The hair wreath: Mary Wilkins Freeman's artist fiction

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Abstract
Mary Wilkins Freeman uses an artist protagonist to explore conflicts and issues she herself faced as a woman writing in male-defined culture. Her artists make art in the content of a highly developed, expressive, sometime subversive, and always deeply personal women's art tradition. Their singing, their poems and stories, and their decorative "household arts" speak a complex poetic language.

The Mary Wilkins artist defines self through her art. In 'A New England Nun' the artist preserves her artistic identity by retreating to her solitary pleasures of household arranging, sewing, and distilling. Other household artists or architects assert their identity by creating and articulating space. The artists in 'A Church Mouse' and "The Revolt of 'Mother'," for example, make man-defined space into woman-defined space, an activity women writers like Wilkins perform when they move into the traditionally male space of literature.

The Wilkins artist attempts to balance her independent identity with her need for connection and love. Like many other artist protagonists in nineteenth-century fiction, the knitter in "An Independent Thinker" ultimately sacrifices her art for love. But the artist in "An Old Arithemetician" affirms the joy of balancing creative work and supportive human love, a dimension excluded from "A New England Nun." In other stories the artist balances art and love by relating to others through her work. In "On the Walpole Road" the artist unfolds her story naturally to an appreciative audience, in much the same way as Wilkins wrote her famous early stories. But in "Sister Liddy" the artist performs to impress a hostile audience, an approach similar to Wilkin's own in her later work. In 'A Village Singer' and 'A Poetess' Wilkins shows how audience pressure and internal conflict destroy the artist, pointing to the ways that she herself was silenced.

In later years, Wilkins wrote fewer artist stories. The forces that threaten the artist in early stories overwhelm her later work. Testifying to the power of these forces, many later novels are "crazy quilts" where we sense Wilkins herself is diverted by love, criticism, or anger. The power of her early artist stories in light of the confusion of her later novels and stories helps us understand what it was like to combine the roles of artist and woman in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This artist theme is an enduring value in Mary Wilkins Freeman's work.

Keywords
Literature, American, Women's Studies

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The hair wreath: Mary Wilkins Freeman’s artist fiction

Johnsen, Norma, Ph.D.

University of New Hampshire, 1989
THE HAIR WREATH:
MARY WILKINS FREEMAN'S ARTIST FICTION

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE ARTIST'S STORY

Many of the eccentric old women and spinsters in the famous early stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman (1852-1930) are artists. When they tell stories, sing, quilt, make wreaths, and write poetry, these women and their work represent Mary Wilkins and her work, and their conflicts and concerns reflect the conflicts and concerns of women artists and writers of the late nineteenth century. Their stories and songs and garlands are part of a women's art tradition in which art may be perishable, like flowers and housekeeping, and deeply personal, like friendship quilts and memorial wreaths. Often overlooked or dismissed by other characters, in Mary Wilkins' early stories this women's art is a form of the struggle to speak about self and about connections between self and others, essential concerns of women artists working in male-defined culture.

In examining the woman artist and her "domestic art" in Wilkins' fiction, I propose a new and illuminating view of this writer's largely neglected work. The artist theme offers a way of interpreting the space and work images by which Wilkins often builds character and meaning in her early stories. This theme also presents a focus for
understanding Wilkins' life in relation to her fiction and in particular for acknowledging her struggle with many of the art, career, identity, and marriage issues that women are still struggling with today. And, finally, this artist theme provides a way of viewing her work as a whole, a critical project which, according to Mary Reichardt's recent review of criticism, is long overdue.

Initial critical attention to this writer who has been called "an anomaly in the American literary tradition" was intense and largely favorable. The stories of Mary Wilkins (she added "Freeman" when she married in 1902 at age 49), first published in Harper's Bazar and Harper's Magazine in the 1880's, were immediately popular with both critics and reading public. Seen as representative of the "local color" genre along with work of Sarah Orne Jewett and Rose Terry Cooke, her stories were promoted and praised by important critics as the beginnings of a genuine American realism. William Dean Howells of Harper's said he saw in Wilkins' stories the genius of American literature: revelation in microcosm of a world "as broad as life." Atlantic Monthly editor Horace Scudder admired Mary Wilkins as a realist who had "genuine originality" and a "strong artistic sense."

This praise from the literary tastemakers highlights the qualities that set the fiction of local color writers apart from the melodramatic "trials and triumphs" plots and heroines of popular women's novels by earlier sentimental
novelists like Susan Warner and Augusta Evans. Wilkins, Jewett, and Cooke wrote realistic stories about village life and rural people, usually women, usually spinsters, often old, homely, and acidic. Frequently, the men have died, gone West, or married someone else. The self-supporting women characters in these stories "make do" with New England resourcefulness. While many of their stories ultimately affirm love and human goodness, the local color writers often include more subversive plots and subplots which question marriage, criticize romantic love, and satirize moral complacency.

Wilkins' stories of eccentric New Englanders are masterpieces of realism, written in a sparse, idiomatic, understated prose. Her style exactly suits her subject; as Sylvia Townsend Warner observes, they go together as neatly as "the green ruff fits the white strawberry blossom."5 Plots in her stories are slight; it is her idiosyncratic, creative, unusual female characters that make "the Mary Wilkins story" a recognizable and much-admired type. At the height of her popularity--around 1900--she was regarded as a leader among realists and was mentioned as the natural successor to William Dean Howells. Reportedly, her early stories were studied at Oxford as examples of "perfection."6 They are still highly-praised today: Marjorie Pryse, for example, says Wilkins' short stories "rank with the best in American Literature."7 In American literary history, she is
variously seen as a recorder of the New England decline after the Civil War, a member of the local color school, and, most recently, as an important figure in the history of American women’s literary realism. Most critics focus on the famous early stories, collected in A Humble Romance (1887) and A New England Nun (1891).

I, too, will focus on these stories, but I read much of Mary Wilkins’ prose as metafiction, as being on some level about the artist working. While the artist theme is often oblique or buried, her stories of crafts-women, of village sewers and knitters, are obvious artist stories, and with these I include stories of aesthetes, visionaries, storytellers, singers, and those with a special "faculty." Among these are "An Honest Soul," "An Independent Thinker," "An Old Arithmetician," "A Souvenir," "A Village Singer," "A Church Mouse," "Christmas Jenny," "A Poetess," "A New England Nun," "Amanda and Love," "A Gatherer of Simples," "The Scent of Roses," "A Patient Waiter," "Sister Liddy," "On the Walpole Road," "A Far-Reaching Melody," and "Mountain Laurel." In stories where Mary Wilkins says her main character is an artist or a genius, I take her word for it. These include "A New England Nun," "Amanda and Love," "A Pot of Gold," "The Revolt of Mother," "A Churchmouse," "Value Received," and "Old Woman Magoun." I also interpret as artist fiction stories about rebellious women, women who are performing or on display, such as "A Humble Romance,"

In later chapters I will examine Mary Wilkins' artist stories in the context of a well-developed tradition of writers who address their artistic concerns by placing them obliquely in other texts. Some critics have asserted there are few woman artist stories in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, other than the obvious ones like Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' The Story of Avis, Mary Austin's A Woman of Genius, and Willa Cather's The Song of A Lark. But actually, as I will show, the woman-as-artist story was a well-established type in the popular magazines, and once we begin reading for the hidden text, many important works by women from 1850 to 1920 are artist stories: among these are Stowe's The Pearl of Orr's Island, Rebecca Harding Davis' "The Wife's Story" and Life in the Iron-Mills, Alcott's Little Women and Behind a Mask, Jewett's A Country Doctor and The Country of the Pointed Firs, Chopin's The Awakening, and Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper."

Jewett, Alcott, and Chopin have in recent years received far more critical attention than Mary Wilkins Freeman. As Reichardt and others have observed, despite critical praise and recently revived interest, Wilkins still has a "dubious
reputation." Reichardt believes she has been neglected largely because critics in the past were biased against what they called "'effeminate'" subject matter and may have been put off by her "large, varied, and uneven corpus." Brent Kendrick, editor of her letters, also cites the "bulk" and "unevenness" of her later work as a reason for neglect, as well as delayed biographical studies, critical emphasis on major male authors, and lack of attention to regional writers.

Certainly the quantity of second and third-rate fiction Mary Wilkins Freeman wrote from around 1898 to 1917 has affected her reputation. Much of this later work is carelessly written, unfocused, and bizarre--often written for the money and sometimes with contempt for an undiscriminating audience. Yet this later work is important and particularly significant to modern readers for its evidence of the problems Wilkins was facing--problems that women continue to struggle with today. Socialized to look to others for definition, yet aware of her own power, Mary Wilkins was deeply conflicted about her "place" as a woman and as an artist. She mistrusted what her society expected of her, and she questioned what part of those expectations would actually fulfill her own needs as a woman; above all she wondered what was necessary for her as an artist. Far more than has been recognized, she put these doubts and conflicts into her work.
The facts of Wilkins' life and career have all the ingredients of a sensational novel. In her twenties, she suffered the loss of her closest loved ones, her entire family. The resulting shock and upheaval, as well as financial need, compelled her into her career as a writer. She worked her way to the top, establishing herself as an accomplished author and a celebrated literary personality who preferred to keep out of the limelight but whose activities were followed and opinions avidly sought in interviews and articles. Yet however successful and popular in her art, apparently she still yearned for more conventionally feminine fulfillment. In her fiftieth year, after a decade of satisfying work, she risked another major life change by marrying -- for love -- a dashing, romantic younger man with a shady past. The resulting marriage ended in disaster, and while her years with Charles Freeman in New Jersey and her enhanced social position certainly had their satisfactions, the long-term effects on both life and art were devastating. In a letter written after her husband's death, she revealingly comments, "Mrs. is often a sad afterthought."

A true New Englander in her reticence and desire for personal privacy, Wilkins used few of these details from her history directly in her work. However, Edward Foster, her biographer, gathered much valuable information from her friends and neighbors which repeatedly affirms their sense
of the autobiographical aspect of her fiction. Thus supported, we can trace the effects of her own struggles in her writing, and in fact a closer look at her life will introduce the major themes of my study.

Mary Wilkins was born in Randolph, Massachusetts, in 1852, and spent her teenage and early adult years in Brattleboro, Vermont, where the family slipped into genteel poverty. One of two adored daughters in a close-knit family, she was unexpectedly left bereft after the deaths of her sister in 1876, her mother in 1880, and her father in 1883. From age 24 to age 30, she lost one by one the people closest to her. Foster notes the long-term effects of this personal cataclysm: she had moods "of bitter doubt and questioning"; at times she was "completely unreconciled" to the deaths; she wrote poems wishing she was dead; and in particular after the death of her mother she felt a "keen sense of loss" for years.14 Alone in an era when women were largely defined by their roles as daughters, sisters, mothers, and wives, Mary Wilkins had to support herself—emotionally as well as financially—at a time when such independence for women was rare. Other unmarried women writers of the period, Sarah Orne Jewett and Louisa May Alcott, for example, had the option of living with parents and extended families until well into middle age. Wilkins' position was precarious: she later said her assets were "four dollars and a mortgaged half of a building."15
After her father died, Mary moved from Brattleboro back to Randolph and lived in an apartment in the house of parents of her childhood friend, Mary Wales. She boarded with the family, and continued a close relationship with Mary Wales. Even though this arrangement gave her a family situation of sorts, in a letter to a friend she refers to having "no one of [my] very own." Thus it comes as no surprise that loneliness, along with poverty and the fear of displacement, is a major characteristic of many of the women in her famous stories of the eighties and nineties. Even in later stories loneliness remains an important theme: as Alfred Bendixen points out, the focus of Mary Wilkins' ghost stories in *The Wind in the Rose-Bush* (1903) is "the loss of a sense of home."

In her early writing, Mary Wilkins had an instinctive sense of the power and vision of her work. Whatever the psychological mechanism involved, the lonely Mary Wilkins developed an alternative self in her stories—the tough, resolute, independent spinster. Critics have noted the assertiveness and power of these women. Barbara A. Johns calls her spinsters "heroic subversives" because they "criticize those patriarchal systems that refuse to women the integrity of their knowledge and the power of their vision." Through her strong old women—Martha, Hetty, Candace, Betsey, Louisa, and all the others—Mary Wilkins wrote out her own alienation and loneliness. Her fear of
loss and abandonment, her desire for community, her frustration and anger, and her sense of the salvation her art offered—these were the energy behind her greatest stories.

Because of her traumatic personal loss and resulting isolation, the attachment and separation issues which psychologists like Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan see as characteristic of female personality are crucial in the Mary Wilkins story. Chodorow argues that women define themselves "in relation and connection to other people" more than males do.19 For Wilkins, torn from these defining relationships, writing filled the void. Foster says, "Her work was...the real center of her existence."20 Like her "poetess" and her "village singer," Wilkins came to identify herself by her art. But for a woman to identify herself by her art is often to further separate herself from the conventional sources of attachment for women—especially marriage and children. Thus, for the woman artist, separation/attachment issues are particularly acute. The task or quest for Mary Wilkins and her artist heroines is to reconcile the artist's need for separation with the woman's need for connection—to balance, in other words, art and love, and in so doing find a place within the community without sacrificing her artistic identity. In Wilkins' stories, this task sometimes is signaled metaphorically as a struggle for "food"—connection, appreciation, community, and love—
and for "place"--artistic identity.

Food in a Wilkins story relates to connection. Because the artist is not nourished (valued, supported, recognized) by her community, often she is hungry. And as a further indication of the inherent conflict of her woman/artist role, she may be what we now call anorexic. Betsy Dole in "A Poetess" forgets to eat. Martha Patch in "An Honest Soul" starves as she agonizes over whose squares go in which quilt. In a late story, "Value Received," two artists threaten to starve themselves to death if their work is not appreciated. Food and art in Mary Wilkins' stories are inextricably connected: the artist either starves or--given the wrong attention--binges. In "Old Woman Maguon" the artist who attracts the wrong audience dies from eating poison berries. In "Noblesse" the artist prostitutes herself as a grotesquely fat woman in a side show. Like Kafka's "The Hunger Artist" many Mary Wilkins stories are intricate parables about the relationship between artist and audience in which failure to eat or lack of food points to unmet emotional needs.

Place in a Wilkins story signifies self. Her old women are architects and designers who carve out personal space and construct their identities with the materials their society allows them: thread, rags, scraps, flowers, herbs, hair. For many Mary Wilkins artists, the house--the personal space--is a crucial image of identity. To
establish and maintain their boundaries, these artists fight for territory. They take over, like nature, like the vines and insects that encroach their cottages. They pinch pennies to pay off mortgages, struggle to keep their small houses and their tiny plots of land, fight to create and articulate a place in the world. They lose, regain, and maintain property in stories like "Cinnamon Roses," "A New England Nun," "A Church Mouse," and "The Revolt of Mother."

In some stories the artist realizes that isolation is the price she pays for place, for her artistic identity. Mary Wilkins herself seems to have accepted this stance. Like Louisa Ellis in "A New England Nun" she consciously retreated and created apart from outside pressures. She trained herself by writing for children's magazines and, with no help from anyone and very little formal education or experience, began publishing her famous stories.

