The Disturbing Virgin:

An Analysis of Criticism on Mary Wilkins Freeman’s short story

“A New England Nun”

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Abstract

Few female literary characters have been treated with more scorn and ridicule than the ‘spinster’. In this essay, I examine how modern critics of Mary Wilkins Freeman’s “A New England Nun” (1891) have interpreted the unmarried female protagonist of this short story, Louisa Ellis. Representative critical strategies are analysed with focus on how they interpret the protagonist, and what the political and methodological implications of choosing a particular strategy are. The two common perspectives on the text are the male-centered and the feminist, where the former interpret Louisa as mentally ill and the latter define her as a woman artist. Although the aim of these strategies is to contradict each other, I show how they both interpret Louisa Ellis according to a patriarchal understanding of women. This suggests that the difference between the two strategies is that of evaluation and explanation rather than perspective. I argue that the motivation behind most interpretations of the text is to appropriate the female protagonist into a system of thought which ultimately serves the interests of patriarchal society. The result is a transformation of a complex female character into a stereotype according to a simplistic victim/heroine dichotomy.

My interpretation of “A New England Nun” shows how the text undermines traditional notions of gender and therefore has a radically subversive potential. The male character Joe Dagget has a feminine personality, while the two female characters Louisa Ellis and Lily Dyer embody masculine character traits. This has never been suggested before. My main argument is that most critics have misinterpreted the text, since they try unsuccessfully to read the text on its own premises, but fail to acknowledge the reversal of traditional notions of gender that these characters portray. Instead, they claim that the text is ambiguous; an ambiguity which I argue is not located in the text, but is created in the critic whose expectations are not fulfilled. To resolve the ambiguity, critics misinterpret the text so that the characters are made to fit notions of gender that they expect to encounter in a nineteenth-century story, meanwhile making the text predictable and harmless. In this context, the consequence of misinterpretations is that critics re-define and elevate the male character Joe at the cost of Louisa and the authority of the text. An important aspect of other critics’ misinterpretations is that they mostly make the same errors. This indicates that they do not arise from individual inclinations, but rather on the cultural conventions which influence their reading and the ideological pressures working on them. By analysing “A New England Nun” with focus on its subversive potential and by analysing the misinterpretations of it, I formulate the ideological pressures working on the critics of this story.
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Introduction

In *Thinking About Women* (1968), Mary Ellmann claimed that “nothing is more reliable than the irritability of all references to prolonged virginity: behind us, and undoubtedly before us, stretch infinite tracts of abuse of *maiden ladies, old maids, schoolmarm, dried-up spinster*, etc., etc.” (136). Most critical essays on Mary Wilkins Freeman’s short story “A New England Nun” (1891) were written after the publication of Ellmann’s influential book. They nevertheless fit the description ‘infinite tracts of abuse’ of the ‘dried-up spinster’, and thus indicate that Ellmann’s prediction for future criticism was right. The ‘spinster’ of “A New England Nun” is the protagonist Louisa Ellis, who decides to break the engagement to her fiancé of fifteen years when she discovers that he has fallen in love with another woman. What most critics appear to find problematic is how to interpret the relief and peacefulness which the decision to remain unmarried provides Louisa Ellis with. Although her situation as unmarried woman in Victorian society is familiar to us, we are not quite accustomed to a woman who embraces her solitude and seems to wish nothing else. Indeed, Louisa is an unconventional woman.

The works of Mary Wilkins Freeman (1852–1930) are usually placed in the American ‘local color’ tradition. She is best known for her depiction of New England village life, which often focuses on oppressed and rebellious women. Freeman wrote and published successfully during most of her adult life, and gained a recognition that was exceptional for women writers at the time. She found a ready market for her poems, stories, plays, and novels, and her popularity has also been substantial within academic criticism. “A New England Nun” was first published in *A New England Nun and Other Stories* (1891), and is one of her most popular and widely anthologized stories. It has gained more attention from critics than any other text by Freeman.

The plot of “A New England Nun” is relatively straightforward. In the beginning of the story Louisa Ellis is described by the narrator as peacefully sewing and carefully preparing her lunch. Enter Joe Dagget, Louisa’s fiancé of fifteen years, the man Louisa will marry in a month. The following conversation between them reveals that their relationship is awkward and tense, and that both are obviously uncomfortable in the presence of the other. The reader is then taken back to the days when a young Louisa Ellis agrees to marry Joe Dagget, followed by his departure for Australia where he intends to make a fortune. Upon his unannounced arrival in New England fifteen years later, Louisa’s comfortable habit of solitary living is interrupted by the necessity of preparing herself for the forthcoming marriage. Then,
one week before the wedding, Louisa goes for a solitary evening stroll. She accidentally overhears a conversation followed by an embrace between Joe Dagget and his maid Lily Dyer. After having heard the couple declare their love for each other, Louisa sneaks home unobserved. The next day she breaks the engagement without mentioning Lily Dyer, and thus enables Joe and Lily to get married, while choosing a solitary life for herself.

Louisa’s unconventional choice of remaining unmarried even when the opportunity of marriage is available to her has induced modern critics to try to establish the exact pretext and consequence of this choice once and for all. In the process, critics have divided themselves into two distinct groups, where one group reads Louisa from a traditional male-centered perspective, while the other group reads Louisa from a feminist perspective. It is generally acknowledged that the first modern interpretation of the story was done by David Hirsch in the essay “Subdued Meaning in ‘A New England Nun’” (1965), and his article will therefore represent the beginning of modern criticism on the story in my essay. In addition, his essay is the foundation for all subsequent male-centered interpretations of the text. Hirsch reads the story as “almost a case study of an obsessive neurosis” (125), thus ascribing Louisa’s rejection of Joe to mental illness. In “An Uncloistered ‘New England Nun’” (1983), Marjorie Pryse contradicts Hirsch’s interpretation, and reads the text from a feminist perspective. Pryse describes Louisa’s rejection of Joe as making her “heroic, active, wise, ambitious, and even transcendent” (289). All critics writing after Hirsch and Pryse have at some point discussed these contradictory perspectives on Louisa. They have mostly attempted to present an interpretation which lies somewhere in between these polar points of view, but most of them eventually end up taking sides.

However, what is striking about both male-centered and feminist interpretations of this short story is that Louisa Ellis with few exceptions is defined in terms of the extreme. Regardless of whether her extremity is considered contemptible or admirable, her behavior and personality are read according to notions of deviation or excess, the extraordinary or exceptional. She is perceived as alternately obsessive or artistic, neurotic or ambitious, foolish or wise, depending on whom you listen to. The number of ‘exceptional’ readings of Louisa Ellis is one of the reasons why I will argue that these two perspectives are actually more closely related than critics have previously acknowledged. It is therefore crucial to bear in mind that this distinction has been created and maintained by critics other than myself. Another common denominator between these two perspectives is that most critics define Louisa Ellis according to terms and concepts which have irrefutable power within patriarchal culture. Male-centered critics argue for Louisa’s mental illness by means of psychoanalytic
terminology, which privileges the phallus. When feminist critics argue for Louisa’s sanity, they do so by comparing her to an artist; a traditionally male figure who is not only acceptable in society at large, but particularly within literary criticism.

Despite the simplicity of the plot, combined with Freeman’s remarkable sense of suggestive detail, “A New England Nun” has often been described as a masterpiece of ambiguity. Either it is caused by the characters’ motivation, the story’s ending or imagery, etc., the text is found to be ambiguous. My main claim will be that the text itself is not ambiguous, but that ambiguity is produced in the reader who fails to notice that the text does not maintain traditional gender roles, but rather undermines them. In fact, the story’s two female characters Louisa Ellis and Lily Dyer embody traditionally masculine characters traits, while the only male character of the story, Joe Dagget, embodies traditionally feminine character traits. To my knowledge, no critic has acknowledged this before. Most critics who have worked on the story read it from a male-centered or feminist perspective, and seem to assume that the different characters can be made intelligible from typical notions of how male and female characters are likely to behave in a nineteenth-century short story. When the text resists the attempt to make sense according to traditional concepts, and the critic’s expectations are not fulfilled, the text appears ambiguous. In order to resolve this ambiguity, critics employ a strategy of interpretation which seeks to explain the text according to non-textual factors, either the invocation of Freeman the author, her other texts, texts by other authors, or a reference to systems of thought in our culture. It is these strategies I want to analyse in this essay.

Peter Rabinowitz claims that “whether you hit upon the right reading will often depend on what you think it likely to be before you begin” (191). Since most critics do not question whether the text might portray the unexpected or unusual, they do not hit upon the right reading of it. I will show how the failure to notice that the manifestations of gender in “A New England Nun” are not traditional leads to what might be called misinterpretations or misreadings of the text. By misreading I mean that critics attempt to read the text on its own premises, but fail to do so. Yet, they present their interpretations as if they had succeeded in their attempt. Considering that the text counts ten pages of communicative and straightforward language, misinterpretations are quite easily detected. Most readings qualify as misreadings because they stress textual elements which support their claims, while completely ignoring the elements which contradict them. An important part of my method will be to indicate that critics find closure at the cost of what the text states, meaning that I
will stress the textual passages which undermine or contradict the various strategies and arguments.

What is so interesting about these misreadings is that critics mostly make the exact same errors. This suggests that the misreadings they present cannot be explained by individual inclinations, but rather through the culture which informs their readings. As Peter Rabinowitz has suggested, this provides us with a great opportunity to analyse the cultural concepts which are at play in the interpretation of literary texts:

Sometimes particular misreadings are widespread rather than idiosyncratic – and I would argue that such persistent misreading usually has its origins, not in the readers as individuals, but in the culture that has taught them to read. We can therefore often uncover forces at work in a society by reading its misreadings, by studying the ways that readers have misappropriated the texts they live with. Specifically, to the extent that we can determine what rules readers actually do apply when they try unsuccessfully to recover an author’s intentions, we can illuminate the categories informing their thoughts, and consequently the ideological pressures working on them (193-4)

With few exceptions, critics writing on “A New England Nun” try to uncover the author’s intentions when interpreting the text. Given that they undermine the authority of the text when they seek to explain it, their attempts to recover the author’s intentions can hardly be said to be successful. My aim will be to analyse the misreadings of “A New England Nun” so as to establish the categories informing critics’ thoughts and the ideological pressures working on them. In addition, I will suggest what the consequences of employing these critical strategies are. My main focus will be on revealing the images of women which influence their strategies. Apart from this politically oriented aim, I will further indicate the methodological problems raised by these strategies relevant to the field of literary criticism.

Since I am writing about both “A New England Nun” and the ways in which it has been read within academia, I will present my own interpretation of the story. However, this raises some problems. Interpretation is never innocent, neutral, or apolitical; neither do I believe that it is possible to give a true, exhaustive, correct, or final interpretation of a text. When my interpretation of “A New England Nun” appears as a contradiction to most readings that have been done, it is motivated by a desire to supplement rather than eradicate previous interpretations. In other words, my interpretation does not pretend to make all other readings superfluous; on the contrary, without previous interpretations with which I strongly disagree, my own reading would have been impossible. This is important for the reader to keep in mind when approaching my analysis of other critics’ interpretations, otherwise it might appear as if
I contradict their arguments simply because they do not correspond with my own. My aim is rather to present a relevant interpretation of “A New England Nun”, and to reflect upon the reasons why other critics read it so differently. I should note that since my essay is centered on interpretations of Louisa Ellis, I will be particularly interested in analysing the characters, rather than doing a more general close reading of the text. Important textual elements such as symbolism and narration will therefore mainly be referred to when they are considered to convey information about the characters.

The ten critical articles chosen for analysis are representative for criticism on “A New England Nun”. Except for the articles most recently published, their influence within this specific field of criticism is detectable through the amount of space various critics devote in their essays to explore and discuss other critics’ arguments. The essays have been selected after searching MLA and BIBSYS, and an examination of the critics’ bibliographies. A criterion for selection has been that the essays must present a close reading of “A New England Nun”, and the main focus of their interpretation must be on this text. My own method is that of close reading, and my motivation is that “it is language which speaks, not the author” (Barthes, 2000: 147). A crucial part of my argumentation against other critics is that they depend too much on biographical information about Mary Wilkins Freeman, historical and sociological knowledge about nineteenth-century New England, or other literary texts. All these approaches are both common and accepted within the literary critical tradition, but I think that they should sometimes be put on hold at least for a moment. I work under the assumption that “A New England Nun”, like any other literary text, is a ‘theory’ of the world in miniature. If it is always read in the perspective of something else, whether a historical person or other texts, one loses sight of what is unique to the specific text. This being said, I do not proclaim the New Critical or Formalist belief that a text is an isolated event that should be read as without the ‘interruptions’ of anything outside the text. But I do believe that if one finds most of one’s arguments outside the text, the question remains whether one has succeeded in reading the text on the premises that it is trying to establish. It is also a risk for the literary critic to impose what is already known onto texts, in order to make them intelligible. This is not a trivial problem. For how can a text offer a new perspective, a new comment, how can it be subversive and challenging, if it is merely interpreted through the perspective of something familiar, that which is already known? When I analyse “A New England Nun” and the responses to it, I will try to recover the subversive potential that has been ignored thus far.
Chapter One: In Pursuit of the Author

In our critical tradition, the notion of the author functions as an organizing principle according to which we structure our understanding of literature. Knowing the author of a literary text certainly provides the critic with a useful tool, since it gives an indication of how the text can be approached before, during, and after reading it. That a critical essay on a literary text should contain information about the person who wrote it is therefore neither surprising nor strange. However, knowledge about the author sometimes becomes the means by which the text is interpreted, to the extent that the author is perceived as the original source of meaning and therefore has intentions which the critic feels compelled to reveal. Roland Barthes claims that “the explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author ‘confiding’ in us” (2000: 147). Michel Foucault argues similarly:

The author provides the basis for explaining not only the presence of certain events in a work, but also their transformations, distortions, and diverse modifications (through his biography, the determination of his individual perspective, the analysis of his social position, and the revelation of his basic design) (2000: 181)

The author function thus described by Barthes and Foucault exceeds far beyond the limits of mere practicality, insofar as the author becomes an authoritative figure awarded with the privilege of explanation; the author ‘confides’ in us through her text, and an analysis of her biography will presumably help the critic reveal exactly what the author was trying to communicate. In New Criticism, this focus on the author was often called “the intentional fallacy”. The implication of this notion of literary criticism is that the meaning of the text can and should be decoded according to the author who created it, since this individual is thought to have superior insight into the true or actual meaning of her text. Hence, the interpretation of a literary text is based not on the text itself, but rather on the author who wrote it.

Most critics on “A New England Nun” reveal this kind of attitude towards the text: The historical author Mary Wilkins Freeman is treated as the voice confiding in us through her text, and the critic seeks to explain the text through an analysis of the perspective and design Freeman is likely to have had, indicated by her fiction and biography. Although never explicitly stated, the text is treated as if it were an invitation to the reader to discover the original, true, and static meaning behind the text, which would also reveal the truth about the
author herself. The most successful and relevant interpretation of the text is accordingly the interpretation which demonstrates its allegiance to the author, since the successful critic must show how he has Freeman on his side to prove the relevance of his perspective. Nevertheless, the actual function of this strategy has little to do with authorial intent. In this chapter I will argue that the author Mary Wilkins Freeman is continually invoked by critics as argument in order to provide various subjective interpretations with an air of authority, validity, and relevance. I will offer three examples of how the notion of an author behind the text is employed by critics as a strategy which seeks to eliminate contradictory interpretations and thus close the text permanently. Then, I will argue how this functions as a limitation or restriction of the potential meanings of the text which renders it a harmless and predictable piece of writing.

The Author as Judge

Gregg Camfield’s essay “‘I never saw anything at once so pathetic and funny’: Humor in the Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman” (1999) is an attempt to re-establish Freeman’s status as a humorous writer. Camfield claims that Freeman’s humor and seriousness are combined and exist side by side, but that “it is easy for a reader to neglect one side of the mixture, especially when the readers are critics trying to prove the serious value of Freeman’s work” (218). What is particularly striking about Camfield’s argumentation is that he refers to knowledge about the historical author in order to convince the reader of the comical side of her literary texts:

To neglect the balance, though, is to neglect a very important feature of Freeman’s approach to life and literature. Granting that our knowledge of the details of her life is limited, especially compared to the unmanageable documentation of so many nineteenth-century lives, it is not easy to know as much about the mind behind the stories as we would perhaps like, but we do know something of her besides what her stories reveal. We have, fortunately, many of her letters, which reveal a playful personality that revelled in perceiving comedy in the tragic or pathetic (218)

Although we know little about the details of Freeman’s life and mind, Camfield argues that her letters reveal a playful personality that revels in comedy. He then quotes two of Freeman’s personal letters before proceeding to an analysis of humor in her fiction, and devotes the five first pages of his essay to a biographically oriented discussion of the author’s sense of humor. However, the citation above indicates that Camfield is more concerned with the idea that critics neglect Freeman’s humorous approach to life and literature than the consequence of this neglect, namely ignoring the comical tone in her texts.
When Camfield eventually presents his interpretations of some of Freeman’s texts with a focus on their humor, he provides quite substantial reasons for why the reader should be aware of their comical potential. It is therefore surprising that his arguments are based on a reference to the author’s private letters instead of her texts: “Such a double perspective [...] is a central feature of Freeman’s work, as she makes clear in many letters talking about her writing” (219). Camfield indicates that since Freeman’s letters makes clear her double perspective of humor and pathos, we should regard it as a central feature of her work. After quoting one specific letter, he draws the conclusion that “Freeman apparently did not wish to publish stories that were unremittingly tragic” (219). However, although Freeman did not wish to publish tragic stories, it does not necessarily mean that she succeeded. Camfield is trying to establish an appropriate perception of Freeman’s stories with reference to intentions expressed in her correspondence, suggesting that we respect the author’s wish when we interpret her texts. Freeman’s texts are thus presented as being somewhat subordinate to Freeman herself.

Camfield’s essay reveals a tendency mentioned by Barthes and Foucault, namely that the explanation of the text is sought in the author, and that an analysis of the author’s perspective can provide this explanation. I would argue that Camfield’s demonstration of Freeman’s personal sense of humor is not merely due to his desire to correct wrongful interpretations of Freeman’s authorship. What the authorial reference provides the critic with is namely the appearance of an original intention, or in Foucault’s terms a ‘basic design’, which once found can validate an interpretation more efficiently than a mere reference to the text. Camfield’s analysis of Freeman’s texts could hypothetically be contradicted by another critic who has, in Camfield’s terms, neglected the humorous side of Freeman’s fiction and who is reluctant to reconsider his point of view. If such a dispute were to develop – as it always does – it could be difficult to decide who has provided the most accurate interpretation. Camfield therefore invokes Freeman as a kind of judge; she wrote the texts and should therefore have the final word in any dispute about the correct way of reading them. Camfield wants to show the reader that he has the author on his side. As a result, a reader who has responded to Freeman’s texts with the impression that ‘this is not amusing’ will have difficulties arguing against Camfield, since he has already indicated that she has not read the text as Freeman intended it, and is therefore in error. Hence Camfield makes Freeman the judge of successful interpretations.
Resolving Ambiguity

Mary Reichardt’s short interpretation of “A New England Nun” is part of her book *A Web of Relationships. Women in the Short Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman* (1992). Reichardt is primarily concerned with how the reader is supposed to feel about Louisa Ellis, due to her claim that “the story, quite simply, is a masterpiece of ambiguity” (91). The majority of her arguments, however, are not based on how we as readers feel about Louisa, but rather on speculations on how Freeman intended us to feel about her. Reichardt warns us that the ambiguity of the text is “certainly intentional” and that “it is important to note that Freeman does not scorn, but neither does she admire, Louisa” (91). Reichardt’s interpretation focuses on how various textual elements seem to contradict each other, and thereby produce the ambiguity which she perceives as masterful. It is therefore interesting that Reichardt nevertheless attempts to resolve this ambiguity in her conclusion, and that she refers to one of Freeman’s personal letters instead of the text in order to do so:

In having Joe voice her own concerns and in having Louisa oppose them, Freeman further indicates her disapproval of Louisa. Also, she lays to rest the tendency of some of her contemporaries to equate her too closely with her protagonist Louisa Ellis, a comparison that she heartily scorned (94).

Reichardt refers to a letter Freeman wrote to her friend Mary Louise Booth (1886/1887), in which she does not mention Louisa, but an old lady who keeps her dog chained because he bit a man in his puppy hood. Freeman felt sorry for the dog, and this dog is often thought to have inspired the creation of Cæsar, Louisa’s dog. Since Freeman lets Joe Dagget voice Freeman’s ‘own concerns’ for a chained dog, Reichardt assumes that this is a sign of Freeman’s disapproval of Louisa. A biographical reference to Freeman’s letter thus closes the text where Reichardt’s close reading cannot do so.

A suggestive description of how Reichardt uses the author here is the ancient Greek ‘deus ex machina’, its current usage defined by M. H. Abrams as “any forced and improbable device [...] by which a hard-pressed author resolves a plot” (62). Reichardt does not find any absolutely convincing indications of how Freeman felt about Louisa by doing a close reading of the text; a focus on the text is what induces her to claim that Freeman did not ‘scorn, but neither did she admire Louisa’. It is only by including Freeman’s personal letters in the discussion that the textual ambiguities can finally be resolved. The author’s letters then become a ‘deus ex machina’; a forced and improbable device by which the hard-pressed critic can resolve textual ambiguities. However, although this solution might be convenient, it
nevertheless contradicts Reichardt’s two initial claims, namely that the story is a masterpiece of ambiguity and that Freeman did not scorn Louisa: A story which can be thus neatly resolved after an interpretation of approximately four pages can hardly be defined as a masterpiece of ambiguity. On the contrary, it indicates the opposite. She further contradicts her initial claim that Freeman did not scorn Louisa, since ‘disapproval’ is not much better than scorn. Self-contradiction appears to be the price Reichardt must pay in order to resolve the ambiguities of a text by means of an authorial reference.

Reichardt’s references to the author also produce other difficulties. When she refers to Freeman’s ‘own concerns’ in the passage quoted above, she creates an emotionally loaded distance between Freeman and Louisa by suggesting that Freeman supports Joe, not Louisa, in the conflict of the chained dog. Reichardt presents this alongside the fact that ‘Freeman heartily scorned the comparison between herself and Louisa’. As I read it, Reichardt here suggests that we interpret Freeman’s scorn of the comparison as a sign of her antipathy towards Louisa. However, although Freeman scorned such a comparison, it does not necessarily mean that she disapproved of Louisa. Surely, a writer’s insistence on maintaining a distance between herself and her fictional characters could be an attempt from the author’s side to persuade readers to place their focus where it should preferably lie, namely on the text, instead of using the text as a source of information about the writer, or vice versa. Neither does Reichardt provide us with more convincing reasons for Freeman’s scorn of Louisa than a letter mentioning an old lady with a chained dog; a letter which was written four years before the publication of the story. In addition, she does not specify further whether Freeman just scorned the comparison with Louisa, or if she scorned all comparisons made with any of her characters. Hence, it is difficult to decide how Freeman felt about Louisa based on Reichardt’s reference. As I will also return to in Chapter Three, several feminist critics refer to Freeman’s biography in order to suggest that Freeman actually approved of Louisa. A biographical reference thus only provides temporary closure, while giving the critic more material to interpret.

**Authority and Interpretation**

In Joseph Csicsila’s essay “Louisa Ellis and the Unpardonable Sin: Alienation from the Community of Human Experience as Theme in Mary Wilkins Freeman’s ‘A New England Nun’” (1998), the author is given a rather astonishing function. Csicsila calls the subjective position from which he speaks ‘Freeman’, so that his interpretation is presented as merely stating undisputable facts about the text. Judging by the ways in which he argues, Csicsila
tries to hide the fact that his close reading of the text is actually an interpretation, since he describes it as “Freeman reports”, “Freeman obviously intends” (4), “Freeman associates”, “Freeman reminds the reader”, “Freeman roundly condemns” (5), “Freeman ironically observes” (7), etc. In fact, Csicsila seems incapable of distinguishing between Freeman’s intentions and his own interpretation. In addition, he bluntly assumes that the historical author and the story’s narrator are identical.

According to Csicsila, “Freeman routinely portrays a character’s spiritual fitness as a healthy and proper appreciation of Nature” (5). His interpretation of Freeman’s texts is structured around “the fundamental dichotomy” between “the organic vitality” of the natural world and “the relative sterility” of indoor environments (4). Characters are then divided into two distinct groups, in which the characters Csicsila associates with nature are read as “the very embodiment of life”, while the characters he associates with indoor environments are read as leading an “artificial existence” (5). As an example, he refers to Freeman’s story “A Mistaken Charity” (1887), in which a widow “embodies a complete antithesis” to “two impoverished elderly sisters” who are read as “teeming with life”, because the widow is connected to “the aseptic and sterile atmosphere of the ‘Old Ladies’ Home’” while the sisters have a “lush, wild garden” (5). Csicsila claims that “by describing the widow as ‘childless’ and ‘elderly’ [...], Freeman associates this woman with images of sterility and death” (5). Freeman, however, describes both the widow and the two sisters as elderly and childless, so why should only the widow be associated with images of sterility and death? This makes sense according to the fundamental dichotomy between nature and artificiality which Csicsila claims can be found in the stories, but it is Csicsila who argues for the existence of such a dichotomy, not Freeman. She merely wrote texts which allow such a construction. When Csicsila further associates the widow with images of sterility and death according to this dichotomy, he presents it as being the made by the author. The connection he makes between ‘describing’ and ‘associates’ suggests that Freeman’s descriptions are so transparent as to provide direct access into her associations, thereby making interpretation a mere formality.

