

สตรีกับศาสนาใน “A Church Mouse”
และ “Christmas Jenny” ของ Mary E. Wilkins Freeman

บทความนี้วิเคราะห์เรื่องสั้น 2 เรื่อง คือ “A Church Mouse” และ “Christmas Jenny” ในหนังสือ *A New England Nun and Other Stories* ของ Mary E. Wilkins Freeman โดยมีจุดประสงค์ที่จะศึกษาความหมายใหม่ของจิตวิญญาณของสตรีที่นักเขียนผู้นี้เสนอไว้ในศตวรรษที่ 19 ในสมัยนี้ สังคมปิดตาธิปไตยกำหนดภาพลักษณ์ของความเป็นสตรีที่เป็นแบบตายตัว เป็นภาพของความเลื่อมใสศรัทธา ความบริสุทธิ์ การเป็นเบี่ยงล่าง และความเป็นแม่บ้านแม่เรือน ข้าพเจ้ามีความเห็นว่า Freeman ปลดปล่อยตัวละครผู้หญิงในเรื่องสั้น 2 เรื่องนี้ออกจากพันธนาการทางความคิดที่เป็นผลผลิตของปิดตาธิปไตย เธอดึงเอาคุณสมบัติดังกล่าวบางประการออกมาจากการครอบงำของบุรุษ และใช้คุณสมบัติเหล่านี้เพื่อเชิดชูสตรี ฟรีแมน (Freeman) ไม่เพียงแต่เปิดพื้นที่ทางศาสนาให้แก่สตรีเท่านั้น แต่ยังยกระดับผู้หญิงให้เป็นแบบอย่างทางจิตวิญญาณที่ทำให้ศาสนาเป็นอิสระจากปิดตาธิปไตย และช่วยฟื้นฟูจิตวิญญาณที่บริสุทธิ์ ด้วยเหตุนี้จึงกล่าวได้ว่า ฟรีแมน (Freeman) เสนอภาพของศาสนาที่ก่อปรด้วยคุณสมบัติของสตรีและตระหนักถึงคุณค่าของสตรี แต่ในเวลาเดียวกันก็ได้ละเลยความจริงที่ว่าจิตวิญญาณที่แท้จริงนั้นปราศจากการแบ่งแยกทางเพศ

ศูนย์วิทยทรัพยากร
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

**A Vision of “Feminized” Religion in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s
“A Church Mouse” and “Christmas Jenny”**

In its analysis of “A Church Mouse” and “Christmas Jenny,” Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s two short stories from *A New England Nun and Other Stories*, my paper examines this writer’s redefinition of female spirituality in the nineteenth century when patriarchal society prescribed the constricting stereotypical image of femininity as characterized by piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. I argue that Freeman liberated her female characters from these patriarchal ideologies, salvaged some of these virtues out of the context of male domination, and deployed them to sanctify women. Not only did Freeman open up religious space for women, but she also presented her female characters as religious exemplars, who employ some of the supposedly feminine virtues to free religion from the domination of patriarchy and to revive a purer spirit of religion. In so doing, Freeman offered a liberal vision of “feminized” religion, which significantly recognizes women’s values, yet was not oblivious to the fact that true spirituality is free from gender distinctions.

ศูนย์วิทยทรัพยากร
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

A Vision of “Feminized” Religion in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s “A Church Mouse” and “Christmas Jenny”

ดารินทร์ ประดิษฐ์ศนีย์*

In her *New England Local Color Literature*, Josephine Donovan points out the debilitating state of the woman's sphere in Freeman's works: "Something is dying in the fictional world of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. A way of life—the women-centered, matriarchal world of the Victorians—is in its last throes. The pre-industrial values of the world, female-identified and ecologically holistic, are going down to defeat before the imperialism of masculine technology and patriarchal institutions" (119). For this reason, Freeman's women, as Donovan tries to argue, are compelled to "active rebellion" against patriarchal authority in order to protect and preserve their own world (133). Donovan views in Freeman's fiction "[t]he softening of the tyrannical patriarchal will" as a solution which brings about "the rebirth of human potential" and "a renewal of the human community, which is sustained by such maternal values as charity and compassion" (137)

Even though this reading recognizes the female potential to keep their own identity by rebelling against the infiltrating threats of patriarchy, it still takes a traditional view of women subjugated by dominating patriarchal power. According to this view, feminine values can potentially uphold the stability of the community. Nonetheless, this can be possible only when male authority agrees to "soften" its will and allow women to take action. The shadow of patriarchy continues to follow every single step that women take.

