, "The absurdities are complicated by the fact that it takes courage for the protagonist to assume and maintain an incongruous position" (232). It could be stated that Juliza and Narcissa are heroic actors in scripts of courtship to be sanctioned by an inquisitive community.<sup>9</sup> Both act as comedians, attempting to

manipulate their public image and establish some control on the formation of their identity. The language of humor allows them to temporarily evade the prescribed codes of behavior and experiment with alternative forms of revolt.

- 48 The two stories appear to be written in the same vein as "The Revolt of 'Mother.'" Analyzing this story, Perry D. Westbrook posits a dichotomy in its messages: "The greatest disservice done to this story was President Theodore Roosevelt's comment in a speech that American women would do well to emulate the independence of Sarah Penn. From then on, the story was removed from the category of comic fantasy where it belongs and placed before the public as a serious tract on women's rights, which it surely is not" (65-66). Westbrook tends to suggest here an exclusive distinction between serious and humorous fiction. In her own efforts to distance herself from the story which she was "lamentably best known for" (134), Freeman resists the process of assessing her work only in terms of revolt. In the light of this dichotomy, "Juliza" and "One Good Time" are intriguing in their combination of a feminist statement on women's rights and an imaginary, often improbable, flight into humorous resolution. Finally, Freeman's work that endures best in time includes stories that combine feminist revolt with humorous fantasy, inviting readers to pendulate between laughter of joy and pain.
- 49 The heroines in Freeman's stories attempt to reinvent courtship in order to empower themselves. Juliza and Narcissa are both inclined to introspection. In an unpublished story, Freeman's heroine Jane Lennox expresses the result of her self-analysis, "Sometimes I think I am a monster and the worst of it is, I certainly take pleasure in it" (qtd. in Glasser 55). Reading this statement of self-celebration, Glasser lauds Freeman's "vision of spinsterhood as both exhilarating and terrifying" (55). By critiquing conventional courtship scenarios, Freeman liberates women from a compulsory obsession with marriage. Like Louisa, her heroines work diligently at breaking the advice in manuals of behavior, each learning to accept herself in her own terms, as "a veritable guest to her own self" (38).

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## NOTES

1. The total absence of letters from Freeman to Mary Wales makes it hard to decide whether theirs was a Boston marriage or the type of relationship that Carroll Smith-Rosenberg reveals in her essay "The Female World of Love and Ritual." In his introduction to the carefully edited volume of Freeman's letters, *The Infant Sphinx*, Brent L. Kendrick explains, "[N]o letters survive to Mary Elizabeth Wales, her earliest Randolph friend and her constant companion and confidante between 1883 and 1902... However, when Wales died on August 4, 1916, she bequeathed to Charles M. Freeman all of her books and manuscripts. The fate of that collection, which might have included letters, is unknown" (17)

2. There are many similarities between "A New England Nun" and "Juliza." Involved in parallel courtship scenarios, Louisa and Juliza both find out about the existence of another woman. In a true system of relationship with other women, they choose to help them. Instead of feeling jilted, Louisa steps back. Similarly, Juliza offers to facilitate the courtship between Frank and Lily Emmons.
3. Charles Miner Thompson concludes his essay with a general statement, revealing the basic contradiction in Freeman's work. For him, Freeman is "an idealist masquerading in the soiled and ragged cloak of realism" (675). Thompson notices that some of the most memorable of Freeman's characters are "nonconformists to their backbones. They are fanatics or martyrs according to the point of view" (671). The characters' spiritual dimension develops a conflict of conscience that appears to go beyond realism, suggesting an analogy with Hawthorne's work.
4. Mary R. Reichardt briefly analyzes the story "Juliza" in *A Web of Relationships*. In her more recent book, *Mary Wilkins Freeman* (1997), Reichardt offers an extensive, thorough interpretation of this story in an attempt to draw attention to neglected work in Freeman's corpus of texts (26-31). Reichardt makes clear that although less known, "Juliza" is "highly characteristic" of Freeman's style (21).
5. Freeman's own childhood could be the model for Juliza's education. Because two of her brothers had died in their infancy, Mary became the center of her parents' attention. Leah Blatt Glasser discusses the "particularly protective and almost fearful approach to her upbringing," whereby "Mary was frequently made aware of her fragility rather than her strength" (*In a Closet Hidden* 6).
6. I am using here Alicia Suskin Ostriker's insightful development of the concept "stealing the language."
7. Monika M. Elbert identifies the theme of "deception as the basis of narrative" (261), indicating that many of Freeman's successful stories are based on a common conflict in which women are involved in a complex process of deception as a means of masquerade and finally empowerment.
8. Freeman often refers to the deprivations that drove her to writing. As late as 1921, in "My Maiden Effort," she remembers the excitement about the things she bought with some of her first earned money for a story published in *Harper's Magazine*: "I gave away a tenth... but I was wearing a shabby black. I bought at once a fine gown, trimmed with black fur, and a fur-trimmed silk cloak, and sailed down Main Street in a certain village, disgracefully more elated over my appearance than possible literary success" (138).
9. Discussing the concept of heroes in relation to Freeman's characters, Jay Martin contends, "Lacking a heroic society, Mary Wilkins' heroes are debased; noble in being, they are foolish in actions" (151).

## ABSTRACTS

Les nouvelles de Mary Wilkins Freeman consacrées au jeu de la séduction associent des stratégies de révolte dissimulées derrière le masque apparemment inoffensif de l'humour à des échappées souvent improbables au delà des limites de la réalité. «Juliza» (1892) et «One Good Time» (1901), deux nouvelles relativement peu connues de Freeman, présentent des scénarios passionnels risibles. Les héroïnes, respectivement Juliza et Narcissa, transgressent les règles du jeu. Se révoltant contre l'ordre établi, elles s'engagent dans un processus de masquerade. L'ignorance manifestée par Juliza des rites de séduction est la source pour elle d'une douleur

constante et fait d'elle un objet de dérision publique. Narcissa, dans « One Good Time », résiste au contraire aux normes patriarcales de sa communauté en se révoltant contre la mémoire de son père et en reportant son mariage. Dans leur refus de se conformer, les héroïnes dénoncent l'hypocrisie de la répartition des rôles et remettent en question un système de pouvoir qui les opprime. Des agents dans la séduction, Juliza et Narcissa deviennent des sujets parlants. Dans les scénarios de séduction élaborés par Freeman, le rire devient une forme de libération. La forme parfois gratuite et ridicule de leur laisser-aller rééquilibre la morale dénonciatrice des héroïnes. L'humour dans les nouvelles de Freeman s'adresse aux contradictions dans la vie des femmes, les libérant ainsi d'une obsession avec le mariage.

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