This example is representative for Csicsila’s approach. ‘Freeman’ becomes a term which replaces his subjective interpretation; it is Freeman who associates, intends, and condemns, not Csicsila who interprets. In other words, he tries to hide his participation in reading the text by ascribing his thoughts to Freeman. When commenting on the final scene of “A New England Nun”, Csicsila again presents his interpretation as being Freeman’s creation:

1 First published in Freeman’s A Humble Romance (1887).
“Freeman creates a deceptively tranquil ending ready to snare unsuspecting readers oblivious to Louisa’s final act of transgression. Throughout her fiction Freeman is ultimately critical of individuals who, like Louisa Ellis, tragically sell their birthright of a full life” (12). Csicsila claims that a reader interpreting the final scene as being positive for Louisa Ellis is deceived, unsuspecting, and oblivious to the snare that Csicsila himself avoided. Not only does he question the intellectual capacity of readers with an alternative understanding of the story; he claims that this trap was created by an author ultimately critical of Louisa. Unlike Camfield and Reichardt, however, Csicsila does not provide us with any biographical reference to support his argument. In fact, biographical references are actually not provided anywhere in his essay. He therefore makes it impossible for the reader to decide if Freeman in fact was critical of Louisa and created a snare at the end of the story, or if this is only a part of Csicsila’s interpretation.

In my opinion, Csicsila’s continual references to Freeman function as a means by which he can bestow his interpretation with authority. By referring to what Freeman is ‘critical of’ and what she ‘obviously intends’, he presents his interpretation as being the final revelation of Freeman’s agenda, the ‘true’ or ‘real’ meaning of the text. An unfortunate consequence of the way in which he employs the author is that he eventually undermines both Freeman’s authority and the quality of her texts. He obscures the boundary between author and critic, since he does not distinguish between the text, Freeman’s alleged associations, and his own interpretation. When he fails to make this distinction, he appears as a man speaking on behalf of a woman as if they had one voice, a united perspective, and shared interests. Freeman’s talent as writer is undermined when he claims that “Freeman’s ability to distinguish herself as a complex writer of fiction is due mainly to her portrayal of the responsible celebration of life as guide to individual morality” (12). Csicsila considers the complexity of Freeman’s fiction as corresponding precisely to his own interpretation of her texts. His use of the terms ‘responsible’ and ‘morality’ indicates that Freeman’s talent lies in her ability to define appropriate conduct with religious undercurrents. I would argue against Csicsila that Freeman’s ability as complex writer of fiction becomes evident by the ways in which “A New England Nun” challenges the expectations our culture induces us to have towards male and female characters, and that it creates masterful irony and ambiguity by undermining the impact of our concepts of gender. Csicsila’s interpretation is unfamiliar with any kind of ambiguity, and he believes that “Freeman in fact expected her readers to draw certain unequivocal conclusions about Louisa Ellis and her actions” (2). The way I see it, Csicsila can only draw these conclusion at the cost of textual complexity.
Closure

The ways in which Gregg Camfield, Mary Reichardt, and Joseph Csicsila invoke the notion of the author behind the text can be described as an escalating degree of “the intentional fallacy”; from being an indication of how the text should be read properly according to notions of authorial intent, Freeman becomes an authority by which the critic can close the text permanently. The location of this reference within the respective essays is not coincidental. Both Camfield and Reichardt bestow the author with the privilege of judgement in a potential critical dispute. However, Camfield refers to Freeman by means of introduction: His interpretation is based on the Freeman’s personal letters, but he proceeds to an analysis of the text. Reichardt refers to the author’s letter by means of conclusion: Freeman becomes the punctuation mark with which the critic closes the discussion; all questions are answered, ambiguities resolved, the text is closed. Where Reichardt finds the text ambiguous and applies Freeman in order to finally resolve this ambiguity, Csicsila’s reading is unfamiliar with textual ambiguities. With Csicsila, the distinction between critical interpretation and authorial intent is dissolved, an attitude which motivates his entire approach. ‘Freeman’ becomes a notion which is practically inseparable from the interpretation done by Csicsila himself.

In my opinion, these three ways of applying the idea of an author on the text are representative of criticism on “A New England Nun”. Mary Wilkins Freeman is, with only one exception, always present in the interpretations of her text; it is the nature of this presence which varies. Fortunately, the majority of the critics are located somewhere between Camfield and Reichardt, insofar as they are mostly capable of separating Freeman’s alleged intention from their own interpretation. Csicsila’s lacking awareness of his own interpretive strategies mostly serves as a potent illustration of how far it is possible to stretch the authorial reference – with one interesting exception. When critics establish the text before proceeding to their respective close-readings, few seem aware of the fact that any paraphrase of a text is in itself an interpretation. The aspects of the text which are given particular stress and the critics’ choice of adjectives thus convey important indications about what they perceive as neutral facts about the text. For example, Susan Harris begins by claiming that Louisa is “delighted to discover that Joe loves another woman” and breaks the engagement “with great relief” (2002: 27). Martha Cutter agrees that Louisa “willingly and happily allows Joe to marry another woman” (1990: 179). Perry Westbrook, however, questions Lily’s importance insofar as she is “actually not much of a factor in Louisa’s decision” (1967: 58). These claims are presented as already given and equally visible to any reader, although they can be quite easy
contradicted. However, this critical blind-spot does not necessarily represent a problem as long as it is restricted to the initial part of the analysis.

The strong authorial focus nevertheless produces difficulties. Needless to say, none of the modern critics who have written on “A New England Nun” actually knew Mary Wilkins Freeman. In order to arrive at a conclusion on what she meant to say through her texts they therefore have to use her letters, etc. When these critics insist on involving the author in their readings, it might be due to the obvious advantage the notion of the author offers literary criticism:

To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyché, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is ‘explained’ – victory to the critic (Barthes, 2000: 149-50)

According to Roland Barthes, the advantages of involving the author in criticism are that it makes the text a manageable size over which it is possible to ‘win’. The implication of this strategy is that the author becomes a mechanism by which the critic can obtain control over the multiple potential meanings of a text. Instead of grappling with textual ambiguities, contradictions, and uncertainty, the critic can focus on discovering the author behind it. That Barthes stresses the victorious aspect of this strategy is especially important, since an explanation or discovery indicates finality, closure, and certainty. The author provides the critic with a belief that criticism has a final destination, and that the critic can achieve superiority over the text.

The advantages of this kind of literary criticism should be measured against the disadvantages. As I have already indicated, certain knowledge about whether one has made correct observations with regard to authorial intent is often impossible to achieve, especially when the author is not available for confirmation. The victory of the critic might therefore be an illusion which cannot be exposed. More importantly, reading the text in search of its author greatly reduces or even undermines the subversive potential of literature. Michel Foucault argues that the author functions exactly as a reduction of the threat which fiction represents:

How can one reduce the great peril, the great danger with which fiction threatens our world? The answer is: One can reduce it with the author. The author allows a limitation of the cancerous and dangerous proliferation of significations within a world where one is thrifty not only with one’s resources and riches, but also with one’s discourses and their significations. The author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning (186)
By giving the text an author, one disarms potentially dangerous meanings that threaten the status quo. Far from being a practical device for organizing the reading of literature, or giving the critic a manageable task to complete, the author can function as the means by which the critic can limit ‘cancerous’ subversive ideas. Engaged in the task of discovering the author behind the text, the critic can direct his attention away from the perhaps disturbing potential of a text which might – if read otherwise – challenge or alter his perspective on the world altogether. Reading for the author could thus provide him with a delusive victory that undermines thoughts that are important, yet have nothing to do with the author, over which there can be no victorious master.

In the context of criticism on “A New England Nun”, the impact of Barthes’ and Foucault’s arguments cannot be stressed enough. The essay which most adamantly insists on revealing the one true meaning of the story is the essay by Joseph Csicsila, where the image of an author corresponds more or less to the critic himself. On the other side of the scale is an essay by Michael Tritt, “Selling a Birthright for Pottage: Mary Freeman’s Allusion to Genesis in ‘A New England Nun’” (2006), in which references to authorial intent are entirely absent, and where the critic is more eager to point out fundamental questions raised by the story, than to give conclusive and authoritative answers. This would support Foucault’s further observation that “the author does not precede the works, he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses” (186). The most limited and excluding essay on “A New England Nun” is the essay in which the author is persistently and absolutely invoked. Instead of reflecting on or admitting to choices necessarily made in the interpretive process, the critic projects the issue of choice onto the author.

My next two chapters will provide an analysis of two different interpretive strategies that arises from criticism centered around the author, based on the notion that “the author is [...] the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning” (Foucault, 186). I will try to establish what kind of meaning the various critics seek to avoid, and how they avoid it. I will argue that in order to ensure that the text communicates ideas with which the critic feels comfortable, the subversive aspects of the text must be silenced, ignored, or distorted. Given that the first approach is firmly rooted in patriarchal ideology, while the second is based on feminist ideas, it is certainly interesting to note that they are nevertheless quite closely related. However, before I proceed to my analysis of critical strategies, I will analyse “A New England Nun” with focus on its subversive potential.
“A New England Nun”

That a story with a protagonist like Louisa Ellis could be a site of anxiety for modern critics seems rather unlikely. Surely, this slightly eccentric woman does not develop provocative ideas or display radical behavior. On the contrary, she spends her days sewing, cleaning, and distilling essences in peaceful solitude. Still, her regular behavior and calm temper are capable of inspiring quite strong feelings of contempt, defensiveness, condescension, or uneasiness. In my introduction, I claimed that a source of ambiguity for critics working on the story is the ways in which the text undermines traditional manifestations of gender. In my opinion, this is the disturbing potential of “A New England Nun”. The portrayal of Louisa Ellis, Lily Dyer, and Joe Dagget disrupt the expectations our culture induces us to have towards the embodiment of feminine and masculine character traits, especially in a nineteenth-century text. The following analysis of the behavior and personality of these three characters will provide an explanation for why the text creates tension and impressions of ambiguity in the critic, and why the text can be described as radically subversive.

In my opinion, the source of all misreadings of “A New England Nun” can be explained by the fact that in the story, the term ‘masculine’ occurs three times in relation to Joe Dagget, while the term ‘feminine’ occurs twice in relation to Louisa Ellis. From Louisa’s perspective, Joe has an “honest masculine rudeness”, “coarse masculine belongings”, and “coarse masculine presence” (12). The narrator states that Louisa has “little feminine appurtenances” (7), and “little feminine weapons” (16). The application of these terms thus signalize that concepts of masculinity and femininity are important in the portrayal of these characters. Now, our culture induces is to expect that when we encounter these terms in a nineteenth-century text, the masculine character should be associated with traits such as adult, rational, mature, active, independent, authoritative, and powerful. The feminine character should be associated with the opposite traits: childish, emotional/ irrational, immature, passive, dependent, submissive, and weak. However, in “A New England Nun”, Joe and Louisa are connected to terms of masculinity and femininity respectively, only to be portrayed as thinking and behaving in the exact opposite manner. Although Louisa is connected to her ‘little feminine’ things twice, her behavior reveals that she is adult, rational, mature, active, independent, authoritative, and powerful. Joe, on the contrary, is described as being rudely and coarsely masculine, while displaying behavior which reveals that he is childish, emotional/irrational, immature, passive, dependent, submissive, and weak. All critics that I am familiar with have failed to notice the substantial difference between the terms describing these characters, and how they actually behave. They simply notice the fact that these terms
are applied, and therefore read this as a confirmation that they should associate Joe and Louisa with traditional notions of gender. The ambiguity arises from the critics’ attempt to understand the behavior of Joe and Louisa according to these notions, and the critics’ irritability probably arises from the resistance of the text to prove this attempt successful.

The first problem which the critic is likely to encounter is how to make a masculine man out of Joe Dagget. Being the only male character in the story, he becomes the only representative for masculine values. The adjectives employed to describe him indicate that he is heavy, large, loud, and speaks with a husky voice. Combined with the fact that Joe is also a farmer by profession suggests that his appearance is indeed very masculine. However, his coarse and masculine physical appearance stands as a contrast to his feminine personality and behavior. He is described as blushing, embarrassed, innocent, afraid, clumsy, and tender.

None of these terms indicate the confidence or sense of superiority which could be expected in a nineteenth-century male. More importantly, Joe reveals a passive and submissive nature by leaving his fate in the hands of women. For example, he lets his mother control his living situation: “Joe could not desert his mother, who refused to leave her old home. So Louisa must leave hers” (11-12). Considering how he left home fourteen years ago for Australia, he should have managed to establish a certain degree of independence from his mother. Of course, it was common for a married couple to live with one set of parents, but being the only male of the family in patriarchal society bestows Joe with the privilege of deciding where they should live. The fact that he complies with his mother’s demand at the cost of his future wife’s wishes suggests that the “boyish look about his large face” also speaks for an immature relationship to the women in his life.

Joe’s immaturity also reveals itself on an emotional level. When seeing Louisa for the first time in fourteen years, “the old winds of romance whistled as loud and sweet as ever through his ears” (11). The fact that Joe has not seen Louisa for fourteen years and still goes straight back into the relationship with the old winds of romance whistling in his ears as if no time had passed suggests that Joe’s emotional development has been miniscule. However, even though Joe’s feelings remain unchanged, the object for his desire does not: “All the song which he had been wont to hear in them was Louisa; he had for a long time a loyal belief that he heard it still, but finally it seemed to him that although the winds sang always that one song, it had another name” (11). When Joe redirects his persistent love from Louisa to Lily Dyer without even recognising the transition before it has been finalised, he brings forth an

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2 Pages 8-10
3 Pages 9-15
association of typical teen-age crushes; deeply felt, but ultimately transient. The way in which he transfers his constant love from one woman to another suggests that it is rather superficial. In the conversation between him and Lily Dyer he also reveals that being apart from her would not prove too difficult: “I’ll get along well enough myself” (15). Of course, if he was capable of simply transferring his love from Louisa to Lily, there is no reason why he should not be able to gradually transfer it back to Louisa again. Lily, on the other hand, assures him that she “ain’t that sort of a girl to feel this way twice” (15). Unlike Joe, who has already felt this way twice, Lily’s love seems genuine enough.

Joe’s way of handling the situation in which he is in love with one woman while engaged to another proves that he is incapable of acting like a ‘typical’ man. We would expect a man to either take advantage of one or both women, or make a final decision and act accordingly. Joe does neither. First, he acts as if the situation is above his control, about which he “ain’t got a word to say” (15). He reminds Lily that he is “going right on an’ get married next week” (15), then he apparently tries to embrace or kiss her: “Louisa heard an exclamation and a soft commotion behind the bushes” (16). Lily, however, interrupts his attempt and says that “this must be put a stop to” (16). As I read it, Joe is not trying to take advantage of Lily’s feelings for him. On the contrary, her interruption indicates that she is taken aback by an embrace that she was unprepared for and did not encourage. Joe seems confused, but his confusion derives from his inability to read the situation properly and understand what he is supposed to do, rather than emotional confusion. Nevertheless, he responds to Lily’s statement that “honor’s honor, an’ right’s right” by saying that “you’ll find out fast enough that I ain’t going against ’em for you or any other girl” (15). Joe tries to ensure Lily of his high moral principles and noble sense of honor, and shortly afterwards embraces his maid behind a bush, visible to any random neighbor passing by, one week before his wedding to another woman. His reference to honor is not a gesture meant to soften or impress Lily; he states his allegiance to principles in which he probably believes, although he does not comprehend how he should practice them, or what kind of behavior the notion of honor actually requires.

Joe shows no sign of malice, and seems to have the best intentions. He nevertheless manages to hurt both Louisa and Lily by his mistaken sense of honor, although in quite different ways. He claims that he “ain’t going back on a woman that’s waited for me fourteen years, an’ break her heart” (15). Instead, he is willing to break the heart of the woman he is currently in love with, and marry Louisa without loving her. Lily assures Joe that “if you should jilt her tomorrow, I wouldn’t have you” (15). Lily’s claim indicates that she would find
it inappropriate if Joe broke his fourteen year old pledge for her sake. However, this does not mean that Joe could not break his pledge for Louisa’s sake. Although he assumes that breaking the engagement would break her heart, he clearly does not consider that if Louisa really loves him as much as he thinks, he is bound to break her heart sooner or later. To let Louisa discover his indifference only after they are married, when she has bound herself to a man who does not return her feelings, is an act of cruelty even if it is unintentional. His chivalry is oddly displaced and sadly ironic; he tries to be considerate, but ends up being selfish, even though his selfishness will deprive everyone of a chance of happiness and dignity, including himself. Joe gives the value of his own promise a higher priority than the feelings of the three parties involved, by showing that he is about to marry a woman out of pity and self-sacrifice. His notion of honor is quite insulting.

Louisa happens to overhear the conversation between Joe and Louisa. What she hears takes her aback; she “sat there in a daze”, then “slunk softly home” (16). Unlike Joe, “she had been faithful to him all these years. She had never dreamed of the possibility of marrying anyone else” (11). Now she discovers that her faithfulness has not been mutual. Indeed, she realizes that she was about to marry a man who makes clumsy romantic advances on his maid in public, and then intends to marry Louisa the following week as a favor. At first, Louisa “could hardly believe that she had heard aright, and that she would not do Joe a terrible injury should she break her troth-plight” (16). She had assumed that “Joe Dagget had been fond of her and working for her all these years. It was not for her, whatever came to pass, to prove untrue and break his heart” (14). Her reasons for remaining faithful resemble Joe’s, but Louisa’s faithfulness is sincere and not simply a figure of speech. She also proves that she is capable of making a decision for both of them, and the following evening she breaks the engagement with “a little quiver on her placid face” (16). Alone later that night she “wept a little, she hardly knew why” (16). I would argue that Louisa is not hurt and disappointed by discovering that Joe does not love her; on the contrary, she seems relieved that she would not do Joe ‘a terrible injury’ by breaking the engagement. Her sadness is rather due to the fact that she only discovered Joe’s feelings by mere coincidence, and that she came very close to marrying a man whose true nature was profoundly different to what she had expected. Indeed, Louisa was about to sacrifice her home, hobbies, control, independence, and dignity to a man unworthy of such a sacrifice.

This leads us to the second potentially ambiguous and disturbing element of the text, namely that despite Louisa’s initial disappointment, she apparently only needs a good night’s sleep to get over Joe’s ‘betrayal’: “The next morning, on waking, she felt like a queen who,
after fearing lest her domain be wrested away from her, sees it firmly insured in her possession” (16). There is something quite unfamiliar with a female character who thus easily manages to shake off a fourteen year old engagement and the discovery of her fiancé’s infidelity while asleep. Louisa’s romantic feelings towards Joe Dagget are mentioned once in the story: “Fifteen years ago she had been in love with him – at least she considered herself to be” (11). The narrator states that Louisa had been in love with Joe years ago, and then immediately suggests that this might be due to a self-deception on Louisa’s side; ‘at least she considered herself’ as being in love. The feelings that she might have had for him fifteen years ago were never strong, and have now grown cold: “For Louisa the wind had never more than murmured; now it had gone down, and everything was still” (11). We expect a male character to have a considerate amount of power over women and their emotions, so that his love would lead to a woman to happiness, while his rejection would lead to devastation. Joe does not have this power over Louisa’s emotions, and he actually does not have them over Lily’s either. Louisa is not even jealous of Lily; when Lily passes Louisa’s window in the final scene, Louisa “felt no qualm” (17). Joe Dagget already belongs to Louisa’s past, and the object of his love produces no ill feelings in Louisa. Lily ensures Joe that she “ain’t going to break my heart nor make a fool of myself” (15). Combined with her unwillingness to let him embrace her and her decision to go away, Lily apparently has full control of herself and her feelings. She is not willing to compromise her honor or heart for Joe’s sake. Hence, it appears as if Joe is deprived of the traditional masculine privilege of swaying a woman’s heart to his own advantage.

In my opinion, Louisa’s portrayal is the greatest source of anxiety, especially for critics who expect a nineteenth-century female character to embody a certain set of traditional feminine character traits. While Joe’s appearance is very masculine, Louisa’s appearance is equally feminine. Her work is performed with grace (7), she eats in “a delicate, pecking way” (8), and has a “sweet serenity which never failed her” (10). Nevertheless, her authority, control, and independence are unmistakably linked to notions of masculinity. When Joe Dagget visits her while they are still engaged, Louisa controls the topics for conversation: She asks the questions, and he answers obediently. Even when Louisa mentions Lily Dyer and Joe “colored” with an “embarrassed warmth” (9) it apparently never strikes him that he might take the initiative and change the subject to something more comfortable. He answers her questions passively, like a boy would to his mother. In Louisa’s presence, “he was afraid to stir” (10). Louisa’s authority over Joe is further indicated by the following comparison: Joe “was not very young, but there was a boyish look about his large face. Louisa was not quite as
old as he, her face was fairer and smoother, but she gave people the impression of being older” (9). Combined with her “effort to reassure him” when he stumbles (9), and her “deprecating smile” when he rearranges her books (9), Louisa resembles a mother gently admonishing her innocently clumsy child.

Apart from her mother-like function towards Joe – or perhaps due to this function – there are no indications that Louisa dreams of having children. When she envisions her future as Joe’s wife, she envisions her role as housewife, hostess, and daughter-in-law: “There would be a large house to care for; there would be company to entertain; there would be Joe’s rigorous and feeble old mother to wait upon” (12). Thoughts on children are conspicuously absent both here and anywhere else in the story. It is also interesting that her main concern of her relationship with Joe is the mess that he will make: “She had visions [...] of coarse masculine belongings strewn about in endless litter; of dust and disorder arising necessarily from a coarse masculine presence” (12). Joe himself is not even mentioned, neither as being pleasurable company nor as being annoying; she does not consider her role as wife in the strictest sense at all. This could be explained by the circumstance that Louisa has never dreamed of marriage. The narrator states that when she was younger, “she had seen marriage ahead as a reasonable future and a probable desirability of life”, and it was her mother who “talked wisely to her daughter when Joe Dagget presented himself, and Louisa accepted him with no hesitation” (11). Of course, for a woman who does not regard marriage as more than a reasonable future, and depends on her mother to encourage even this moderate amount of enthusiasm, there is no reason why she should spend her days in reveries about being Joe Dagget’s life companion. Louisa’s main concern appears to be how she will manage the situation of living with Joe’s mother, whom she perceives as being a “domineering, shrewd old matron” (12), since Louisa’s authority will be jeopardized when entering the territory of this materfamilias for good. Joe has already shown that he takes his mother’s side in the question of residence, and will probably remain loyal to her. So when Louisa discovers Joe’s feelings for Lily Dyer, she is given the opportunity to avoid a loss of authority and independence, and in a final maternal act allow Joe to marry the woman he loves.

In terms of gender, “A New England Nun” seems to be a charade over traditional concepts of masculine and feminine characteristics. Joe has a masculine appearance, while both Louisa and Lily are correspondingly feminine; Louisa sees Lily as “full-figured” girl of “calm rustic strength and bloom, with a masterful way which might have beseemed a princess” (15). However, even Lily’s feminine appearance has strength and a ‘masterful’ way. The behavior of these three characters indicates that traditional notions of masculinity and
femininity only apply to physical appearance. Louisa is financially, emotionally, and mentally independent, and does not dream of a life filled with romantic love, marriage, and children. Lily loves Joe, but nevertheless has full control over her feelings, and formulates the conditions for their relationship. In contrast, Joe passively submits to the will of his mother, Louisa, and Lily. In fact, he appears to be quite needy. The one determination he makes in his life is to go to Australia, where he “would have stayed fifty years [...] or never come home at all, to marry Louisa” (10). Considering how he decides to leave after having proposed to Louisa, it is strange that he does not either take her with him, or relieves her from the engagement so that she is free to marry another man. Judging by his overall character, one gets the impression that Joe needs someone to wait for him in case he decides to come home, a safe haven to return to. Compared to Louisa’s lack of interest in him or any other man, and Lily Dyer’s claim that her love is a ‘once in a lifetime’ feeling, Joe appears to be a man who depends on having a woman – any woman – in his life.

Being the male character of the story, we would expect Joe to exert masculine power and be somewhat decisive. However, it is the women who make decisions, for themselves and Joe, while he yields to their demands. His mother decides where he should live. Lily decides when their relationship must be put a stop to, and whether they should kiss. Louisa controls what they talk about, which items he can touch, and finally breaks the engagement. Joe makes no decisions except for his choice to remain loyal to an old pledge at any expense, although this passive decision might also indicate his indecisiveness. He has no power over women; in fact, he barely has power over himself. The contrast between Joe’s physical masculinity and his feminine personality draws attention to the masculine traits that he ‘fails’ to embody, while the feminine appearance of the female characters emphasize the absence of typically feminine traits. Gender in “A New England Nun” is thus not what one might expect. This creates masterful irony in the story, especially since the characters themselves never seem to notice the significance of this gender reversal. The target of this irony is Joe Dagget, not only because he fails to embody the characteristics of the typical male, but because the typically male traits are often those traits which inspire respect and admiration in the reader and in the other characters he deals with. Although it is both possible and plausible to sympathize with Joe, it is due to his clumsiness and good intentions rather than impressive personal qualities.