Even more important than food and place are the character configurations Wilkins uses to express the simultaneous separation and attachment needs of the artist. In many stories interconnecting characters suggest the Demeter and Persephone myth used to explain the seasonal cycles: the earth mother, Demeter, is separated from and then reunited with her daughter, Persephone. According to Grace Stewart's study of mythic backgrounds for the artist novel, Demeter/Persephone are believed to be originally one goddess, and thus this myth synthesizes the imbedded
"mother" and "daughter" aspects of each woman's personality, which together achieve a balance between independence and dependence. In showing the two often conflicting and often connecting parts of the strong "mother" and the dependent "daughter" in a cycle of sacrifice and rebirth, this myth suggests the conflicts of the artist who in male-centered culture must continually give birth to her artist self, nurture that self, and often sacrifice that artist self to convention and intimacy.21

Mary Wilkins' frequent use of this archetypal pairing does not necessarily indicate that she consciously uses a pattern from Greek myth, but rather that she has an instinctive sense of the urgency of keeping the two parts of the psyche together--the independent adult and the dependent child--and a feeling for the regeneration implicit in women's relationships. In stories like "An Old Arithmetician," when the "mother" figure is the artist, her connection with a younger "daughter" self enables the artist to be a woman of energy and independence whose relationship with a younger woman gives her a nurturing bond at the same time as she establishes herself as an individual through her art. Thus the old woman artist is a kind of a super-ego figure countering the younger woman who acts out dependency needs in a conventional romantic subplot. Often in Wilkins' stories, as in "A Gatherer of Simples" for example, the "mother" and "daughter" figures merge, one "giving birth" to
the other by means of her art. This regeneration theme further suggests the perpetual birth/death/rebirth cycle of the Demeter/Persephone myth. According to Stewart and Gilligan, this cyclic motif stands for the interdependency of all life as it is experienced by women.22

In other early stories, Mary Wilkins shows the woman artist directly achieving a balance between separation and attachment by loving as an artist—relating to an audience through her art. For example, in "An Honest Soul" Martha Patch's quilting leads to her acquiring a window in her blank front wall. Thus, watching her neighbors come and go, she no longer feels isolated. While the Mary Wilkins signature story, "A New England Nun," shows the artist rejecting marriage and choosing to live alone, in many of her other early stories a woman's loneliness is tempered and alleviated, not by a man, nor by public recognition, nor by a mother or daughter "self," but by a mediating "outside" woman who is a supportive audience for her work. This woman is a neighbor or friend, like Mary's own friend Mary Wales. Even though the larger community, village elders, ministers, and other women, may be indifferent or hostile, Wilkins' artists speak to an enlightened and supportive few. In stories like "On the Walpole Road," "A Church Mouse," "A Poetess," and "Christmas Jenny," the artist shares her gift with an audience that values her woman centered art.

But for Mary Wilkins, the support from sympathetic women
was not enough; in both her life and her career, she wanted male validation to give her a secure place as woman and as artist. While in some stories, for example "A Church Mouse" and "The Revolt of Mother," women's values prevail, in others the woman artist is defeated when the standards for judging her art conflict with the standards for judging "Fine Art"—usually created and judged by men. Mary Wilkins' own relationship to critics and audience was conflicted. Extremely sensitive to criticism, particularly in her later career, she constantly adapted her writing to the suggestions of friends, critics, and finally to her husband, Charles Freeman, whom she married in 1902 after a long engagement.

With Charles, she moved to New Jersey, where they built their own large and opulent house, where she had servants and expensive bric-a-brac, and where she continued to write, often using suburban characters in a New Jersey setting. Here in "Freewarren," her New Jersey house, the silent and mostly undocumented tragedy of her life was played out. Charles, addicted to opium and alcohol, was hospitalized again and again, and when Mary finally achieved a legal separation for "protection" he left his money to his chauffeur. Yet she "stood by him" and no account of their troubles survives, other than the court records of the trial to break his will unearthed by Brent Kendrick.

In her later work, Mary Wilkins Freeman sacrifices her
artist to convention. The childish woman—and the "child" part of the psyche—becomes dominant, and she writes about women from a stereotypical male point of view, emphasizing their weakness. In these novels and stories written after the turn of the century, Wilkins no longer pairs younger and older women in harmonious bonds. She no longer uses sympathetic neighbors as audience surrogates, and she focuses her plots around the needs of men. She writes less and less about her resolute old women and more and more about pretty, emotional, "flower-like" young girls who attach themselves like leeches to indulgent male characters. Although in transitional novels like Madelon and A Portion of Labor Wilkins attempts to show a young woman achieving both love and art, the powerful woman as central character disappears from her work.

Although there is no tidy chronological continuum, Mary Wilkins' early artist stories focus on variations of the attachment/individuation issues that Chodorow and Gilligan see as crucial to female socialization. In subsequent chapters I will show how her stories cover the range of possibilities, from the deliberate retreat of the artist in "A New England Nun," to the different degrees of relationship and connection between artist and audience in stories like "An Old Arithmetician" and "On the Walpole Road," to the rejection by audience in "A Village Singer" and "A Poetess," and finally to the glorification of the
dependent woman and death of the artist in her conflicted last novels and stories.

More specifically, in Chapter Two I examine the women's art tradition through which the Wilkins artist establishes identity. In Chapter Three I discuss the relation between isolation and female artistic identity in Wilkins' life and work. In Chapter Four I analyze the ways her artists use their household art to define their own space. In Chapter Five I explore the love/art conflict in Wilkins' work related to the woman-as-artist genre. In Chapter Six I examine the various relationships between artist and audience in her stories. In Chapter Seven I show the woman artist destroyed by public hostility and male criticism. In Chapter Eight I discuss how and why her later work denies woman's artistic identity. In a final chapter I reflect upon the enduring value of Mary Wilkins Freeman's work.
Mary R. Reichardt, "Mary Wilkins Freeman: One Hundred Years of Criticism," Legacy 4 (Fall 1987): 32.

Reichardt's phrase, 31.

William Dean Howells, "Editor's Study," Harper's, 75 (September 1887): 640.

[Horace Scudder], "New England in the Short Story," Atlantic, 67 (June 1891): 847.


Letter from Mildred Howells to Thomas Schuler Shaw April 4, 1932. Library of Congress.


Linda Huf says "women have only rarely written artist novels" in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman (New York: Ungar, 1983), 1-2. Patricia A. Klemans also notes the scarcity of portraits of women artists, 39.

Reichardt, 31.


14 Edward Foster, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (New York: Hendricks, 1956), 56, 133, 50.


16 Letter to Mary Louise Booth, 21 April 1885, letter 6 in Kendrick, 62.


20 Foster, 62.


22 Stewart, 49; Gilligan, 22.

23 Thomas Schuler Shaw in his unpublished biography of Mary Wilkins describes the circle of friends who advised her on her work, "A Nineteenth Century Puritan, Being a Biography of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman" (1931), Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 62-3. Margaret Hamilton Welch also mentions these "critics," in "American Authoresses of the Hour," Harper's Bazar (29 June 1900): 69. Edward Foster describes Charles Freeman's attention to Mary's writing in his biography, 162.
CHAPTER 2

THE HAIR WREATH: OUR SISTERS’ ART

Displayed in a gilded oval frame, the beautiful wreath in Mary Wilkins' "A Souvenir" is woven from human hair. Although it hastens the death of the artist who obsessively created it, this wreath is her masterpiece, the sign of her kinship with great artists of the past, and most importantly a powerful artistic symbol of women's values. As souvenir it embodies the past, and as art work it speaks to the future.

Embedded in Wilkins' fiction, woman-created art objects and processes are mysterious. Obviously symbolic, usually centrally involved in the plot, yet like the hair wreath in "A Souvenir," her artists' creations are often mentioned incidentally and described obliquely. These half-revealed wreaths, quilts, songs, and poems are stories within stories. As if artifacts from another culture (which in a sense they are), these art objects speak a language we can learn to read in order to understand a neglected part of our human history.

Feminist critics have used the myth of Philomela to represent the situation of the woman artist and the special kind of interpretation her art requires. In Ovid's version
of this myth, Tereus rapes his sister-in-law Philomela and cuts out her tongue to prevent her from telling her story. The dilemma of Philomela suggests the way the woman artist may feel in patriarchal society—overpowered, violated, and silenced. But even though she is speechless, Philomela manages to tell her story indirectly, subversively, by weaving it in a tapestry which her sister, Procne, reads. Just as the art object—Philomela's tapestry—can stand for women's art, so too can Procne's act of reading provide a model for feminist criticism. In the act of reading we are rescuing, salvaging, preserving the women's versions of experience that have been lost to us. We rescue, save, share—all actions that belong to a subculture whose stories have not been part of the dominant story and so have been passed from hand to hand like quilt patterns.

In our search for the woman's story, readers and critics join writers whose characters also search for the messages woven into the tapestry by their sisters and mothers. The narrator of Margaret Atwood's novel Surfacing finds her sign in a crayon drawing her mother had saved. Tillie Olsen in Silences discovers eloquent testimony in the very absence of women's voices from the past. Alice Walker, looking for evidence of black women's creative spirit, finds it flourishing in her mother's flower gardens. Art historians search for "old mistresses," and visual artists find in quilts and other traditional women's arts "the feminist
resurrection of our foremothers' lives." By reading with
an understanding of woman's situation we come to the
authentic voices of the women of our past, who Nancy K.
Miller tells us have been so often "read out" of the text.

As we search for and discover women's themes in women's
art and literature, we perform what feels like a very
personal act: we take back what is ours. "Thieves of
language" in the sense of reappropriating male-encoded
speech, we are beginning "to recover, to preserve, and to
interpret our own tales." The need to find the woman's
tradition is a part of the need to find the real story in
our own histories, and the personal nature of our quest is
evident in the tendency for critics to call the women they
are working on their mothers, their daughters, their
sisters.

Similarly when Mary Wilkins writes about the perishable
art of her characters--their needle-work, their sentimental
poetry, their hair wreaths--she affirms a women's art
tradition. Her work describes her artists' work, and their
work in turn often symbolizes her work. She becomes their
collaborator. In the more conventional art form of her
carefully crafted stories she makes their struggle to speak
accessible to us. She serves as a kind of collective
daughter in that she makes "prominent the work both have
achieved" by "expressing herself in some more dominant art
form," a function Rachel DuPlessis believes fictional
daughters perform for their failed artist mothers in woman-as-artist fiction. In DuPlessis' analysis the maternal figure becomes a muse for the daughter, and the daughter becomes an artist to complete the realization of the mother's thwarted talent. I see the same dynamic at work in Mary Wilkins' stories of artists, deliberately primitive and nostalgic. She rescues and preserves the often unacknowledged art of a buried tradition in her stories of our collective "mothers."

Besides affirming a woman's art tradition, Mary Wilkins uses the artist theme to comment on her own situation. In stories like "A Village Singer" and "A Poetess," Wilkins' artist theme is obvious. But in many of her other stories and in some of her novels, Wilkins addresses this important theme less obviously. The things she has to say about art and artists are complex, and since they often implicitly critique the system and challenge convention, they cannot be said directly. In a culture that sees art and the artist as male and that questions either the "woman" or the "artist" in the woman artist, Mary Wilkins, like many of her fictional creations, often has to defy, hide, pose, and placate in order to speak at all. She frequently uses an old woman artist-figure as a disguise: this persona enables her to write covertly about her experiences as a woman and as an artist.

An example of this artist character is Nancy Weeks in "A
Souvenir." She has created her amazing hair wreath with "true artistic instinct." When she says it "ain't worth showing," and when, "solemn and embarrassed," "speaking deprecatingly," with "throbbing wonder and delight," she displays her "intricate handiwork" to a guest, we have a sense of what Wilkins may have experienced when she submitted a story (350-53). Wilkins also describes the pain and concentration of the creative process when she tells us, "Many a night [Nancy] had lain awake with her tired brain weaving the hair roses and lilies which her fingers had laid down." These glimpses of the artist's inner life are not especially radical, but Wilkins goes further. In "A Souvenir" she subtly contrasts male egocentricity with female community. Significantly, women admire the wreath extravagantly, while men react with anger or indifference. Emotion associated with the wreath gives us a hint of the explosive forces often generated in both artist and viewer when a woman tells her story. A lock of hair from a young man was hidden in a girl's drawer, stolen from it by her mother, given to the artist, who wove it into the wreath. The man, angered, goes west in retribution. Wilkins thus suggests what the wreath confirms: in the woman's "story," the man's private, romantic "donation" to his beloved is only a tiny part of a whole vision. And further, in a guarded way, Wilkins insists that this woman's artistic vision is as valid as man's when she asserts the kinship of
Nancy Weeks, an "innocent, narrow-minded, middle-aged woman," with masculine "genius," with "a Michael Angelo or a Turner" (354).

Even a guarded challenge to male artistic superiority was an act of bravery. In Private Woman, Public Stage Mary Kelley writes of the guilt and ambivalence earlier American women writers felt in encroaching on a "traditionally male realm." As members of the generation immediately after the "literary domestics" of Kelley's study, Mary Wilkins and other "local color" writers, Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1909), Rose Terry Cooke (1827-1892), Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1844-1911), and Alice Brown (1857-1948), were perhaps the first American women writers who dared to think of themselves as artists, and were therefore particularly susceptible to the self-doubts of women entering man's domain. These writers were subject to what Gilbert and Gubar term "anxiety of authorship," a subtle and complex fear that in writing beyond the confines of the sentimental "women's story" they were acting like men, and thus behaving inappropriately for their sex. As one art manual put it in 1877, "When a woman desires to paint large-sized pictures... she is lost--lost as a woman."

Forced to dissemble by cultural attitudes and by their own internalized doubts, Mary Wilkins and other women writers often convey part of their experiences indirectly as a buried or hidden text. This buried text, explicated,
gives readers a sense of what women in the past felt they had to hide—perhaps as important as what they wanted to say. Thus, deciphering Philomela's tapestry, figuring out the "other" story in a text, has become an important part of American feminist criticism. Like Gilbert and Gubar I will be in search of the "palimpsest." I will read for the "muted story" which, according to Showalter, accompanies the "dominant story" in the "double-voiced discourse" of women's literature. In the hair wreaths, the art objects and events in Mary Wilkins' stories, I will examine what Cheryl Walker describes as "the deeper and less accessible script [which] points to a part of the self that has been violated, almost rubbed out, but that speaks, nevertheless."

Before discussing the artist theme in Mary Wilkins' fiction, I want to take a look at the kind of art her artists create. "Women's art" had a definite place in the nineteenth-century hierarchy of the arts which begins with the "fine arts," mostly male, descends to the "applied arts," still mostly male, and then on to "women's art," also called "household art," or "domestic art." This woman's art was and is devalued, often seen as "antiques," as merely utilitarian, or as sentimental and trivial. According to Parker and Pollock's study of women and art, Old Mistresses, women's art was assumed to have "a lesser degree of intellectual effort or appeal and a greater concern with manual skill and utility."
When they attempted serious writing and painting, most women artists and writers were not seen as being in the same league as men. Some opponents of women's equality argued that since creativity was by definition masculine, women lacked "genius," a quality variously described. Others argued by analogy to physical strength, sexual drive, or brain size that women possessed talent or creativity in lesser amounts than men. Women whose accomplishment could not be doubted were belittled: Emily Bronte and Olive Schreiner in 1887, for example, were called "girl geniuses." Mary Cassat and George Eliot were simply explained away as "masculine."

Therefore, no matter how successful Mary Wilkins' writing was, as a woman she wrote out of a tradition that was subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) disparaged. Her artists reflect this position. They tell stories as they plod along in a wagon, they write sentimental poetry, they sing in village churches. They work with scorned materials—with rags, scraps, and hair. But Wilkins challenges the arts hierarchy in her stories. She repeatedly calls her craftswomen and storytellers artists and geniuses. She speaks eloquently about her experiences as an artist, using the language of "women's art" to disguise her theme.