In reality, patriarchal society deeply engraved its powerful influence upon women's lives in the nineteenth century. It prescribed the constraining stereotypical virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, which are known as the nineteenth-century cult of True Womanhood (Welter 104). The male-defined image of femininity became the only way for

* อาจารย์ ดร.ดารินทร์ ประดิษฐ์ศนีย์ ภาควิชาภาษาอังกฤษ คณะอักษรศาสตร์ จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

women to exist. As Barbara Welter puts it, "[I]f anyone, male or female, dared to tamper with the complex of virtues which made up True Womanhood, he was damned immediately as an enemy of God, of civilization and of the Republic" (104). Under the rule of male domination, these ideological virtues perfectly espoused women's dependence and subservience exclusively to men. For example, "[y]oung men looking for a mate were cautioned to search first for piety, for if that were there, all else would follow" (104). Piety in women existed only for men's sake. Similarly, purity, which was equated with virginity from the male perspective, was a woman's most precious belonging, which should be cherished and only be lost to a man in marriage (106). Submissiveness forced women to be passive to, and dependent on, men so that "the order of the universe" would be maintained (108). Domesticity required that a woman have a husband and be confined to the home.

My paper argues that Freeman's female characters not only liberate themselves from the fetters of these patriarchal ideologies but also re-appropriate the values of piety, purity, and domesticity in their revival of a pure spirit of spirituality/religion. Freeman erases submissiveness from her characters' concept of life; they rebel against the injustice and hypocrisy of patriarchal society. Moreover, she takes the values of spirituality and domesticity out of the context of male domination. When untainted by the patriarchal shadow and placed in the pure religious light—which is neither male nor female, but human—the value of spirituality becomes a holy attribute leading to salvation for all humanity. Freeman also provides women with the right in full over their domestic sphere, which is neither controlled nor protected by men. More significantly, in re-conceptualizing religious space and the profane / sacred binary structure, she legitimizes the domestic sphere as a place for spirituality. Freeman also succeeds in crowning her female characters with the halo of religious exemplar. To put it differently, in reconstructing the values of femininity, Freeman frees religion from the domination of patriarchy and offers her paradoxical vision of "feminized" religion, which seeks to balance out male and female roles and concomitantly aims to dissolve the socially constructed male/female binary opposition. An analysis of two short stories from A New England Nun and Other Stories, "A Church Mouse" and "Christmas Jenny," will provide an illustration to corroborate this argument.

As F. O. Matthiessen comments on Freeman's fiction, "[t]he struggle of the heart to live by its own strength alone is her constant theme, and the sudden revolt of a spirit that will endure no more from circumstance provides her most stirring dramas" (102). In the two short stories, Hetty Fildes and Christmas Jenny are unmarried and live their own self-supporting

lives. In these two characters, submissiveness is superseded by rebellion, self-trust, and independence. Both revolt against the senseless traditional ideas of patriarchal society. Focusing on women's will and determination, both stories point out that, as Perry D. Westbrook states, "a strong but healthy will is directed toward constructive ends that it eventually attains after severe struggle" (50).

Freeman depicts Hetty in "A Church Mouse" as a strong powerful woman with an innate rebellious nature. Hetty is imbued with both physical and mental strength: "She stood . . . like a May-weed that had gathered a slender toughness through the long summer; her brown cotton gown clung about her like a wilting leaf, outlining her harsh little form" (408). Her "pretty black eyes" which are "bright, although she was old" suggest her brilliance and determination (409). This elderly woman is able to make a living by herself; "Hetty although she was old, she could well have paid for her food and shelter by her labor" (415). Moreover, she is well known for her self-will and her rebellious spirit: "People were afraid to take her into their families; she had the reputation of always taking her own way, and never heeding the voice of authority" (416). Especially, it should be noticed that society regards this old woman as a threat because of her resistance to authority.