Considering how all the critics whose essays I will analyse have read the text under the assumption that Joe is very masculine – this is either explicitly stated as fact or obviously taken for granted – while Louisa is read as feminine with everything that entails, it is understandable that they have gone to quite extreme lengths in order to transform Joe and
Louisa into individuals who embody the traits that we would expect them to. Whereas the victim of the text’s irony is Joe, the victim of critical transformation is Louisa. To re-instate traditional notions of gender in the text, Joe must be elevated to supreme heights, while Louisa must be degraded accordingly. This is a task quite easily accomplished, since our reading conventions suggest that “when a female character is described as a complex combination of contradictory traits, the reader should give priority to the most negative qualities and should in fact interpret her very complexity as a negative factor on its own” (Rabinowitz, 1987: 206). The rule of what Peter Rabinowitz calls ‘the dominant negative’ not only allows us to read the complexity of female characters as a negative factor; it seems to demand that we do:

In our culture, we have a number of categories in which to place women, but they tend to fall into pairs of binary oppositions: madonna/whore, good girl/bad girl, victim/villain. This tendency to dichotomize leads to a particular horror of those who refuse to stay put, for such border straddlers seem to threaten the very order of the universe (207)

Louisa Ellis invokes hostile or ambiguous feelings because she is a woman who ultimately prefers orderly bureau-drawers and shining windowpanes to a man, and does so without compromising her integrity or future chances of happiness. That this should be perceived as disturbing in a culture whose foundation is ideas of male superiority is quite understandable, since the man in this story is reduced to a nuisance at best, a nothing at worst. Louisa thus threatens the order of the universe by being not only a ‘border straddler’, but by venturing into the territories of the privileged male. To restore order in the universe, the strategies of the critics on the story will shortly be seen as attempts to force Louisa into a category which defines her as either a ‘good girl’ or a ‘bad girl’.
Chapter Two: Madness and Reason

In the essay entitled “Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy” (1975), Shoshana Felman shows how literary criticism associates men with reason and discourse, and women with the oppositional terms madness and silence. The terms identified as ‘male’ are further valued above their ‘female’ equivalents and men are claimed to control both reason and discourse:

Women as such are associated both with madness and with silence, whereas men are identified with prerogatives of discourse and reason. In fact, men appear not only as the possessors, but also as the dispensers, of reason, which they can at will mete out to – or take away from – others (1997: 15)

Being in possession of reason involves having the power of definition. Unlike women, men function as possessors of reason, meaning that men decide what counts as reasonable, meaningful, and healthy, and what counts as the opposite. Men thus have the privilege of dispensing reason at will. Felman further argues that by identifying reason with men and madness with women, discourse erases the woman as problem. By doing a rereading of Balzac’s short story “Adieu”, comparing it to earlier readings of the text, Felman shows how the male characters in the story as well as the male critics reading the story function as possessors and dispensers of reason. The former seek to cure the central female character of her madness so that she will again be capable of doing a ‘woman’s duty’ in relation to her lover. The latter ignore the woman and her madness altogether, claiming instead that the realistic description of suffering male soldiers is the significant aspect of the story. Felman argues that under a pretext of neutrality, an ideological circle based on reason is drawn in which men control the ‘feminine’ discourse of madness.

Felman’s essay elaborates on issues which are acutely relevant to criticism on “A New England Nun”. The interpretation done by David Hirsch is indeed characterized by multiple references to severe mental illnesses in his reading of Louisa Ellis, and so are those done by Monika Elbert (2002) and Joseph Csicsila. However, where the male approach to “Adieu” is either an attempt to restore the woman’s reason so that she will again be capable of performing her duty in relation to men, or to completely ignore her, an interesting reversal takes place in the readings of “A New England Nun”. These critics seem to think that breaking her engagement to Joe Dagget is a failure of Louisa Ellis to perform a woman’s duty, and they attempt to define Louisa Ellis in terms of insanity. Louisa’s choice to remain unmarried is presented as a sign of mental illness instead of a decision made on rational grounds. In order to disarm the potential criticism of patriarchal notions of womanhood which
this choice is capable of producing, Louisa is defined as a madwoman incapable of making sense, and as displaying behavior which is devoid of meaning. Louisa is thus excluded from discourse and erased as problem. These critics function as dispensers of reason: it is their prerogative to define what counts as meaningful and healthy, to advocate standards of intelligibility which efficiently excludes any threat to its ideology by placing it outside the circle of rationality. The following analysis of their readings of “A New England Nun” will examine how it is done.

**An Obsessive Neurosis**

In “Subdued Meaning in ‘A New England Nun’” (1965), David Hirsch claims that Louisa Ellis can be read as “almost a case study of an obsessive neurosis” (125). According to Hirsch, there is particularly one scene of the story where “the relentlessness with which even the surface of the [text] reveals the character of Louisa” (125). The scene he has in mind is the conversation between Joe and Louisa while they are still engaged. Hirsch quotes two long passages. He begins with Joe Dagget entering the room to his comment that “Yes, it’s pretty hot work in the sun” (9). Then he skips the second half of the conversation, to the part where Joe begins fingering Louisa’s books, and concludes with Joe’s flushed reaction when Louisa rearranges her books to their initial position (9). Hirsch writes:

> The naturalistic details are rendered so as to provide what is almost a case study of an obsessive neurosis, that is, a “neurotic disorder in which there are repetitive impulses to perform certain acts. Although the person sees that his ideas are unreasonable, he nevertheless feels compelled to carry out ritualistic behavior.” Louisa’s neurotic compulsiveness becomes especially prominent after her meager store of conversation has been exhausted [...] Louisa must set the books in their proper order, but the order, as Joe’s challenge makes clear, is arbitrary and useless (125-6)

What Hirsch claims here is that Louisa’s obsessive neurosis reveals itself through a compulsive desire to keep her possessions arranged in a certain way. He argues that she feels compelled to maintain order, even though the order is devoid of meaning and completely arbitrary. Louisa is further perceived as knowing that her behavior is unreasonable, something that Joe Dagget is also supposedly aware of, but she cannot control her impulses to carry out her rituals even if they are meaningless.

The final sentence of the citation indicates that Hirsch finds Joe Dagget to be an appropriate means by which the meaning of Louisa’s behavior can be measured. Hirsch here

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adopts the perspective of the male character without reservation. He treats Joe as an innocent and neutral character incapable of making poor judgments, while Louisa’s personality becomes the entire object of critical scrutiny. What Hirsch fails to notice, is that the order which appears useless and arbitrary to Joe is meaningful to Louisa. Indeed, keeping her house in impeccable order is a great source of satisfaction to her, and she has “almost the enthusiasm of an artist over the mere order and cleanliness of her solitary home” (12). The narrator further reveals how Louisa has “throbs of genuine triumph” and “gloated gently” (12) when assessing the result of her daily effort to maintain perfect order. Joe reacts with astonishment upon Louisa’s desire to keep her items arranged in a certain way, because he cannot understand why her system of order should be important. However, the text suggests that Joe himself is an untidy person. When imagining her future as Joe’s wife, Louisa has visions of “coarse masculine belongings strewn about in endless litter” (12). While this could support the claim that Louisa’s sense of order has turned into an obsession, it also indicates that Joe regards Louisa’s order from the perspective of one incapable of maintaining order himself. During his short visit, Joe rearranges Louisa’s books, knocks over her work basket, and tracks in dust (9-10). If he is thus capable of making a mess in other people’s houses, I suspect that Louisa’s startling visions of the ‘endless litter’ of his home are well founded. In other words, Joe is not a neutral judge of order.

The perhaps greatest paradox of Hirsch’s assessment of Louisa’s behavior is that what would be considered meaningful activities in the presence of Joe Dagget is considered meaningless in his absence. Cooking, cleaning, and sewing are the essential tasks expected of Louisa as a wife, and considering the level of skill with which Louisa performs these tasks, one would expect her behavior to be regarded as both meaningful and necessary. When her skills are read as a sign of an obsessive and compulsive personality, this is not due to the performance of these tasks, but to her attitude towards them. Louisa is described as “she did her housework methodically; that was as much a matter of course as breathing” (16). The above cited argument that she feels compelled to carry out ritualistic behavior although unreasonable is incorrect, because Louisa simply does not feel compelled to clean; like sewing, she does it “not always for use, but for the simple, mild pleasure which she took in it” (12). Neither does Louisa find her activities unreasonable, because they are the activities that any New England woman is expected to do. The difference is that Louisa does with pleasure for herself what her neighbors are doing out of necessity for someone else. When Louisa responds with a “deprecating smile” upon Joe’s request of why the order of her books is important (9), it does not mean that she understands that her behavior is unreasonable; a more
articulate person than Louisa would be at a loss of how to explain to the untidy Joe why she derives so much pleasure from her spotless home. Louisa’s behavior thus appears unreasonable to Joe Dagget and David Hirsch – not to Louisa. That she finds genuine pleasure in her spotless home is never mentioned by Hirsch as a legitimate reason for her efforts.

If the activities performed by Louisa are perceived as meaningless by Hirsch, this might be due to a common notion that women’s work is in itself meaningless, repetitive, insignificant, and can only be perceived as meaningful by the man that benefits directly from the result. As I read it, his perception of Louisa’s behavior as obsessive is based on a standard of acceptability that defines a woman’s existence as meaningful and rewarding in relation to her husband. Susan Harris defines “the perfect female” of the nineteenth century as the woman who “cares everything about domestic concerns and nothing for herself” (2002: 28). The perfect female spends all her energy on the repetitive and endless activities of the housewife. Her own comfort level should preferably be diametrically opposed to that of her husband, since her exhaustive efforts lead to his comfort. Measured against this standard Louisa might appear ill, since she apparently performs her duties for no reason. Although she cares everything about domestic concerns, she cares more about her own comfort than that of her fiancé. Hirsch claims that Louisa’s domestic concerns lead to “a clash between two opposed forces. Louisa, who feels herself responsible for the maintenance of order, is frustrated by Joe’s presence. Joe is equally frustrated by Louisa’s ‘fussing’” (128). I agree with Hirsch that there is a clash between two opposed forces here, between order and disorder. However, Hirsch again suggests that we read Louisa from Joe’s perspective: Louisa is described as feeling responsible for maintaining order, indicating that her feeling might be out of place. Joe’s frustration over Louisa’s ‘fussing’, on the other hand, is not presented as being Joe’s feeling, so that it appears as if Joe’s perception of Louisa’s fussing is a fact that Joe merely acknowledges. Seeing how Joe does not benefit from Louisa’s order, but instead is frustrated by her ‘fussing’, Hirsch can draw the conclusion that her efforts are useless.

A failure to recognize that Louisa’s system of order makes sense when seen from her own perspective, does not suffice to explain how Hirsch can define Louisa’s behavior as compulsive and obsessive. The key to understanding how he arrives at this conclusion lies both in the way he adopts Joe’s perspective against Louisa, and – perhaps more importantly – in how he manages to ignore certain crucial parts of the text. It is interesting to note which part of the above mentioned scene Hirsch completely refrains from referring to in his interpretation:
“Is your mother well to-day?”
“Yes, mother’s pretty well.”
“I suppose Lily Dyer’s with her now?”
Dagget colored. “Yes, she’s with her,” he answered, slowly.
He was not very young, but there was a boyish look about his large face. Louisa was not quite as old as he, her face was fairer and smoother, but she gave people the impression of being older.
“I suppose she’s a good deal of help to your mother,” she said, further.
“I guess she is; I don’t know how mother’d get along without her,” said Dagget, with a sort of embarrassed warmth.
“She looks like a real capable girl. She’s pretty-looking too,” remarked Louisa.
“Yes, she is pretty fair looking.”
Presently Dagget began fingering the books on the table (9, ital. mine)

The part of the scene left out by Hirsch is strikingly enough the part in which Lily Dyer, the woman Joe has fallen in love with and ends up marrying, is discussed. Hirsch apparently does not find the discussion significant in other ways that its potential to reveal Louisa’s “neurotic compulsiveness” and “meager store of conversation” (125). The scene is both comical and revealing. While Louisa chooses topics that are customary and polite – Joe’s work in the fields, the weather, Joe’s mother, and his maid – she stumbles into the core of Joe’s acute inner conflict; that he is in love with one woman while being engaged to another. Unsuspectingly, and perhaps incapable of interpreting his reactions to her questions, Louisa forces Joe to praise the woman he loves in her presence. Joe blushes and is obviously embarrassed by the awkward situation. By the time Louisa points out how pretty Lily is the unbearable tension induces Joe to start fumbling to shift focus from his embarrassment. What he begins fingering is Louisa’s books.

Hirsch is right when he claims “the relentlessness with which even the surface of the scene reveals the character” (125), but it is the character of Joe which is relentlessly revealed, not Louisa. The situation reveals that while Louisa has remained faithful to her fiancé during his absence, Joe has not returned the courtesy. On the contrary, Joe’s feelings are quite ironic; while he has apparently not met another woman during his fourteen years in Australia, he manages to fall in love only months before his marriage to Louisa. Obviously, Joe reacts with discomfort at Louisa’s attempt to make conversation about Lily Dyer, but the reason is located in his own emotions rather than Louisa’s obsessive sense of order. In fact, it is rather through her sense of order that she manages to detect that something is wrong. Louisa might not be a very clever woman, tuned into verbal nuances or facial expressions, but she does understand disorder. Joe’s discomfort causes him to disarrange her items, an act which is perceived as an intrusion of her premises. When Joe later knocks over Louisa’s work basket,
Louisa reacts with “a mild stiffness. Either she was a little disturbed, or his nervousness affected her, and made her seem constrained in her effort to reassure him” (9, ital. mine). While the cause of tension might be unknown to her, she nevertheless perceives that Joe is incredibly nervous. Louisa perceives only the physical manifestations of the chaos that Joe has created both literally and emotionally for the three parties involved.

Hirsch’s argument that Louisa Ellis suffers from an obsessive neurosis, inducing her to compulsively engage in ritualistic activities, is not supported by the text. In order to read Louisa’s behaviour as unreasonable and meaningless, Hirsch quotes two passages that would support his argument, meantime disregarding the passage in between – in addition to the text as a whole – which would serve to explain her behavior. Louisa’s actions are taken out of their proper context, emptied of meaning, and then applied as argument that the absence of meaning is caused by a mental disorder, rather than an interpretive strategy employed by the critic. Hirsch functions as a possessor and dispenser of reason, and the apparatus invoked to interpret Louisa’s behavior is that of psychotherapy. As I see it, Hirsch appears as a psychologist diagnosing his patient’s disorder; the male doctor with power to determine the mental health of his passive female patient. He adopts the perspective of the male character without reflecting upon the implications of such an act, so that Louisa’s actions become meaningful in a negative way; denied their original context, her behavior can only be understood by Hirsch as a severe mental illness. Hirsch reads “A New England Nun” as dealing with the problem madness and women impose on a healthy, male society.

Although Hirsch’s essay was published in 1965, there are nevertheless reasons why an analysis of his essay is important in this context. First, Hirsch’s essay is acknowledged to be the first serious attempt to explore the depths of Freeman’s fiction, and has thus been highly influential for critics working with Freeman’s texts in general and “A New England Nun” more specifically. In fact, Michael Tritt and Susan Harris are the only contemporary critics who do not refer to Hirsch’s arguments in their essays. Second, Hirsch’s reading of Louisa Ellis as a mentally ill character has been adopted and elaborated by recent critics, which will become evident in my following analysis of essays by Monika Elbert and Joseph Csicsila. Those critics disagreeing with Hirsch’s opinion of Louisa have also felt compelled to confront some of Hirsch’s claims, meanwhile securing the continued influence of his arguments.
Obsessive, Incessant, and Fetishistic Behavior

With Monika Elbert’s essay “The Displacement of Desire: Consumerism and Fetishism in Mary Wilkins Freeman’s Fiction” (2002), Louisa’s mental illnesses reach a sophisticated and astonishing height. In her analysis of several Freeman texts, Elbert claims that the female characters are to be read as fetishistic, compulsive, repressed, alienated and narcissistic. The terms specifically applied on Louisa Ellis range from fetishistic, obsessive, incessant, ornery, and asocial, to onanistic, maddening, masturbatory, schizophrenic, and anal-retentive.

Although Elbert does not refer to a work on psychoanalytic theory, she seems well acquainted with its terminology. The Naturalist-determinist angle Elbert applies on Freeman’s fiction leads to a negative interpretation of “A New England Nun”, in which Louisa is read as culpable for what apparently is a miserable fate. To Elbert, Louisa is one of many nineteenth-century female victims of consumer culture who replace material goods for love and affection, and eventually become alienated from their true feelings as well as other people. However, Elbert seems to be more interested in condemning the victims of this culture than those who benefit from it.

Central to Elbert’s understanding of the term ‘fetishism’ as she interprets it in Freeman’s characters is that the “protagonists project their displaced desires or aborted dreams onto household objects and/or the newest fashions, and these fetishes then begin to assume more prominence than the men in their lives” (192). What induces Elbert to define Louisa as a fetishist, then, is that she bestows too much value upon her possessions and too little value upon Joe Dagget; that she displaces her desire on household objects which in turn assumes more prominence than the man in her life. Elbert’s arguments draw on David Hirsch’s essay: “Hirsch’s initial pronouncement is right [...] the New England nun is involved in obsessive, incessant, and fetishistic behavior” (201). In addition, she seems to agree with Hirsch’s claim that “for a person [Louisa] has substituted things, for a ‘Thou’ an ‘it’. Her commitment is no longer to any human or divine values but to possessions” (Hirsch, 135). The object becomes a fetish when it is bestowed with this kind of unreasonable significance by its owner.

Although Elbert stresses that she is “using the term ‘fetish’ loosely here [...] the common denominator is the longing for what is missing” (198), a problem arises from her claim that Louisa should be read as a fetishist. Elbert does not formulate precisely what

5 Elbert also compares Freeman’s texts with Frank Norris’ short story “McTeague” in terms of fetishism.
6 Specific examples of how she uses these terms will be given later in this section.
7 Naturalist fiction mainly portrays tragic and miserable fates.
Louisa desires and dreams are, and why they are displaced and ‘aborted’; she apparently takes for granted that Louisa desires what the ‘perfect female’ should desire: ‘A man in her life’, family, and children. Elbert assumes that Louisa is ‘longing for what is missing’, and that she displaces her desire for Joe Dagget on material objects. However, as I argued in my analysis of the story in Chapter One, the text indicates that Louisa does not desire Joe. Dreams of love, marriage, or maternity are never mentioned in the story, so it does not seem as if Louisa is longing for anything that is currently missing in her life. On the contrary, in the fourteen years of separation from Joe, “she had never felt discontented nor impatient over her lover’s absence” (11). Indeed, what seems to motivate Elbert’s reading of Louisa as a fetishist is not so much the fact that she values her possessions, as that she does not value what Elbert implies should have been so. What bestows Louisa’s possessions with the significance that Elbert defines as fetishist is not actually made through the value that Louisa herself finds in them, but rather through the fact that in Elbert’s opinion, the place that should have been occupied by husband and children appears to be occupied by material objects.

Elbert says of Freeman’s characters in general: “There are no maternal women, no sexual women, no sisterly women – only women who desire something intangible, projected onto the collectible, article of clothing, or household object” (197). She further stresses Louisa’s “denial of maternal urges, obviously allied to her negative attitude toward sexuality” (203). Considering that the maternal woman is defined in relation to her child, the sexual in relation to her lover, the sisterly in relation to her family, I get the impression that Elbert defines Louisa as a fetishist because she cannot be defined according to the traditional notions of ‘woman’ as relational, incomplete in herself. When Louisa is read as failing to channel her desire in a ‘healthy’ manner through maternal, sexual, or sisterly behavior, Elbert seems to take for granted that Louisa has internalized the desires that her culture finds appropriate for a woman. In other words, Elbert assumes that Louisa desires something of proper value (a husband), which she then projects onto an object. Considering how the text does not indicate that Louisa has these desires, it appears as if it is Monika Elbert who displaces Louisa’s desire of the intangible onto the object, not Louisa herself. If anyone is engaging in the activity of fetishizing material objects, it thus appears to be Monika Elbert.

Elbert’s argument partly collapses if one disagrees with her assumption that Louisa desires what is missing in her life. Her claim that Louisa places too much value on her possessions nevertheless deserves further attention. Elbert writes: “The fact, too, that her household goods become ‘a very part of her personality’ suggests that object and self have become indistinguishable. This is a woman without society of any kind, as ‘maidenly
possessions’ have become her ‘dear friends’” (201). Elbert here suggests that the absence of human companions has induced Louisa to become incapable of distinguishing between object and self. What Elbert does not specify here, or anywhere else, is how it is possible for Louisa to regard an object as being part of her self and her friend simultaneously. According to my sense of logic, these options are mutually exclusive: If an object is perceived as being part of her personality, then it is perceived by Louisa as being part of herself as subject. An object perceived as being her friend, however, must mean that Louisa is capable of distinguishing the object from herself as subject at some level. If a mental condition can explain how this union could be possible, Elbert does not refer to it.

A possible explanation for this breach of logic is that Elbert merely refers to fragments of sentences that support her hypothesis of madness, in a way resembling Hirsch’s method of disregarding the parts of the text which contradict his claim. However, whereas Hirsch ignores other passages, Elbert ignores other parts of the same sentence. The text states that Louisa’s “little feminine appurtenances, which had become, from long use and constant association, a very part of her personality” (7). That Louisa’s possessions have become a very part of her personality is due to ‘long use’ and ‘constant association’, in a way that the hammer and saw of a carpenter may become a part of his personality for the same reasons. This indicates that Louisa has come to associate herself with appurtenances frequently used, it does not mean that she considers them to be an actual part of herself. Elbert further ignores the full sentence when she claims that Louisa’s ‘maidenly possessions’ have become her ‘dear friends’. The text states that “going about among her neat maidenly possessions, she felt as one looking her last upon the faces of dear friends” (12, ital. mine). Louisa feels as one seeing her friends for the last time; she does not actually mistake her possessions for real friends. The narrator employs a simile, a basic rule of language, in order to compare one emotion with another. As I read it, the simile is the narrator’s creation, a means by which Louisa’s emotions can be efficiently conveyed to the reader. Whether or not Louisa herself is even aware of this comparison is uncertain. Either way, Louisa appears to be capable of distinguishing between herself and material objects.

In Elbert’s essay, there is no distinction between practical ownership and fetishism, since Louisa is found to fetishize everything, her sewing equipment, books, and pets included (200-202). All material objects listed in the story are read as an illustration of Louisa’s perverse relationship to her possessions. This makes it difficult to decide whether Louisa is a

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8 Joseph Csicsila draws a similar conclusion about Louisa’s hobbies: “The reader is told Louisa looks upon these hobbies as ‘dear friends’” (7).
fetishist because she bestows too much value upon her possessions, of if she is a fetishist merely because she owns things. Even the rosary beads at the end “become a meaningless religious icon and yet another fetish in the story” (204). Considering how the rosary beads represent yet another simile employed by the narrator, as Louisa “gazed ahead through a long reach of future days strung together like pearls in a rosary” (17), Elbert seems to interpret any reference to objects as a sign of Louisa’s fetishism. Ownership thus becomes a conspicuous activity in “A New England Nun” because the protagonist is mentioned to deal with material objects. Elbert does not mention the fact that literature is not a pure reflection of reality insofar as the relationship described between character and object can inhibit an important literary function, and convey meaning to the reader which the character is unaware of. Yet, it is mainly by assuming that Louisa fetishizes material objects that Elbert can refer to insanity. Elbert further ascribes Louisa’s tendency to both produce and collect household goods to the behavior of the consumer woman, who is compulsively caught in the activity of purchasing and consuming material goods. Elbert writes: “Though she is an energetic producer of household goods, she is also a voracious collector of things – china, linens, aprons, herbs, and essences – and thus seems to get caught in the compulsive and draining activity of the consumer woman” (201). However, the text never states that Louisa ‘collects’ household goods. Neither does Elbert consider whether it is actually possible to locate a nineteenth-century middle-class housewife in New England not in possession of these items, and that these items in fact also have a practical function.

Like David Hirsch, Monika Elbert does not attempt to understand Louisa on her own terms. Louisa’s behavior can only produce meaning in a negative way, as sign of an illness. The scene describing Louisa preparing lunch “as if she had been a veritable guest to her own self” (7) invokes astonishing associations to madness in Elbert:

She sets the table in a compulsive, maddening way [...] it is as if she dissociates in a rather schizophrenic manner, as if she ‘had been a veritable guest to her own self’ [...] The narrator enumerates the types of food she eats, the listing sounding as anal-retentive as Louisa is in her collecting (202)

Again, Elbert does not distinguish properly between the narrator’s description and Louisa’s mind, since the indications of dissociation and anal-retentive listing are actually located on a level of narration which Louisa herself is unaware of. If this is an indication of mental illness, then the narrator of the story, not Louisa, must be its appropriate target. This argument also seems to oddly contradict Elbert’s claim that Louisa fetishizes her possessions, because unlike
her neighbors, Louisa actually make practical use of her linen and china on an everyday basis, whereas her neighbors regard china as so valuable that it should be used on special occasions only. In my opinion, the significance of the scene lies in the narrator’s portrayal of Louisa’s ability to regard herself as worthy of the best treatment. The pleasure she takes in both preparing and eating her lunch reveals that the most central person in Louisa’s life is herself. Every day is equally pleasurable, and she does not need an excuse to celebrate. Unable to grasp how this can be both plausible and healthy, Elbert interprets this as schizophrenia. The implication is that such effort can only be made for the pleasure of others, and since Louisa is the only person lunching, she must have lost her sense of self.

The perspective from which Monika Elbert reads “A New England Nun” is that of psychology, or more accurately, the ideology of reason. Elbert writes: “Modern psychologists would look askance at such compulsive, fetishistic behavior, especially as it deteriorates into meaningless (almost masturbatory) repetition without any obvious purpose” (202). Again, the critic assumes the powerful authority of the doctor diagnosing her patient. However, since Elbert has interpreted the story from the perspective of mental illnesses rather than that of Louisa, it is no wonder that Louisa’s behavior seems meaningless and without obvious purpose. Elbert’s approach is the same as David Hirsch’s, insofar as she applies a perspective on the text which is not justified by the text itself. Through her interpretation of the text, literature becomes a simplistic and transparent reference to reality. Louisa’s solitary existence is read through the eyes of modern psychology, and thus designates a cure for Louisa’s displacement of desire: Conformity. The rationality which Monika Elbert is in possession of can only be dispensed to Louisa Ellis if she is cured of her unconformity, indeed conformity itself is the cure. In the words of Michel Foucault, quoted by Felman, “the cure of the madman is in the reason of the other – his own reason being but the very truth of his madness” (Felman, 16). Only by adjusting to what society considers healthy can Louisa’s behavior make sense. Otherwise, her behavior will be read as the activities of a madwoman, which modern psychology alone can explain.