In addition to problems of status and acceptability, women artists faced other obstacles on a more mundane level. Few women had private money for art supplies. Mary Wilkins'
first love was painting, but she could not afford oils. If the artist lived in a family, and most women did, she faced the ever-present problems of time and energy since women attempting "man's work" must in most cases add it on to traditional women's work of housekeeping, nurturing, and establishing and maintaining social networks. Even in the late nineteenth century, most women were not encouraged to develop careers outside the home, and most were denied access to studios, nude models, and serious art education. Painting, writing, music, and crafts were for leisure time, after their work as daughters, wives, and mothers in labor intensive households had been completed. Therefore, most of women's art existed in the domestic area, where the artist was free to create within the prescribed confines of her domestic role, often in small blocks of time between other tasks.

Women with talent have always found a socially acceptable outlet for their creative drive in traditional domestic art. Because of time, money, and space constraints, this art has developed highly specialized distinguishing characteristics, which art historians are only beginning to study. Because this women's art was often the only outlet for expression, it was frequently autobiographical. According to Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, its basic structure is non-hierarchical, "visually organized into many centers," and its basic method
is often collage or assemblage, in response to the fract

In the nineteenth century, women's art frequently was utilitarian or memorial, reflecting the feminine domestic role. In the artist's "studio," usually a corner of the kitchen or back porch, her materials were often whatever she had--thread, scraps, rags, twigs, flowers, and herbs. Women wove bedcovers and rugs and pieced quilts. They embroidered, crocheted, and knitted clothing, scarves, table and bed linens; they sculpted in wax and clay and wood, made pottery and decorated china; they painted and decorated fans, screens, furniture; they sketched, painted, stenciled, made frames and wallhangings; they decorated rooms and planned gardens. They designed and wove commemorative jewelry and wreaths from yarn, flowers, and human hair.

While this "domestic art" was considered of lesser value than "fine art," the artists themselves often had an accurate sense of its value, and other women did as well, as can be seen by signed work, testimony in journals and letters, and instructions in wills. Fairs and exhibitions enabled artists to display their art and receive recognition, as described in Dorothy Canfield's story "The Bedquilt" (1917), and women developed local fame similar to the recognition given to Elvira Slawson in Mary Wilkins' "A Pot of Gold," who was admired because she made up lace patterns "out of her own head."
One quilter interviewed by Cooper and Buford remembered all her life that her teacher told her, "Piecing was like art," and, indeed, more and more today the products of this domestic arts tradition are being recognized as valid art forms, affirming what the artists have always known. Not just naive folk crafts, these domestic arts can be highly sophisticated responses to life and materials, the work of trained artists. They are products of an arts tradition which encouraged the development of technique and the sharing of materials, a tradition which was transmitted from mother to daughter and woman to woman in a widespread apprenticeship system. Belatedly, quilts and hooked rugs, in particular, are now regarded as design work which anticipates Cubism by at least a hundred years.

The handcrafts and nostalgia of the Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are a background for the Mary Wilkins artist story. The Arts and Crafts movement, while not elevating women's status in the arts, served to provide more art opportunities for women. More importantly, the success of Morris and Company, an English arts group led by William Morris which specialized in embroidery and interior design, helped women see the value of the traditional women's crafts which were suddenly considered fine arts when men like Morris created them. Magazine articles encouraged women to look on their needlework as "the oldest of the fine arts"
and even as the "source of art."  Books on interior
decoration and landscape gardening became popular. The Arts
and Crafts interest in folk art showed women that baskets,
textiles, and pottery could be forms of expression in
themselves.  

In America during the eighties and nineties, the Arts
and Crafts movement stimulated a colonial revival which
further reinforced interest in traditional women's crafts.
Pride in this woman's tradition is evident when Candace
Wheeler, an important needleartist and organizer, describes
the applied arts exhibit in the Women's Building of the 1893
Exposition in Chicago, as "a new birth, a revival of ancient
handcrafts."  Like Wheeler, Mary Wilkins was keenly
interested in the colonial revival. Her old women artists
are a part of the primitivism of the period, the nostalgic
look backward to the handwork of the older generation
characteristic of the Arts and Crafts movement. The blue
and white coverlet Deborah weaves in Pembroke, the obituary
pieces embroidered by Persis Buckley in "The Buckley Lady,"
and the decorative innovations of Mrs. Jameson in her
Colonial Revival novel, The Jamesons, all show Wilkins'
interest in the revival of rural crafts and the new appeal
of Colonial interiors. When she promotes old crafts like
weaving and lace making she asserts the value of what they
represent: a tradition of women's art in America which was
part of a new sense of woman's possibilities.
By helping to establish the validity of the women’s art tradition, the Arts and Crafts movement indirectly promoted women’s rights. Crafts societies provided an informal forum for discussion of women’s issues. According to Eileen Boris’ study of the Arts and Crafts organizations, the usual sex role divisions of labor promoted "a sisterhood of art, a sense of community, developed through networks of friends and through common activity." This political function of women’s arts groups was already well-established in another woman’s art organization, as is evident by the fact that Susan B. Anthony gave her first suffrage speech at a quilting bee. In fact, women’s sewing groups played a major part in nineteenth century abolition and temperance movements. By incorporating into her stories a small and specialized audience which functions similarly to the members of a quilting bee or a crafts group, Wilkins likewise provides a feminist frame of reference for her artists which can render the establishment judgement irrelevant. In "A Church Mouse" Mrs. Gale supports Hetty’s takeover of the church; in "Christmas Jenny" Mrs. Carey sees Jenny as a hero. In Pembroke other women appreciate the care and skill of Deborah’s weaving and other women notice the intricacy and beauty of Charlotte’s embroidered designs. Wilkins reflects the importance of these artists when she repeatedly refers to them as artists and geniuses and compares them to Napoleon, Michelangelo, Turner, Webster,
and Joan of Arc. She insists on the validity and stature of her artists. The Arts and Crafts movement encouraged Mary Wilkins and other women to see their crafts as potential challenges to male arts domination and also gave women for the first time a sense of place in the history of arts development.

But women did not need the Arts and Crafts movement to validate their art amongst themselves. This woman's art has always been valuable to both artist and her initiated audience because it has enabled woman to speak her piece freely. Woman's art is self-expressive: artists have always spoken of their daily lives and of their deep feelings in their domestic art. Because quilts are the most documented women's art we have, much evidence of the way women express their own lives in their art comes from quilts. Elaine Showalter sees in quilts "an album of the female life cycle from birth to death." One quilter quoted in *Anonymous Was a Woman* says, "My whole life is in that quilt....All my joys and all my sorrows are stitched into those little pieces." Many of the traditional patterns express themes of domestic life: "Baby Blocks," "Log Cabin," "Attic Windows," and "Baskets," for example. The messages of quilts made in these patterns have always been accessible to other women who would not only appreciate the formal intricacies, but would also understand and appreciate the feelings expressed.
Long before the male arts establishment, domestic and folk artists showed that simple line, form, and color can express complex ideas and emotions. Many powerful quilts in original adaptations of patterns like "Wild Goose" and "Pine Tree" express deep feelings for nature. Other domestic arts express the religious and spiritual concerns of the artist. For example, the Kopps describe an "apocalyptic" rug;33 Jonathan Holstein explains a quilt in his study of the quilt design tradition as having "the aura of a mystic drawing;"34 and Eleanor Munro writes of the "subtle mysticism" of the "Broken Star" quilts.35 And other forms of women's art besides quilts and rugs tell stories to those who, as Annette Kolodny says in an analysis of Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers," have the "fund of shared recognitions and potential inference" upon which "symbolic representations" depend.36

As Gilbert and Gubar point out, women's art has always been a means of communication: "Like Ariadne, Penelope, and Philomela, women have used their looms, thread, and needles both to defend themselves and silently to speak of themselves."37 In Susan Glaspell's story, "A Jury of Her Peers," as Showalter, Kolodny, and others have demonstrated, the domestic details and the missewn quiltblock "speak" to the women who serve as a jury for Minnie Foster.38 Minnie defends herself and speaks for herself in her quilt piece. Similarly, the art objects and processes in Mary Wilkins'
stories speak to her readers. Like the themes of the stories themselves, this art is both a way of asserting self and a symbol of human interconnectedness; it speaks in a private language about what is essential to women.

The private language of women's domestic art can be subversive. With her art the artist can speak more eloquently and suggestively about her real concerns and frustrations and pleasures than she can with words which are freighted with historical assumptions about women and men, art and genius. In Mary Wilkins' stories frequently the women's art asserts alternative values against strictures of preachers, husbands, and church and town officials whose tunnel vision often ignores human needs. Stories like "A Church Mouse" and "A Village Singer," in which women defy patriarchal self-interest and fight for their rights, show Wilkins' sense that these humble women's crafts contain the seeds of rebellion. Because the artist could circumvent convention when she circumvented language, these art objects and processes could be an outpouring from those with a "story" to those alert to catch it.

If this claim for the subversive quality of women's domestic art seems exaggerated, let me give two historical examples from quilts. Jonathan Holstein describes a complex, turbulent, nineteenth-century "crazy" quilt, on one tiny square of which the artist has embroidered "I wonder if I am dead." With this quilt, through design, color, and
epigraph, the artist has created a powerful poem about existential despair, a statement she almost certainly could not have made in any other form. My second example, the famous "Bible Quilt" (1895-1898), now in the collection of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, shows how a woman who had no voice at all in white-supremist, male-dominant culture could speak about "her deeply felt spiritual life."40 The artist, Harriet Powers, an uneducated Black woman, appliqued the story of the creation and of Biblical history interspersed with details of local history. Marie Jeanne Adam's analysis of the structure of this quilt concludes it is "a grand spiritual vision."41 With her art, Powers has given an eloquent sermon, thus usurping the minister's function of preaching.

One square of her quilt contains a motif that may be even more audacious. At the focal point, the central bottom square, Powers appliqued a pig, the largest figure in the quilt. Her caption is, "The independent hog which ran 500 miles from Ga. to Va. her name was Betts." Reading this motif as a reference to the route taken by runaway slaves, Adams argues that it brings together Powers' "faith in the Biblical stories of deliverance and her vision of her life experience as a freed slave."42 Since the femininity of this independent creature is unmistakably emphasized by large hanging teats, I read an additional meaning of woman's independent creativity clearly on the loose and traveling
far. Indeed, Betts exhibits the kind of freedom Powers demonstrates in making her quilt. And the fact that a group of women commissioned this quilt raises intriguing questions about how consciously support from her contemporary audience may have encouraged her vision.

Women's domestic art is not only a means of self-expression and a way of communicating subversively. As Parker and Pollock suggest, women’s traditional crafts are best seen as "a distinctive form of art with different kinds of relations between maker and object and between object and viewer and user." One of the different relations expressed in this art is a personal dimension, demonstrated in the art created by Mary Wilkins' artist heroines. These creations are important parts of personal and family ritual. The hair wreath in "A Souvenir," for example, is valuable to the artist's sister not only because it is beautiful but because it was made by a sister and it contains hair from deceased family members. In Pembroke Deborah weaves the blue and white coverlet for her daughter's bride chest. In "A Poetess" Betsy's memories of the dead boy make the poem she writes about him more valuable for her, and the poem helps console his mother when she had thought nothing would ease her pain.

Because of the personal associations of women's art, the artist often used her materials in a unique way. In a culture where the dominant symbol-makers were male, women
devised a system of private symbols to express their relationships. Materials used to make art were usually recycled, and thus carried personal associations. In Wilkins' "A Wayfaring Couple," for example, one of Araminta's "chief treasures" is "a tiny pincushion made of a bit of her mother's wedding dress."44 Says Showalter, a quilt's "special symbolism" is found "in the individual piece, the fragment that recalls a costume or a memory."45 Often the artist's material is given by or has been used by a loved one, and by incorporating pieces of her own and another's clothing into her art, she makes the art into a tangible memorial to a relationship. Artists thus put themselves and their loved ones into their work in a very physical way. As one quilter interviewed by Cooper and Buford said, a piece of material from a favorite teacher "meant a little bit of Miss Jessie in your quilt."46

Artists who practice this kind of collage or assemblage immortalize their loved ones in a work of art that is as tangible as a monument, an almost sculptural and evocative memorial. That this kind of memorial was common can be seen in Jane Gove's famous rug made of her dead mother's clothes (1845), Sarah Blackstone's rugs of interwoven material and her children's hair (1885), and the many testimonials of quilts that contain pieces from friends' and relatives' clothes.47 Hair from loved ones, often deceased, was used to make wreaths, pictures, and memorial jewelry. Quilts and
hair pictures could thus be a history of a woman's life and relationships. In a world where women had little legal and economic identity, their art was a way of "documenting" their lives with "pieces" from friends and relatives. It was a ritual of bonding and a way of preserving the past.

That the emotional associations of the materials making up the art object are part of its value is a woman's theme—it is sentimental. It is also underground. Although it has always been a part of women's art, its value is seldom asserted in literature. Exceptions are stories like "The Foreroom Rug" by Kate Douglas Wiggin, where the artist makes a rug of her own and her sister's old clothes saying, "This rug is going to be a kind of a history of my life and Lovey's wrought together." Also, a modern story by Alice Walker, "Everyday Use," shows how a sister who loves a quilt because it reminds her of the family members whose clothes it is made of appreciates its true value more than the sister who wants to hang it on the wall as art. And in Mary Wilkins' story, "A Souvenir," part of the value of the art object, a hair wreath, is that it is made out of the hair of several generations of family members. As Nancy says:

"I had a good many locks of 'em 'way back. I had some of my great-grandmother's hair, an' my grandmother's. That little forget-me-not in the corner's made out of my great-grandmother's--I didn't hev much of that--an' that lily's grandmother's. She was a light-favored woman, an' her hair turned a queer kind of a yellow-gray. I had a great piece of it mother cut off after she died. It worked in real pretty. Then I had a lot
of my mother's, an' some of my sister's that died, an'
a child's that mother lost when he was a baby, and a
little of my uncle Solomon White's, mother's brother's,
an' some of my father's. Then thar's some of the
little boy's that Charlotte lost."\(353\)

This view of art as constructed out of souvenirs forces
us to look at art in a very different way, to think about
the artist's feelings and her life and relationships, to see
artwork less objectively, to be drawn into the work and the
life behind it. This view is a powerful counter to
modernist use of "found" materials which insists upon
randomness, the nadir of objectivity. It is a way of
asserting what Carol Gilligan shows us is the woman's theme:
the importance of human connections.\(^5\)\(^0\)

The idea of materials as souvenirs, as pieces of memory
from which art is constructed, has another significance.
Speaking of quilts, Eleanor Munro believes that the "latent
religious" character of women's art comes from its
"redemption" of "memory-laden bits" from oblivion and
decay.\(^5\)\(^1\) As image, the process of saving scraps and
creating new entities from them is a remarkable metaphor for
what occurs in the writer's mind as she creates an ordered
whole out of chaos. This metaphor underlies many
explanations of the artistic method. As an example,
consider this description of Mary Wilkins' stories by an
anonymous 1891 reviewer: "From suggestions of emotion and
action, from fragments of incidents and bits of life and
personality...she constructs the living characters found in
her pages."