The conflict between Hetty and patriarchal society indicates Freeman's critique of male domination in the realm of religion and her attempt to make women stand up for themselves. Hetty's discord with Caleb Gale, the deacon who does not allow her to work as a sexton, is tantamount to her challenging to the "ideas of church decorum and propriety" which privilege men over women. When she rebelliously states, "I dun' know what difference that makes; I don't see why they shouldn't have women sextons as well as men sextons, for my part, nor nobody else either," Hetty speaks not only for herself but also on behalf of her gender. She indicates that men are not more competent than women, and that they are, however, able to take dominating positions in society because they simply "push in ahead of women." She is conscious that women have to "push in" to fight against male domination in an unjust society (407). She declares that she has both strength and "knack" to carry out this job (408).

Moreover, Freeman harshly criticizes the inhumanity of the society that claims to be religious and makes her female character fight for righteousness. While the church discourages her from working as a sexton, this community heartlessly renders Hetty even more despicable by turning her into a helpless burden to her society. It "[has] removed the shelter from her head" without providing her with a new home (416). Instead, it would force her to live as a subordinate in the house of another lady. Hetty's daring move into the meeting house, her

refusal to move out of it despite the patriarch's command, and her declaration of her autonomy all point to her unremitting defiance of the church authority.

As in "A Church Mouse," Freeman presents a woman of strong will, self-reliance, and independence in the protagonist of "Christmas Jenny." The description of Jenny Wrayne gives an impression of her toughness and eccentricity: "her large face was weather-beaten, but deeply tanned, and reddened." Her features were strong, but heavily cut. She made one think of those sylvan faces with features composed of bark-wrinkles and knot-holes, . . . She was not an aged woman, but her hair was iron-gray, and crinkled as closely as gray moss" (164). Her strange likeness to nature makes her different from others. Moreover, because of an unrequited love in her youth, people view her life as being stained by "an alien element" and call her "love-cracked" (167).

Like Hetty, Jenny is considered a menace to society. First of all, as Barbara A. Johns notes, her being a "love-cracked" spinster places her in the position of "an outsider" or "a marginal figure" (4). Her isolated life with a little deaf-and-dumb boy on the mountain remote from the village and her mysterious relationship with nature, especially her ability to communicate with animals, make her even more incomprehensible to villagers. As the narrator comments, society—which is regulated by the patriarchal institution of the church—condemns her as a cruel witch mainly because it feels threatened by this self-reliant spinster who daringly leads an autonomous life that breaks away from the straight and narrow way of life as rigidly prescribed by society:

Indeed, everything out of the broad, common track was a horror to these men [the minister and the deacon] and to many of their village fellows... The popular sentiment against Jenny Wrayne was originally the outcome of this characteristic, which was a remnant of the old New England witchcraft superstition. More than anything else, Jenny's eccentricity, her possible uncanny deviation from the ordinary ways of life, had brought this inquiry upon her. (173-174)

In her portrayal, Freeman indicates that Jenny's self-trust is not at all shaken by gossip or criticism from patriarchal society. While the whole community accuses her of treating the boy "dreadfully," "shut[ting] birds and rabbits "up in cages," and "half-starv[ing] them," Jenny continues to extend her selfless charity to the boy and the animals. Jenny's firmness in being herself demonstrates her refusal to be submissive to patriarchal values. More interestingly, Freeman does not require Jenny to speak with the two church patriarchs who intrude into her