Natural and Artificial: Inside and Outside the Ideological Circle
In Chapter One, I outlined how Joseph Csicsila structures his interpretation of Freeman’s texts around the fundamental dichotomy between the organic vitality of the natural world and the relative sterility of indoor environments. In relation to “A New England Nun”, Csicsila’s main project is to draw a rigid line between the artificial and sterile existence of Louisa Ellis, and the natural and vigorous lives of Joe Dagget and Lily Dyer. Csicsila’s distinction between
natural and artificial corresponds exactly to the ideological circle that includes women who behave ‘properly’, and excludes women who do not. Whereas Hirsch and Elbert need to refer to mental illnesses in order to exclude Louisa Ellis from the ideological circle, Csicsila’s entire argument is an act of exclusion: While Joe Dagget and Lily Dyer “embrace living with all of its richness as well as its adversities”, Louisa’s “solitary existence is firmly rooted in a deep spiritual and psychological malady” (12). According to Csicsila, the final passage of the story leaves “the reader with a deceptively bleak and disturbingly hollow portrait of Louisa” (11). However, it appears as if Csicsila’s concept of ‘natural’ is more or less identical with ‘married’, and ‘artificial’ with ‘virginity’.

Joseph Csicsila begins by claiming that “A New England Nun” should be compared to the fiction of Nathaniel Hawthorne as dealing with “the theme of radical individualism and its resulting spiritual isolation” (1). Louisa’s decision not to marry is thus interpreted alongside those of Hawthorne’s characters who become alienated from society after following a fanatical and wrongful inclination of some kind. It is striking to note how Csicsila thus considers a woman who decides to remain unmarried as equally fanatical and ‘sinful’ as, for example, the minister in Hawthorne’s “A Minister’s Black Veil”, who decides to permanently cover his face with a black veil for purposes unknown even to his wife. It is equally striking that Csicsila does not reflect upon the fact that the “self-imposed alienation from the community of human experience” Louisa is claimed to be guilty of (2), is far from being self-imposed. On the contrary, it is Joe Dagget’s inclinations which shape Louisa’s existence. The narrator reveals that “shortly after they were engaged [Joe] had announced to Louisa his determination to strike out into new fields, and secure a competency before they should be married” (10). After proposing to Louisa, Joe decides that he wants to make a fortune, and leaves without asking Louisa’s opinion of the matter, apparently expecting her to wait patiently until he has succeeded, even if “he would have stayed fifty years if it had taken so long, and come home feeble and tottering, or never come home at all, to marry Louisa” (10). We also know that in his absence, “they had seldom exchanged letters”, and Joe did not even take the trouble to announce his return in advance: “he had not apprised her of his coming” (10-11). Not only does he expect Louisa to comply with his decision to go to Australia and wait unquestioningly for a day that may never come; upon his return in New England he falls in love with his maid. Csicsila, however, chooses to interpret Louisa patiently waiting for her

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fiancé’s uncertain return as self-imposed alienation, and accepts Joe’s self-centered behavior as being completely reasonable, while reading Louisa’s loyalty as an unpardonable sin.

In Csicsila’s further attempt to describe Louisa’s ‘self-imposed alienation’ from society, he constructs the previously mentioned dichotomy between the natural world and indoor environments, and transfers this dichotomy between ‘natural/outside’ and ‘artificial/inside’ to the central characters. According to Csicsila, “the static unnatural order of Louisa’s home seems to symbolize her attempt to purge from her existence all traces of life’s inherent organic complexity. And with these images of aseptic rigidness Freeman deftly begins to suggest Louisa’s spiritual disconnection from the natural world” (3). Joe, on the other hand, “is by trade a farmer, a thoroughly active participant in Nature, whose character throughout the narrative exudes vitality and figuratively represents the antithesis to Louisa’s artificial existence” (4). However, in this narrative the outdoor work of farming is male work, while the indoor work of cleaning and tidying is female work. Hence Louisa and Joe work in their traditionally designated areas, meaning that their respective work places reflect their gender, not their respective attitudes towards nature. What Csicsila suggests in the citation above, is that we read Louisa’s ability to perform her indoor work well as a sign that she is ‘spiritually disconnected from the natural world’.

Like Hirsch, Csicsila ignores the fact that keeping the house clean and orderly is expected by Louisa as a housewife. In this context, the most interesting comparison made by Csicsila is therefore between the two women in the story, Louisa and Lily Dyer, since they presumably perform the same indoor work. Lily, however, “functions literally as a benign sort of adversary to Louisa [...] she comes to represent, like Joe, the very essence of life and vitality [...] she demonstrates full human interaction in her love for Joe and in the care of his mother, Lily represents a complete opposite to Louisa” (10). Lily is associated with ‘life and vitality’ because she loves Joe and cares for his mother, like a ‘perfect female’ who “cares everything about domestic concerns and nothing for herself” (Harris, 2002: 28). Louisa’s alleged disconnection from the natural world might thus not be due to her ‘aseptic’ house, but to her unwillingness of demonstrating ‘full human interaction’ by loving Joe and caring for his mother. That Louisa does not embrace the prospect of caring for Joe’s mother is interpreted as suggesting the “realm of spiritual oblivion” in which Louisa lives, since “Louisa’s anxiety about Joe’s mother is presumably greatly exaggerated. After all, Lily Dyer manages to perform all of the duties that terrify Louisa, including looking after Joe’s mother, quite cheerfully and without appearing to be inhumanely overworked” (7). The fact that Lily Dyer gets paid to tend to Joe’s mother while Louisa must do so for free is apparently
irrelevant. Whereas Hirsch employs Joe as an appropriate standard for measuring Louisa’s behavior, Csicsila makes Lily the standard of proper female behavior.

Csicsila’s dichotomy between (natural) Joe and (artificial) Louisa is made on dubious grounds. The adjectives employed by Csicsila in his description of Joe and Louisa are almost diametrically opposed to the adjectives used by the narrator in the story. The narrator describes Louisa as acting peacefully, gently, carefully, precisely, sharply, heartily, and prayerfully, as being methodical, faithful, mild and deprecating, and possessing solemn cordiality, sweet serenity, calm docility, pretty manner, soft grace, and thankfulness. Csicsila, however, describes Louisa and her home only in negative terms such as aseptic, uncommonly pristine and orderly, static, unnatural, spiritual disconnection, affected, unemotional, sterility, artificial, life-deprived, physically and spiritually withdrawn from Nature, lifelessness, death, useless, spiritually inert, a violation of nature, uneventful state of being, depressed, isolation, alienated from the universal throb, deceptively bleak, and disturbingly hollow. Louisa’s everyday use of china, for example, “suggests at once an affected and unemotional air of artificiality” (3). The terms with which Joe are described by the narrator are ambiguous: loud, heavy, good-humored, slowly, boyish, embarrassed, fingering, awkward, large, flushed, perplexity, loyalty, afraid, clumsy, sturdy, huskily, honest masculine rudeness, coarse masculine presence, sense, and shrewdness, while the terms Csicsila describes Joe with are unequivocally positive: the very embodiment of life and natural vigor, active participant in nature, the antithesis to Louisa’s artificial existence, virile presence, embodiment of vitality, boyish, youthful, fundamental appreciation of Nature, the very essence of life and vitality, embrace living, and richness. For example, “Joe, the story’s representative embodiment of vitality, appears boyish and youthful” while “Louisa, physically and spiritually withdrawn from Nature, seems to be aging more quickly than normal, an ominous suggestion of lifelessness and an unmistakable diametric opposite to Joe” (5).

Csicsila’s interpretation of the characters is not supported by the text. The adjectives used by the narrator to describe Louisa are positive, while the adjectives describing Joe are more ambiguous; both positive and negative terms occur. In Csicsila’s essay the use of adjectives is reversed, so that Joe receives unambiguous approval for his ‘virility’ and ‘vigor’, while Louisa and her surroundings are associated with ‘lifelessness’, ‘sterility’, and ‘artificiality’. In fact, Csicsila is so absorbed by his association between Louisa and lifelessness that he seems surprised that Louisa is capable of displaying human emotions:

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10 For more detailed examples of how Csicsila uses these terms, see my pages 39, 40, 82, and 83.
“She does not comprehend the necessity of community, but she feels the sorrow nevertheless because she is human after all” (11). Unlike Hirsch and Elbert, Csicsila does not explicitly argue for Louisa’s madness or provide a detailed description of her illness, but he nevertheless concludes that her “solitary existence is firmly rooted in a deep spiritual and psychological malady” (12). Judging by his overall argument, however, Louisa’s malady derives from her rejection of marriage, Joe Dagget, and the role as selfless and sacrificing woman. From this perspective, conventional becomes ‘natural’, resistance ‘artificial’.

The ‘Realist’ Reader

A condition for reading Louisa Ellis from the perspective of psychiatry is that Louisa’s personality should be read as realistically rendered. Indeed, to diagnose a literary character with the disorders of real people requires a high degree of resemblance between the psyche of the character and the people who have been diagnosed as having these disorders in real life; otherwise the comparison would be rather pointless. The critics who interpret Louisa Ellis as mentally ill read “A New England Nun” as a realist or naturalist text. David Hirsch argues that “the naturalistic details are rendered so as to provide what is almost a case study of an obsessive neurosis” (125). Monika Elbert claims that “Freeman’s work belongs to the Naturalist school of writing” (198), and Joseph Csicsila’s essay was published in (and perhaps also written for?) the journal American Literary Realism. Their interpretations reveal that they regard “A New England Nun” as being so realistic as to provide them with full access into Louisa’s mind. The respective critic can then compare Louisa’s personality and behavior with symptoms of various disorders.

Gregg Camfield has convincingly argued that realist readings tend to entirely ignore the humorous aspects of “A New England Nun”, and thus emphasize the serious sides of the story on behalf of its comical aspects. The difference between these two perspectives can be briefly described: The humorous reading of Louisa’s eccentricity regards any exaggeration as an artistic device employed by the author in order to efficiently establish important character traits that are both informative and amusing. In the realist reading, Louisa’s eccentricity is perceived as a completely realistic feature of Louisa’s personality meant to be analysed and diagnosed in psychiatric terms. The difference is crucial: If exaggeration of character portrayal is perceived as an artistic device, it becomes possible to laugh at the characters and yet grasp the criticism subtly present in the story. If one considers exaggeration as a choice

11 For his discussion of realism versus comedy in “A New England Nun”, see Camfield 227-230.
made by Louisa herself as a character, and to be realistically understood, the reader will be capable of understanding Louisa only as obsessive, abnormal, insane. By reading exaggeration as an artistic device rather than a realistic character trait, it becomes possible to read Louisa as a quite ordinary woman, but ordinary according to the rules of her fictional universe, not the world of the reader.

My intent is not to suggest that there is only one correct way of reading “A New England Nun”, but rather to stress that the realist reading of the text is certainly not given, and to indicate the conditions for and consequences of reading it is a realist text. Shoshana Felman presents the following claim on the agenda of the critic who reads for realism:

The “realistic” critic is haunted by an obsession with proper names – identity and reference – sharing the same nostalgia for a transparent, transitive, communicative language, where everything possesses, unequivocally, a single meaning which can be consequently mastered and made clear, where each name “represents” a thing, where each signifier, properly and adequately, corresponds both to a signified and to a referent (19)

Like Felman’s ‘realistic’ critics, Hirsch, Elbert, and Csicsila believes in the realism of Louisa’s personality because they believe in the transparency of the language with which she is portrayed. The poetic, imaginative, and suggestive potential of language is repressed on behalf of its communicative function. Their obsession with identity and reference is located in the insistence of defining Louisa as insane; the incapability of understanding Louisa on her own terms is inextricably tied to their search for a reference to the real world that would identify and explain the nature of Louisa’s eccentricity. Felman’s claim can further be read in relation to the discussion in Chapter One. The belief in a ‘single meaning’ that can be ‘mastered and made clear’, that each signifier corresponds both to a signified and a referent, echoes the notion of a literary criticism which seeks finality, closure, and truth. The text is something which the critic can master, and textual meaning can be made clear. Hence, the text becomes subordinate to the critic’s sense of reality.

A further implication of the realist mode of reading is that it allows the critic to employ a familiar model of intelligibility on the text, in this case the model is psychiatry. Felman distinguishes between cognition and recognition, production and reproduction of meaning:

The readable is designed as a stimulus not for knowledge and cognition, but for acknowledgement and re-cognition, not for the production of a question, but for the reproduction of a foreknown answer – delimited within a pre-existing, pre-defined
horizon, where the “truth” to be discovered is reduced to the natural status of a simple *given*, immediately perceptible, directly “representable” through the totally intelligible medium of transparent language (19).

The ‘realistic’ critic searches the text for what he already knows. He or she recognizes and reproduces what he perceives as the ‘truth’ of the text, this ‘truth’ corresponding to the perspective from which he reads it. Hence, the ‘realistic’ critic perceives his task to be the revelation of a given, constant meaning, not a production of meaning, identifying and discovering rather than interpreting. Instead of reading “A New England Nun” as a stimulus for knowledge about an unconventional character, then, the realist critic searches his own world for explanations for Louisa Ellis’ behavior. This mode of reading has a reductive function which strikingly resembles the reductive author function outlined by Foucault in Chapter One. The common denominator would clearly be the belief in transparent and communicative language, whether its transparency reveals authorial intent or its direct, unmodified reference to reality. This incapability of considering questions raised by the text, this incorporation of unfamiliar and perhaps challenging meanings into a context which the critic masters, undermines the threat by means of its explanation. In short, by recognizing and reproducing a foreknown answer, the critic can disregard inconvenient questions.

**The ‘Madness’ of Louisa Ellis**

Returning to the discussion of women and madness in Felman’s essay, it becomes possible to understand the perspective from which Hirsch, Elbert, and Csicsila reads Louisa Ellis:

> “Woman” is consequently a “definable being” – chained to a “definition” itself implying a model [...] the literal, *proper* meaning of metaphorical femininity, paradoxically enough, turns out to be a masculine property [...] “Woman,” in other words, is the exact metaphorical measure of the narcissism of man (16).

Since man has had the prerogative of discourse and definition, ‘woman’ is defined in her relationship to him as a masculine property. What Felman calls ‘metaphorical femininity’ says more, then, of male narcissism than it reveals about actual women. When Hirsch, Elbert, and Csicsila approach Louisa Ellis, they see her from this traditional masculine perspective. The fact that Louisa is not a masculine property and cannot be used as a metaphorical measure to the narcissism of man serves to explain why Louisa’s rejection of Joe Dagget is

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12 The argument echoes Simone de Beauvoir’s claim that man is seen as an entity, complete in himself, while woman is his ‘other’, a relative being; only understood in her relationship to man, either as wife, daughter, mother, sister, etc. (1977).
not read as one woman rejecting one man due to circumstances partially beyond her control, but as one specific (mad)woman rejecting men, society, and life altogether.\textsuperscript{13} Louisa’s independence and control combined with her rejection of Joe suggests that she has rejected her prescribed role in the patriarchal model of masculinity and femininity, and her choice therefore contradicts what man defines as reasonable and healthy.

When Joe appears clumsy, boyish, and feminine in the text, this should apparently not be ascribed to his personality. Since man, here represented by Joe, is seen as being infallible and neutral, Louisa’s rejection of him is explained by madness; an explanation which defines her as culpable and acquits Joe. It thus appears as if madness here has a double function. It is the only way her choice can make sense from a male-centered perspective, and it also justifies her exclusion from an ideological circle which is based on male narcissism. Felman defines this ‘female madness’ as being an “‘absence of womanhood’ to the extent that ‘womanhood’ is what precisely resembles the Masculine universal equivalent, in the polar division of sexual roles (16). A further quotation by Virginia Woolf illuminates Felman’s argument: “Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (2000: 2171)\textsuperscript{14}. As I have already indicated, Louisa’s character traits are masculine, which explains her ‘absence of womanhood’. Instead of assuming her prescribed sexual role in relation to Joe, thereby reflecting him in his alleged masculine superiority, she becomes ‘a border straddler’ who threatens the order of these critics’ male-centered universe. It appears to be the impossibility of placing Louisa in a dichotomized role which qualifies her for the label of madness.

Csicsila’s comparison between Lousia and Lily demonstrates the male-centered critics’ tendency to construct female dichotomies: “Lily functions literally as a benign sort of adversary to Louisa” (10), and “Lily represents a complete opposite to Louisa” (10). This is a good example of how the critic attempts to restore order by defining Lily as a good girl and Louisa as a bad girl. He implies that they are enemies, although both take active steps to ensure the other’s happiness. Lily Dyer – described by Edward Foster, another male-centered critic, as a “blooming and womanly person” (1956: 106) – will probably perform her duties as wife, mistress, mother, daughter-in-law, and housewife selflessly; a woman these critics respect for her ability to adapt to the role society has prescribed for her. Louisa is read as a failure both as woman and human being, because she hesitates in embracing a role that is strange to her from the perspective of her present lifestyle. Louisa’s ‘malady’ and her

\textsuperscript{13} Hirsch and Elbert are accompanied by several other critics in this assumption.

\textsuperscript{14} Felman also quotes this passage in another part of her essay.
‘alienated’ existence are based on her hesitation to give up her current pleasure and autonomy to a life opposed to her own interests. The fact that Louisa lives by another standard of meaning than the traditional, induces Monika Elbert to regard her behavior as fetishistic, schizophrenic, maddening. Of course, the validity of this claim depends on accepting that Louisa has dreams and desires which are mainly conventional, and that she has completely internalized patriarchal ideology. That Louisa might not be in possession of these dreams is never mentioned. From this male-centered point of view, Louisa’s behavior becomes a madness only conformity can cure.

The attempt to define Louisa’s madness places these critics in the same position as the critics discussed by Felman, who refuse to acknowledge madness when actually present:

The critic seeks to “normalize” the text [...] making the text a reassuring, closed retreat whose balance no upheaval can upset [...] by reducing the story to a recognition scheme, familiar, snug and canny, the critic [...] “cures” the text, precisely of that which in it is incurably and radically uncanny (19)

The desire to obliterate female difference is apparently equally strong when confronted with a sane, but unconventional woman, as when confronted with madness. By seeking to explain Louisa in familiar terms of madness, the text is brought to a conclusion which Louisa’s sanity cannot disrupt. The male-centered critic can thus disregard any meaning which threatens his or her perspective on the world, since it has already been placed in the realm of the insignificant. Although both Csicsila and Elbert are contemporary critics, their critical strategies nevertheless reveal that the desire to place women in dichotomized categories is still acute. Confronted with a woman whose situation questions important aspects of patriarchal ideas of womanhood, the response of these critics is characterized by distorting definitions and a label of madness. Psychiatric terms here function like the invocation of the author: it provides the critic with a perspective which determines interpretation and closes the text.
Chapter Three: Connecting to the Mind of the Absent Author

Unlike the male-centered interpretations of “A New England Nun” which result in definitions of madness and resentful condemnation of Louisa Ellis, feminist critics have largely attempted to read the story from Louisa’s perspective. Marjorie Pryse, Martha Cutter, Leah Blatt Glasser (1996), and Susan Harris are generally positive in their evaluation of Louisa Ellis. Central to their interpretations are issues of work and autonomy for nineteenth-century women, and the threat that marriage represented for women’s development. Pryse and Harris compare Louisa’s devotion to cleaning, sewing, and distilling to that of an artist, and Glasser reads her housework similarly as being her creation, her craft. However, a problem arises from these interpretations of Louisa. At first glance, they would appear as the complete opposite from male definitions of madness and meaningless behavior described by Hirsch, Csicsila, and Elbert, but they are nevertheless related. By comparing Louisa’s housework to artistry – the artist being a figure who for obvious reasons enjoys unmistakable respect among literary critics – these feminist critics imply that Louisa’s lifestyle must somehow fit into established criteria of sense-making if she is to be an understandable and interesting character. What separates the feminist approach from the male-centered approach is not their analysis of Louisa’s position outside the ideological circle, then, but rather a presentation of arguments for why she should be included in the circle of male rationality. The difference lies in male-centered critics dismissing Louisa as unreasonable according to a patriarchal model of understanding, and feminist critics arguing that she is reasonable according to the exact same model, except that she is compared to the traditionally male artist rather than the female housewife. Implicit in this argument is the dubious notion that women must behave in a certain way if they are to be understood and defended, which is precisely what feminist criticism originally set out to avoid. In this chapter I will analyse how the interpretations comparing Louisa Ellis to an artist – essentially what makes her an intelligible and important character for these feminist critics – relies on the assumption that the connection between Mary Wilkins Freeman and Louisa Ellis extends far beyond the relationship of author to protagonist. I will argue that this is due to a common feminist tendency to construct the literary text as the manifestations of the subjectivity of the woman writer; a means by which the critic can reach the actual point of interest, in this case Mary Wilkins Freeman. “A New

15 It could be argued that Ben Couch (1998) and Michael Tritt are feminist critics since they also read the story from a woman’s perspective and focus on gender issues against a patriarchal notion of womanhood. However, their critical strategies are different than those of the feminist critics dealt with in this chapter, in terms of attitude, rhetoric, method, etc.
England Nun” is seen as the manifestation of Freeman’s own personality and as dealing with her personal difficulty of choosing between marriage and creativity. This relationship is either explicitly stated and regarded as a case of almost complete identification between the two, or is implicitly assumed: Louisa Ellis can only be interpreted as an artist in light of Freeman’s biography, since this is neither indicated nor supported by the text. I will further indicate some of the consequences of this critical strategy, particularly the implication that a female character should be in possession of certain qualities if she is to be considered intelligible.

A Feminist Praxis

In an essay on feminist criticism and reader-response theory entitled “Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading” (1986), Patrocinio Schweickart approaches the issue of how gender influences reading. In this context, her suggested method for feminist readings of women’s texts (discussed under the heading ‘Reading Women’s Writing’) is of particular interest. After establishing the unfortunate influence the androcentric canon of literary texts – and the androcentric critical strategies developed in order to read these texts – has had on female readers, Schweickart presents what she calls an exemplary feminist essay in order to articulate “a paradigm that illuminates certain features of feminist readings of women’s writing” (621). This exemplary essay is “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson”, in which Adrienne Rich does a reading of Dickinson’s poetry. What Schweickart stresses as a positive about Rich’s strategy is primarily her attitude towards her subject: Unlike the resistance and scepticism with which feminists read male texts, Rich approaches Dickinson as “a witness in defense of the woman writer” and “her destination, ultimately, is Dickinson’s mind” (621). Schweickart writes:

The metaphor of visiting points to another feature of feminist readings of women’s writing, namely, the tendency to construe the text not as an object, but as the manifestations of the subjectivity of the absent author – the “voice” of another woman. Rich is not content to revel in the textuality of Dickinson’s poems and letters. For her, these are doorways to the “mind” of a “woman of genius” [...] To read Dickinson, then, is to try to visit with her, to hear her voice, to make her live in oneself, and to feel her impressive “personal dimensions” (622)

What Schweickart recommends and outlines as a representative method for feminist critics is their tendency to regard the literary text as a medium through which a connection between the

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16 Rich visits Dickinson’s home in Amherst, Massachusetts as part of her attempt to ‘visit’ Dickinson’s mind.
Feminist critic and the absent author can be established. Indeed, the text represents the “voice” of this absent woman, and its appropriated function is to provide the critic with access to the historical author. What is of actual interest from this perspective is not the text itself, but the mind of the woman who wrote it. Schweickart continues:

Feminist readings of female texts are motivated by the need “to connect,” to recuperate, or to formulate [...] the context, the tradition, that would link women writers to one another, to women readers and critics, and to the larger community of women. Of course, the recuperation of such a context is a necessary basis for the nonrepressive integration of women’s point of view and culture into the study of a Humanities that is worthy of its name (623)

According to this notion of feminist criticism, the successful integration of women’s perspective into academia depends on a sense of community and affinity between women; a community that rests on the feminist critic’s ability to connect to the mind of the absent author. Successful feminist criticism, then, depends on the construction of and connection to an absent historical woman, accessible through the transparency of her texts.

Of the many problems necessarily arising from this statement of purpose for feminist literary criticism, the idea that it is both possible and desirable to connect to the mind or voice of the author is particularly dubious. In “What is an Author?” Michel Foucault recognizes this tendency as a common critical strategy in our culture, and explains how this is an important function the author has:

Critics doubtless try to give this intelligible being a realistic status, by discerning, in the individual, a ‘deep’ motive, a ‘creative’ power, or a ‘design’, the milieu in which writing originates. Nevertheless, these aspects of an individual which we designate as making him an author are only a projection, in more or less psychologizing terms, of the operations that we force texts to undergo, the connections that we make, the traits that we establish as pertinent, the continuities that we recognize, or the exclusions that we practice (180)

According to Foucault, the critic’s attempt to give the author a realistic status is merely a projection of the critic’s own strategies. By nurturing the idea of the author as an individual with a certain design or motive, the critic projects her own operations on to the image of an author. The result is that the critic’s own agenda is ascribed to the author, so that her reading appears to be a rather objective and innocent revelation of another person’s ideas. A reference to the author thus becomes a mask behind which the critic can hide her own strategies, meanwhile transferring the responsibility of her reading to someone else.
The author function here described by Foucault regards our culture at large. What is particularly interesting in this context is that Schweickart recommends this strategy as a legitimate pursuit that serves the interest of feminist criticism. The significance of this strategy in relation to feminist approaches to “A New England Nun” is that it helps to articulate an attitude towards women writing that seems to motivate these critics. Indeed, the main title of the essay, “Reading Ourselves”, indicates that the essential attitude is that of identification between critic, author, and the literary character. Although none of these critics refer to Schweickart’s essay, they approach Freeman’s text with the attitude and method Schweickart outlines as common for feminist critics. Leah Blatt Glasser extends the process of identification to involve Louisa Ellis as a representation of Freeman by stressing textual similarities and ignoring the contradictions, and uses the text as a ‘doorway’ to the mind of the absent author. Both Marjorie Pryse and Susan Harris draw heavily upon the definition of Louisa Ellis as an artist, an interpretation based on the implicit assumption that Louisa Ellis is the textual image of Mary Wilkins Freeman. These three critics read the text as dealing with Freeman’s personal issues. Martha Cutter’s essay reveals the difficulties represented by all four essays of employing a model of understanding on a female character that is based on identification, or, to use Schweickart’s term, affinity.