The writer who puts together "pieces" of salvaged memory creates by saving life. This saving has particular importance because often woman's art (like life) is perishable and because the personal associations which give this art its unique value are not always communicable. In order to give these private symbols of woman's art permanence, writers like Mary Wilkins who realize their value incorporate them into the "high" art of stories and novels. In the process, the personal meanings and associations of the art object in the story become much of the significance of the story itself. As a result of this interweaving, frequently women's art objects in fiction become condensed and rich symbols for the novels or stories themselves. In Kate Douglas Wiggin's "A Foreroom Rug," the rug Diodema makes is a "kind of a history" of the two sisters' intertwined lives, represented by intertwined symbols in the rug made of their old clothing. This rug, a "pathetic little romance of rags," in which all the important events of two lives are "chronicled in this narrow space not two yards square," is a metaphor for the story, which likewise "chronicles" the two sisters' lives in brief. Similarly, as Glenda Hobbs observes, the statue Gertie carves in Harriet Arnow's The Dollmaker is, like Arnow's novel, "weighty, skilled, ingenious, penetrating, and also somewhat unfinished." And the quilt both sisters
want in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" brings together in its pieces, from Civil War uniform to faded housedress, all the diverse strands of an American Black heritage, just as Walker's story itself does.

The art Mary Wilkins' artists produce likewise becomes a condensed, multi-faceted symbol for the story itself. Her writing replicates the art objects and processes of her characters, and vice versa. Wilkins tells stories of women telling stories (singing, sewing, writing) and the story the woman tells (sings, sews, writes) signifies the story Wilkins tells. The art her characters create is both embedded in the story and representative of the story. In this way she gives permanence to their art--she rescues it.

Mary Wilkins' "A Souvenir" illustrates how an art object is both an artifact within a story and a symbol for it. In this story, the artist, Nancy Weeks, makes an "intricate" and "beautiful" wreath of family hair which she displays proudly in her parlour. This wreath made of "souvenirs" from several generations of family members, serves as a metaphor for Mary Wilkins' story and for women's art.

Like Mary Wilkins' art in creating this story of ordinary village women, their pretensions, their little economies, and their dreams, Nancy's art is realistic. As admiring women exclaim, "'That acorn is so natural! and that sprig of ivy!'" Wilkins' story is about the relationships between generations of women and their men. Nancy mentions
her great-grandmother, her grandmother, and her mother, and a subplot concerns the love affair of Emmeline, Nancy's sister Charlotte's daughter. At the end of the story, Emmeline, reunited with her lover, kisses her mother's "soft, old cheek" (367), in a symbolic gesture which draws together Emmeline, her lover, and her mother. Nancy's art is also "about" relationships. Her wreath combines the hair of generations of women and men and draws them together, like Emmeline's gesture. Like the relationships in the story, and like women's domestic art, Nancy's wreath is non-hierarchical, a circle of woven forms with no beginning and no ending. Hair from dead people is made into a circle of images from nature including "'rose-buds, an' lilies, an' pansies, an' poppies, an' acorns, besides the leaves'"(352).

These nature images that comprise the hair wreath (an archetypal symbol of female sexuality) themselves represent the life cycle: rose-buds for youth, lilies for redemption, pansies for memory, poppies for death, and acorns for new life. The wreath in this story thus speaks of the enduring cycle of birth and death which is woman's particular province, which occupies her memory and her art. Carol Gilligan reminds us: while the male "developmental litany intones the celebration of separation, autonomy, individuation, and natural rights" women preserve and protect human recognition of the cycle of life.55

At the end of "A Souvenir," male pride and male laws of
inheritance are clearly secondary to the women's focus on the connections and intricacies of human circles of life. Nancy dies, and her husband, who quickly remarries, shows that he does not value her art. But Nancy's sister Charlotte breaks into his house and steals her sister's wreath. When her former brother-in-law comes after it, she tells him what she thinks of the way he has treated her sister's things. She shows him that he is not worthy to own the hair wreath, and he backs down. He sees she is right. The same pattern is repeated in another story, "Cinnamon Roses," where Elsie Mills, evicted from her home, saves the roses her sister had "set"--her art, her "one little legacy of grace"--by stealing the scythe of the man who had threatened to mow them down. Like Charlotte, she asserts her right to her sister's art and educates a man as to its value. Thus Elsie's neighbor's and Nancy's husband's rights of ownership are engulfed by a more powerful and profound force of ongoing human connections.

By the end of "A Souvenir," Charlotte is the proud owner of a treasure, the hair wreath which is part of her folks, part of her sister, part of her daughter, and part of herself. In writing about it, Mary Wilkins saves from oblivion this beautiful symbol of interconnected life. Within the story, Charlotte performs the same function for her sister's art as Mary Wilkins does: she rescues it and saves it because it is a work of art. I also like to think
Charlotte's act and her appreciation, her ability to read her sister's art, can be a metaphor for what we are doing today in women's studies. We are taking back something valuable which is rightfully ours, work that has been neglected. We treasure it because it expresses our connections with life--because it is our sisters' art.


Joplin, 52.


Mme. M. Elizabeth Cave, *Drawing from Memory*, quoted


13 Walker, 31-2.


17 Pannill, 4.

18 See the history of three talented young artists, two boys and a girl, in Diana Karzenik's *Drawn to Art* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1985). Emma (1850-1933) became a teacher and lived with her parents in Manchester, New Hampshire, while her brothers became artists in Boston. When her parents moved to the country, Emma quit her job and moved with them. When she did finally make the "unusual" move to Boston in 1883, she worked in her rooms as a photo retoucher and took evening courses.


22 Cooper and Buford, p.42.

23 Dewhurst and others describe a 1913 cartoon in the *New York Evening Sun* depicting an old woman quilting. The caption reads "The Original Cubist." The cartoon was intended to mock the infamous Armory Show, but it also "unconsciously acknowledged" American women's abstract


26 Boris, 122.


28 Boris, 44.

29 Dewhurst, 47.


31 "Piecing and Writing," The Poetics of Gender, 230.

32 Bank, 94.

33 Joel and Kate Kopp, American Hooked and Sewn Rugs: Folk Art Underfoot (New York: Dutton, 1985), 57.


35 Eleanor Munro, "Breaking Stars: A Collaboration in Quilts," The Artist and the Quilt, 44.


37 Gilbert and Gubar, 642.

38 Showalter, "Piecing and Writing," 242-3; Kolodny, 55-58.
Holstein incredibly suggests this quilt may be the work of a lunatic: p. 62.


Adams, 16.

Adams, 21.

Parker and Pollack, 78.


"Piecing and Writing," 230.

Cooper and Buferd, 42.

Joel and Kate Kopp, 72, 127. See also Cooper and Buferd, passim.


Gilligan, p.23.

Munro, 46.

"Miss Mary E. Wilkins," *The Book Buyer* 8 (1891), 54.

Wiggin, 317, 323.


Gilligan, 23.

CHAPTER 3

NEW ENGLAND ESSENCES

In "Cinnamon Roses" and "A Souvenir" the woman artist takes back what is hers and in the process educates a man who threatens her tradition and her art. "A New England Nun" is another Mary Wilkins story that focuses on a woman who resists male encroachment. Frequently anthologized, "A New England Nun" has become the representative Mary Wilkins Freeman story, probably because modern readers find contemporary reverberations in Wilkins' portrait of the artist who retreats to her "room of one's own." Not only does the artist resist marriage, she also separates herself from the community who whisper about her ways and "laugh and frown down" her art. The heroine resists all connection in order to assert her sense of her own space and her own rituals. A powerful testament to the pressures on the nineteenth-century woman artist and writer, this story thus shows one way of dealing with the love/art conflict.

At the end of "A New England Nun," Louisa Ellis, who has decided not to marry, sits by her window sewing with a new sense of peaceful dedication:
She gazed ahead through a long reach of future days strung together like pearls on a rosary, every one like the others.... Outside was the fervid summer afternoon; the air was filled with the sounds of the busy harvest of men and birds and bees;... Louisa sat, prayerfully numbering her days, like an uncloistered nun.¹

In an early assessment of Mary Wilkins' writing, William Dean Howells might have been thinking of this passage when he compared Wilkins to Tennyson's Lady of Shalott":

Long may she sit at her loom, our Lady of Shalott, and weave this rare rich tapestry, ever remembering
"A curse is on her if she stay
To look down to Camelot."²

Howells' comparison suggests that for him the hidden themes of "A New England Nun" are clear. The Lady of Shalott weaving by her mirror is not so different from Louisa Ellis sewing by her window: to create, both abjure "the busy harvest." Howells recommends the same seclusion for Wilkins, a writer he regards as a genius of "natural realism" who has developed her unique art "without tutors and advisors." Wilkins' image of Louisa "prayerfully numbering her days" suggests a creative introspection which is echoed in Howells' hope that Wilkins will continue to "listen to the gentle spirit that whispers in her ear." Thus Howells' admonishment not to "look down to Camelot," not to be influenced by rules and models, advises for Mary the retreat Louisa achieves in "A New England Nun."

Howells' advice to Mary Wilkins is implicitly challenged by twentieth-century critics who argue that
Louisa's retreat signifies neurosis and sexual repression. It is worth noting that until recently the seclusion of Emily Dickinson was similarly viewed as neurotic, although not by Howells, who said of Dickinson, "The heart of full womanhood...speaks in the words of this nun-like New England life." Not all Wilkins' critics share Howells' belief that a "nun-like" life can express "full womanhood." According to Wilkins' biographer, Edward Foster, Louisa chose a "sterile" lifestyle. Perry Westbrook says she "has done no less than permit herself to become unfitted for life." David Hirsch sees "A New England Nun" as a study of "obsessive neurosis." Leah Glasser calls the story "an icily precise portrait of neurotic spinsterhood."

However, for other critics the implications of being a "nun" are not necessarily only sexual, and Louisa Ellis represents more wide-ranging values. Margorie Pryse argues that Louisa offers an alternative paradigm for American experience. Rosamund Bailey says Louisa "may have spiritual values that practical minds can't understand." Alice Petry shows how in a "marriage minded age" Wilkins had to "guide the reactions of her readers" with familiar imagery to persuade them to find positive value in a woman living alone. I agree with Bailey and Pryse that Louisa represents important values in herself, and I agree with Petry that Mary Wilkins takes pain to sugarcoat her message. Adrienne Rich argues that Emily Dickinson
retreated because "she was determined to survive." I think Louisa avoids marriage for the same reason. In my view, "A New England Nun" is an autobiographical story of artistic self-preservation and a central document of Mary Wilkins' literary career.

As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out in The Madwoman in the Attic, nineteenth-century women writers were able to develop ways to circumvent criticism at the same time as they continued to write about controversial topics. To manage this feat, say Gilbert and Gubar, they channeled "their female concerns into secret or at least obscure corners." Through "submerged meanings of their texts" writers could address issues of female autonomy. Mary Wilkins in "A New England Nun" is, to use Gilbert and Gubar's phrase, "publicly presenting acceptable facades for private and dangerous visions." This disguise is a necessary strategy in a story about a woman choosing a solitary life in a culture where marriage is the norm.

In her portrait of a "nun" who releases her lover from his promise, Mary Wilkins writes the story of a woman artist who preserves her integrity and her artistic vision by deliberate withdrawal to her ivory tower. "A New England Nun" is a carefully disguised portrait of the artist which denies most of the popular assumptions of nineteenth-century womanhood. In releasing the lover who has made his fortune and returned to marry her, Louisa is
refusing the wife and mother role which secured a woman's identity in nineteenth-century America. In flinching from the prospect of caring for her fiance's elderly mother she is denying the nursing and nurturing which gave many women a sense of purpose and usefulness and provided novelists with their one dramatic role for women apart from sweetheart/wife/mother. In choosing her own home and the companionship of her dog and her bird instead of her lover's house and his family and his "company to entertain," she is resisting the domestic circle where her womanly graces could influence other lives. What "A New England Nun" substitutes for domestic connubiality is a near-Utopian harmony and self-sufficiency which echoes the life Mary Wilkins had chosen for herself and was living in 1887 after her decision to leave Brattleboro, Vermont, and live in Randolph, Massachusetts. While Wilkins, anticipating her readers' expectations, concludes the story with a conventional match between Louisa's former suitor and a village girl, "A New England Nun" is primarily an affirmation of Mary Wilkins' faith in her artist self.

An unmarried woman sensitive about her age and her privacy, Mary Wilkins was 35 when "A New England Nun" was published, but three years later she was successfully passing for under 30. She angrily protested a comparison between herself and her aging spinster characters. Nevertheless, the resemblances between Mary Wilkins and
Louisa Ellis are striking. Both have lost parents and siblings, and both have established a private domain. Louisa lives alone in her little house; Mary lives in a private apartment in the Wales farmhouse. Like Louisa's, Mary's lifestyle is unusual, and evidence in her letters and stories shows how it was scrutinized. In an 1889 letter she says of her apartment, "It is one of the queerest looking places you ever saw, I expect. You ought to see the Randolph folks when they come in. They look doubtful in the front room, but they say it is 'pretty.' When they get out into the back room, they say it 'looks just like me.'" The prevalence of the theme of village prying and censure in stories like "A Gala Dress," "Christmas Jenny," "A Modern Dragon," and "An Independent Thinker" further suggests that Mary Wilkins like Louisa Ellis was no stranger to the whispers of the village tribunal.

A contemporary eyewitness noticed the similarities between Louisa and Mary Wilkins. When he visited Wilkins in Randolph, Hamlin Garland felt "large and rude like that man in ...'A New England Nun,'" and he recognized details of food and furnishings from the story. In addition, details in Wilkins' life that Garland was not aware of are also similar to those in Louisa's. Like Louisa's fiance Joe Dagget, Mary Wilkins' real-life romantic interest, a popular Brattleboro youth named Hanson Tyler, had gone away
to sea. In fact, Tyler left Brattleboro in 1873, fourteen years before "A New England Nun" appeared in Harper's Bazar. It seems more than coincidence that Joe Dagget was also gone "to make his fortune" for fourteen years (6). In writing of Joe's return to Louisa, Mary Wilkins exorcises the idea of Hanson Tyler returning to her. Given the parallel details and situations of Louisa and Mary, it is likely that Wilkins disguises the true nature of her story to protect her own privacy as well as to avoid being condemned by critics and readers who would be offended by portraits of women avoiding traditional women's roles.