cottage with the intention of persecuting her as a witch. Instead, it is Old Mrs. Carey, impressed by Jenny's altruistic kindness, who speaks out for Jenny and opens the eyes of the churchmen to the truth. Old Mrs. Carey aims her words at the minister and the deacon with her "weak" yet "defiant" voice: "I ain't goin' to have you comin' up here to spy on Jenny, an' nobody to home that's got any tongue to speak for her" (171). She succeeds in revealing the truth to the churchmen by telling them about Jenny's charity—feeding and healing animals, taking care of the boy, and spending money for bird food instead of for a new calico dress. Furthermore, Mrs. Carey criticizes patriarchy for its unjust view of Jenny as "love-cracked" and its denunciation of her spinsterhood as associated with witchcraft (172). She poses a challenging question of why society does not blame Jenny's boyfriend for his wrongs: "I know that Anderson fellar went off an' married another girl, when Jenny jest as much expected to have him as could be. He ought to ha'been strung up (173). She also argues that Jenny is able to overcome infatuation and ascend to charity—a nobler kind of love: "if she did git kind of twisted out of the reg'lar road of lovin,' she's in another one, that's full of little dumbies an' starvin' chippies an' lame rabbits, she ain't love-cracked no more'n other folks" (173). While Mrs. Carey speaks out to defend Jenny, it is, in fact, Jenny's own selfless charity to all beings that defends her and consequently helps dissipate the narrow-mindedness of the patriarchs. At the same time, in her comparison of Old Mrs. Carey to "a ruffled and defiant bird that was frighting herself as well as them [the churchmen] with her temerity" (171), Freeman insinuates that Jenny's virtue frees Mrs. Carey from the fetters of her previous submissiveness to church authority.

Moreover, as Johns notes, Jenny is able to exert her influence upon the institution of marriage (10). Jenny shows Mrs. Carey that submissiveness does not help her in coping with a husband who acts "imperatively" and childishly in his tantrums (161). Jonas irrationally refuses to move and does nothing except sit still in the cold twice in the story: the first time when he falls on the ice, and the second when his shoes are untied. Each time his wife "piteously" offers to help and pleadingly asks him to come in. But her polite and thoughtful concern is unfairly answered with his frustration and anger. Jenny advises Mrs. Carey to do nothing to make Jonas get up except "wholly ignor[ing] the old man" (164). To put it differently, Jenny rejects the traditional role of the wife as a submissive servant, and helps liberate Mrs. Carey's mind from this idea.

As Mary E. Richardt argues, "in their protest against such injustice, Freeman's older women protagonists strive toward a deeper, true spirituality, one based on efficacious justice

and charity" (32). Moreover, the female attributes of piety and purity in the purest spirit of religion are, in fact, very significant for the spiritual life of humanity—both female and male. But in the nineteenth-century patriarchal world of materialism, where men were unable to fulfill their spiritual needs, they transferred these qualities to women whom they imprisoned in the home (Welter 103). Freeman frees these virtues from the repressive rules of male domination. In infusing her female characters with these virtues—in their purest sense—she also endows them with autonomy. Her characters do not rely upon the patriarchal institution of the church to attain piety and purity; these virtues inform their lives and dwell in their own souls. Furthermore, Freeman portrays her female characters as the apostles of pure religion, who exert their influence upon the church by evoking the conscience of those who claim to be Christians and by purifying their spirits.

In "A Church Mouse," Hetty is described as "the resolute little pilgrim" in front of her "gaudy tent pitched in the house of the lord" (414). This biblical allusion refers to an episode in Genesis, in which Isaac, who was compelled to move from one place to another, eventually reached Beersheba and settled there. Isaac, witnessing an apparition of God and receiving blessings from Him, "built an altar there" and "pitched his tent" (26: 24-25). Like Isaac, Hetty has moved from one house to another all her life until she decides to settle in the house of God. By placing her in a biblical context through the use of this allusion, Freeman presents Hetty as a devout person who is endowed with special blessings.