In a Closet Hidden...

Leah Blatt Glasser’s short interpretation of “A New England Nun” is part of her literary biography on Mary Wilkins Freeman, entitled In a Closet Hidden: The Life and Works of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1996). The extensive parallels she draws between Freeman and Louisa Ellis are therefore not surprising. Indeed, Glasser’s opening statement is that “in ‘A New England Nun’ [...] Freeman seems to be addressing her choice to remain unmarried in order to protect her work life” (32). According to Glasser, “A New England Nun” shows Freeman’s analysis of the tension that arises when a woman has to choose between independent work and autonomy on the one hand, and marriage and sexual fulfillment on the other. In Glasser’s opinion, the text therefore illuminates Freeman’s personal experience of this tension. She writes:

The strong relationship between these radically different constructions of fulfillment can best be addressed by studying the story in the context of its focus on Louisa’s work as well as on her sexuality. The story helps illuminate Freeman’s view (and her own choice) of independent work as it stood in direct opposition to the alternative of marriage (33)
From this perspective, “A New England Nun” becomes a useful means by which the critic can access Freeman’s personal conflict of having to choose between marriage and a professional career as writer. Glasser’s interest is therefore not located in the text per se, but rather in its potential to reveal Freeman’s private concerns. Glasser treats the text as some kind of sophisticated fictional journal, and it appears as if she thinks that Louisa is Freeman’s alter ego: “The sacrifices that were necessary in [Freeman’s] decision to devote herself to a career in writing were indirectly addressed in ‘A New England Nun.’ Freeman knew that she would lose a degree of social acceptability; Louisa, after all, heard the whispering of her neighbours” (37). After quoting Hamlin Garland, who had visited Freeman and ended up feeling like Joe Dagget17, Glasser writes that “Garland was right to feel out of place, for both Louisa and Freeman passionately protected their self-made territories of order” (34). Further, “the major function of [Louisa’s] work, similar to Freeman’s work, is to offer her time for self-reflection, time for self-love” (35). Louisa’s decision to remain unmarried is therefore understood by Glasser as a choice made to protect her work life.

Although Glasser’s approach to the text might valuably illuminate the conflicts that troubled Freeman specifically and nineteenth-century women writers in general, it does not result in a relevant interpretation of “A New England Nun”. The method of reading Louisa as Freeman’s alter ego ensures that Louisa’s work around the house is bestowed with a legitimate kind of meaning which is absent from male-centered interpretations. However, the comparison induces Glasser to regard Louisa’s sewing, cooking, cleaning, and distilling as representations of Freeman’s writing, so that the meaning of Louisa’s work is established on inaccurate premises. For example, Glasser claims that “Freeman’s story actually captures the isolation and quiet that attention to one’s craft requires” (34), but does not explain why cleaning and sewing would require the same isolation and quiet that fiction writing requires. Indeed, most housewives in Louisa’s time performed these tasks in the presence of servants, children, or other adult female members of the family, with the noise and disturbance such company entailed. In fact, sewing and cleaning were activities which allowed women to work together, and would therefore not require isolation or quiet. Glasser does not offer any explanation as to why Louisa’s work should require something which the work of other housewives does not.

Neither does Glasser explain her characterization of Louisa’s work as ‘craft’, so that the reader is left to figure out for herself why sewing, cleaning, cooking, and distilling

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17 Garland explicitly compares his visit to Freeman with Joe’s visit to Louisa.
essences should be considered as crafts in themselves, and in relation to Louisa Ellis. Glasser merely states that the major function of Louisa’s work – similar to Freeman’s work – is to ‘offer her time for self-reflection and self-love’. While Glasser has a point when she claims that Louisa’s work means time for self-love – the scene in which she prepares lunch would support this claim – there is nevertheless little sign of self-reflection. On the contrary, Louisa is described as doing “her housework methodically; that was as much a matter of course as breathing” (16). The narrator’s comparison between Louisa’s housework and a vital body function indicates that her work is extremely important to her, but it also indicates that it is done habitually without much reflection. Indeed, although housework allows thoughts to wander freely, the repetitive and predictable nature of this work does very little to fuel such thoughts. The difference between Freeman’s work and Louisa’s work thus seems quite radical: The former being creative and intellectual, the latter being the opposite. The paid and prestigious work of writing (if not so for women at the time, then definitely from our perspective) is significantly different from the unpaid and low-status work around the house, and cannot be unproblematically treated as one and the same.

The problem with Glasser’s focus on Freeman is that once the analogy between character and writer has been found, it produces an understanding of the text in which tensions and conflicts absent from the text are constructed as central themes of the story. Glasser claims that the story illuminates Freeman’s conflict of having to choose between work and marriage, but this is a very misleading description of Louisa’s conflict. While Freeman’s work as professional writer would indeed be compromised by marriage, Louisa would be expected to perform exactly the same work that she is currently doing. Where Freeman might find it difficult to find the time, space, and solitude necessary to devote herself to writing, Louisa’s time as Joe’s wife would be spent cleaning, preparing meals, and sewing – business as usual. The conflict that Louisa is experiencing cannot be explained by the dichotomy work/marriage, since the work she performs in solitude will be both implicitly and explicitly demanded of her in marriage; hence there is no such dichotomy creating tension in the story. Louisa’s work will not be threatened by marriage; it will be enthusiastically encouraged.

Glasser repeatedly stresses the parallels between Louisa and Freeman, while ignoring the differences. Her desire to prove the connection between Freeman and Louisa even induces her to wrongfully state that “not unlike Freeman in her wait for Hanson Tyler, Louisa Ellis waits fourteen years for her sailor fiancé, Joe, to return from sea” (33). Whereas Freeman waited for her fiancé to return from the sea, Louisa waited for her farmer fiancé to return from Australia. This error seems to derive from Glasser’s perception of Louisa as being more or
less the projection of Freeman’s mind, so that the specific details of the story can be replaced with biographical information about Freeman where differences between author and character occur. When Glasser further does not explain the specific function of Louisa’s work as opposed to Freeman’s work, it appears to be due to her reading of “A New England Nun” as a transparent medium through which Freeman’s personal conflicts become accessible. Whether Louisa sews, cleans, or writes fiction is irrelevant from this perspective, since the text functions merely as a doorway into knowledge about Freeman’s personal dilemma. Glasser’s reading depends entirely on a reference to Freeman to support the meaning of Louisa’s activities, and this reference becomes her main argument.\(^\text{18}\) Glasser’s construction of the dichotomy work/marriage transferred from Freeman’s life blurs and ignores the fact that Louisa does not break the engagement because she wants to protect her work life, but because she discovers that her fiancé is in love with another woman. In short, Glasser constructs a tension which is unfamiliar to the text.

**From Acceptance to Rejection**

Unlike Leah Blatt Glasser’s later attempt to explicitly read the story as dealing with Freeman’s personal conflicts, Marjorie Pryse’s essay “An Uncloistered ‘New England Nun’” (1983) focuses on the text. According to Pryse, “‘A New England Nun’ dramatizes change in Louisa Ellis. A situation she has long accepted now becomes one she rejects” (290). The rest of Pryse’s interpretation is devoted to a close reading of the text with focus on “what [Louisa] stands to lose, and on what she gains by her rejection” (290). The value of Pryse’s interpretation is located in her willingness to explore Louisa’s situation on her own premises, and her thorough textual analysis. However, like Glasser, Pryse constructs the story as dealing with a kind of dichotomy which remains unfamiliar to the text itself, and which only makes sense if the reader accepts the implicit parallel between Louisa and Freeman. Where Glasser seeks to connect to the mind of Freeman through her text, Pryse’s essay reveals another tendency implicit in Schweickart’s recommended method; that of integration into a feminist community by means of affinity and identification.

One of Pryse’s central claims is that Louisa “has no doubt that she will lose, not gain, in marrying Joe Dagget” (291), and that this is the reason why she rejects him. According to Pryse, Louisa’s control is one of the things she stands to lose by marrying: “Forced to leave

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\(^{18}\) It is significant that an interpretation so heavily informed by Freeman’s biography actually does not mention that Freeman several times insisted upon the differences between herself and Louisa, as Reichardt was seen to state in Chapter One.
her house, she will symbolically have to yield her world as well as her ability to exert control within it” (291). Another potential loss is “the freedom to express herself in her own art”; an art which “expresses itself in various ways” (291). By rejecting Joe, however, “she gains a transcendent selfhood, an identity which earns her membership in a ‘sisterhood of sensibility’” (294), and she becomes “heroic, active, wise, ambitious, and even transcendent” (289). In short, Pryse suggests that Louisa rejects Joe because she comes to realize that she will not gain anything by marrying him, and that after analysing her potential gains and losses, she discovers that she will gain more by remaining unmarried.

While I agree with Pryse that Louisa risks losing control by marrying Joe and that she will gain more by remaining unmarried, there are several problems with Pryse’s claims. The text does not indicate that Louisa breaks the engagement because she has calculated her potential gains and losses. On the contrary, the text states that Louisa’s attitude towards marriage is that “it was not for her, whatever came to pass, to prove untrue and break his heart” (14). In fact, it is only after her discovery of Joe’s love for Lily Dyer that Louisa breaks the engagement, and even then “she could hardly believe that she had heard aright, and that she would not do Joe a terrible injury should she break her troth-plight” (16). She is determined to marry Joe no matter how much it will cost her, and she only breaks the engagement after realizing that he does not want to marry her. Louisa does not reject Joe in the name of self-interest, but because her discovery of Joe’s love for Lily induces her to re-define what her duty consists of. As long as she believed that Joe “had been fond of her and working for her all these years” (14), she felt obliged to honor her pledge to him. When she discovers that Joe has feelings for another woman, she finds herself released from her duty, and her ‘troth-plight’ now involves a rejection which will enable Joe’s happiness with another woman, and her own solitary happiness.

Pryse’s claim that Louisa comes to reject something that she has long accepted is thus an inaccurate description of Louisa’s situation. On the contrary, Louisa begins by making the most of her situation, and ends by making the most of her situation; the change dramatized in the story is not from acceptance to rejection, but rather from accepting one situation to accepting the opposite situation. This means that Pryse’s description of Louisa as visionary, heroic, active, wise, ambitious, and transcendent is also inaccurate, since it derives from her perception of Louisa’s rejection as being based on self-interest. Pryse also assumes that Louisa’s awareness of her potential gains and losses in marrying Joe are identical with what Pryse herself sees as Louisa’s potential gains and losses. However, this assessment of Louisa rests on a paradox. If Louisa were transcendent, ambitious, and visionary, she would not
accept waiting patiently for fourteen years for something that may never happen. Neither would she break the engagement only one week before the wedding after discovering that Joe is in love with someone else, if she wanted to pursue her ambitions all along. In fact, it appears as if what enables Louisa to deal with her situation in a serene and calm way is exactly her lack of ambition and vision. Louisa does not spend her time imagining how brilliant life would be *if only*; she happily embraces the status quo.

Again, problems arise from the interpretation of Louisa as an artist. Like Glasser, Pryse does not explain why sewing, distilling, and table-setting should be understood as artistic endeavors; she merely claims that Louisa’s art ‘expresses itself in various ways’. The fact that the activities Louisa engages in are repetitive, constant, and immanent nevertheless contradicts the idea that she is a transcendent and ambitious artist. Neither does Pryse reflect upon the fact that this ‘art’ is not threatened by marriage at all, and is therefore not something Louisa stands to lose by marrying Joe. As I read Pryse, her attempt to define Louisa as an artist could be inspired by a desire to establish that Louisa has acceptable reasons for rejecting marriage. However, Louisa’s reasons for rejecting Joe are legitimate, even if they are not based on artistic ambition. Louisa’s repetitive housework indicates an immanent lifestyle and a lack of ambition, but it is still an immanence which she deeply appreciates. The usual type of female immanence, which is related to pregnancy and motherhood, is rejected by Louisa on behalf of an immanent life of her own design. By describing it as artistic and visionary, Pryse tries to define Louisa in terms which are inaccurate, and which imply that the joy Louisa finds in her work does not sufficiently justify her rejection of marriage.

Pryse deserves credit for being the first critic to argue against the sexist interpretations done by David Hirsch, Perry Westbrook, and Edward Foster, and her interpretation of the text is a valuable attempt to redeem Louisa from the spinster stereotype. Her interpretation nevertheless reveals the desire to ascribe admirable character traits to female characters. As outlined by Schweickart, Pryse’s essay seeks to integrate Louisa into a feminist community, or ‘sisterhood of sensibility’, by means of affinity and identification. Louisa is made into the kind of female character with whom the feminist critic can identify herself: A brave woman who defies patriarchy in order to preserve her autonomy, self-interests, and creativity. However, Pryse’s desire to define Louisa in positive terms induces her to employ the exact same strategy as the male-centered critics employed in order to define Louisa’s madness: By invoking a familiar model of intelligibility. Where the male-centered critics applied the model of psychiatry, Pryse applies the feminist model of the nineteenth-century heroine as she appears either as character in a literary text, or as a woman writer of such a text. Suggested by
this desire to define Louisa as a heroine is the notion that certain feminist critics actually search for a specific type of woman in their readings. If the female character does not fit the description, she is made to fit the description through misreadings and speculative parallels.

The Dilemma of the Woman Artist

With Susan Harris’ essay “Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s ‘A New England Nun’ and the Dilemma of the Woman Artist” (2002), a definition of Louisa Ellis as an artist is finally clearly articulated. Harris claims that “Louisa’s artistry is manifested in her extraordinary attention to domestic detail, her love of domestic order and her devotion to the delicate beauties she can create and maintain in solitude” (28), and continues: “Louisa Ellis is an artist of the intensely private, whose greatest happiness consists of aestheticizing the domestic and performing it within the confines of her own home” (31). This description of Louisa’s artistry in many ways serves as an articulation of what also Glasser and Pryse seemed to indicate, namely that it is not Louisa’s engagement in household activities per se that deserves the definition of artistry, but rather her attitude towards these activities. According to Harris, it is Louisa’s ‘attention’, ‘devotion’, and ‘love’ that elevate her activities from necessity to artistry. By separating Louisa’s work from her attitude towards it, Harris avoids the inaccuracies of Glasser and Pryse. Where the latter claim that Louisa’s work is threatened by marriage, Harris acknowledges that it is rather Louisa’s artistic attitude towards her work which is threatened.

In my opinion, Susan Harris is the critic who is most aware of the critical potential of “A New England Nun”, more specifically the criticism of “the domestic ideal and the notion of womanhood that [the story] implies” (29). Harris succeeds in describing Louisa’s dilemma without constructing misleading dichotomies or tensions that are not supported by the text. Harris writes:

On the one hand [...] Louisa’s artistic expression is only possible if she gives up the world. On the other hand, the state of being isolated [...] is the only distinction between what Louisa embraces and what she relinquishes. Paradoxically, Louisa’s talents can be manifested only in an exaggerated form of the very domesticity she appears to have rejected (28)

19 In a footnote, Harris claims that “Glasser’s reading of ‘A New England Nun’ is certainly the basis for all subsequent readings of the story. My contribution concerns the relatively weighting of sexuality and celibacy and the humor with which Freeman approaches her subject” (37). Since Harris does not comment Glasser’s strong biographical focus and refers to Glasser’s interpretation as her basis, she apparently agrees with Glasser’s parallel between Freeman and Louisa, and implicitly bases her own reading on this parallel.
Harris thus shows that Louisa’s dilemma is not having to choose between work and marriage, but rather in having to choose with which attitude she wants to perform her work. She further indicates the paradox demonstrated by the story through the odd fact that Louisa’s domestic talents can only be raised to the level of perfection if she rejects the institution that both demand and legitimize such efforts. The value of this observation lies in its emphasis on Louisa’s exceptional housewifery as exemplary according to New England standards, and that Louisa’s ‘problem’ is not located in her enthusiastic embrace of domestic work, but rather because “she prefers to be the sole consumer of her own labors” (28). Harris reveals a central aspect of patriarchal ideology, both as it surrounds Louisa in the story, and as it motivates later critical judgement of her, namely that a woman should not place herself before others. The culture that values a good housewife becomes suspicious and hostile towards the housewife who performs her duties brilliantly if she does it for her own pleasure rather than that of someone else.

Harris reads “A New England Nun” against several other short stories and novels in order to show how Freeman criticized both the limited options contemporary women had, and the ideal of domesticity itself. However, although Harris manages to formulate Louisa’s dilemma successfully, her interpretation of Louisa as an artist is somewhat peculiar. After having read Southworth’s and Phelps’ novels in light of the familiar debate of whether the woman artist should marry or live by a Romantic notion of the isolated artist, Harris concludes that this is not a valid description of Louisa Ellis:

This is not a woman who fancies herself a Romantic artist. On the contrary, Louisa is conservative, unimaginative, and timid. She does not perceive herself as extraordinary, and she does not long for Romantic selfhood, at least not in any form that she would recognize. Unlike all the other protagonists I have mentioned, she is not reflective, and she would be surprised to be told that she was experiencing a crisis of selfhood (33)

While I agree with certain aspects of Harris’ description of Louisa, I find her argument quite confusing. Her initial definition of Louisa’s artistry was cited in the first paragraph of this section as being based on the implicit distinction between performing housework in itself and her attitude towards it, to the extent that it is Louisa’s attitude rather than her work which deserves the definition of artistry. Yet, Harris here claims that Louisa’s attitude is not that of

20 E.D.E.N. Southworth’s *The Deserted Wife* (1855), Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’ *The Story of Avis* (1877), William Wordsworth’s sonnet “Nuns Fret Not” (1807), and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s stories “The Birthmark” (1843) and “The Artist of the Beautiful” (1844). Harris’ discussion of Hawthorne versus Freeman can be read as a brilliant response to Joseph Csicsila’s comparison of the two writers, although Harris does not refer to Csicsila’s essay.
an artist. On the contrary, Louisa is neither imaginative nor reflective, and she is presented as the opposite of the Romantic artist both as type, and as represented by the other female characters mentioned by Harris. Louisa is to be understood as an artist, then, because of her attitude, and yet her attitude shows no signs of artistic awareness.

Of course, the idea of the Romantic artist is – although typical – not the only possible way of defining the artistic attitude, especially since actual Romantic artists were, as Harris points out, almost exclusively male (29). An alternative would be to define Louisa’s artistry alongside the Arts and Crafts movement – also mentioned by Harris – as allowing nineteenth-century New England women to be productive without leaving their domestic sphere (29). Considering how Louisa does not perceive of herself as an artist according to any notion of artistry, and therefore does not make important life decisions because of it, the artist comparison produces more difficulties than it solves. An acutely relevant question to ask at this point is why it is so important for these critics to compare Louisa to an artist. Do literary critics in general almost always read protagonists as artists? Is artistry the only legitimate excuse Louisa can have for not wanting to marry Joe Dagget? Can Louisa’s exceptional housewifery and the pleasure she derives from it not be defended unless it is seen as inhibiting a ‘higher’ purpose? And further, must all nineteenth-century female characters be read according to issues which relate directly to the interests of feminist literary critics? Although Harris, Glasser, and Pryse undoubtedly have the best intentions when attempting to make sense of Louisa’s behavior, they end up undermining their own feminist project. For their arguments reveal that female characters should ideally portray behavior which is somehow relevant for and related to the interests of later feminist criticism, or criticism in general. Unfortunately, when the artist parallel fails to convince – which it mostly does – the most accessible critical alternative is male-centered readings of Louisa Ellis as a neurotic and obsessive spinster.

A Conscious Choice
Unlike Pryse and Glasser, Martha Cutter recognises in “Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s Two New England Nuns” (1990) that Louisa Ellis does not reject Joe Dagget out of self-interest or to protect what Cutter defines as “a genuine lifestyle” (183), but rather because she discovers that she will not hurt anyone’s feelings by rejecting him. Strikingly enough, this recognition greatly reduces the value of Louisa’s decision from Cutter’s point of view: “Hers is a passive resistance; rather than heeding her inner voice, Louisa has allowed chance, circumstances, coincidences, and the needs of others to dictate her fate” (185).
Cutter’s project is – as the title indicates – to compare the two Freeman short stories which portray protagonists named Louisa who remain unmarried, “A New England Nun” and “Louisa” (1891), in order to discuss “Freeman’s depiction of a paradigm for feminine psychological self-definition” (180). What separates Cutter’s interpretation of “A New England Nun” from those of the other feminist critics is mainly her conclusion. Cutter claims that “unlike Louisa Ellis, Louisa Britton [protagonist in “Louisa”] makes the right decision for her own self, because it is the right decision for herself – not for others [...] and Freeman approves most strongly of Louisa [Britton]’s self-creation” (191). In other words, even if Louisa Ellis’ choice is perceived as the right choice per se, it is not admirable because she places the needs of others before her own needs. I should note that Louisa Britton, who is eagerly defended by Cutter, remains unmarried mainly in order to pursue her “sweet, mysterious, girlish dreams” (189). Rejecting marriage on behalf of ‘girlish’ daydreams is thus described as admirable, because it is done entirely out of self-interest.

At this point, it is interesting to note a tendency in the feminist critics’ attitude towards Louisa. Glasser and Pryse project a tension onto the story which explains Louisa’s behavior in a meaningful, yet inaccurate way, and evaluate her in unequivocally positive terms. Harris’ projection is also misleading, although more accurate, and enables her to draw similar positive conclusions. Cutter, on the contrary, understands Louisa’s motivation according to what the text indicates, namely that Louisa does not base her choices on ambition or self-interest. It is therefore interesting that Cutter’s evaluation of Louisa is ambivalent to the point of self-contradiction. On one page she claims that “Louisa has defined a lifestyle for herself, a ‘delicate harmony,’ an autonomous and fulfilling existence” (184). On the next page, she acknowledges the fact that Louisa only breaks the engagement after discovering Joe’s love for Lily Dyer, but that Louisa nevertheless feels ‘like a queen’ who has won an important victory the next morning. According to Cutter, “it is at this point that the text becomes particularly ambivalent’ (185). Suddenly, Cutter changes her evaluation of what she initially defined as a ‘genuine lifestyle’ and a ‘fulfilling existence’, and argues that “Louisa has folded herself away, locked herself into a repetitive and meaningless existence” (185). Cutter’s initial willingness to defend Louisa’s lifestyle as sufficient reason for remaining unmarried apparently disappears when she recognizes that Louisa seems to be of another opinion than herself. This recognition induces Cutter to change her evaluation of Louisa’s lifestyle from fulfilling to meaningless. It seems as if it is Cutter’s attitude rather than the text which becomes ambivalent ‘at this point’, especially since it is ‘at this point’ that Cutter introduces
terms in her argument which clearly echoes the resentful language of the male-centered critics.

Cutter explains this ambivalence by referring to something else than her own attitude. It is not surprising that it is Mary Wilkins Freeman who is explained as intentionally having created an ambivalent text: “After carefully going to great lengths to establish that Louisa will lose a great part of herself in a marriage to Joe Dagget [...], Freeman undercuts Louisa’s choice of spinsterhood by suggesting that Louisa is not fully conscious of what she has chosen” (185). She continues: “Louisa is satisfied with the outcome of events, with her ‘placid narrowness’ – but is Freeman?” (186), and “Freeman seeks to indicate that women must be more active participants in their own self-construction” (186). Cutter conveniently invokes the image of Freeman to legitimize her own interpretation, when, in fact, one could replace the name ‘Freeman’ with ‘Cutter’ in all three sentences and arrive at the exact same conclusion. Except, of course, that the replacement would reveal that it is Martha Cutter, not Mary Wilkins Freeman, who is unsatisfied with Louisa’s choice, and who wants women to be more active participants in their own self-construction. What remains Louisa’s problem according to Cutter, is that “she cannot see the larger picture in which she might have actively chosen [...] to make celibacy and freedom – rather than ‘placid narrowness’ – her birthright” (186). In short, Cutter’s ambivalence towards Louisa Ellis is located in her recognition of Louisa’s lack of the exact same qualities which the other feminist critics wrongfully ascribe her with, and which in turn makes them embrace her choice. Cutter sees a less idealized version of Louisa than the other feminist critics, and she clearly does not like what she sees.

That Cutter is the only feminist critic who does not advocate an idealized image of Louisa seems to result in an almost imperceptible slide into the area of male-centered hostility towards Louisa. This becomes especially evident in her use of Freeman’s intentions. Whereas the other feminist critics seem eager to reach Freeman’s intentions through her text, Martha Cutter has a similar aim, but in addition she ascribes Freeman with her own strategy. It is thus interesting to see how an ambiguous or even hostile attitude towards Louisa is strangely accompanied by the increasing desire to project this attitude onto Freeman. A comparison between Cutter’s projection and Glasser’s conclusive words stresses this tendency: “What then did writing mean to Freeman? What were the complexities of this choice and what fulfillment did she find in such a commitment to work?” (37) Glasser is humbly directing her questions to Freeman towards her text. Cutter, on the contrary, is certain that she has already found the answer, and her questions to Freeman are – at best – rhetorical.
The Feminist Heroine

In Chapter One I discussed some of the ways in which the author functions as a means of limiting the potential meanings of a text, and how the author is continually invoked as an authority that can support the critic’s interpretation. Clearly, for these feminist critics the name Mary Wilkins Freeman functions as more than a name on the cover of her books. The idea of who this historical woman was and what she wanted to convey to her readers becomes the guiding principle of their readings. Nevertheless, there is a difference between these constructions of an author identity, and the references to the author which I discussed in Chapter One. When Joseph Csicsila refers to Freeman’s intentions and opinions, it is an attempt to bestow his interpretation with authority. Csicsila is not interested in revealing what Freeman actually meant; she is merely the figure of authority with which he can validate his own interpretation. Hence, the difference between his appropriation of Freeman’s intentions forms a contrast to the feminist approach, which I believe is motivated – at least partially – by the desire to discover what Freeman herself actually wanted to communicate through her work. Martha Cutter is, as I have shown, an exception.