When Louisa ignores village social pressures, her attitude toward public opinion is an explanation of and a commentary upon Mary Wilkins and the artistic success of her early career, when she avoided critics and wrote following her own bent. Even though Wilkins describes Louisa as mild and simple and gentle, when we look beyond the facade we see her rebelliousness. Like Mary, Louisa rejects the conventional wisdom that marriage is "woman's best and highest destiny"18 and chooses to live alone. She enjoys what she has and she does what she wants. She ignores the village virtues of making do and saving the best for company:

Louisa used china every day—something which none of her neighbors did. They whispered about it among themselves. Their daily tables were laid with common crockery, their sets of best china stayed in the parlor closet, and Louisa Ellis was no richer nor better bred than they. (2)
In the village code, "good" things are an index to wealth and social status, not a pleasure in themselves. Louisa, then, lives by principles the villagers don't recognize. At the same time, she is aware of the pressures the village could exert on her: she knows, for example, that if she marries Joe "thrifty village traditions" will prevent her from having adequate servants for his big house (9). Conversely, she knows that remaining single will enable her to live apart from village whispers, undisputed queen of a domain where she can weave her web and sew her seam for her own pleasure. She is a nun, but she is "uncloistered": she owes duties to no one. Her timid, fussy, "old maid" exterior disguises an artist who would say with Mary Wilkins that she is conscious of "caring more in [her] heart for the art of [her] work than for anything else."19

For Mary Wilkins, order can be artistry, for in "A New England Nun," she tells us "Louisa had almost the enthusiasm of an artist over the mere order and cleanliness of her solitary home" (9). Louisa, like Sarah Penn in "The Revolt of Mother" and other interior artists in other Wilkins stories, uses her art to define and decorate her personal space. In Wilkins' description of Louisa's highly developed pleasure in "the art of [her] work" we see her dedication to drying blossoms, distilling perfumes, sewing, polishing, and folding her linens away in lavender. We see
her sensuous delight in a "delicate harmony" of perfectly baked cakes, lettuce, and sugared currants. We see an artist's composition in her tablesing of pink china, silver, cut glass, damask napkin, and "starched linen cloth whose border pattern of flowers glistened" (2). She lives in strict order with everything in its place, and all her household objects are carefully chosen, even delicately luxurious. What Louisa Ellis achieves in "A New England Nun" is similar to what Mary Wilkins achieved in her years living in Randolph. Foster and others point out the dearth of information on the Randolph years, but evidence from her stories and the quality of her work suggest that from 1880 to 1901, from age 28 to age 49, Mary Wilkins led a harmonious and productive life. During the years in Randolph, she wrote most of her best stories, collected in A Humble Romance (1887) and A New England Nun (1891), and her best novels, Jane Field (1893) and Pembroke (1894). After her marriage in 1901, her work declined. From what we know of Mary Wilkins Freeman's married life in Metuchen, New Jersey, "A New England Nun" is amazingly prophetic. She moved into a large house with a mother-in-law already installed. She had to manage servants and a busy household for the first time in her life. Her husband supervised her reading and writing and "criticized her stories in detail."20 In 1907 she wrote: "Sometimes I wish I could have a little toy house, in which I could do just as I
pleased, cook a meal if I wanted to, and fuss around generally."21 This letter suggests that Mary Wilkins Freeman, in retrospect, was well aware of the rare autonomy she had granted Louisa Ellis in her tiny domain. The phrases "do just as I please" and "fuss around generally" could refer to her writing as well as to her housekeeping, just as in "A New England Nun" similar deprecating phrases—"foolish comfort" and "pretty but senseless old maiden ways" (9)—refer to Louisa's favorite occupations.

Distilling and sewing, the two "senseless" and "foolish" handcrafts that occupy Louisa for "mere pleasure" and "mere delight" (9), are both arts in themselves and metaphors for artistic process in "A New England Nun." In the nineteenth century both were typical women's crafts, but as a result of the Arts and Crafts movement both were increasingly being seen as serious arts by the popular press. In particular, needlework was undergoing a renaissance. American views toward this traditional women's work were changing as a result of some radically different English embroidery—the creations of Morris & Company and of the Royal School of Art Needlework—exhibited in the United States at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial.22 Describing the "needle art" craze sweeping America after the Philadelphia exhibit, Lucretia Hale, writing in Mary Wilkins' favorite magazine, Harper's, in 1880, predicts that talented women will "elevate and exalt
our lives by showing how the needle can enter the province of art."²³

Other articles in the 1880's stress the aesthetic qualities of the new art needlework, a crewel embroidery of flowing stylized floral patterns done in silk or wool on linen, and encourage women to see their handwork as art and themselves as artists.²⁴ Since sewing was one of the few crafts whereby a woman could earn money, in one magazine story embroidery is called "the kind of art to command the readier sale.²⁵ Distilling, too, was called an art in the popular magazines. An 1874 Harper's article, "The Art of Perfumery," describes how essential oils are distilled from flowers and herbs. Significantly, the author makes an explicit comparison between this process and painting: "The perfumer's efforts approach those of the artist. The painter reproduces the flower to the eye; the perfumer grasps and preserves its fleeting fragrance."²⁶

Mary Wilkins' articulation of fine linen, delicate stitchery, and floral pattern aligns Louisa's needlework with the art embroidery movement, and her emphasis on the process of both sewing and distilling establishes Louisa as an artist much like herself. Unlike the Wilkins heroines who decorate their parlors with coarse "Berlin work" or wool crosstitch, Louisa has embroidered her linen tablecloth with a glistening "border pattern of flowers," most likely of glossy silk. Her company apron, also of
linen, has a "little cambric edging on the bottom," probably some kind of applique work (3). Louisa sews, "not always for use, but for the simple, mild pleasure which she [takes] in it" (9). Because she is not mending or making something to wear, her sewing is identified with aesthetics, with enjoyment, with doing something for its own sake. Likewise, she distills "the sweet and aromatic essences from roses and peppermint and spearmint" as she sews, "for the pleasure of it" (9). In denying utility for Louisa's vials of scented oils, Mary Wilkins emphasizes that Louisa works for her delight in the process and her pleasure in the perfumes themselves.

In her emphasis on Louisa's dedication to the process of her art rather than the product, Mary Wilkins leads us to consider Louisa's sewing as not just an activity in itself but also as a metaphor for other artistic processes. Some Wilkins stories assert rather baldly that needlewomen are artists. In "Amanda and Love" a "silk patchwork bedquilt" is considered "a work of genius."27 In "A Pot of Gold" Elvira Slawson is considered "somewhat on the line of an artist" because she knits lace from patterns "out of her own head."28 In other stories where the heroine knits or sews or quilts, needlework takes on a metaphoric meaning, as it does in Emily Dickinson poems like "Don't put up my Thread and Needle."29 In fact, Mary Wilkins uses the metaphor of knitting to explain her writing in her one
published commentary on her own writing process: "If there is not a story in the truth knit until a truth happens which does contain a story.... If you can do no better at that than I, who drop more stitches...you can at least pull out the knitting."\textsuperscript{30}

As I will show in subsequent chapters, Mary Wilkins frequently uses needlework to remark subversively about her own work, often to write out her anxieties or fantasies about her relationship to her audience. In "An Independent Thinker," for example, Esther defies the town with her knitting, and in "An Honest Soul" Martha is obsessed with getting the squares of a quilt exactly "right" for an audience that really does not care. Like "A New England Nun" these stories consider art in relation to the community, with the difference that in "A New England Nun" the artist turns away from the community because she anticipates censure. In a conscious decision, Louisa, knowing that Joe and his mother will "laugh and frown down" her work, retreats to create in her own way, a way she wants to keep secret since she is "loathe to confess" how often she has "ripped a seam for the mere delight of sewing it again." She knows there will be "small chance" of continuing thus to enjoy the process of her craft if she marries Joe (9). This passage with its sewing and resewing suggests the knitting and pulling-out-knitting metaphor of Mary Wilkins' own description of her process and echoes as
well a friend's observation of her method. According to this friend, Joseph Chamberlin, she "elaborate[s] a good deal as she goes along, throwing away a great many closely written sheets which are her trial-lines." Thus, Louisa's sewing and resewing serves as a subtle metaphor for Mary Wilkins' own recursive writing process.

Similarly, the "aromatic essences" Louisa distills provide an apt metaphor for the sharply condensed local color stories Mary Wilkins writes. Like Louisa when she distills her vials of pungent oils from "roses and peppermint and spearmint" (and like Emily Dickinson's poet who distills "Attar so immense/ From the familiar species/ That perished by the Door-"), Mary Wilkins extracts the telling phrase or detail from the jumble of possible phrases and details to isolate and define the truth of her characters. Foster acknowledges this process when he states that her stories "distill the flavor of life in a New England village," as does Westbrook in saying she describes "the very essence of the New England character." Jay Martin likewise recognizes the truth of Wilkins' metaphor in "A New England Nun" but objects to her practice when he says Louisa distills essences but ignores "the whole wine." His comment is a reminder of the all-too-familiar indictment of women writers like Mary Wilkins who wrote closely-observed stories instead of epic novels. What he fails to note is that Louisa is not interested in
wine—she is after perfume. Mary Wilkins and the other local color writers forego "the whole wine," the panorama, for the essence, the particulars, the microcosm. In the same commentary where she compares writing to knitting, Wilkins asserts that "the backbone of the best fiction is essential truth." This "essential truth" is conveyed as intensely by local incident as global. Thus Louisa expresses the "essential" aromatic oils from plants, and Mary expresses the "essential" qualities of life in the speech and action of her characters.

Just as Louisa's distilling suggests a writer's instinct for finding the truth in ordinary incidents, it also parallels the way Louisa draws out of her experiences her sustaining artistic vision—her sense of harmonious order. It is this vision Joe threatens, with his clumsy boot thrust into her "hedge of lace," the "fairy web" of her life (6). Above all, when Joe threatens to release Caesar, Louisa's chained yellow dog, he threatens her vision of order. Thus Mary Wilkins expresses her own fear that a man upsetting her own "delicate harmony" (10) might change her own artistic vision. And in fact this is what does happen, once Mary Wilkins becomes Mrs. Charles Manning Freeman.

Caesar is a confusing figure because a careful reading fails to establish completely that he is as harmless as Joe believes. Wilkins tells us that he is "fat and sleepy" but
to the villagers he is "a very monster of ferocity." Children with a "fascinated appetite for terror" run by Louisa's house fearfully; their mothers warn them against him, and passers by are wary. His fourteen years on a chain, his fate because of a bite he took of a neighbor in his puppyhood, have made him an amorphous monster: "Caesar at large might have seemed a very ordinary dog, and excited no comment whatever; chained, his reputation overshadowed him, so that he lost his own proper outlines and looked darkly vague and enormous"(11). In this passage, the "might" leaves a seed of doubt as to the real nature of Caesar. But Joe has no doubts: "with his good-humored sense and shrewdness," Joe "saw him as he was," or at least as he was to Joe, and threatens to release Caesar in spite of Louisa's fear and her "soft clamor of warning" (11).

Louisa knows that he will do it:

Louisa had very little hope that he would not, one of these days, when their interests and possessions should be more completely fused in one. She pictured to herself Caesar on the rampage through the quiet and unguarded village. She saw innocent children bleeding in his path. (11-12)

Although the image of Caesar conveys other meanings which I will discuss later, here it is part of a challenge to Louisa's autonomy which shows Joe's blatant disregard for her needs. Male power represents a real threat in Louisa's life. Even before marriage, Joe walks roughshod over her most cherished values. As Marjorie Pryse points out, "Louisa's greater fear seems to be that of losing not
her virginity but her vision."

Mary Wilkins devotes much of "A New England Nun" to subtly documenting how male encroachment upsets the balance of Louisa's world. In an early passage of the story, when Joe visits Louisa, he awkwardly changes the order of two books on her table and then laughs, "Now what difference did it make which book was on top?" when she puts her books back the way she had them (5). However, the position of the books is obviously not the real issue: Joe's and Louisa's actions display a power struggle in progress. Joe's action suggests that he is taking over Louisa's life already, even before they are married. He has previously announced how he will handle Caesar "when their interests and possessions should be more completely fused in one" (11). This oblique comment reminds the reader that when a woman marries she and her husband become one--and that one in Louisa's day, in the eyes of the church and the eyes of the law, is the husband. Hence, Louisa resists, and her resistance indicates a healthy unwillingness to give herself up to Joe's management. She changes the order of the books back to the right order--hers.

The kind of books Louisa and Joe are rearranging is not accidental. An autograph album with its conventional wishes for love and happiness and a "Young Ladies Gift-Book," inherited from her mother, with its sentimental stories and poems, represent the limited life opportunities
available to women of Louisa's time and place. These books thus repeat the advice of Louisa's mother, who "talked wisely to her daughter when Joe Dagget presented himself" (7) and convinced her to agree to marry Joe. Both books and mother reinforce the traditional view that marriage is a woman's best option.

But Louisa does not see marriage as her best option, and her vision, while framed as a nun's, must have struck a note in the hearts of many weary housewives. What Louisa sees in her future with Joe is the other side of the gift-book view of marriage. Louisa sees "dirt and disorder," "endless litter," "a coarse masculine presence" (10), a "domineering," irritable, and demanding old woman to care for, constant rearrangement of her arrangements, un.rewarding labor with little help, and critical scrutiny of her every move. As Rosamund Smith Bailey points out, "Society would tear her from her hortus conclusus [walled garden] and turn her into an unpaid household drudge."36

When Joe overturns Louisa's workbasket on his way out, his action signifies his effect on her work. Mary Wilkins tells us that Louisa's sewing implements have never been mislaid, have become "from long use and constant association, a very part of her personality" (1). Like the artist's brushes and the writer's pen, these tools are a part of Louisa's creative identity. In spite of the comic overtones of this scene, Joe threatens Louisa's work in a
blunt, physical sense, just as in a psychological sense his comments and his failure to understand her need for her own space and her own activities threaten her artistic identity. Thus Louisa must refuse him, to save her soul, her artist self.

Lily Dyer, Joe's mother's hired girl and Joe's new love, represents Louisa's "other self": she is a foil to Louisa in that she represents the life Louisa rejects. She is the fertile, lovable, real woman, "full-figured" and "good and handsome and smart" (13). Unlike Louisa, she is "a favorite with the village folk" (13) as well as "real capable" and "a good deal of help" to Joe's mother (4). Lily will be a resourceful and loving wife to Joe; thus, in meeting the conventional requirements for ending a love story, Mary Wilkins draws attention away from the radical import of Louisa's decision to remain single. But Lily Dyer's name conveys a message: art is immutable, while the love that blooms may also die.

This "other self" that chooses love and marriage undeniably represents a valuable part of experience. However, for Louisa, and for Mary Wilkins at this point in her career, the price she would have to pay for conforming to conventional expectations is too great. It is true that in retreating from Joe and marriage Louisa in many ways is left with a limited life. Her domain is, after all, confined to a house and a garden. But the compensations of
such a life are suggested in the sensual diction Mary Wilkins uses to describe Louisa's art.\textsuperscript{38} If, as Freudian critics tell us, all literary texts contain a core fantasy, then this fantasy in "A New England Nun" is self-gratification. Wilkins' language is quite explicit. She tells us that Louisa's bureau drawers with "exquisitely folded contents redolent with lavender and sweet clover and very purity" are for her pleasure alone (10). Her "sweet and aromatic essences" remain her own. She shrinks from the idea of being watched in her "simple, mild pleasure" (9). This fantasy-level meaning reinforces the conscious meaning: Louisa is getting away with something--with freedom, with independence, with "selfishness," with pleasure--hence what she does must be disguised. Although her domain is small, it does not follow that her experience of life is neurotic, sterile, or shallow. Like Marjorie Pryse, I see Louisa's solitude as leaving her "freer, in her society, than she would otherwise have been."\textsuperscript{39}

Mary Wilkins defends Louisa's choice of "selfish" pleasures using the same argument other writers used to demonstrate the opposite: woman's biological compulsion to be "selfless." The argument from "natural rights" was frequently used to show that women who aspired to be artists could not shirk higher responsibility to biological roles. Both Augusta Evans and Rebecca Harding Davis argue this conforming view of woman's "natural rights" using the
same figure—the Biblical story of Esau, who traded his birthright to his brother for a dish of lentils, or pottage. Hence the story was used metaphorically to refer to a woman who for temporary satisfaction foolishly trades her most precious asset for something of little value. According to Evans, most literary women "barter their birthright of quiet, life-long happiness in the peaceful seclusion of home for a nauseous mess of poisoned pottage." They thus barter away their birthright of "fireside joys and domestic serenity." In Rebecca Harding Davis' "A Wife's Story" (1864), Hetty at first mistakenly thinks her talent is her birthright, which she has thrust aside for "a mess of weakest pottage,--a little love,..." But after a terrifying dream of artistic failure, Hetty realizes "a woman has no better work in life" than being a wife and mother. Davis repeats this theme in "Earthern Pitchers" (1874). When Audrey, a musician, gives up her singing career for marriage, her singing teacher warns her not to give music lessons: "Don't make a market of your birthright," he says. Audrey touches her husband's arm and says, "My birthright is to love."