In her daring rebellion against the church's "decorum and propriety," Hetty not only criticizes the hypocrisy of her society but also rectifies the church's fallacious beliefs and helps restore the spirit of charity to Christians in her community. In her fight to settle in the meeting-house, she awakens her community's latent moral conscience, crying out for charity and responsibility for an elderly woman without home or relatives like her. She forcefully asks the deacon, "Where do you s'pose I've got any place? Them folks air movin' into Mis' Grout's house, an'they as good as told me to clear out. I ain't no folks to take me in. I dun' know where I'm goin'; mebbe I can go to your house?" (410). The deacon's hasty answer—"We've got company to home"—exemplifies the community's indifference to others' sufferings as Hetty retorts to him that "[m]ost everybody in the town has got company" (410). While it is uncharitable enough of him to refuse to help her, this religious figure also hinders her in her attempt to help herself. His opposition to her working as a sexton and moving in to the meeting-house is mainly because of his blind respect for church rules. Hetty's protest,

therefore, points to the religious complacency of her community and the inhumanity of the church's rigid rules that are depriving people of a chance to help those in need.

Hetty continues to be a challenge to the church's "decorum and propriety" when she places on the pulpit "her chiefest treasures of art, a white wax cross with an ivy vine trailing over it, all covered with silver frost-work" (417). This cross arouses suspicion among the congregation which has "a double vision of a little wax Virgin upon an altar" and "wonder[s] if it savor[s] of popery" (417). By having Hetty placed a symbol that people associate with Roman Catholicism on the altar of a Protestant church, Freeman is criticizing the church's sectarianism. Hetty's action reminds one of St. Paul's proclamation of the unity of all Christians: "I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought" (1 Corinthians 1: 10). In other words, sectarianism does not exist in the purest spirit of religion, but it is created and perpetuated by the patriarchs of institutionalized religion. The Virgin Mary here can also be interpreted as symbolizing this purest form of piety and purity, which can be embodied in the female figure.

Notably, while it is what the patriarchs find unmanageable, Hetty's desperate yet adamant cry for her community's mercy is able to evoke sympathy from women in that congregation. It is Mrs. Gale, the deacon's wife, who sympathetically expresses her approval of Hetty's request in her "clear," "strong and irrepressible" voice: "Of course you can stay in the meetin'-house. . . . I should laugh if you couldn't" (425). Furthermore, another woman asks Mrs. Gale whether Hetty could live in a small room where the minister hangs his hat since he "could hang it somewhere else" (425). Although Mrs. Gale and other women are conscious that their support is against religious authority, these women courageously stand up to protect the unfortunate. Their courage arises from their heart-felt compassion and sympathy for Hetty—that is, quintessential virtues that constitute religious sentiments.

Freeman is here redefining spirituality. Hetty's unrelenting fight inspires these women to liberate their long-incarcerated virtue from the prison of male oppression. The women's rebellion indicates that their spiritual purity arises not from the authority of the church, but from their own inner authority of the heart that recognizes the divine within itself. Freeman incorporates this spirit of Emersonian self-reliance into her version of "feminized" religion. She presents her female protagonist as a "pilgrim" who brings into existence a truly religious community of women whose courage and charity help reform the church. At the end of the story, the narrator notes that "Christmas had not been kept at all in this New England village

when she [Hetty] was young," and that "[n]ever before had a Christmas bell been rung in this village" (426). Freeman's last sentence—"Hetty had awakened the whole village to Christmas day"—portrays this female figure as an apostle of Christian love and charity who brings about the spiritual awakening of the whole community (426).

Similarly, Freeman depicts Jenny as an exemplar of pure Christian love. Mrs. Carey calls her a "missionary to robins an' starvin' chippies an' little deaf-an'-dumb children" (172). As Sarah W. Sherman points out, Jenny can be identified with the qualities of love and charity. Her first appearance at the beginning parallels that of "the ghost of Christmas Present in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, a figure which appears bedecked with holly and crowned with icicles" (Sherman 158). Jenny is compared with "a broad green moving bush." "[S]he was laden with evergreen wreaths—her arms were strung with them; long sprays of ground-pine were wound around her shoulders" (163). She is also presented as an embodiment of love and charity. Always thoughtful of little creatures, she tells Jonas, "They [birds] can't git no breakfast. . . . They can't git through the ice in the trees. They'll starve if there ain't a thaw pretty soon. . . . I'am goin' to feed a few of 'em. I ain't goin' to see 'em dyin' in my door-yard if I can help it" (166). Her selflessness is evident in her foregoing a new calico dress for herself in order to save money for the animals' food.