A difference in motivation leads to different problems. The best way to describe the feminist strategy is perhaps the echo: Intent on listening to what Freeman says through her text, the critics ask questions which aim at a confirmative reply. They fail to notice that they receive the echo of their own voices rather than the reply of the author. A critical strategy which seeks to reconstruct or reveal the design of the author behind a text is bound to end up with a rather predictable interpretation. By comparing biographical information about the author to her text, one is inclined to bestow the similarities with significance while ignoring the contradictions. The literary text thus becomes a somewhat modified reproduction of the author’s life and opinions; a confirmation of what the critic already knows for a fact.

Apart from the somewhat questionable relevance of this kind of criticism, a particular danger reveals itself through the approach of these critics, namely the tendency to interpret a female character in flattering, yet wrongful, terms. If common female activities such as sewing and cleaning can be understood as artistic endeavours, and the parallel to the author is duly established, just about any nineteenth-century female character can fit the description; if these feminist critics can make an artist out of Louisa Ellis, they are probably capable of seeing the artist in just about anyone. Of course, the tendency to read the craft of a literary character as an authorship or artist’s work is general, and not specifically feminist. However, I would argue that in the context of “A New England Nun”, the artist parallel has a quite specific function. Louisa Ellis is a character in desperate need of a positive evaluation. By
drawing the implicit or explicit parallel to Mary Wilkins Freeman, a woman writer and an artist, Louisa Ellis’ devotion to housewifery suddenly takes on a greater depth and becomes an acceptable lifestyle. Indeed, it is the safest way imaginable to make an important and respectable woman of Louisa Ellis. The artist or writer is the foundation upon which our profession is built; without the artist there simply is no literary criticism. If the critic can argue that Louisa rejects Joe Dagget in order to pursue her art, no further defence of that choice is required.

However, this recuperation of Louisa Ellis can only be temporary. Except for the narrator’s statement that “Louisa had almost the enthusiasm of an artist over the mere order and cleanliness of her solitary home” (12) there is no indication in the text of any kind of artistry and even this reference is a meager one. The key words here are ‘almost’ and ‘enthusiasm’. These words indicate that Louisa housework is emotionally satisfying and extremely rewarding for her. When the narrator compares her to an artist it is not because her activities are to be understood as such; it is an indication that Louisa finds almost the same pleasure in cleaning as the artist finds in her creation. I would argue that this parallel is not invoked by the narrator in order to make the reader reconsider or stretch her definition of artistry, but rather to signalize to the perhaps intellectually sophisticated or hostile reader what he or she might be incapable to grasp, namely that it is actually possible to derive the same amount of satisfaction out of cleaning as the artist has after finishing her work. When the feminist critics are so eager to define Louisa’s pleasure in housewifery in artistic terms, they meantime imply that the pleasure a woman can derive from keeping her house spotless simply is not good enough – it must have a deeper significance. They therefore end up confirming the notions that the male-centered critics nurture of meaningful womanhood, namely that it must be intelligible according to accepted standards of behavior, either traditionally male or female.

What the interpretations of these feminist critics show is the risk of letting affinity and identification be the driving force behind the readings of female characters. On a basic level, there is the odd possibility of ‘discovering’ that all female characters resemble each other by stressing similarities and ignoring differences. There is a further risk of preferring one specific type of female character while neglecting characters with whom the feminist finds it difficult to identify. In order to defend Louisa, she must be re-created and re-defined according to an idea of admirable womanhood that the academic feminist can relate to. When the text resists this attempt, as Martha Cutter discovers, the critic is left with an ambiguous feeling of how to defend her, and the conclusion that Louisa’s choice deserves at least partial contempt.

Feminist critics have for decades been aware of aspects such as race and class in their
readings, but their status as intellectuals make their perspective vary immensely from women who are not, never could be, and does not want to be ambitious intellectuals. The indications of the feminist approach are therefore not pleasant. These critics are too willing to explain women in terms that patriarchal culture can accept, and adjust themselves to the cultural standards that they claim they want to challenge. It is thus that the feminist critics, who eagerly try to defend Louisa, ironically end up by confirming the opinions of male-centered critics: Women must adjust to a given standard of acceptable behavior if they are to make sense. The main feminist contribution to the debate on “A New England Nun” is to replace the traditionally female ‘housewife’ standard with the traditionally male ‘artist’ standard.
Chapter Four: The Disturbing Virgin

Although thoughts or ideas concerning sexuality are never expressed in “A New England Nun”, it remains one of the main points of interest for critics writing on the story today. Perhaps influenced by contemporary candor regarding sexuality, most critics seek to explain how Louisa, by rejecting Joe Dagget, can turn down her one and only opportunity of experiencing sexual fulfillment. Efforts have been made to reveal signs of repressed desire and uneasiness towards sexuality in Louisa’s emotions. Whether critics argue that her desires are strong but repressed or inherently weak, Louisa’s virginity seems to unsettle them. In this chapter I will suggest possible reasons why her virginity represents such a problem to critics of the story. Since the majority of the critics writing on “A New England Nun” have commented Louisa’s sexuality, it is impossible to give an exhaustive account of the various arguments presented in the discussion. However, the idea that a woman’s sexuality depends entirely on a man is particularly prominent: In solitude, female sexuality is regarded as a passive and latent potential that slumbers expectantly and can only be awakened and realized by a man. Sleeping Beauty being brought to life by the kiss of her prince is a suggestive image of this notion. If a man for various reasons fails to awaken this slumbering sexuality, there are mainly two options. The woman is perceived as repressing her sexuality, since our post-Freudian culture generally considers sexual urges to be so strong as to demand fulfillment at some point. Alternatively, the woman’s sexuality is thought to be so fundamentally weak that no man could ever arouse it. Especially the first option pervades critical perceptions of Louisa Ellis.

This chapter will be structured around three concepts: Repressed desire, sexual fulfillment, and disturbing virginity. The first section provides an analysis of two essays in which Louisa’s sexuality is claimed to be repressed. I will argue that this claim is founded on a notion of sexuality which can only understand female sexuality in relation to male sexuality, and that what is perceived as Louisa’s repressed desire might as well be explained as a complete absence of desire for Joe Dagget. This notion of female sexuality mainly concerns women’s role in the system of reproduction. In the next section I will discuss the idea of sexual pleasure; a concept which is often presented as one of Louisa’s losses by remaining unmarried. My analysis questions the idea that Louisa rejects sexual fulfillment by rejecting Joe Dagget. Instead, I will suggest that marrying Joe Dagget would actually reduce her

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21 This option will not be discussed further. Edward Foster (1956) and Susan Harris (2002) both advocate this opinion on Louisa’s sexuality; see Foster p. 105 and Harris p. 35.
chances for sexual fulfillment, and I will provide textual indications that Louisa lives quite harmoniously with her sexual self. The last section will be devoted to a discussion of why prolonged virginity disturbs modern critics so violently. Drawing on the discussion of the two previous sections, I will further point out some of the consequences of approaching Louisa’s sexuality with terms which ensure that her virginity is perceived as a deviance from ‘normal’ and ‘healthy’ sexuality.

**Repressed Desires**

The two essays chosen for analysis in this section were not merely selected due to their representative attitudes towards Louisa Ellis’ sexuality, although their responses to Louisa’s virginity are typical. Both essays have previously been analysed in terms of critical strategies: David Hirsch argues that Louisa suffers from an obsessive neurosis, and has been discussed alongside other male-centered critics who similarly defines Louisa in terms of mental illness. Leah Blatt Glasser’s interpretation primarily seeks to establish parallels between Louisa Ellis and Mary Wilkins Freeman, and her essay was placed among feminist critics who have a generally more sympathetic attitude towards Louisa than male-centered critics. These essays will be examined more closely because one might safely assume that an interpretation done by a feminist critic writing in 1996 would contradict an interpretation done by a male-centered critic writing in 1965, especially when she is familiar with it. This is not the case. On the contrary, Hirsch and Glasser will presently be showed as interpreting Louisa in more or less the same terms.

The notion of female sexuality briefly outlined in the introduction above is firmly rooted in Freudian theory, although neither Hirsch nor Glasser show much awareness of this influence. Shoshana Felman offers the following sceptical summary of its main hypothesis: “Female sexuality is [...] described as an absence (of the masculine presence), as lack, incompleteness, deficiency, envy with respect to the only sexuality in which value resides” (9). In other words, female sexuality has little value in the absence of male sexuality, and even in his presence it is incomplete and deficient. This is an accurate description of how Louisa’s sexuality is perceived by critics. The second Freudian idea in circulation here deals with the potential consequence of repressing sexual impulses, the result of which was claimed by Freud to be a neurotic disorder. As discussed in Chapter Two, David Hirsch defines Louisa Ellis as an obsessive neurotic; a neurosis which he thinks is caused precisely by her repressed sexuality. According to Hirsch, Louisa’s neurosis consists of a “dynamic tension between
conscious desire and unconscious, repressed fears” (127) – the object of Louisa’s conscious desire and repressed fears being Joe Dagget.

Interestingly enough, Hirsch’s method for establishing Louisa’s repressed sexuality is to largely ignore her, and instead devote two full pages to a comparison between Joe Dagget and the mythological heroes St. George and Perseus, upon which Hirsch concludes that “Joe – without being St. George or a sun god – stands as a sexual threat to Louisa” (131). In other words, the nature of Louisa’s assumed fears of sexuality are ignored on behalf of a description of the person who is assumed to invoke these fears in her. The starting point for Hirsch’s analysis of Louisa’s repressed sexuality is thus Joe Dagget’s exceptionally well-functioning sexuality rather than her own repression. Although Hirsch makes due precautions after his sun god-comparison, he nevertheless places Joe in a god-like position:

Whereas in the ordinary fertility myths the god is welcomed by the society because he brings with him the renewal of life, to Louisa, Joe is actually abhorrent because precisely what she does not want on at least one level of her psyche is the renewal of life and fertility that he promises, though she cannot consciously acknowledge or articulate her abhorrence (131-2)

“A New England Nun” should apparently be read as a fertility myth, in which the male god promises to impregnate the virgin. The only modification of the ‘ordinary fertility myths’ is that the virgin Louisa abhors the idea of becoming pregnant by the fertile Joe Dagget; Joe’s protrusive fertility appears threatening to Louisa, although it is only her psyche which resists what her body seems to crave. Peculiarly enough, the concept of sexuality thus outlined has nothing to do with a desire for physical fulfillment; it is reduced to being a desire for procreation. From this perspective, Louisa represses a desire for motherhood rather than sexual impulses, since what she fears is fertility.

The fact that Hirsch focuses more on Joe than Louisa is not coincidental, and the ways in which he describes Joe are particularly revealing. By comparing Joe to a god, Hirsch transforms a clumsy, blushing, and boyish farmer into a heroic and masculine figure who ‘stands as a sexual threat’ to the terrified virgin. In Chapter One, I argued that Joe’s physical appearance is his only masculine trait. As I see it, Hirsch here emphasizes the only possibility Joe has to embody the traditional masculine role in relation to a woman, namely by making her pregnant. However, a masculine appearance is no guarantee for fertility, meaning that Joe is in no position to promise ‘the renewal of life and fertility’ which Hirsch here makes on his behalf. Although Hirsch here tries to describe Joe as an impressively masculine creature by stressing his only masculine potential, he innocently confirms the irony of the story by
comparing Joe to a masculine god-like figure whose traits Joe does not embody, thus enhancing the contrast between them.

In the citation above, Hirsch also suggests that Louisa is afraid of Joe, rather than vice versa. He describes Louisa’s reaction towards Joe – twice – as abhorrence, although the text never indicates that she despises or detests him. Looking at the text, it is somewhat amusing that the horror actually invoked by Joe in Louisa is related to his treatment of Cæsar the dog, when “he strode valiantly up to him and patted him on the head, in spite of Louisa’s soft clamor of warning, and even attempted to set him loose” (13). Although the narrator states that Joe “saw [Cæsar] as he was” (13), Cæsar is mostly perceived as being “a very monster of ferocity” (13). This suggests that Louisa’s horror derives from her worry of what might happen if Cæsar were set loose, and she imagines “innocent children bleeding in his path” (14). What Louisa fears is not Joe, but that his sympathy for Cæsar might cause damage to children. Although the reader knows that Cæsar is harmless, Joe appears to be the only person in the village aware of this. The other instance of horror comes from her vision of Joe being unable to clean up his own mess: “She had visions, so startling that she half repudiated them as indelicate, of coarse masculine belongings strewn about in endless litter” (12). The horror which Joe invokes in Louisa is not located in his protrusive sexual and masculine appeal, but rather in her fear of what his childish and irresponsible behavior might lead to.

The core of Hirsch’s concern might be that Louisa’s rejection of Joe might induce readers to search Joe’s character for traits that would support her decision to break the engagement. Indeed, the narrator’s description of Joe as “an innocent and perfectly well-intentioned bear” in a china shop (9-10) does not produce connotations of a Prince Charming. The scenes in which Louisa and Joe interact are tense and awkward; they have nothing in common, nothing to talk about, and the tension between them appears to arise from a general lack of comfort rather than sexual attraction. By describing Joe as – to put it bluntly – a man-sized phallus, Hirsch ensures that this awkwardness is not ascribed to any fault of Joe’s. Instead, he attempts to project any unfortunate tension onto Louisa alone, so that the explanation for any emotional ambivalence should be sought in her thwarted sexuality rather than Joe’s ‘failure’ to capture Louisa’s interest. Hirsch’s construction of Joe as a god-like apparition seeks to distract our attention from the fact that no man is infallible or capable of producing desire in any given woman. His flattering description of Joe indicates that his eagerness to understand Louisa as sexually repressed is motivated by an unwillingness to question the influence of male sexuality. Claiming that Joe stands as a sexual threat to Louisa is a convenient and readily accessible excuse for maintaining the patriarchal belief that
women desire, envy, and fear the phallus. Thus far, it appears as if Louisa’s repression basically consists of a fear of fertility combined with a reluctance to admire Joe the way David Hirsch admires him.

Although it might be possible to maintain that Louisa represses her sexuality, it is not done convincingly by David Hirsch. If one were capable of disregarding the fantasies of male sexual superiority which the citation above reveals, the problem still remains of distinguishing between repressed desire and a complete absence of desire. Hirsch claims that Louisa’s repression has been so successful that “Louisa herself is not and cannot be aware of” contradictory sexual impulses, and that “she cannot consciously acknowledge or articulate” them either (132). However, even though Louisa does not articulate her emotions, the narrator does it on her behalf: “for Louisa the wind had never more than murmured; now it had gone down, and everything was still. She listened for a little while with half-wistful attention; then she turned quietly away and went to work on her wedding clothes” (11). The narrator states that Louisa’s feelings for Joe have never been more than tepid, and now they have vanished completely. Nevertheless, Louisa listens with mournful expectancy for a sign of even the slightest emotion towards Joe. Now, this passage could either suggest Louisa’s mild yearning for feelings that should preferably accompany the creation of a wedding dress, or a woman who has repressed her sexual desires so forcefully that she confuses her repressed emotions with indifference. These options are mutually exclusive since they contradict each other.

When Hirsch’s claim of Louisa’s repression eventually fails to convince, it is not only due to the odd fact that indications of Louisa’s assumed successful repression corresponds exactly to indications that positive feelings towards Joe Dagget are completely absent, so that the more disinterested Louisa appears, the more violent her repression is perceived as being. He also claims that Louisa suffers from the fear and anxiety which accompanies a repression of sexual desire: “the price paid for unqualified repression of sexual impulses is fear and anxiety, and the more violent the repression, the greater the fear and anxiety” (135). While this sounds reasonable from a general point of view, it appears quite absurd in relation to Louisa Ellis. For where are the signs of fear and anxiety? The narrator describes her as “peacefully sewing” at the beginning (7), and “fairly steeped in peace” at the end (17). Even in Joe’s ‘threatening’ presence she merely responds with “mild uneasiness” and “mild stiffness” (9). For being a violently repressed woman filled with fear and anxiety, Louisa certainly hides her emotions well. It is true that she has “startling” visions of the future (12), but this could be yet another indication that she simply does not want to marry Joe. It appears as if Hirsch takes advantage of Louisa’s unconscious as a conveniently unavailable area
assumed to contain desires for Joe which the text does not communicate. Nina Baym makes the following comment on this kind of appropriation of the unconscious: “This fantasy [...] is too patently useful, too crassly interested, and too culturally sophisticated to qualify as an emanation from the Unconscious” (1992: 208). Not coincidentally, Louisa’s unconscious is thought to contain proof of male sexual superiority, waiting to be revealed by a critic with therapeutic inclinations.

It would be a waste of time to spend so much space on Hirsch’s essay if his ideas of Louisa’s sexual repression had not been both representative and influential. Except for those critics who obviously share Hirsch’s patriarchal perspective on the story, no critic has successfully undermined his interpretation or questioned the source of his ideas. Marjorie Pryse claims that the idea of heterosexual fulfillment is “a concept current in our own century rather than [Louisa’s]” (290), but the fact that this is only mentioned in a parenthesis and not explored further indicates that the patriarchal influence is allowed to prevail. Susan Harris recently claimed that Louisa is more worried about “submitting to other people’s control” than “the prospect of initiating a sexual life when her own weak hormonal demands had already passed” (35). While I agree with Harris that Louisa worries about losing control, her assumption that Louisa’s lack of desire for Joe Dagget is caused by her weak hormonal demands is just as presumptuous and unjustified as arguing for a repression. Either way, Louisa’s sexuality is presented as being flawed and unhealthy, while Joe’s sexuality escapes their attention altogether.

The essay to be discussed in greater detail alongside Hirsch’s interpretation reveals how even feminist critics of the story have not yet managed to discard the notion that female sexuality is centered around and depends on the male. Leah Blatt Glasser even gives David Hirsch credit: “His interpretation of the conclusion of the story, when set beside more recent feminist criticism, suggests the remarkable ambiguity of Freeman’s work” (33). The conclusion thus celebrated by Glasser is that “Louisa’s acceptance of the price that must be paid for rejection of life is described as the story subsides into its deceptively placid conclusion” (Hirsch, 135). It is striking how Hirsch’s interpretation of Louisa as a repressed and obsessive neurotic is actually not perceived by Glasser as being founded on a male-centered and misogynist view on women, but rather as revealing Freeman’s talent and textual

22 Edward Foster, Perry Westbrook, Joseph Csicsila, and Monika Elbert.
23 Ben Couch is, as I will return to later in this chapter, a possible exception.
24 Joseph Csicsila clearly repeats this claim: “Freeman creates a deceptively tranquil ending ready to snare unsuspecting readers oblivious to Louisa’s final act of regression” (12). The discussion of this citation in chapters one and two could highlight important features of Hirsch’s claim.
complexity. More importantly, Glasser has not noticed how Hirsch automatically equals the rejection of Joe with a rejection of life. Read in the context of Hirsch’s other claims, the term ‘life’ comes to represent both giving birth and a fulfilling existence. Although Glasser argues that Louisa finds enough pleasure in her ‘work’ to justify her solitary life, she nevertheless shares Hirsch’s opinion that Louisa must therefore repress her sexual desires.

Glasser never applies the term ‘repression’ on Louisa; she prefers to speak of how Louisa ‘buries’, ‘denies’, and ‘suppresses’ her sexuality. She thus avoids invoking immediate Freudian connotations, even though the terms indicate the same process. In Chapter Three, I analysed the dichotomy work/marriage constructed by Glasser. This dichotomy also involves the idea that autonomy and sexuality are mutually exclusive, at least for nineteenth-century women. Glasser writes:

Louisa denies the dog “innocent canine joys,” as she must deny herself sexual joys. Avoiding marriage, she will never release the passions her imprisoned animals represent. These visions of the sexual release that marriage might bring accompany all of Louisa’s fantasies of losing her own domain, losing selfhood. For many women of her time, denying one’s sexuality was the price of autonomy (36-7)

Sexual joys, marriage, and sexuality become almost equivalent concepts in this paragraph. For Glasser, ‘sexuality’ means a rather straightforward desire for sexual intercourse between husband and wife. ‘Sexual release’ becomes a euphemism for an orgasm, and suggests that marital intercourse is always joyful and has great orgasmic potential. What Louisa denies herself, then, is the pleasurable opportunity of experiencing moments of sexual satisfaction with Joe. Glasser seems to think that marriage would resolve the awkwardness between Joe and Louisa. Although it only takes a rug on the floor to prevent the nervous Joe from walking straight in Louisa’s presence, the slightly more complicated task of providing Louisa with ‘joy’ in the bedroom would perhaps be found less difficult. Indeed, Glasser even claims that Joe’s disruption of Louisa’s books leads to a recognition in Louisa of “the release of sexual energies that she has learned to suppress after years of living alone” (37). Glasser presents Joe as being so attractive to Louisa that even his disruption of her order brings forth associations of sex.

In Glasser’s opinion, Louisa’s hobby of distilling essences has a quite specific function in the story: “Her hobby is to distill the essences from rose petals, and she stores the oils in vials for no apparent use. This small detail indicates Louisa’s stored-up though ultimately unrealized and useless sexuality” (36). Considering how Glasser argues that Louisa rightfully celebrates her autonomy through her work, it is somewhat odd that Glasser
nevertheless questions her purpose in performing this work, or hobby, as she renames it as soon as she questions its value. However, what I find interesting about this claim is that Glasser defines Louisa’s sexuality as ultimately unrealized and useless. There is an unmistakable resemblance here to the male-centered critics’ claim that Louisa’s sense of order is meaningless. In chapter two I argued that Louisa’s exceptional housewifery was perceived as meaningless since it did not benefit a husband and family. Louisa’s pleasure in performing it was not sufficient to bestow it with meaning; on the contrary, her pleasure was taken as a sign of illness. When Glasser similarly claims that Louisa’s sexuality is unrealized and useless, she indicates that female sexuality has little value in the absence of its male equivalent. Like oils in vials being stored up for no apparent use, the virgin has no purpose; her potential to be useful remains unrealized. The value of female sexuality, then, apparently resides in its ability to make itself useful. Since Louisa remains unmarried, her “passionate self, the sexual ‘monster,’ will remain locked within her nunnery” (37).

What I find difficult to understand is how these critics can argue for Joe’s quite stunning attractiveness to Louisa and still believe that a woman would actually be capable of rejecting this male wonder and sleep peacefully afterwards. In order to provide this with a solid medical or psychological explanation, one would be forced into conditions far more serious than a hazy reference to Freudian concepts can account for; an acute psychosis or severe schizophrenia would be more appropriate. The fact that critics such as Joseph Csicsila and Monika Elbert have proceeded in this direction indicates how unwilling critics are to even consider the possibility that Louisa simply is not attracted to Joe; that her initial attraction to him was only moderate, and died peacefully in his absence. Instead of regarding this as a plausible option, complicated explanations are offered for a phenomenon that would otherwise not even require an explanation, namely that most women are not attracted to all men who happen to be available for them. I get the impression that these critics find it more reassuring to probe into the various malfunctions and abnormalities of a ‘wasted’ female sexuality than to admit that being in possession of a phallus does not bestow any given man with magical powers of enchantment.

**Sexual Pleasure**

As I have already suggested, the idea that Louisa’s rejection of Joe involves a loss of some kind circulates in the various articles interpreting the story. Since critics rarely distinguish between sexual fulfillment, obligatory marital intercourse, and reproduction, it is difficult to decide if Louisa’s alleged loss consists of her being deprived of physical and emotional
satisfaction or a more general participation in common human experiences such as sexual intercourse and motherhood. Judging from previous citations by Hirsch and Glasser, the reason why critics do not distinguishing between these very different concepts is because they assume that they are inseparable. Even today, this remains one of the most persistent myths about sexuality. Now, this myth might appear as a romantic and noble ideal promising happiness and fulfillment. However, its darker function consists of glorifying the institution of marriage and patriarchal notions of the nuclear family, while excluding homosexuals, the celibate, the sexually ‘promiscuous’, just to mention a few. This idea of sexual pleasure thus becomes a narrowly defined and normative principle which ultimately has little to do with actual pleasure.

Considering how most critics writing on “A New England Nun” reveal a general amount of insight into late Victorian society, it is surprising that they to a great extent manage to ignore the influence which Victorian notions of sexuality would have on the characters in this story, especially since they consider sexuality to be such an important theme. In The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870 (1957), Walter Houghton establishes that the Victorian age was the great age of the stork. Sex was a secret mentioned by no one, due to associations of shame and revulsion. Children were not informed about the function of the reproductive organs, and “most girls, it would seem, knew nothing before their marriage night” (353). Once marriage brought with it the inevitable initiation into this adult secret, the prospect of having a fulfilling experience was not promising:

For the sexual act was associated by many wives only with a duty and by most husbands with a necessary if pleasurable yielding to one’s baser nature: by few, therefore, with an innocent and joyful experience [...] one suspects that some women, at any rate, would have been happy if the stork had been a reality (353)

The perspective on sexuality thus outlined represents a stunning contrast to Glasser’s ideas of sexual joys and sexual release that marriage might bring to Louisa Ellis. Houghton writes about the ‘many wives’ and ‘most husbands’, indicating that exceptions surely existed, but bearing Louisa’s tepid emotions for Joe in mind one might safely assume that their odds of having a joyful sexual experience together are not promising. Louisa could come to regard sex as a duty to be performed and endured alongside her other housewife duties. The fact that Joe loves another woman indicates that he would similarly yield to the demands of duty and his ‘baser’ nature. Hence there is no reason to assume that marrying Joe Dagget would automatically provide Louisa with sexual fulfillment.
Houghton’s observations indicate that one should be careful to equate marriage with sexual pleasure, especially when dealing with a Victorian marriage. The concepts of marriage and sexual pleasure being duly separated, to the extent that Louisa’s rejection of Joe should not be assumed to include the loss of sexual pleasure, I will presently argue that her prospect of having what Houghton calls an ‘innocent and joyful experience’ is not compromised by rejecting Joe; on the contrary, I will argue that her rejection actually brightens this prospect. As mentioned above, sex in Victorian society was a secret no one mentioned. Houghton claims that “this conspiracy of silence was partly a mistaken effort to protect the child, especially the boy, from temptation (initially from masturbation, which was condemned on grounds of health as well as morals)” (353). When Houghton describes the efforts of secrecy as being mistaken, I read it as not preventing temptation, either through masturbation or otherwise. Although Houghton stresses how this effort to protect concerns the boy in particular, I see no reason why it should not concern Louisa Ellis as well.