The young Audrey had felt summoned to her career by God when she heard "strains of simple, powerful harmony on a midnight walk." This sense of oneness with creation is discarded along with her ideas of a musical career. However, harmony is what Mary Wilkins establishes as Louisa
Ellis' birthright in "A New England Nun." When Louisa finally decides not to marry Joe Daggett, she feels peaceful and happy sewing by the window; she has retreated from active to contemplative life as a "New England nun." Wilkins tells us, "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" (17).

Wilkins makes explicit reference to the pottage theme which was used in other fiction to show that a woman artist was bartering the "birthright" of married life for a transitory pleasure. But in "A New England Nun" Wilkins uses this theme to assert that Louisa's birthright is her right to choose. At the end of the story Louisa is an "uncloistered nun:" she lives a dedicated life, but in her own way. She sees ahead of her "a long reach of future days strung together like pearls on a rosary" (17) She will enjoy "prayerfully numbering her days" with her art--her sewing, her distilling, her domestic order. Her "natural right" is the harmony her soul craves. Ironically, Wilkins says that her pottage--if it is pottage--is the very domestic satisfaction Augusta Evans maintained the unmarried woman artist could not have.

Louisa chooses seclusion as the only way to retain her autonomy, her occupation, and her vision. In order to preserve her "pictures of life," Howells recommends a
similar strategy as an artist for Mary Wilkins, "our Lady of Shalott." However, this solution, while it gives Wilkins a degree of freedom, as it does Louisa, is not perfect, for women who so mark off their territory still jealously view the wider spaces available to their male counterparts. Howells warns Mary Wilkins to keep writing her short stories, not to be influenced by other writers and other genres. With benefit of hindsight now, we see he was right; yet Mary Wilkins’ desire to write novels and her interest in deviance and sexuality, evident in a fragment Foster quotes, and in novels like The Shoulders of Atlas (1908) and The Long Arm show her urge to explore forbidden territory. Louisa is restricted just as Mary Wilkins is restricted, by her sex, and this sense of restriction, generating both anger and creative power, is conveyed by the complex image of Caesar.

In reply to critics who see the chained Caesar as representing how Louisa will treat Joe, Leah Glasser points out that Caesar is better compared with Louisa than with Joe, for after all both Louisa and Caesar have been "chained" while Joe has been gone. I agree, but unlike Glasser, I do not see this similarity as suggesting that Louisa fears her sexuality will be released on Joe's return. Rather, Caesar, chained because of aggressive behavior as a puppy, is closely related to Louisa and Mary Wilkins’ anger toward the village view, their culture’s
restriction of women. Caesar comes close, in fact, to being a kind of "madwoman in the attic" in "A New England Nun," a displacement of authorial rage. His confinement to a "tiny hut" suggests the way women have been limited to a narrow domestic range in life and literature—but limited because they are women, not because Joe Dagget has not released them.

Yet displaced anger does not completely explain Caesar, for though it was her brother who originally chained him at the insistence of a neighbor, it is Louisa who keeps him chained. But just as women may change their lives by saying "this is my choice" to a limited existence chosen from limited existences, so too when Louisa asserts her right to control Caesar she asserts her power to transform. For only under Louisa's control, chained, does Caesar lose "his own proper outlines" and become "darkly vague and enormous" (11). Thus Caesar's larger-than-life image suggests not just the artist's displaced anger, but also the creative power that can result from women's restriction. Louisa's experiences, unlike Joe's, have been curtailed by her life in a rural village, by her engagement to an absent lover, and above all by her sex. Again, her situation closely parallels Mary Wilkins'. An early commentator on New England realism, Charles Miner Thompson, while praising Wilkins' achievement, regrets that she is limited by her environment, her temperament, and her sex.
But however regrettable these limits seem to Thompson, the concentration of vision imposed by environment and sex, as Josephine Donovan points out, may have actually favored women's participation in the development of the local color genre. The women local color writers, typically confined by their sex and situation to one village and one landscape, looked closely at these and wrote about what they saw. As it turned out, they saw the world. Writers like Mary Wilkins Freeman, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Rose Terry Cooke reveal the universals of human experience in their closely observed stories of rural and village America.

Mary Wilkins insists that we see these transcendent meanings in Caesar when she compares him to "St. George's dragon" (11). While dragon legends may not be historically true, their existence indicates truth on another level, and a literal person who says that dragons never existed may be discarding the psychological truths that go along with the legend. Caesar's ferocity is the legend in Louisa's village. Joe's compunction to reveal the truth--the "proper outlines--of Caesar, rejects the truth beyond the edges: that Caesar embodies the village "appetite for terror," the villagers' "greedy belief" in an evil they can identify and avoid (11). As the artist's transformation of anger and creative energy, Caesar satisfies the need for danger and excitement in Louisa's village. Indeed, the
very villagers who represent the code Louisa spurns are awed and controlled by their belief in Caesar's ferocity. They warn their children to stay away and they enter her yard warily if at all. Thus Caesar's legend as "written" by Louisa ensures the order and harmony of her retreat.

The final passage of "A New England Nun" affirms that harmony: now Louisa can "sew linen seams, and distil roses, and dust and polish and fold away in lavender" just as she wants. Religious undertones throughout the story reinforce the sense of purposeful order. Mary Wilkins tells us that Caesar may have felt remorse and certainly "encountered a full measure of righteous retribution" for his sin (10). She uses language of church ritual to describe Louisa, also, who sets forth her meal with "grace" (2) and whose occupations, whose art, is "graceful" (9). The implication is that Louisa like Caesar moves through remorse and retribution to grace. I believe that Mary Wilkins felt those productive Randolph years to be a state of grace and that she wrote "A New England Nun" in celebration. A "nun," she had served her novitiate, passed the test, and emerged inviolate, her domain secure. In the final passage of "A New England Nun" Louisa Ellis enters a similar state of grace as an "uncloistered" but dedicated nun, her vision that of an artist with her vocation before her.

William Dean Howells, "Miss Mary E. Wilkins's Stories," *Harpers* 85 (1892): 961.


Leah Blatt Glasser, "'In a Closet Hidden': The Life and Work of Mary Wilkins Freeman," Dissertation, Brown University (1983), 51. Glasser alters this judgement slightly to "icily precise portrait of self-imposed, seemingly neurotic spinsterhood" in a later article, "'She is the One You Call Sister': Discovering Mary Wilkins Freeman," in *Between Women*, ed. Carol Ascher and others (Boston: Beacon, 1984), 192.


Gilbert and Gubar, 74.
14 Information from "a lady who knows Miss Mary Wilkins well" in "The Lounger," Critic 14 (Nov. 29, 1890): 283.

15 Foster, viii and 82-3.


18 This phrase was used by a reviewer who objected to the critique of marriage in another nineteenth-century woman-as-artist portrait, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' The Story of Avis (1877): "The Story of Avis and Other Novels, The Atlantic Monthly 41 (1878): 487.


20 Foster, 162.


27 Mary Wilkins, "Amanda and Love," in A New England Nun,


31 "Miss Mary E. Wilkins at Randolph Massachusetts," *Critic*, ns 29 (March 5, 1898): 156.

32 Poem #448, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*.


34 Mary Wilkins Freeman, "Mary E. Wilkins Freeman: An Autobiography," 25.


36 Bailey, 72.

37 For the "divided self" in artist novels, see Maurice Beebe, *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts: The Artist as Hero in Fiction from Goethe to Joyce* (New York: New York UP, 1964), 5-11. Louisa fits Beebe's formulation of the artist torn between "the 'holy' or aesthetic demands of his mission as artist and his natural desire as a human being to participate in the life around him" (18). Linda Pannill notes that the divided self led to "a much more absolute dichotomy" in women's novels because women's social restrictions allowed them fewer experiences and artistic detachment was seen as going against women's "nature." "The Artist-Heroine in American Fiction, 1890-1920," Diss University of North Carolina, 1975, 60-1. Both Pannill and Huf point out that the conflict between the social and the artist self in women's artist novels is dramatized by foil characters who represent "the approved model for girls and women in contrast to the artist-heroines," Pannill, 61; see also Linda Huf, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman: thee Writer as Heroine in American Literature* (New York: Ungar, 1983), 8.


44. Howells, "Miss Mary E. Wilkins's Stories," 961.

45. This undated fragment narrated by "Jane Lennox, spinster," begins, "I am a rebel and what is worse a rebel against the Overgovernment of all creation...," Foster, 142.

46. Glasser, "'In a Closet Hidden,'" 60.

47. Gilbert and Gubar argue that nineteenth-century women writers who do not openly criticize conventions "almost obsessively create characters who enact their own covert authorial anger" (77). Caesar--who may or may not be ferocious--seems an apt image of covert anger. Louisa's fear that Caesar may go on a rampage through the village suggests a distanced hostility toward the villagers and the view of life they represent. See Barnstone for the view that Caesar "embodies the disturbances which she has diligently been purifying from her life," 132.


CHAPTER 4

HOUSEHOLD ART

The "art of decorating and furnishing," Harriet Prescott Spofford proclaims in an 1878 "how-to" book, "is an affair of genius and tact."1 Although professional interior decorators were men until after the turn of the century, in everyday life the art of decoration was usually left to women, and nineteenth-century women's fiction is full of descriptions of "artistic" interiors where a woman has created harmony in color and form. In the stories of Mary Wilkins, women's decorative art is a complex and poetic language which reveals character, defines space and identity, and traces the evolution of American taste from late nineteenth-century Victorian to Colonial Revival.

As the term "housewife" attests, women have always been associated with their living spaces, but never so strongly as in the last century. Space was a key concept in nineteenth century cultural ideology. Men and women were thought to have separate "spheres," and woman's "sphere" was her "place," the home. Here her cultural work was to "influence" others to Christian values, rather than to develop self-reliance and personal power as the man did in his sphere, the world of business, politics, religion--of
everything outside the home. Of course the woman's sphere was limited—some say that was the point; nevertheless, historians point out that the "separate but equal" configuration as it developed in the early nineteenth century created a women's subculture that gave many women for the first time "a unique sense of their integrity and dignity" and as a result helped women develop identity, a social role, and eventually a voice with which to address the world.²

Indeed, many early feminists believed that the domestic values—values like cooperation, love, support, and mutual respect—would eventually become the dominant social values of American life. Promoting this vision in the later nineteenth century, the women Dolores Hayden describes as "material feminists" challenged separation of male and female spheres. They called for new arrangements of space like cooperatives and public kitchens that would combine domestic and public life, and campaigned for women's real control over the domestic space, including property, housing, and education.³ So when women arrange interior spaces with "genius and tact" they are doing what is expected of them, keeping in their "place," the home, but at the same time they are acting more subversively according to the vision of the material feminists: they are defining their own space on their own terms.

For Mary Wilkins and other writers even tending this
space could be an art. As we have seen, Louisa Ellis in "A New England Nun" has "almost the enthusiasm of an artist over the mere order and cleanliness of her solitary home." Likewise, in Wilkins' "The Revolt of Mother," Sarah Penn is "like an artist" in her housekeeping, and in Rose Terry Cooke's "Miss Lucinda" we are told "...it takes as much sense and refinement and talent to cook a dinner, wash and wipe a dish, make a bed as it should be made, and dust a room as it should be dusted, as goes to the writing of a novel...." These writers insist that if woman can not step beyond her sphere into the male world of High Art, within her sphere the creation of harmony and order qualifies as art. In fact, as Kathryn Rabuzzi points out, the difference between the production of a recognized artist and that of a housewife is one of degree, not kind. Like the artist, says Rabuzzi, the housewife gropes "for inner feelings and images" even if she does not always "actualize them in finished form."

Beyond housekeeping, many of Mary Wilkins' heroines are artists--or expressionists--of interior design. Wilkins was an expert user of the language of decoration, of the unique form of expression known as household art--a term she uses in A Portion of Labor (1901), when she calls her era "the ugliest period of household art." I will use the term "household art" as Wilkins does to mean furnishings and articles created or chosen and arranged in a room with an
eye to comfort, self-expression, and aesthetics. This term includes the art objects made by women, the woven, embroidered, and otherwise constructed or arranged objects that usually had personal significance. For Wilkins this art is a powerful poetic language which she uses to re-define and enlarge woman's "place" in patriarchal culture.

Mary Wilkins writes at the time that the "great clean up" of Victorian extravagance had begun. Eastlake's *Hints on Household Taste*, which advocated simple, uncluttered decorating, was published in 1868, and the effects of Morris and Company's "Arts and Crafts" style were being seen in American decorating during the 70's and 80's and 90's. The simpler reform style and the mainstream ornate Victorian style developed along parallel lines until the turn of the century. In the United States, the design revolution was allied with a colonial revival--a nostalgia for the values of the colonial period. Mary Wilkins admired the reform; samplers, engravings, and hearths abound in her earlier work, and Colonial Revival features were prominent in her own living space as well. One early reviewer was impressed by her "old fireplace" where "visitors sometimes receive cups of tea made from a kettle on the crane," and another interview is accompanied by photographs which offer glimpses of her Morris chair and her open hearth. However, many of her great stories in the 80's and 90's use the expressive language of the cluttered and stuffed Victorian style.
Even though she calls Victorian household art ugly, Mary Wilkins frequently uses details of the standard Victorian "best parlor," to show the passion of an artist who makes the most of what opportunity for expression she has. An example is the parlor of Nancy Weeks in "A Souvenir." This room, which Wilkins tells us is "the perfect flower ... of all [Nancy’s] wishes and fancies," features "a Brussels carpet with an enormous flower pattern." Her furniture is "covered with red plush--everybody else in town had haircloth, plush was magnificent audacity." Every chair has "a tidy on its back." On the marble top table is "a very large ruffled lamp mat;" mats are placed under all the vases on the shelf, and a "beautiful" hearth rug completes the decor. But the focal point and artistic glory of this room is the large wreath of "rose-buds, an’ lilies, an’ pansies, an’ poppies, an’ acorns" (352). Nancy’s creation is important as a memorial, for the life-like flowers and acorns are woven from the hair of dead relatives--grandmother, mother, father, and child. As I have shown, this circle of hair--the ultimate symbol of female creativity--is also important as an art object, for it testifies to the essential concerns of the woman’s sphere: life and death and human connections in an ongoing circle. When Wilkins compares Nancy’s "true artistic instinct" to Turner’s or Michelangelo’s, we understand that the exhuberance of Nancy’s decorating reveals her passionate
Thus Mary Wilkins uses the details of household art to convey the intensity of a woman's creative drive, to show how a woman whose domain was limited to a tiny house, a cramped "sphere," could create a powerful poem to human life by the way she decorated her space. But the usual view of Victorian interior decoration was not that it provided a vehicle for artistic expression. In terms of Victorian culture, it had a more important function. Decoration of interior space, largely the work of the women who were restricted to that space, signified woman's place. While the aesthetic instinct was praised in the homemaker, her major role as interior decorator was to present an environment that would encourage her husband and children to live Christian lives. Her true genius was always a means to an end.