In contrasting her selfless charity with the churchmen and villagers' unkindness and narrow-mindedness, Freeman makes Jenny's charity, together with Mrs. Carey's defiant words, an influential factor that brings about changes in the minds of the village people. Mrs. Carey reveals truths about Jenny to the churchmen, pointing out that while some people try to kill small animals, it is Jenny who heals them. Ashamed of their suspicion of Jenny and the villagers' unkindness, the deacon and the minister have been awakened to their own faults and the true meaning of religion. The deacon's offer to send Jenny a Christmas present and the minister's simple words—"I'll do what I can do"—indicates Jenny's influence; they learn to extend indiscriminating charity to others. The story also offers a symbolic end in which the minister's daughter points out "Christmas Jenny's candle" to her boy-friend (177). In likening this candle to "a Christmas star" which "seemed to flash out on the dark side of the mountain" (177), Freeman presents Jenny as a female Christ figure. Jenny who proclaims the gospel of love—not by her words but by her actions—is transformed into a guiding star for the villagers; her selfless charity enlightens their hearts and inspires them to follow her path. In so doing, Freeman succeeds in reconfiguring spiritual authority so that it does not reside in the hands of patriarchs, but within every human being—both female and male.

Apart from piety and purity, Freeman also salvages the feminine virtue of domesticity from the domination of patriarchy. Domesticity, which once incarcerated and enslaved, is now transformed into a valuable attribute that women can render benevolent to humanity. To Hetty and Jenny, the house is, thus, neither "a rocklike prison" nor "a frail refuge from a world more frightening than any prison" as Ann D. Wood describes it (21). Although both women move the "home" to unusual locations, the domestic sphere becomes their sacred realm of spirituality that reflects the purity of their free souls. Simultaneously, the two women's deployment of domesticity invites us to re-think the male-defined concept of religious space.

"A Church Mouse" portrays Hetty's radical fight for a domestic sphere of her own. Rebellious against church rules, she crosses the gender line into the realm that has long been considered as belonging to men and establishes her domestic sphere there. In her vehement struggle against male authoritarians, she has to assert herself in order to guard her sphere, as a "garrison," from "the besiegers" (425). She locks herself in the meeting-house, not allowing these besiegers to enter. It is from the inside of this domestic sphere that she expresses her right and elicits sympathy from the community.

Hetty's virtue of domesticity brings to the church both physical cleanliness and spiritual simplicity. When being taken care of by a male sexton, the church is depicted as dirty, and, thus, symbolically impure. As Hetty comments, "I've seen the dust layin' on my pew thick enough to write my name in a good many times" (407). Once she inhabits it, this meeting-house is then described as "very clean." "[T]here was not a speck of dust everywhere, the wax cross in the pulpit glistened in a sunbeam slanting through the house" (418). Furthermore, Hetty decorates the walls of the house with "her treasures of worsted-work" (416). Freeman's comparison of these simple ornaments that are hung between the meeting-house windows as "pictures of saints in a cathedral" implies that spirituality arises from a pure and truly pious heart (417). That is, there is no difference between Hetty's worsted work in this small-town meeting-house and exquisite pictures of saints in a cathedral since both similarly signify the purity and piety of those who create them.