At this point, Louisa’s extraordinary situation in life is significant: After Joe left for Australia, “Louisa’s mother and brother had died, and she was all alone in the world” (10). Being all alone means having a separate bedroom. It also means receiving no warnings about the immorality of masturbation, or being met with an indicative and insistently persuasive silence if she were to ask innocent questions. If this had occurred in her youth, there is no one left to remind her, catch her in the act, or reproach her if she were to yield to her ‘baser’ nature. Most importantly, it means that Louisa Ellis might not even associate sexual pleasure with anything but her own body. Given that her mother might – as other Victorian mothers – have intended to keep her daughter ignorant until her wedding night, Louisa could be in a situation totally unfamiliar to the modern critic, namely the situation of complete ignorance regarding what goes on in the bedroom between husband and wife. She has probably never seen a naked man, and she has probably never been explained how the reproductive organs function. Combined with tepid emotions towards Joe Dagget and the fact that “he was the first lover she had ever had [...] she had never dreamed of the possibility of marrying any one else” (11), Louisa might never have had the opportunity to connect her own secret pleasure to either marriage, or men in general. Louisa’s perspective on female sexuality could thus be quite radical: Far from seeing her pleasure in relation to male sexuality and the world of ‘birds and bees’, she might simply think that her pleasure is entirely individual, and incomprehensible to other people for the same reasons that they do not understand how she sews and distils only for the “simple, mild pleasure which she took in it” (12).
Of course, in order for this to be a plausible argument in the discussion of Louisa’s sexuality, a reference to Victorian notions of sexuality and an appeal to common sense does not suffice if the text indicates otherwise. There are, however, abundance of textual indications that Louisa’s solitude provides her with pleasure in more than one sense. Reading the following citations as loaded with sexual references requires that one associates anything even vaguely sexually suggestive as representing sexuality, but since critical consensus has been to do this in order to argue for Louisa’s disturbed sexuality, I will presently do the same in favor of her healthy sexuality. The text suggests that Louisa might have discovered masturbation after her mother and brother died: “Greatest happening of all [...] Louisa’s feet had turned into a path, smooth maybe under a calm, serene sky, but so straight and unswerving that it could only meet a check at her grave, and so narrow that there was no room for anyone at her side” (10-11). Discovering the pleasures of her body would indeed be a great happening. The sexual release thus ‘smoothly’ attained leaves her calm and serene, and provides her with so much pleasure that only death can stop her. That this path once taken is so narrow that there is no room for anyone at her side supports the argument further, since masturbation is a solitary act that Joe, or any other man for that matter, cannot participate in. Hence, ‘at her side’ means more than marriage; it means that there is no room for any physical presence at her side in bed. Louisa imagines her future with Joe as having “a coarse masculine presence in the midst of all this delicate harmony” (12). This is yet another example of how the text’s irony strikes Joe, since he is reduced to a mere ‘presence’ disturbing Louisa’s ‘delicate harmony’.

When Louisa compares her present situation as Ms. Ellis with her future situation as Mrs. Dagget, she acknowledges that “there were some peculiar features of her happy solitary life which she would probably be obliged to relinquish altogether. Sterner tasks than these graceful but half-needless ones would probably devolve upon her” (12). The peculiar features of Louisa’s happy solitary life which she must probably relinquish are distilling essences, and sewing and cleaning for pleasure. What provides Louisa’s hobbies with such a stunning potential for indicating masturbation is the contrast between doing alone for herself, with pleasure and without consequences, what she will soon be obliged to do with or for Joe, without pleasure and with consequences. The ‘sterner tasks’ than the ‘half-needless ones’ she currently enjoys suggests that the ‘peculiar’ happiness of masturbation will soon be replaced.

25 I should note that this is a further example of the difficulties which a reference to authorial intent represents: I suspect that most critics would hesitate to ‘accuse’ Mary Wilkins Freeman of masturbating, so that reading the text in accordance to perceived authorial intent would make the issue of masturbation a violation of common decency towards an actual person.
by dutiful, unsatisfactory intercourse in order to produce children. Louisa herself might not realize the nature of these ‘sterner tasks’, but assumes that anything currently providing her with pleasure will probably be replaced by needful and unsatisfactory tasks ‘devolved upon her’ by others.

The contrast between pleasure and duty is particularly emphasised in relation to both distilling and sewing: “Her store of essences was already considerable, and there would be no time for her to distil for the mere pleasure of it. Then Joe’s mother would think it foolishness; she had already hinted her opinion in the matter” (12). Further:

Louisa dearly loved to sew a linen seam, not always for use, but for the simple, mild pleasure which she took in it. She would have been loath to confess how more than once she had ripped a seam for the mere delight of sewing it together again. Sitting at her window during long, sweet afternoons, drawing her needle gently through the dainty fabric, she was peace itself. But there was small chance of such foolish comfort in the future. Joe’s mother, domineering, shrewd old matron that she was even in her old age, and very likely Joe himself, with his honest masculine rudeness, would laugh and frown down all these pretty but senseless old maiden ways (12)

Both sewing and distilling are tasks which are performed for the ‘mere’, ‘simple’, and ‘mild’ pleasure of doing it, rather than being performed with any specific purpose in mind. Again, this represents a parallel to masturbation as opposed to marital intercourse; pleasure and fulfillment as opposed to intercourse for procreation. Intercourse could, of course, also be pleasurable, but this would most likely be a fortunate by-product rather than an end in itself. However, there are other reasons why Louisa’s sewing and distilling can be read as symbolising masturbation. The fact that she would have been ‘loath to confess’ the ‘delight’ and ‘foolish comfort’ which her ‘old maiden ways’ provide her, indicates a tinge of shame or embarrassment. This could be due to a recognition of the fact that respectable women in her society should not seek pleasure of any sort, combined with her being surrounded by a ‘conspiracy of silence’ which associates the secrets of the body with shame, and therefore makes it a forbidden topic altogether.

Now, the final and perhaps most interesting parallel to masturbation in the above quoted passages, is the indication that Louisa considers Joe’s mother, more than Joe himself, as the largest threat to her pleasure. Joe’s mother would indeed be a concrete obstacle for masturbation since Louisa would be forced to spend her entire day in her presence. No doubt, the ‘domineering and shrewd old matron’ would scrutinize Louisa’s every movement, and thus deprive her of the possibility to spend time alone. Joe stands a smaller threat since he spends his days outside the house, working in the fields. The ways in which the text’s irony is
produced by Joe’s absence of masculine character traits and his clumsy ‘bear in a china shop’ behavior suggests that he would indeed prevent Louisa’s sexual pleasure, but mainly when in her actual presence. Joe’s mother, however, represents a further threat to Louisa’s masturbation, since she appears to be the ultimate personification of strict Victorian values: Physical pleasure represents immorality and sin; the decent wife should be saint like and endure sex only because this inherently shameful activity is justified by its results – motherhood. Hence, Joe’s mother would function as both a concrete obstacle for masturbation, and a constant implicit reminder that no respectable woman should enjoy her body. By remaining unmarried, Louisa seems to enjoy the advantages of Victorian sexuality without suffering the disadvantages. No one can tell her that her pleasure is shameful or that it should be directed against a man, and she is not forced to endure marital intercourse in the name of duty.

Whether one chooses to interpret Louisa’s hobbies as symbolising masturbation or not, I would argue that the times when one could comfortably define female sexuality as a mere subordinate equivalent to male sexuality are irretrievably gone. When contemporary critics search “A New England” for out-dated notions of female sexuality, they should therefore be challenged. Female sexuality is sexuality also in isolation, and the intimate nature of masturbation stresses that sexuality primarily functions on an individual level, and does not require company. It is further important to bear in mind that although masturbation was not considered a suitable topic for explicit portrayal in ‘respectable’ nineteenth-century literature, that does not mean that people were not doing it. What I have tried to suggest is that “A New England Nun” questions our inherited concepts of sexuality by removing it from the world of “men and birds and bees” (17). The possibility that Louisa has innocently discovered the pleasures of her own body, combined with her probable ignorance of the reproductive system, presents female sexuality as being more than a question of love, sexual intercourse, or procreation.

The Disturbing Virgin
Masturbation in “A New England Nun” has been discussed by Monika Elbert and Ben Couch. Both analyse the exact same passage of the text as indicating masturbatory behavior in Louisa, but the motive behind their references seem very different. Elbert’s interpretation of “A New England Nun” was discussed in Chapter Two as describing Louisa Ellis as displaying fetishistic behavior caused by displaced desire. Elbert claims that “there is something
unsettling in Louisa’s obsessively orderly existence and simultaneously onanistic behavior, which prevents union with another” (201). She further writes:

Modern psychologists would look askance at such compulsive, fetishistic behavior, especially as it deteriorates into meaningless (almost masturbatory) repetition without any obvious purpose: “Louisa dearly loved to sew a linen seam, not always for use, but for the simple, mild pleasure which she took in it. She would have been loath to confess how more than once she had ripped a seam for the mere delight of sewing it again [sic]” (202).

In the previous section I suggested that this particular passage could be read as symbolising masturbation. Now, when Elbert refers to the same passage, she employs the term ‘masturbatory’ in order to describe Louisa’s behavior, after having already described it as being ‘onanistic’. Associations to masturbation thus being firmly established, it is quite surprising that Elbert does not consider if this masturbatory behavior might in fact represent actual masturbation. In addition, Elbert employs the terms ‘onanistic’ and ‘masturbatory’ in a way which loads them with unequivocally negative connotations, as being connected to Louisa’s obsessive, compulsive, and fetishistic behavior as it deteriorates into meaningless repetition without purpose. It appears as if Elbert associates masturbation with perversion and mental illness, like a Victorian guardian of morals.

To my knowledge, Ben Couch is the only critic who has ever argued explicitly for Louisa’s masturbation. His essay “The No-Man’s-Land of ‘A New England Nun’” (1998) is therefore an important contribution to the discussion of Louisa’s sexuality. Couch claims that Louisa does not give up her sexuality by rejecting Joe, and that she lives out her sexual fantasies by masturbating. Although Couch agrees with both Hirsch and Glasser on an alarming number of issues, he nevertheless deserves credit for being the first critic to write on “A New England Nun” who actually reflects on how cultural prejudices against unmarried women influence the way we interpret texts about them:

Behind the spinster image, Louisa has a very powerful sexual drive. Perhaps our own prejudices about the spinster character make it hard for us to see Louisa as a sexual being, thus limiting our perception of the story [...] Traditional notions of propriety about spinsters and about women in general make it difficult for us to accept that Louisa, an unmarried spinster, could seek sexual satisfaction by masturbating. It is difficult enough to accept Louisa as a sexual entity, let alone as a woman who explores her own sexuality as intimately as I believe she does (196)

Couch brings the discussion of “A New England Nun” to another level as soon as he introduces the question of critical prejudice against the spinster character. This reminds us
that an interpretation inevitably reveals the individual critic’s perspective, and the cultural norms which he or she has accepted and interprets texts against. When David Hirsch compares Joe Dagget to a mythological sun god representing fertility; when Leah Blatt Glasser associates marriage with sexual pleasure; when Monika Elbert employs the term ‘masturbatory’ to indicate perversion and illness, this reveals that they still cling to patriarchal notions of sexuality: Sex equals marriage equals procreation, and masturbation is a sin. Healthy female sexuality depends entirely on the presence of its male superior equivalent, otherwise it sickens or dies. Sexual pleasure can and should only be sought in heterosexual company, preferably within marriage. It thus becomes difficult to accept Louisa as a ‘sexual entity’ because her personality deviates from the feminine norm, and her sexuality deviates from critical expectations of normativity. That she might find sexual pleasure alone is not considered, since these critics still associate sexuality with a heterosexual act leading to conception.

The significance of the citations above move far beyond the issue of masturbation. To use some of Elbert’s terms as a representative example for the perspective which Louisa is read from: Louisa’s existence is ‘unsettling’ because it ‘prevents union with another’. Her focus has ‘deteriorated’ from what should have been her most important priority – to prepare for a union with Joe. Her current pleasures are therefore ‘meaningless’ and ‘without any purpose’, since they are precisely what prevents her from having a meaningful and purposeful life as Joe’s wife and mother of his children. What ultimately becomes evident about all these comments on Louisa’s sexuality is that they have nothing to do with female sexuality at all. On the contrary, they merely reflect a patriarchal fantasy of self-sacrificing ‘perfect females’ who place their bodies and minds at men’s disposal. When a woman refuses to do so, she ‘unsettles’ the fantasy, and the peace of mind of those who advocate it. This might be what induces Elbert to claim that Louisa’s “final renunciation of connection and sexuality should not be construed as positive” (204). Of course, if we construe Louisa’s rejection of Joe as being a final renunciation of connection and sexuality, it is difficult to perceive of it as something positive. However, the power to define sexuality and connection is no longer an exclusively male heterosexual prerogative, so Louisa’s rejection of Joe does not have to be construed as a renunciation of anything valuable.

On the surface, these critics pretend that their primary concern is to express regret for Louisa’s wasted chance of happiness. What they are actually doing is to ensure that the definition of pleasure remains safely within the limits of conformity. Mary Ellmann accurately describes this attitude:
Since copulation is presupposed to be pleasurable, this hostility is directed, incomprehensibly, at those who are deprived of pleasure. The insistence, in fact, seems to be upon uniformity of pleasure, since resentment of these women is paralleled only by the resentment of homosexual men and women by heterosexual men. But for heterosexual women, the issue is complicated by an insistence upon subsequent and visible proof of copulation as well – upon conception, pregnancy and childbirth (136).

In short, ideas of sexual pleasure are inextricably linked to copulation, and copulation is mainly justified by its visible results in the shape of a child. Resentment and hostility is therefore directed against the virgin and the homosexual since neither experience the right kind of pleasure, and both fail to procreate.

Louisa disrupts the idea that pregnancy and motherhood justifies any sacrifice the woman has to make in order to realize a glorified image of male sexuality. Indeed, the idea of maternity appears in the discussion as a close relation to the fantasy of male sexuality. Monika Elbert claims that Louisa’s “denial of maternal urges” is “obviously allied to her negative attitude toward sexuality” (203). Elbert here bluntly reveals her belief in the inevitable existence of maternal urges in all women, since the text never suggests that Louisa wants children. In addition, the fact that Elbert describes Louisa’s assumed denial of maternal urges as an ‘urge’ instead of, say, ‘desire’ suggests that Elbert ascribes this craving for motherhood with tangible force and persistency, not unlike the violence with which Hirsch assumes that she represses her sexual impulses. The belief in some kind of physiological determinism is apparently what connects these ideas of sexuality and maternity: The female body predictably urges the woman to participate in the act which leads to the final goal of maternity, and her mind will ultimately force her to give in to these persuasive bodily urges, otherwise she becomes repressed or perverted. This could explain the peculiar ways in which the dichotomy sterility-fertility frequently occur as descriptions of Louisa and Joe respectively in essays by the male-centered critics Hirsch and Csicsila. The denotation of these terms merely describe whether or not a person is physically able to conceive. Considering that we do not know whether Joe, Louisa, or Lily are capable of conceiving, there is no reason for these terms to be included in the discussion. In this context, however, they are employed in order to describe a willingness to conceive, meaning that ‘fertility’ is to structure one’s life so that conception becomes possible, while ‘sterility’ means doing the opposite. A willingness to conceive, or ‘fertility’, is eventually what these critics call ‘sexuality’.

In The Second Sex (1949), Simone de Beauvoir connects the hostility directed against prolonged virginity to a notion of women’s ‘proper destination’:
Many men of today feel a sexual repugnance in the presence of maidenhood too prolonged; and it is not only psychological causes that are supposed to make ‘old maids’ mean and embittered females. The curse is in their flesh itself, that flesh which is object for no subject, which no man’s desire has made desirable, which has bloomed and faded without finding a place in the world of men; turned from its proper destination, it becomes an oddity, as disturbing as the incommunicable thought of a madman (1997: 187, ital. mine)

One of Beauvoir’s main hypotheses in The Second Sex is that men are regarded as entities complete in themselves, while women are merely defined in relation to men. Women’s ‘proper destination’ in life is to become someone’s wife, mistress, and mother. Prolonged virginity represents a problem because the ‘spinster’ has failed to find her designated place in the world of men; she is object for no male subject. What is so disturbing about Louisa Ellis, then, is that she cannot be defined in her relation to men. There is no husband, lover, or son to justify her existence, or to provide her life with the specific kind of meaning which a woman’s life should apparently consist of. On the contrary, the terms of her existence suggests that we should regard her as an entity complete in herself, since she is financially, emotionally, and mentally independent of men. However, as Beauvoir indicates, to be regarded as an complete entity is an exclusively male prerogative. Louisa’s virginity thus deeply unsettles those who are incapable of seeing women outside their proper destination, and who believe that a healthy female sexuality has one inevitable condition: The presence of male sexuality.

Simone de Beauvoir and Mary Ellmann wrote about the resentment and hostility directed against prolonged virginity in 1949 and 1968 respectively. They nevertheless accurately describe the attitude with which contemporary critics read Louisa Ellis. She is measured against a concept of sexuality which critics know beforehand that she cannot possibly fulfill, since this concept basically consists of a ‘willingness to conceive’. Few critics reflect on what notion of sexuality they measure Louisa against. None question the consequences of advocating this notion, or what kind of ideology it defends. As I have suggested, this narrow concept of sexuality is ultimately based on a fantasy of male sexual superiority; a heterosexual ideal meant to glorify the institution of marriage, and exclude those who choose otherwise. The function of such a narrow concept of sexuality is to reproach the individual who seeks pleasure on her own terms, and to ensure that this violation of conventionality does not escape due punishment. If Louisa’s decision to remain unmarried makes her happy, modern critics seek to avoid potential damage by condemning her for it.
Chapter Five: Stigma and Language

It is now possible to draw the conclusion that a concept of normality motivates the various readings of “A New England Nun”. The critics that I have discussed so far in my essay regard Louisa’s sexuality, personality, and behavior from the perspective of normative society. Her eccentric lifestyle combined with her rejection of Joe is considered to be so unconventional as to require a solid explanation, and to invoke hostility and contempt in several critics. The critics who do accept her make her into an acceptable character by invoking misleading terms. In the social sciences, an individual who, like Louisa, deviates from the standards of normative society is described as carrying a stigma. In an essay entitled *Stigma* (1963), the sociologist Erving Goffman defines stigma as “the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance” (9). Goffman describes the stigmatized individual as one who has been “reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” because of “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (12-13). Although Goffman writes about stigma in relation to the interaction of real people, his focus on the role of language in the process of stigmatization nevertheless makes his arguments relevant to the study of literature. One of Goffman’s most important observations is that what produces stigma is the “language of relationships, not attributes” (13). Being in possession of a potentially discrediting attribute does not in itself lead to stigma; it is only when this attribute is perceived as protrusive and collides with our expectations and notion of normality that stigma occurs.

What produces stigma, then, depends on the perspective of the person who finds an attribute to be discrediting, not the attribute itself. This means that Louisa’s stigma cannot be found by searching the text, but rather in what the individual critic responds to as discrediting attributes in Louisa. I will analyse the process of stigmatization as it reveals itself in a selection of citations from articles that I have already analysed. My focus will be on the language and rhetoric of stigma as it becomes evident in two polar views on Louisa’s isolation from society. The first part of this chapter will thus be devoted to the language of the critic. Louisa, however, does not share the language or perspective of her critics. Instead, she undermines the critical attempt of stigmatization since it is the narrator of the story which indicates her potential future loss, while Louisa herself remains peacefully ignorant of the consequences of her decision. This ignorance innocently questions the power of definition, the power of normative society, and the power of language.
Stigma Theory

The attitude ‘normals’ have towards an individual with a stigma is thus described by Goffman:

We believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination [...] we construct a stigma theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences (15)

A person with a stigma is made into an ‘other’. What Goffman calls the ‘normals’ construct a theory of inferiority which explains this individual’s shortcomings, meanwhile rationalizing any hostility directed against her. Louisa Ellis is reduced to a tainted, discounted person due to the alleged discrediting attributes of having, for example, a ‘flawed’ sexuality or an obsessive personality. However, her discrediting attributes emanate from a language of relationships rather than the attribute itself, since it is language which produces her difference, not her actual characteristics. This theory meantime obscures resentment directed against other differences than those accounted for by her discrediting attributes.

The most prominent example of the construction of a stigma theory is Joseph Csicsila’s essay, discussed in Chapters One and Two. Csicsila reads the story as exploring “the spiritual consequences of self-imposed alienation from the community of human experience” (2), which the title of his essay describes as being ‘an unpardonable sin’. Louisa’s ‘self-imposed alienation’ is explicitly connected to her rejection of Joe: “Louisa’s spiritually inert existence results not from her inability to marry Joe Dagget but from the reason why she will not marry him, namely her refusal to participate within the community of human experience” (12). Csicsila here presents Louisa’s rejection of one man as being practically synonymous with a refusal to participate in society at large. He reads it as an act of voluntary isolation from Louisa’s side, her own ‘refusal’ meanwhile justifying his description of her isolation as being an ‘unpardonable sin’. Csicsila presents Louisa’s isolated existence as being entirely of her own making: “During the fourteen years of Joe’s absence, Louisa gradually descended into a solitary and isolated existence, withdrawing herself effectually from any sort of meaningful participation in life” (6). He then quotes the part of the text in which the death of Louisa’s mother and brother has left her all alone in the world. Csicsila seems to interpret the death of Louisa’s relatives and Joe’s absence as her withdrawal from participation in life, as if these were circumstances within her control and for which she is responsible.
But as I argued in Chapter Two, Louisa’s isolation from society is not self-imposed. Joe decided that he wanted to go to Australia, without asking Louisa. The death of her mother and brother could hardly be said to make a difference in this context, since Louisa has no more control over the life of her relatives than other human beings. Csicsila nevertheless seems determined to interpret all aspects of her situation as indicative of her self-imposed isolation. Another example is how he interprets her house as supporting the notion that she has isolated herself from anything ‘natural’: “Louisa’s residence, which is of course also an island of seclusion surrounded by a richly organic and vital outside world” (6). In fact, any human made residence is an island of seclusion from the organic outside world, and even a Manhattan skyscraper can be surrounded by the organic Central Park. If this conveys any meaning about Louisa’s state of mind to Csicsila, it is because he is determined to show how anything related to Louisa suggests her spiritual isolation. This determination of his reveals yet another sign of stigmatization mentioned by Goffman, namely that “the usual scheme of interpretation for everyday events has been undermined”, where even “minor failings or incidental impropriety may [...] be interpreted as a direct expression of his stigmatized differentness” (26). In his search for suspicious aspects of Louisa’s situation, Csicsila uses even the ordinary features of Louisa’s life as evidence against her.

As I read it, Csicsila presents Louisa’s isolation as being a matter of choice in order to obscure the resentment which Louisa’s unconventionality invokes in him. He seems to confirm Goffman’s claim that discrediting attributes are “those which are incongruous with our stereotype of what a given type of individual should be” (13). Judging by his entire argumentation, Louisa’s deviance from the stereotype of the nineteenth-century female appears to be the core of Csicsila’s spite against her. In Chapter Two, I showed how Csicsila compares Louisa to Lily Dyer, and constructs a female dichotomy which seeks to re-establish order in a male-centered universe. The above mentioned citation similarly shows how Csicsila lets Joe represent the entire ‘community of human experience’, so that Louisa’s rejection of him is bestowed with an impropotionate amount of significance. Hence Csicsila presents Louisa’s situation as being a refusal of society, “a lifeless state of being in exile from the community of human experience” (11). However, when Csicsila presents Louisa’s relatively isolated existence in life as being a matter of choice, he employs the kind of rhetoric which seeks to ascribe the situation of individuals entirely to personal responsibility. Similar examples are people who explain poverty as being a sign of laziness, or depression as being a sign of weakness. Instead of reflecting on the circumstances leading to a given situation, and
the role of society in creating these circumstances, other influences are obscured by referring to individual choice and responsibility.

Csicsila fulfills every criteria mentioned by Goffmann in the first paragraph of this section. First of all, Csicsila seems surprised that Louisa is capable of displaying human emotions: “She does not comprehend the necessity of community, but she feels sorrow nevertheless because she is human after all” (11). Louisa, of course, is not human, she is a literary character. However, Csicsila’s surprise seems to derive from his own stigma theory, which has been constructed in order to show how Louisa is an ‘other’ whom we should regard as incapable of reacting like us ‘normals’.

Her ability to feel sadness cannot be accounted for by this theory, and thus functions as the only reminder for Csicsila that she is, after all, ‘human’. Csicsila’s stigma theory is an attempt to rationalize the animosity which Louisa as a happily unmarried woman invokes in him. He argues that her rejection of Joe is a rejection of society and life in order to present her as an inferior, ‘spiritually inert’ human being. By claiming that she has chosen her own isolation, he justifies his own discrimination of unmarried women. Considering how patriarchal ideology already provides him with ready-made ammunition against the ‘spinster’, he has easily accessible weapons at hand to ensure that the danger represented by Louisa Ellis is thoroughly accounted for.