Nineteenth-century prescriptive literature stressed the relationship between a woman's function as interior decorator and her role as influencer and guardian of spiritual values. As John F. W. Ware put it in Home Life (1866), the home shapes character, "Its situation, its convenience, its facilities for movement and for work, ... the figures in its carpets and its walls, are all unconscious educators and directors... of that which is deeper within." Even design books emphasize the positive relationship between family values and household art.
Clarence Cook's influential essays on interiors describe the living room as "an important agent in the education of life." And another local color author turned decorator, Harriet Prescott Spofford, writes that "the art of furnishing" helps shape "the gentle manners that make life easier to one and pleasanter to all."  

If interior decorating could be beneficial, it could be harmful, as well. A favorite theme in popular literature is that the socially ambitious i.e. selfish woman can hurt family members by the wrong kind of decorating. In Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Pink and White Tyranny* (1871) the wife who replaces comfortable family pieces with French fripperies creates an atmosphere where her husband cannot hold to his democratic principles. And a *Harpers Magazine* story, "Aunt's New House," by Katherine G. Ware shows how a woman who redecorates from comfortable old furniture to "gilded misery" alienates her family and has a nervous breakdown.  

Inevitably, since decoration influenced values, Victorian household art was symbolic. As John Ware states in *Home Life*, "Every thing should mean something, even the ornaments." In fact, the everpresent shelves, brackets, niches, mantels, etageres, and whatnots beloved by our ancestors displayed a kind of educational museum for family edification. On these showpieces were arranged plants, plaster statues, china, ceramics, collections of natural objects like shells, leaves, pinecones, birdnests, and a
profusion of textiles, mats, tidies, pictures, and bric-a-brac. Nature symbolism was particularly important, as the home was seen as a refuge from the commercial world and allied with "natural" themes. Plants and dried grass arrangements, popular in the 70's and 80's, brought the beneficial associations of nature into the home. Most important of all were religious motifs. Religious statues, pictures, and mottoes encouraged piety; and momentoes of the departed--hair pictures, coffin plates, wreaths, and deathbed scenes--exhorted family members to live morally in preparation for the Life to come. The home, in fact, during the nineteenth century became a substitute for the church in many ways. The home, not the conflicted and increasingly evangelistic church, became center of stability, continuity, and nurture: Victorian domestic architecture borrowed Gothic lines and stained glass, and parlor organs allowed families to gather and worship right in their homes.

Parlor arrangements, in particular, showed visitors family values, and household art in all the rooms supposedly silently "influenced" family members. Writers made distinctions between "sincere" and comfortable furniture, usually of American colonial design, and the immoral and usually French products of the gilded age. In a civilization that heated by stoves and furnaces, the open fireplace, as colonial as possible with cranes and pokers nearby, suggested the warmth of family life, as well as all
the virtues associated with an idealization of early American culture. The mantel was the focal point of parlor decoration; situated over the hearth, it was the symbolic center, the heart of the home.\textsuperscript{16}

Since it was woman's role to affect others indirectly, the house became her adjunct, silently spreading her influence. In her fiction, Mary Wilkins relates house and woman so closely that the concept of personal "space" is synonymous with identity or sense of self. This identification is archetypal. As Oliver Marc argues in \textit{The Psychology of the House}, pointing to repeated motifs in primitive and modern architecture, in children's drawings, and in dreams, "The house [is] the most perfect expression of the self."\textsuperscript{17} In Wilkins' stories the house, the living space, is a central image. According to Perry Westbrook, her "typical situation" is "an old woman and an old house."\textsuperscript{18} But she goes a step beyond the conventional ideology in using the materials of her culture and sometimes its symbolism, not to reinforce Christian values, but to establish and explore personal identity. The massing of details in interiors—often articles displayed on shelves, and walls, and particularly on mantels (the "heart")—serves as a Victorian whatnot displaying, instead of the expected religious knick-knacks or family treasures, the important symbols of a heroine's inner life.

In Mary Wilkins' early stories, collected in \textit{A Humble
Romance (1887) and A New England Nun (1891), interior design emphasizes women's power and identity as individuals. Before I go on to discuss more of these stories, I want to take another look here at the instability of Mary Wilkins' early life, to show how the theme of identity rises out of her own sense of finding her own place in the world. Her father, although unsuccessful in his trade, was an architect-builder, surely a significant detail in view of his daughter's awareness of space in her stories. When Mary was in her teens, the family moved from Randolph to Brattleboro, Vermont, where Warren Wilkins failed in the dry goods business. Mary also had difficulties. After high school and an unhappy year at Mt. Holyoke, she taught school and then music, with little success. She dabbled in painting and wrote children's poems and stories. According to her biographer, her mother was distressed at Mary's failure to practice housekeeping skills and disapproved of her painting and writing. The family lived in a number of rentals, including a house across the street from the Vermont Insane Asylum. At one low point they lived in rooms, perhaps servants' quarters, in the elite Tyler home where Mrs. Wilkins worked as housekeeper. This crowded and inferior situation must have been particularly humiliating for Mary, as she had a crush on the son of the family, Hanson Tyler, a secret love that lasted to the end of her life.
After this unsettling period of seven years of moving around, during which her sister, her mother, and her father died, Mary returned to Randolph and took rooms in the Wales house, where she lived for almost twenty years. Given her experiences, it is no wonder her stories are full of women who have no places or precarious places, who live on the fringes of society. After years of poverty and insecurity, she began writing and publishing her famous stories. She found a place, but like many women who step outside society's prescribed women's roles, she had to create that place on her own, to give birth, in a sense, to a new self.

Thus, it is not surprising that space is crucially related to sense of self in Wilkins' artist stories. In some stories, "A New England Nun," for example, artists like Louisa Ellis build their independent identities within a carefully constructed "nest," much as Wilkins herself did. But in other stories the world offers no place at all for the woman artist. Polly Moss in "Sister Liddy," an extreme example, lives in the poor house; all her life she has had "standing ground" only.19 Her lack of space signifies her denied identity. Many other Wilkins protagonists have been dispossessed and their tasks as artist heroines are to take over new space that is rightfully theirs. Within her space—whether it is space originally hers or space she acquires—the artist creates herself. In establishing and adorning their living spaces,
Mary Wilkins' decorators—who create unique interiors—and her architects—who carve out new spaces—are thus involved in an essential act of self-definition.

I will look at the decorators first. For these women, decorative art is a private act. It expresses the self. Betsy Dole in "A Poetess" reveals her poetic character in her rooms: "Great plumy bunches of asparagus waved over the tops of the looking-glass; a framed sampler, a steel engraving of a female head,...sheaves of dried grasses,... were fastened to the walls; vases and tumblers of flowers stood on shelf and table," a poem is pinned to the wall, and "a great pink shell" sits on the shelf, near the chimney cupboard where Betsy keeps her poems. The sampler, a representative of early women's art, and the steel engraving of a woman, perhaps a "poetess" like Betsy, suggest a female arts tradition, while the waving plumes, the grass, and the flowers connect Betsy to the flowers and the garden outside that show her aesthetic nature. Above all the "great pink shell" which whispers when a child holds it to his ear, like the hair wreath suggests an essential female creative symbol, that ultimate "inner space," the womb.

Other stories also show the artist expressing herself through articles and arrangements which make her rooms extensions of character. Frequently, there is an implicit critique of conventional values. In "Christmas Jenny," Jenny, whom Wilkins describes as a mythic figure like "a
broad green moving bush" with hair "crinkled as closely as gray moss," has decorated her house with "heaps of evergreens here and there; and some small green trees [leaning] in one corner. All around the room--hung on the walls, standing on rude shelves--[are] rough little cages and hutches" full of injured birds and animals. Although Jenny's interior strikes the men who visit as "unlike any apartment they had ever entered," in a strange literal way it satisfies the dictums of Victorian decor by bringing nature indoors, and Jenny's shelves, cages, and hutches serve as an whatnot, displaying what is important to her (170). Thus, Mary Wilkins uses the conventional Victorian language of interior decoration to convey Jenny's love for deserted creatures, for "robins and starvin' chippies" and the deaf and dumb orphan she adopts. Her selfless love, ironically, puzzles the church deacon and leads townspeople to dismiss her as "love-cracked" (172).

If we see the house as "the most perfect expression of self," the interior decoration of many of Wilkins' early stories describes an exploration of the female artists' psyche. Appropriately, Mary Wilkins sets her characters in small houses reminiscent of fairy-tale huts, decorated with fantastical objects which she describes in detail. Her plots likewise often have the logic of fairy-tales or dreams with repeated tasks and characters who die and come to life again in new forms.
In "A Patient Waiter" (1886) and "A Gatherer of Simples" (1884) a nurturing older woman is paired with a child who seems to be a younger version of herself. These pairings suggest the traditional renewal implicit in the woman's caretaking role: she is able to "live again" through the young lives she nourishes. But I think that Mary Wilkins, who had no children, was suggesting another kind of renewal that she was more familiar with: the self-creation possible within the physical limits of the woman's "sphere."

Household art both expresses and transforms in "A Patient Waiter." The artist, Fidelia Almay, groups cut flowers in cracked containers, and has draped and shrouded all the other objects in her house. Every day Fidelia heaps "floral offerings" on her "white-painted mantel-shelf." Two "tall gilt and white china" vases with "scrolling tops" occupy the center of the mantel, and beside these are "broken china bowls, cream jugs without handles, tumblers, wine glasses, saucers, and one smart china mug with 'Friendship's offering' in gold letters"--all full of flowers. The rest of the room is muffled and wrapped. A sheet covers the carpet, chairs are sewn up in calico, pictures are hidden in pillow cases, the "chiner card tray" and the lamp are in bags, "'Mrs. Hemann's Poems [is] pinned up in a white rag,'" and all of Fidelia's good clothes are covered up and packed away.22

With this strange floral design in a room where
everything is either broken or in limbo, Fidelia illustrates her hope and her despair. The festive bowls, cream jugs and wine glasses—conventional symbols of conviviality aborted of their original purpose—serve as memorials to a broken pact. Years ago, Fidelia's lover, Ansel Lennox, left for California, and she spends her days waiting for a letter, guarding her furniture and her clothes against the "'fadin' and wearin' out'" of time, and arranging flowers for his return (405).

Reality, in the form of a practical sister, tells Fidelia, "'All them flowers on the mantel, an' all those white things. I declare, Fidelia Almy, it does look jest as if twas laid out'" (405). Like a well-arranged corpse—"laid out" in Victorian mortuary ritual—the room is "life-like"; so too is Fidelia's life "life-like" but it is not living. Fidelia remains suspended in time until her death, daily repeating the formulas of her fiction.

Her story is an old one—Sleeping Beauty—the myth of the passive woman who will be awakened to life with a kiss. Her tragedy is that she can envision only one possible ending for her story. She is, Wilkins tells us a "poor, nodding enchanted princess," waiting passively, caught in time, "till the prince return[s] and the enchantment cease[s]" (408). Fidelia passes this traditional woman's story onto her niece, Lily, who lives out her aunt's story as the "fairy tale of her childhood" (406). Lily inherits
her aunt's story, her female tradition. She believes in Ansel Lennox, just as her aunt does, until sometime in late childhood the fantasy vanishes and she understands the story is false. At that point the lover returns, but in a new form, as a young man who is interested in Lily. In true fairy-tale fashion, he too goes off, promising to write.

Thus the cycle is repeated. Wilkins stresses the correspondence between Fidelia and Lily. In what seems like a grim retelling of her aunt's sad story, Lily begins trudging to the post office each day and returning empty handed. She feels as if in looking at her pitiful aunt, she is "looking into her own destiny" (411). At times she feels as if she is her aunt: "she could hardly believe herself not to be the veritable Fidelia Almay, living life over again, beginning a new watch for her lost lover's letters" (413). But even though she seems to be frozen into Fidelia's pattern of delusion, Lily has learned. From Fidelia's experience Lily knows that the lover may not come back. She can see both the dream and the reality; she understands the woman's story has multiple possibilities.

With the apparent repetition of her story, Fidelia becomes ill, and Lily gets a letter explaining that her lover has been sick, and that he will return soon for their marriage. On her deathbed, Fidelia tells Lily to take out her gowns and wear them, and uncover the furniture and use it. Time begins again. Fidelia, like her rooms, is
transformed. She lives on in Lily, her recreated self, signified by the resurrection symbolism of the name Lily and by the black bag representing death and life together which she carried to the post office, "worked on one side with a wreath [for death] and on the other with a bunch of flowers [for life]" (403). The room that seemed to be death, like a well-arranged corpse swathed in white, turns out to have been a bulb, a chrysalis, a white cocoon from which the transformed waiter emerges. The room is a symbol of female regeneration, like Betsey's pink shell and Nancy's hair wreath. In it, the cycle of life continues: Mothers can live with new insight through their daughters, and artists can repeat old patterns and find powerful new configurations. In the person of clear-eyed Lily, who has lived through both Fidelia's delusion and her own disillusion, the passive myth, the life in death, ends. Lily, as critic Marjorie Pryse points out, "achieves the story's vision" and perhaps she will be the teller of a new woman's story. Certainly she will decorate a new room.

In another Mary Wilkins story, "A Gatherer of Simples," the household art likewise supports an empowered identity. The central character, Aurelia Flower, is an herb gatherer. The child of a father who had committed suicide, she was raised by a "hard, silent" mother, now dead. Aurelia learned her herbal art from this stern mother, but she found no love in her mother's bitterness and "cold censure."
However, the force that molded Aurelia's personality was not her critical mother but the herbs themselves. Aurelia dresses in browns and greens like the woodland flowers she searches for, and "the healing qualities of sasparilla and thoroughwort, and the sweetness of thyme and lavender, seemed to have entered into her nature" (288).

Aurelia lives in "a square, unpainted building, black with age." Her household art brings nature inside with a vengeance. In her "great kitchen" the walls are "as green as a lady's bower with bunches and festoons of all sorts of New England herbs...." This rather romantic picture of a room like a lady's bower "festooned" with herbs is sharply undercut with a closer look: "...their blossoms turning gray and black, giving out strange, half-pleasant, half-disgusting odors"(281). The decaying flowers contrast sharply with the flower-festooned bower; they are also a favorite Victorian metaphor for death in poetry and gravestone iconography: a tombstone with a drooping flower conveyed a life cut off in its prime. Yet these herbal and floral death-images are also life-images. When Aurelia adopts a baby girl she makes her a pillow stuffed with hops, a life-giving herb whose use is underlined in the story when Aurelia fortifies a languishing neighbor girl with her "root beer." The herbs are further identified with life by their association with Aurelia's adopted daughter. Aurelia takes the baby, whom she names Myrtilla, herbing with her, and
returns in the evenings with "the baby asleep in her carriage, with a great sheaf of flowers beside her" (288). Aurelia, we are told, is "actively happy, for the first time in her life" (285).

But the old melancholy past and the bitter lessons of the censuring mother return in another form. Myrtilla's grandmother, a hard, cold woman like Aurelia's mother, declaring she won't have her kin raised by "'an old yarb woman,'" claims the child (289). But Myrtilla escapes and finds her way home, and Aurelia hides her under a huge pile of herbs in the corner of the room. Magically, that same night the old grandmother dies. Next day, Aurelia lines her grave with "fragrant herbs"—"thyme and lavender and rosemary." Wilkins tells us Aurelia cries as she picks the herbs, "because she could not help being glad, and they were all she could give for atonement" (295).