In her portrayal of Hetty's domesticity, Freeman argues for the interweaving of the domestic sphere and religion. Hetty cooks in the meeting-house and fills it with the odor of food. The narrator describes how this act causes dissatisfaction among the church-goers:

[T]he odors of turnips and cabbage were strong in the senses of worshippers. They sniffed and looked at one another. This superseding the legitimate savor of the sanctuary, the fragrance of peppermint

lozenges and wintergreen, the breath of Sunday clothes, by the homely week-day odors of kitchen vegetables, was too much for the sensibilities of the people. (417)

Consequently, people turn their eyes "indignantly" toward the old lady, considering her act as a sacrilege. Here Freeman criticizes the hypocrisy and the superficiality of the practice of Christianity of this congregation. She insinuates that religiosity is connected with neither any "legitimate" smell nor any specific day of the week. On the contrary, spirituality is infused in the inner spirit of humans and manifests itself in all places and at all times. Moreover, Freeman breaks down the mundane / sacred binary opposition. Her description of the church-goers' reactions indicates that they separate not only the mundane from the sacred, but also the male-defined realm of religion from the domestic space of the home. But Hetty's domestic sphere is a place where she lives, sleeps, cooks her food, and worships God. To her, the holy dwells in everything. This is also a spiritual message of which Freeman wants her reader to be cognizant.

Freeman is very careful in presenting the domesticizing and feminizing of the religious space of the church as done out of purity of heart. For example, when Hetty places her beautiful cross—a product of her domesticity—on the pulpit, Freeman describes her as "always survey[ing] this cross with a species of awe" and "[feeling] the irresponsibility and amazement of a genius at his own work" (417). Freeman is here implying that women are able to derive their worth and self-satisfaction from their domesticity. Concomitantly, Freeman's depiction of Hetty as a "genius" who looks at her work with "awe" and "amazement" suggests the old woman's selfless surrender to divine power that possesses her and endows her with an ability to create the artistic masterpiece. Freeman also emphasizes that "no queen casting her rich robes and her jewels upon a shrine could have surpassed her [Hetty's] in generous enthusiasm" (emphasis mine; 417). That Hetty places the symbol of spirituality—the product of her "femininity"—in the church can be interpreted on the level of mundane reality as demonstrating the autonomy of her female sphere. However, it should be noted that her autonomy is not despotically asserted and that it is permeated with generosity and genuine piety. Moreover, Hetty's statement—"I guess when they see that they won't say no more"—attests to her wish to justify her place in the church and to construct a peaceful relationship with the congregation (417). My point is that while she offers a vision of "feminized" religion, Freeman does not want to replace patriarchy with matriarchy. Instead, she envisions a religious community where women are accepted as human beings not subordinate to men, and

where the two sexes co-exist harmoniously. More importantly, Freeman suggests that gender distinctions do not exist on the level of spiritual reality. After finishing her pious work of cleaning the meetinghouse, Hetty is described as "sitting in the gallery" and appreciating "innocently how nice it looked" (418). The word "innocently" suggests that when she communes with, and offers her pious work to, the Divine, she is an innocent child—neither male or female—imbued with spiritual purity that blesses her with a joyful insight into the oneness of all beings.

While Hetty expresses the autonomy of her domestic sphere in the male-dominated realm, Jenny's sphere is far removed from the reach of patriarchal power and values. Her home is presented as "hardly more than a weather-beaten hut," but Jenny keeps it tidy and clean. Moreover, Freeman depicts this domestic sphere as embraced and protected by the loving arm of Mother Nature: "there was a grape-vine trained over one-end. . . . Just before the house stood a tall pine-tree" (169). It is in this little home that Jenny lovingly nurtures the deaf-and-dumb boy and heals injured animals. The house is therefore filled with the spirit of maternal love for all beings. As Martha Salz notes, "Christmas Jenny" illuminates the existence of a separate female realm, one more loving, more nurturing, and potentially stronger than the brittle harshness produced by patriarchal values" (189). She also sees "the mute boy in girl's clothing" as signifying "the possibility of undermining the rigid sexual distinctions and antagonisms that produce conflict and hostility" (189). Moreover, the boy's cross-dressing and his feminine face—a "small pink-and-white" one with "his pretty, soft, fair hair"—suggest not only the breaking down of the male / female binary structure in Jenny's domestic sphere but also the harmonious co-existence of the masculine and feminine in it.