**A Feminist Dilemma**

The production of a stigma theory can be found in other articles of “A New England Nun” as well. Although the details of the respective theories may vary, the process remains the same. However, the feminist essays have a different approach than to provide us with reasons for reading Louisa as an ‘other’. As I discussed in Chapter Three, feminist critics have a tendency to place Louisa among the nineteenth-century female artists, who had to decide whether they should marry or pursue their artistic inclinations. By implication, the feminist critics invite us to regard Louisa Ellis as a representative for women’s issues. The rhetoric of this approach is political, as this citation from Susan Harris’ essay indicates:

> Freeman foregrounds not only the female artist’s dilemma but by implication, the difficulty all women faced in nurturing a conscious and viable selfhood in a society that posits “selflessness” and community as the epitome of moral probity for the female sex. If women are censured for voluntarily forsaking the community in order to perfect their craft, how can a woman ever succeed? (31)

Harris here makes Louisa into an example of the difficulties women are likely to encounter when trying to establish themselves as individuals in a society where female selflessness is
the prominent ideal, and which censures women who forsake community in order to perfect their craft. Whereas Csicsila interprets Louisa’s isolation as a sign of her spiritual inert existence, Harris suggests that Louisa “rejects the human community in order to perfect her art” (28). Louisa’s isolation is thus given the legitimate purpose of artistic ambition.

Except for the problems arising from reading Louisa’s housewifery as art, which I discussed in Chapter Three, a further problem becomes evident in Harris’ argumentation. She refers to a ‘voluntary forsaking’ and ‘rejection’ of human community in the citations above, and further claims that Louisa “implicitly shuns the community” (31), and discusses the “benefit of voluntary restriction” (32). Harris clearly defends Louisa’s choice of rejecting human community. However, apart from her defence of the isolation which Csicsila reads as an ‘unpardonable sin’, their perspective on Louisa’s isolation are strikingly similar. Both regard Louisa’s isolation as voluntary, a matter of individual choice, and both refer to her rejection of ‘human community’. Interestingly enough, both also seem to interpret Louisa’s isolation as absolute. My following examination of the text nevertheless suggests that this is not the case. When Louisa envisions Lily Dyer, she remembers how she “had often heard her praises sounded” (15). If she has often heard Lily praised, she must have been surrounded by people often enough to notice how Lily is a recurring topic for conversation. Louisa’s neighbors also gossip about the fact that she uses china every day. “They whispered about it among themselves”, since “Louisa Ellis was no richer nor better bred than they. Still she would use the china” (7-8). If Louisa had no contact with her neighbors, it would be difficult for them to know that she uses china every day. It would also be difficult for Louisa to know that they whisper about her, and ‘still’ use the china, since an absolutely isolated person would not know what her neighbors gossip about, and still be in a position to ignore it. More importantly, if Louisa’s extravagant use of china is a topic for discussion among them, they might not find other faults with Louisa. This means that Louisa could be an accepted member of society despite certain eccentric habits. Louisa wears a company apron under her sewing apron, indicating that she is actually prepared for receiving visitors. However, if Louisa’s neighbors actually do use her every day use of china against her, it would be more appropriate to regard this as an act of exclusion from their side rather than a case of chosen isolation from Louisa’s side.

Although the text only refers to Joe’s visit, there is no reason to assume that he is her only connection to the ‘human community’. In fact, the claim that Louisa rejects human community by rejecting Joe is actually quite strange, since Joe has been away for fourteen years and has therefore never been Louisa’s ‘human community’. When breaking the
engagement, she does not break her connection to the rest of the world; she continues living her life the way she always has – without Joe’s company. Even if the text never mentions Louisa’s sorrow at losing her mother and brother, it does reveal that “she was herself very fond of the old dog, because he had belonged to her dead brother” (14). This indicates that Louisa loves Cæsar the dog since he reminds her of her dead brother, and perhaps also reminds her of the days when her family was still alive and provided her with human company that she did not shun. Combined with the fact that the death of Louisa’s relatives was a circumstance beyond her control, and therefore contradicts the idea that her solitary life is entirely voluntary, the indication that Louisa has contact with her neighbors – no matter how negative – undermines the interpretation of her as an isolated individual who ‘shuns’ human community.

Harris’ rhetoric is fundamentally different than that of Csicsila, but their use of language is quite similar. Either Louisa’s isolation is interpreted as positive or negative; it is argued to be a voluntary and absolute rejection of human community. Whereas Harris proposes that we should read Louisa from a political feminist perspective, Csicsila represents the group of critics who refer to psychiatry. Goffman makes an important distinction between these two modes of arguing as part of the stigmatization process: “The language of this stance inspired by normals is not so much political, as in the previous case, as it is psychiatric – the imagery of mental hygiene being employed as a source of rhetoric” (140). In the context of Goffman’s claim, ‘this stance’ consists of normals who argue for the inferiority of the stigmatized individual in psychiatric terms, while ‘the previous stance’ are normals who argue politically that a deviation from the norm should not lead to exclusion from society. I should note that those who defend the stigmatized individual are often fellow sufferers, which could explain why Harris and other feminist critics are eager to establish Louisa as ‘one of us’ struggling women in order to defend her.

I have previously argued how the feminist approach shares with the male-centered approach that they both seek to explain Louisa Ellis according to already available models of intelligibility. In fact, their references to the same terms and categories, their tendency to construct textual dichotomies which are unfamiliar to the text, indicate a collapse of the popular tendency to divide critical interpretation of “A New England Nun” into two distinct groups in which one defends Louisa while the other condemns her. A more accurate description would perhaps be that the feminist critics largely adopt the perspective of male-centered critics in order to prove its fundamental weaknesses, but eventually end up confirming its continued authority. According to Goffman, an effort to achieve separation...
from the group one disagrees with is often presented in the language and style of the ‘enemy’. In this context, it is useful to read Goffman’s ‘he’ as a ‘she’:

If he seeks some kind of separateness [...] he may find that he is necessarily presenting his militant efforts in the language and style of his enemies. Moreover, the pleas he presents, the plight he reviews, the strategies he advocates, are all part of an idiom of expression and feeling that belongs to the whole society [...] the more he separates himself structurally from the normals, the more like them he may become culturally (139)

The presentation of an alternative perspective might not be as oppositional as it is part of the same rhetoric and the same culture. In other words, the rhetoric remains the same, and only the value of it changes from one extreme to the other, from negative to positive. The feminist critics here represented by Harris seem to confirm Nina Baym’s notion of the feminist who makes her own project impossible by paying too much respect to her enemy: “We are most ‘daddy’s girl’ when we seek [...] to seduce him. Our attempt to seduce him, or our compliance with his attempt to seduce us, guarantees his authority” (206). Feminist efforts to recuperate Louisa the spinster character from hostile stigmatizing interpretations are based on the ‘idiom of expression and feeling that belongs to the whole society’, and can therefore not alter our perception of Louisa as radically as they seem to wish. To redefine Louisa in radically new and positive terms requires a willingness to question the idioms of expression, the language and style of those who seek to condemn her.

Silent Resistance

Although Louisa would be surrounded by the attitudes and ‘idioms of expression’ of her later critics in her textual setting, she appears to be ignorant of it: “If Louisa Ellis had sold her birthright she did not know it” (17). Goffman mentions this as one possible reaction for a stigmatized individual: “It seems possible for an individual to fail to live up to what we effectively demand of him, and yet be relatively untouched by this failure [...] he bears a stigma but does not seem to be impressed or repentant about doing so” (17). The crucial condition for being untouched by the failure to live up to the demands of society becomes evident if we compare the ‘untouched’ stigmatized individual to the situation of an individual who is aware of his failing: “the standards he has incorporated from the wider society equip him to be intimately alive to what others see as his failing, inevitably causing him, if only for moments, to agree that he does indeed fall short of what he really ought to be” (18). The key word here is ‘incorporated’. In order to see oneself as a failed individual, one must have
incorporated the standards of society which one fails in fulfilling, since it is these standards which create the norms from which one deviates. Goffman again stresses the aspect of language in causing this situation: “This differentness itself of course derives from society, for ordinarily before a difference can matter much it must be conceptualized collectively by the society as a whole” (149). Again we see how difference is not explained in relation to the actual attribute, but rather to a collective concept which defines the attribute as a difference.

Louisa’s ignorance of what others perceive as her failing could thus be explained through her ‘failure’ to incorporate the standards and concepts which circulate in her society. In my analysis of the text in Chapter One, I argued that Louisa only wanted to marry Joe because her mother had talked wisely about marriage: “She had seen marriage ahead as a reasonable feature and a probable desirability of life. She had listened with calm docility to her mother’s views upon the subject [...] She talked wisely to her daughter when Joe Dagget presented himself, and Louisa accepted him with no hesitation” (11). This passage reveals that Louisa has been exposed to the demands of society, here voiced by her mother. Louisa has also made her choices in accordance with the standards of society by listening to her mother and accepting Joe. However, even if Louisa has accepted these demands, she has not internalized them. Louisa thinks of her future marriage “as the inevitable conclusion of things”, and “had fallen into a way of placing it so far in the future that it was almost equal to placing it over the boundaries of another life” (11). Considering how she perceives of marriage as a conclusion and places it so far into the future that it has nothing to do with her everyday life, Louisa apparently has not incorporated the standards of society although she lives by them. Instead of allowing norms to dictate her dreams and her identity, she treats the standards of society almost like a rule of conduct that she must accept without necessarily believing in them.

If we read the ending through this perspective, it becomes clear that Louisa has not incorporated collective concepts into the perception of her own life: “If Louisa Ellis had sold her birthright she did not know it, the taste of the pottage was so delicious, and had been her sole satisfaction for so long. Serenity and placid narrowness had become to her as the birthright itself” (17). To arrive at a deeper understanding of Louisa’s eventual ‘satisfaction’, it is useful to explore the terms ‘birthright’ and ‘pottage’ as they appear in this context. Michael Tritt (2006) has discussed the significance of the allusion of this passage to Genesis 25.29-33, in which Esau sells his birthright to Jacob for some pottage. According to Tritt, the comparison between Louisa and Esau highlights “inequitable gender-specific conceptions of birthright and consequent lifestyle decisions” (39). Whereas the birthright of Esau was “a
double portion of the patrimony”, and to be “next in line to assume the role of paterfamilias, a position of ultimate familial influence” (36), “Louisa’s birthright, culturally conceived, is her privilege/duty/right to devote herself to her husband, children, and family” (37). Tritt further indicates that “Louisa’s solitary existence is so ‘delicious’ to her, precisely because her actual New England birthright, (as a woman), requires that she ‘live [...] and die for others’” (37, original brackets).

Now, it is safe to say that concepts of birthright and pottage represent a hierarchy of value in society, in which the birthright of marriage has supreme superiority over its poor substitute pottage/solitude. At this point, it is important to bear in mind that it is the narrator, not Louisa, who refers to birthright and pottage. The word ‘if’ at the beginning of the comparison, indicates that the narrator predicts that the reader, unlike Louisa, has internalized the standards of society and measures Louisa against the traditional hierarchy of value. That Louisa ‘did not know it’ signalizes that she does not share the value system of the reader. In fact, the narrator implies that Louisa has actually turned the traditional value system upside down, since ‘serenity and placid narrowness’ have become as important to her as the birthright of marriage could have been. However, since Louisa’s satisfaction lies precisely in her ability to resist internalization of cultural concepts, she is also incapable of formulating this herself. In fact, an ability to fully understand what society demands of her and a recognition that she has failed to fulfill these demands would make her calm satisfaction impossible. Instead, she would be forced to present her effort of separateness in the language and style of her enemies, like Harris was shown to do above, or to painfully accept her status as deviant. The narrator thus communicates to the reader that Louisa might have given up what society values, but that she remains peacefully ignorant of what society perceives as her sacrifice.

Therapy and Murder
It appears as if the condition for Louisa’s contentment is her resistance to internalize standards of normative society, and thereby resist a self-conception based on these standards. Before discussing the quite radical implication of this resistance, I will examine two citations from critics who have both acknowledged Louisa’s inability to articulate or comprehend her own situation, but who read this inability as part of her problem. In Chapter Two, I argued that David Hirsch reveals therapeutic inclinations in his interpretation of the story, particularly through his references to psychiatry. Hirsch suggests that “if she were able to articulate what Mrs. Freeman conveys through the imagery in Louisa’s surroundings and in her mind, then
she would very possibly no longer be the victim of her fate. That fate is a spiritual death” (134). In other words, Hirsch claims that Louisa would have avoided her fate if she were able to articulate the terms of her existence as they are conveyed to us by the author (narrator?).

Of course, Hirsch is right. If Louisa had been able to see herself as she appears to the male-centered critic or patriarchal society – they abound to the same in this context – then her fate would indeed be very different. However, the fate that Louisa would most likely become victim of if she could articulate her situation is perhaps worse than Hirsch’s notion of a ‘spiritual death’. I have already quoted Goffman’s analysis of the situation of the stigmatized individual who has incorporated the standards of society, and therefore is ‘intimately alive to what others see as his failing’, and causes her to agree that she ‘does indeed fall short of what she really ought to be’. An articulation of her situation would necessarily force Louisa to express herself in the language and terms of a culture which defines unmarried women as spinsters and failed women. Not only would she be deprived of her current joy, she would probably come to question it and perhaps also agree that it is meaningless. Although Hirsch seems to regret Louisa’s tragic fate of ‘spiritual death’ on her behalf, it appears to me as yet another attempt to normalize and cure Louisa of her unconformity by establishing the dangerous consequence of disregarding the authority and righteousness of normative society.

As I showed in Chapter Three, Martha Cutter agrees with Louisa’s decision to remain unmarried, but criticizes Louisa for her lack of consciousness in making her choice:

Louisa only sees a small part of the picture: she can only be relieved that her lifestyle has been preserved. But she cannot see the larger picture in which she might have actively chosen to preserve her lifestyle; in which she herself might have chosen to make celibacy and freedom – rather than “placid narrowness” – her birthright (186)

As I read the text, Louisa does choose to make celibacy and freedom her birthright. Even if the narrator describes it as ‘placid narrowness’, it does not change the fact that Louisa can continue her celibate life in freedom. What appears to be the problem for Cutter is not Louisa’s situation, but rather that Louisa does not actively make her decision according to the larger picture. However, the larger picture seen by Cutter indicates the picture seen by society at large, and in Louisa’s time this picture is patriarchal ideology. To actively choose solitude and be fully aware of the consequences would require the strength and ability to fight, and it would require a quite solid conviction. It would further involve doubt of whether she has made the right decision, and the awareness that others criticize and condemn her for her choice. The consciousness that Cutter wants in Louisa might be appropriate according to a
feminist political perspective, but I doubt that it would lead to peaceful contentment for Louisa. When Louisa only sees a small part of the picture, it enables her to embrace her current situation without considering what it entails. I get the impression that Cutter, like Hirsch, wants to cure Louisa, so as to make her into a different kind of woman, or at least suggest that she fails to be the kind of woman whom an feminist critic can admire.

This joint perspective of a male-centered critic and a feminist critic again indicates the collapse of a distinction between these two groups of interpretation which are normally seen to contradict each other. Although their motivations and strategies are different, this difference becomes rather insignificant compared to what appears as their common wish: to read Louisa Ellis as a woman who recognizes and acknowledges their perspective on life. Since Louisa’s fate would be rather miserable if she saw herself from their point of view, it seems as the common goal here is reassure themselves that Louisa loses something of value by neglecting to recognize their standards. In a way, Louisa becomes the weakest link, the person who questions the reliability and value of the standards she deviates from; standards which these critics have internalized. Goffman explains this kind of reaction with a claim that the normal and the stigmatized are, after all, part of each other, so that “if one can prove vulnerable, it must be expected that the other can, too. For in imputing identities to individuals, discreditable or not, the wider social setting and its inhabitants have in a way compromised themselves; they have set themselves up to be proven the fool” (161). In terms of strategy, then, it would be important for all critics who become anxious when confronted with Louisa’s response to her situation to define her in a way that makes it possible for them to save faces, and rescue their ideas from being compromised and ridiculed.

In order to take the arguments of Hirsch and Cutter to their natural length, and show the consequences of the therapeutical project which they share with several other critics of the story, I will compare “A New England Nun” to the dramatic technique of Henrik Ibsen’s modern plays as it is analysed by Peter Szondi in Theory of the modern Drama (1956). Ibsen’s plays provide a useful point of comparison, since the characters of his dramas are forced into the kind of recognition of ‘the larger picture’ that these critics want in Louisa Ellis. First, however, it is necessary to establish parallels between Ibsen’s modern plays and “A New England Nun”. What they have in common is a tight composition with few characters. They have one plot evolving in one setting, and the time frame from beginning to end is short. By the time readers are introduced to the central conflict, most events have already occurred; character development and their choices belong to the past. During a brief period of time, however, the past becomes part of the present, and characters are forced to
acknowledge who they have become and what lives they have lead. All that remains is a final choice.

According to Szondi, Ibsen’s modern dramas have a form problem, since a direct dramatic presentation of his themes is impossible. The characters’ development is crucial to the plot, yet this development has occurred over long periods of time, and cannot be dramatized in real time on stage without disturbing the realist pretension. Ibsen solved this problem by his retrospective technique, in which the characters convey their past to the reader/audience, so that they can attain background knowledge of the characters’ current situation. However, what originated as a problem of dramatic form influences the characters as well, since they are necessarily forced to articulate and thereby acknowledge who they have become by means of enlightening the reader/audience. Szondi argues that this forced insight destroys the characters:

Because [Ibsen] tried to reveal this hidden life dramatically, to enact it through the dramatis personae themselves, he destroyed it. Ibsen’s figures could survive only by burrowing into themselves and living off the “life lie.” Because he did not enclose them in a novel, because he did not leave them within their life but instead forced them to publicly declare themselves, he killed them [...] the dramatist becomes the murderer of the creatures he has created (1987: 17-18)

Ibsen’s characters can only live as long as their life lie remains intact, as long as they can only see part of the picture. When Ibsen forces them to speak about themselves, the result is despair, misery, or suicide. The writer thus murders his own characters.

Szondi claims that Ibsen’s form problem is caused by the fact that his themes of choice belong to the epic. Whereas the passing of time cannot be dramatized on stage without disturbing its realism, novels or short stories are unfamiliar with this kind of problem. Here, a presentation of characters’ development during long stretches of time can be achieved through narration, without influencing the characters or destroying the text’s realism. In this context, the most important difference lies in Ibsen’s characters being forced to analyse themselves and take the consequences, whereas in “A New England Nun”, it is the narrator who analyses and concludes on behalf of the characters. If we look at the final meeting between Louisa and Joe when she breaks the engagement, the narrator states that “she never mentioned Lily Dyer. She simply said that while she had no cause of complaint against him, she had lived so long in one way that she shrank from making a change” (16). In my opinion, this is an instance of the text’s delightful irony, since Louisa’s perception of actual reason and excuse are opposed to what the narrator indicates throughout the story. What is presented as an excuse by Louisa,
that she shrank from making a change, is what the reader might perceive as the actual reason, while Lily Dyer appears as a convenient excuse for breaking an undesirable connection to Joe. Irony is created by Louisa perceiving herself as lying to Joe with the best intentions, while she is actually telling him the truth.

The reason why Ibsen’s dramas represent a useful point of comparison to Louisa’s situation is that they suggest what appears to me as her only alternative fate: despair and misery. To complete the parallel between Louisa and Ibsen’s characters, they are all average people who do not see the ‘larger picture’. However, where Ibsen’s characters eventually have to come to terms with themselves by analysing the impact of the past on the present, a process which leads to tragedy for the parties involved, the narrator of “A New England Nun” performs the analytic role on behalf of the characters, a process which makes happiness possible for Louisa, Joe, and Lily. The narrator functions as a medium through which the characters’ motivation becomes clear to the reader while the characters themselves remain ignorant of the insights available to us. Unlike Ibsen, Freeman did not murder her protagonist. When so many critics show therapeutic inclinations towards Louisa, I get the impression that they would prefer it if she did. Therapy here takes on various disguises, the most obvious example are those who diagnose Louisa like a mental patient in need of a cure. However, the feminist critics presenting her as a woman who fails to live by feminist ideals, whether they recognize her failure or not, also imply that the ending of the story and/or Louisa Ellis as character should have been cured of undesirable elements. In my opinion, this therapy can hardly be distinguished from murder. Even if Louisa were to survive the misery arising from seeing the larger picture, the recognition would nevertheless transform her into another type of character. Either way, Louisa Ellis as we know her would seize to exist.

**How Should We Read?**

Previously in this chapter, I suggested that the silence of Louisa Ellis has radical implications. So far, I have argued that her peace of mind depends on her inability to internalize the standards, and thereby the language and concepts, of normative society. However, Louisa’s silence places the critic in what feminist theory has taught us is an unfortunate position: We must speak on her behalf. In “Women and Madness”, Shoshana Felman stresses the problem of this position in relation to a book by Luce Irigaray: “Is she speaking the language of men, or the silence of women? Is she speaking as a woman, or in place of the (silent) woman, for the woman, in the name of the woman?” (9). It thus appears as if Louisa’s peace of mind comes at the cost of the critic’s peace of mind, since she forces the conscientious critic to ask
herself who she is actually speaking for, and whose language she is speaking. Although most critics never discuss the text at this level, Louisa’s peace of mind nevertheless seems to be profoundly disturbing. The radical implications of Louisa’s silence become evident when we acknowledge that the *raison d’être* for the literary critic is language and verbal concepts. By showing that it is not only possible to ignore our language and system of thought, but to find happiness by doing so, Louisa questions our power as critics and the influence of our work. Louisa’s silence forces us to speak on her behalf, a task which most critics engage in as an attempt to transform her into a feminist heroine or a mentally disturbed spinster. Yet, Louisa remains unchanged. Of course, Louisa is a literary character and cannot respond to our interpretations, but her example indicates that our power of definition has limited authority.

As I read “A New England Nun”, it reveals the same critical irony that Felman finds in Balzac’s “Adieu”, and raises the same questions:

> From this paradoxical encounter between literature’s critical irony and the uncritical naïveté of its critics, from this confrontation in which Balzac’s text itself seems to be an ironic reading of its own future reading, the question arises: how *should* we read? How can a reading lead to something other than recognition, “normalization,” and “cure”? How can the critical project, in other words, be detached from the therapeutic projection? (19)

Indeed, “A New England Nun” seems to be an ironic reading of its own future readings, insofar as it resists the uncritical critic’s attempt to read the text according to traditional perspectives precisely by questioning the influence and validity of this perspective. The text creates irony at the expense of the reader who approaches it with a particular set of expectations and conventions. When reading the text’s critical irony against interpretations which are mostly characterized by a desire to recognize the familiar, and normalize and cure the text of uncanny aspects, the question arises of how our readings can be detached from this ‘therapeutic project’. In short, how should we read?

Considering that this question is one of the most important questions of our discipline, it is both impossible and undesirable to arrive at a final answer. However, it is both possible and desirable to suggest how we should *not* read. What most critics on “A New England Nun” have in common is that they read the story according to what they already know and have accepted as true, and try to appropriate the text and assimilate it into their own perspective. In the essay “A Mindless Man-Driven Theory Machine” (1997), James Sosnoski defines this kind of critic as a ‘machismic intellectual’, since “assimilation, the hallmark of appropriation, mechanizes falsification” (44). According to Sosnoski, “the machismic intellectual already
has a set of beliefs to encompass his world” (44). When he encounters a belief which does not correspond to his own, the contradicting belief is often “assimilated into his belief system as an error” (44). Sosnoski further calls this kind of critic a ‘Ramboist’, due to the aggressive strategy of the critic who responds to opposing views by declaring them false, and “finds counter-evidence in his stock of beliefs, or identifies a lapse in logic, or invokes an authority (someone who believes what he believes) [...] In his Ramboistic wargames, critical arguments are not distinguishable from quarrels” (44). The ‘Ramboist’ critic does not want to generate knowledge or seek new insights; he merely wants to defeat his enemies.

Consequences

By means of conclusion, I will outline two serious problems caused by this kind of criticism. The first problem concerns the moral responsibility of the intellectual. When Goffman explains why certain individuals are stigmatized, he claims that “normals really mean no harm; when they do, it is because they don’t know better” (141). However, we as intellectuals should know better. Among other things, we have devoted our careers to analysing how ideology, prejudice, and oppression function in our culture. Our role should not be to advocate or reproduce biased beliefs, but rather to challenge them. If the literary critic uses her access to sophisticated theories only as a tool to confirm her initial set of beliefs, change becomes impossible and prejudice continues. The value of literary criticism is thus reduced to stating the obvious, meanwhile serving dubious interests. What my analysis of criticism on “A New England Nun” provides is a sad example of what happens when literary critics seem unwilling to challenge our inherited ideas, and instead employ theory as a means of maintaining, confirming, and solidifying prejudice. The fact that the theories I have referred to by Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Shoshana Felman are analyses of similar problems indicate that the critics I have discussed belong to a larger group of critics. However, these theories fortunately also indicate that machismic intellectuals are severely challenged, and ultimately deprived of a final victory.

Apart from the moral implications of this kind of criticism, the second problem arising from it is, as Sosnoski suggests, that critical arguments become indistinguishable from quarrels. In order to contradict the ‘machismic intellectual’ in a way which he takes seriously, one must employ the same aggressive strategy and language, and repeat his errors. When presenting an alternative interpretation of “A New England Nun”, I have engaged in a quarrel where the ultimate goal seems to be determining winners and losers, rather than generating knowledge through dialogue. I have spoken on behalf of a woman very much unlike myself,
although my experience and education warns me of the implications of such a procedure. I have scrutinized Louisa’s sexuality, rationalized her behavior, justified her lifestyle, and defended her choice, even when these acts are precisely what I read as a sign of disrespect of women in other critics. I have implied that critics with whom I disagree are biased, misogynist, and wrong, questioned their motivation and sense of morality, and their ability as critics. In order to do so, I have invoked authorities within my field to falsify arguments opposed to my own. In short, my own analysis has contributed to maintaining a critical strategy that prevents dialogue, in which uncertainty is read as a sign of weakness and partial agreement as an indication of defeat. That quarrelsome arguments seem to be the only appropriate response to critics of “A New England Nun” is unfortunate.
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