Jenny's domestic sphere has certain qualities that deprive the two intruding churchmen of their authority. Her hut is depicted as being full of suffering animals that need maternal care and nurturing. When they enter the house, the churchmen become nervous because of "a loud and demonstrative squeaking and chirping and twittering" (169). They become at a loss when the boy utters a sudden "cry"—"wild and inarticulate, still not wholly dissonant"—that is mixed with "the cries of the little caged wild animals" (170). Moreover, Jenny employs her feminine virtue of domesticity to bring the nurturing spirit of nature into her home. "[A] curious sylvan air" and "heaps of evergreens here and there" in the house can be read as signifying Jenny's Christ-like power to heal and to give life (170). In such an atmosphere, the men feel somewhat disoriented and incapacitated. Their nervousness is sharply contrasted with the picture of the little boy who sits comfortably "in the midst of a heap of evergreens, which he had been

twining into wreaths" (170). The men also feel threatened by the sweet boy's unfearful gaze imbued with "an innocent amiability" (169). It is clear that while Jenny's domestic sphere is able to dissolve the male power to dominate, this female Christ figure is empowered by her domesticity to render her home a sacred realm of selfless love and charity.

In these two short stories, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman glorifies women's ability to emancipate themselves from patriarchal restrictions and to assert their identity as holy, self-reliant beings. These two stories also nullify Ann D. Wood's statement about the "ugliness and age" of Freeman's women: "Strong in Freeman's fiction . . . is the sense that their women characters perversely yet logically chose disfigurement in their wasted femininity" (25). As I have argued, by salvaging those virtues that have long been prescribed by patriarchy as constituting the stereotypical image of femininity, these female characters open up religious space for women and help revitalize a purer spirit of religion, that lies not in rigid decorum but in the virtues of selfless love and charity active in each individual's heart. Finally, while celebrating women's self-liberation from patriarchal oppression, Freeman's vision of "feminized" religion concomitantly encourages the blurring of gender distinctions and the harmonious existence of men and women in a religious community.



ศูนย์วิทยทรัพยากร
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

Bibliography

- Cutter, Martha J. "Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's Two New England Nuns." *Colby Library Quarterly*. 26.4 (Dec 1990): 213-225.
- Donovan, Josephine. *New England Local Color Literature: A Women's Tradition*. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1983.
- Freeman, Mary E. Wilkins. *A New England Nun and Other Stories*. New York: Harper, 1891.
- Johns, Barbara A. "'Love-Cracked': Spinsters as Subversives in 'Anna Malaan,' 'Christmas Jenny,' and 'An Object of Love.'" *Colby Library Quarterly*. 23.1 (Mar 1987): 4-15.
- Matthiessen, F. O. "New England Stories." *Critical Essays on Mary Wilkins Freeman*. Ed. Shirley Marchalonis. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1991. 95-105.
- Richardt, Mary R. *The Web of Relationship: Women in the Short Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1992.
- Satz, Martha. "Going to an Unknown Home: Redesigning in *The Portion of Labor*." *Critical Essays on Mary W Wilkins Freeman*. 185-196.
- Sherman, Sarah W. "The Great Goddess in New England: Mary Wilkins Freeman's 'Christmas Jenny.'" *Studies in Short Fiction*. 17.2 (Spring 1980): 157-164.
- The Student Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible, 1973.
- Toth, Susan Allen. "Defiant Light: A Positive View of Mary Wilkins Freeman." *Critical Essays on Mary Wilkins Freeman*. 123-131.
- Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860." *Women and Womanhood in America*. Ed. Ronald W. Hogeland. Lexington: D. C. Heath, 1973. 103-113.
- Westbrook, Perry D. *Mary Wilkins Freeman*. Revised Ed. Boston; Twayne, 1988.
- Ann Douglass. "The Literature of Impoverishment: The Women Local Colorists in American 1865-1914." *Women's Studies*. 1.1 (1972): 3-40.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to express her thankfulness to Professor Martha Cutter, Ajarn Donald Sandage, and Ajarn William Whorton for their comments and suggestions.