Thus the angry and bitter old woman who had scorned Aurelia, in the end has a final home like Aurelia's—it is black and lined with herbs. The herbs—associated with both life and death—line Aurelia's walls and the grandmother's grave, and both hide and release the baby into new life. Aurelia has offered atonement to the "hard, silent mother" and out of her art—her herbs—gives birth to a new happy self. Like the Demeter/Persephone myth which Grace Stewart sees as the "new mythos" of the woman artist, this story suggests the correspondences of the creative female self.25
In a culture that does not nurture and love the woman artist, the "mother" self of a woman must learn to nurture and love her "artist/daughter" self. The similarities between Aurelia's mother and Myrtilla's grandmother suggest an identification between Aurelia and Myrtilla. Aurelia is able to give birth to her new loved self through the rituals of her art, which transcend death by appeasing the voices of the past and thus release new life. Like Nancy's wreath and Betsey's pink shell and Fidelia's rooms, the household art in "A Gatherer of Simples" suggests woman's regenerative power within her "place."

Other Mary Wilkins household artists are architects who create and articulate space, not objects, and their work also has symbolic meaning in its clear relationship to identity, to "place" or situation. Both Hetty in "A Church Mouse" and Sarah Penn in "The Revolt of 'Mother'" redefine larger buildings. Unlike Wilkins' decorators, whose art is private, for these women, household art becomes public, a way of reaching beyond the woman's sphere. These architects are feminists who refuse to stay in their place, who challenge male control. They move into and transform male space. Thus they are similar to other nineteenth century "material feminists" like Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Frances Willard, who, according to Dolores Hayden's study of feminist living designs, sought to extend the boundaries of woman's sphere, to "'bring the home into the world.'"
Hetty and Sarah each make a man-defined space into a woman-defined space--a radical activity also analogous to what women writers do when they move into the traditionally "male" space of literature.

In "A Church Mouse" Mary Wilkins shows a woman who asserts self and who radically articulates space. The church mouse, Hetty Fifield, uses her art--her quilt and her wool embroidery--to define her place in the world, represented by the "meeting house." Like the young Mary Wilkins, Hetty has lost her place. The woman she had lived with and worked for has died. In losing home and position, she is stripped of her domestic role as part of a "family." Old and homeless, Hetty is evicted, and her poor pile of household possessions, a "small cooking-stove, a hair trunk, a yellow bedstead, and a pile of bedding," her worsted-work, her wool flowers and mottoes are cruelly exposed on the lawn. Even Hetty is an artist who has taught local girls to embroider and whose work is admired; nevertheless her community does not provide her a place. She must make one for herself.

At the beginning of the story, Hetty tries to get a "place" as sexton of the church from selectman/church deacon Caleb Gale, who asserts that this building is no place for a woman. He declares, "'I've never heard of a woman's bein' saxton,'" marking the meeting-house as masculine territory (405). Hetty insists she can do the work as well as men
have, and counters his argument about woman's place with a
description of the way men take space away from women:
"'Men git in a good many places where they don't belong, an'
where they set as awkward as a cow on a hen-roost, jest
because they push in ahead of women'" (405). Mary Wilkins,
having defined the central issues of her story as spacial,
goes on to describe how Hetty carves out her own personal
part of this space. Hetty's task is to find a place for her
domestic goods and for her art--the materials of her
identity. By hinting that the deacon should find quarters
for her in his own house, Hetty finagles her way into the
meeting-house with her things, sets up camp, and appoints
herself sexton. Interestingly, while in conventional
Victorian decorating, religious motifs became part of home
furnishings, representing ways that the home had taken on
church functions, in Mary Wilkins' story the reverse occurs:
the home, woman's sphere, invades the church.

Within the church, Hetty artfully hangs her art, her
radiant "sunflower quilt," to set off her territory from the
common area. She makes a partition to establish her space
by draping the quilt in a corner of the gallery of the
meeting house. In describing how Hetty uses this women's
art, Mary Wilkins echoes Biblical phrases. Hetty's quilt
partition is "a gaudy tent pitched in the house of the Lord"
(414). Since Biblical useage equates "tent" with
tabernacle, or place of holy worship, this phrasing
legitimizes the art. Thus Hetty's tent pitched in the church is a sanctuary, a private recess, "gaudy" but safe, another creative "inner space." Wilkins describes Hetty as a "little pilgrim" whose face is "dark and watchful against the flaming background of her quilt" (414).

Just as Hetty hangs her quilt to define her living space, she displays her needlework and wax sculpture to define the boundaries of her working place. Wilkins tells us "her skill in fancy-work was quite celebrated" (416); accordingly, Hetty hangs her "wreaths and clusters of red and yellow wool roses and lilies" along the walls of the church, placing a sculpted wax cross draped with frosted ivy--"her chiefest treasure of art"--on the pulpit, with a "worsted motto" above it (417). Her household art articulates the bare walls, transforming the interior with bright colors and forms. Thus woman's art humanizes the meeting-house, just as the sympathetic women in the congregation mediate the male view of Hetty's occupation. Hetty's interior decoration influences the whole community and turns the church into a home.28

But she takes her homemaking too far. When the selectmen try to evict her after she cooks cabbage in the church, Hetty further encroaches on the common space by locking and bolting the meeting-house door. The artist denied a place becomes dangerous to the community. In a dramatic speech through a window she begs for a place of her
own, and when she is finally given the minister's cloak room for her living quarters, order and happiness are restored. She will further decorate the meeting-house with "a wreath to go the whole length of the gallery" (424) showing the way women's art will continue to influence the entire community.

Sarah Penn in "The Revolt of 'Mother'" (1890) is another woman artist who usurps space and redefines it by her art. Sarah is cramped in her "box of a house" for twenty years by a husband who likewise boxes in and limits her experience of the world to what he wants to tell her. Identified with her tiny house, Sarah is "belittled," but by trusting her own powers she achieves a larger vision. Sarah rejects her husband's boundaries. Spurred by his refusal to build the house he promised her, she moves her household into his new barn. Her move is a metaphor for the woman who refuses to be "boxed-in" by patriarchal culture.

Unlike Hetty, who actually occupies only a small area, Sarah redefines the whole of a large building. Her appropriation of the space that her husband had intended to house his animals is nothing short of inspired: Wilkins describes it as having an "uncanny and superhuman quality" and compares Sarah's artistic appropriation of space to male feats. When she tries to persuade her husband to build a new house instead of the barn he has planned, Sarah pleads "her little cause like a Webster" (457). When she and the children move their household goods into the fine new barn,
Wilkins tells us that her moving was "equal in its way to Wolfe's storming of the Heights of Abraham" (463). And defending her action to the minister, Sarah refers to the Pilgrims, saying, "'I think it's right jest as much as I think it was right for our forefathers to come over from the old country 'cause they didn't have what belonged to 'em'" (465).

As in "A Church Mouse" Hetty is a "little Pilgrim," so too is Sarah a Pilgrim. Both women are seeking a new "place," and the subtle references to American history support their actions. Both women have the sense that they are taking what they have a right to take. Sarah reshapes and redefines the barn, a "man's structure" or place for man's work, into a "woman's structure," a home, a place for woman's work. The woman's sphere engulfs the man's.

Sarah's artistry in thus creating a space for her family is "a purely original undertaking" (463). She has vision and an unerring instinct in her craft. When she looks at the large new barn, she sees "at a glance its possibilities" (463). Like Hetty, she hangs woman's art to redefine communal space into personal space. She makes bedrooms out of the "great boxstalls, with quilts hung before them"; the harness room "with its chimney and shelves" makes "the kitchen of her dreams"; and in the middle of the barn she creates "a parlor...fit for a palace" (463). In her imagination she pictures the rest of the architectural
details, constructing a mental floorplan of where the front entry, the partitions, and the windows will be (463). She is an artist who creates a remarkable living space in one day.

Mary Wilkins' vision in "The Revolt of Mother" is radical. The woman artist remakes male commercial space into female domestic space. She reshapes the world according to her values. Besides the obvious parallels with Hayden's material feminists, Sarah's achievement and vision suggest Mary Wilkins at the height of her powers. Wilkins and the other local color writers moved into the man's world of art when they began publishing their own brand of realism. While William Dean Howells and others welcomed them, some critics, predictably, viewed their encroachment with alarm and voiced their dismay that women were taking over male territory. For example, a 1895 Atlantic Monthly review of Danvis Folks by Rowland Robinson, one of the few male New England local color writers, admires Robinson's stories for their "masculinity" and complains about the "feminization of the dialect story" in the hands "of the desiccated minor sisterhood" which included Mary Wilkins.

Perhaps the gauge of the subversiveness of "The Revolt of 'Mother'" can be found in the fact that Mary Wilkins Freeman later in her career, when she had long since given up the idea of challenging new spaces in her art, disowned this story, saying that it was not true, that a New England
woman would never behave in such a way. By 1899 Mary Wilkins, at the age of 47, was no longer interested in rebellion. She was seriously considering marriage to Charles Freeman, a drastic change in her own life which inevitably changed her work. Eight or nine years after "The Revolt of Mother" she wrote another story about a woman taking over space, but this novel, *The Jamesons* (1899), treats household art as an indicator of taste and style and makes fun of women who want to enlarge woman's sphere.

Mrs. Jameson, an inspired interior decorator and one-woman reformer who tries to educate the villagers into a new standard of art, engineers a Victorian village home into a Colonial Revival showpiece. The first person narrator, widowed Sophia Lane, says the women of the village may have "had our spheres enlarged a little by her."

But in *The Jamesons* the enlarging of women's place is a joke that fails to challenge either the religious or the commercial order. This abbreviated novel pits woman against woman, with the fat, red-faced Mrs. Jameson as a comic portrait of the New Woman. A summer visitor and a know-it-all, she invades the quiet country village and attempts to change the women's traditional ways. She is described as "a great, overgrown bird of another species" obtruding like a cowbird in the "village nest" (44). In spite of Sophia's assertion that their spheres were "enlarged," most of Mrs. Jameson's reforms, with the exception of her interior
decorating, are ridiculed in the story. She wears a dress "cut short enough to expose her ankles"—an outfit the villagers regard as unbecoming on such a stout lady. They "shudder" at the idea of wearing a similar costume. The few that copy Mrs. Jamesons' style go for "long tramps with strides of independence and defiance" but don't keep up with the walking because they have too much work to do at home (120).

Perhaps this caricature is Mary Wilkins' way of diverting attention from her own "strides of independence and defiance." In the town of Randolph, where Mary Wilkins, the independent and successful writer, raised eyebrows, gossips must surely have thought she went too far out of her sphere, and perhaps her impending marriage made her strive for a more conventional image. Clearly, Mrs. Jameson is a satire on the woman who, like Wilkins, neglects the proper duty of women and has far too little work to do at home. There is a humorous and tricky kind of self-knowledge in her portrait. Mrs. Jameson introduces literary topics to the sewing circle but cannot sew; she tries to force dietary reform on the other women, but she is a terrible cook. She puts boots on hens, has her garden planted in August, and fails to teach her daughter the elementary skills of housekeeping.

But Mrs. Jameson does introduce interior decoration reform that Mary Wilkins herself admired. A look at these
changes shows us, in progress, the transformation of American taste that occurred around the turn of the century. Mrs. Jameson follows the Arts and Crafts inspired Colonial Revival style of simplifying and using "honest" materials. She eliminates stuffed furniture and relies on plain wood. She scandalizes the village by taking down closet and cupboard doors, hanging curtains over the closet but leaving the shelves exposed. On these shelves she displays "forsaken bits of crockery ware," valuable remnants of Colonial dinnerware like Mrs. Gregg's "old blue cups" and the narrator's "old blue plate and another brown one," for which she "ransacked the neighborhood" (89). She arranges wild flowers in old bean pots, which villagers think are some "strange kind of vase...from New York" (91). She dispenses with the ubiquitous floral Victorian carpet. As a neighbor boy reports, her carpets have "no roses on 'em; and there ain't no stove 'cept in the kitchen; jest old andirons like mother keeps up garrett; and there ain't no stuffed furniture at all" (87-8).

When Mrs. Jameson decides the village must have a centennial celebration, she takes over Emily Shaw's house, the oldest building in the village. Poor Emily, who "seemed as fond of her home as an animal of its shell," like one of Mary Wilkins' earlier heroines, is forced to live in one hot little room upstairs. Emily had arranged her house "in a very pretty fashion" with tapestry carpets, lace curtains,
and red velvet furniture, and the fireplaces had been covered up and set with marble slabs. Under Mrs. Jameson's direction, this typically Victorian interior becomes Colonial Revival. She takes antique furniture from village houses "as by right of war"--an "old-fashioned highboy," "a swell-front bureau," "a mahogany table" (153)--and she eliminates the Victorian decor:

The tapestry carpets were taken up...the lace curtains were pulled down. In their stead were the old sanded bare floors and curtains of homespun linen trimmed with hand-knitted lace. Emily's nice Marseiles counterpanes were laid aside for the old blue-and-white ones which our grandmothers spun and wove, and her fine oil paintings gave way to old engravings of Webster death-bed scenes and portraits of the Presidents, and samplers .... [Emily's] kitchen range had been taken down, and there was only the old fireplace furnished with kettles and crane to cook in. (155)

Interesting as these details are in tracing the history of American taste, the poetry is gone--along with all the Victorian sentiment and symbolism of the women's "sphere." Mrs. Jameson's decorating, like everything she does, is a fad. In fact she condemns the kind of household art that revealed character in earlier Mary Wilkins stories. She objects to a "wreath of wool flowers, a triumph of domestic art," which, circling a coffin-plate "instead of the original funeral garland" was used to decorate a parlor. She calls it "grewsome and barbarous" and as a "false standard of art" she fears it will "pervert the morals" (128-29). Her statement shows how the sense of interior decoration had changed. An artwork that ten or twenty years
ago would signify a whole web of values relating to family and religion and the cycle of life and death—by 1899 becomes immoral because it is a "sin" against the aesthetic sense.

Beyond her early remarkable stories of women and houses, Mary Wilkins does not create new spaces in art. "The Revolt of 'Mother'" hints at a possible future move to a more spacious form, the novel, but Wilkins' novels—including *The Jamesons*—never achieve the artistic vision of her stories. In fact, Emily Shaw crowded into a tiny corner of her house, signifies the future of what had become known as the Mary Wilkins heroine—the idiosyncratic, independent old woman. This heroine and her household art survives as a minor character, an old aunt or neighbor, barely glimpsed on the periphery of Mary Wilkins Freeman's novels. Emily and her sisters are evicted by the conventional young beauties, attractive matrons, and their stylish lovers and husbands who move their "aesthetic style" or "Colonial Revival" drapes and divans into her place. The forces that compelled Wilkins to abandon these women and their houses are the complex issues of love and art which I will discuss in subsequent chapters.


For the Arts and Crafts movement in America see Wendy Kaplan, "The Art that is Life": The Arts and Crafts Movement in America, 1875-1920 (New York Graphic Society: Little, Brown, 1987).


Spofford, 232.

15 John F.W. Ware, 12.


26 Frances Willard, quoted in Hayden, 5.

28 See discussion in Leah Blatt Glasser, "'She Is the One You Call Sister': Discovering Mary Wilkins Freeman," in Between Women, ed. Carol Ascher, Louise DeSalvo, Sara Ruddick (Boston: Beacon, 1984), 205.

29 Marilyn Davis DeEulis, "'Her Box of a House': Spacial Restriction as Psychic Signpost in Mary Wilkins Freeman's 'The Revolt of Mother,'" The Markham Review 8 (19):52.

30 Mary E. Wilkins, "The Revolt of 'Mother,'" in A New England Nun, 463. Subsequent references in text.

31 Leah Glasser notes the correspondence between Sarah and Mary Wilkins and also points out possible connections between Sarah's art and Mary Wilkins' mother, 203.


33 Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "Mary E. Wilkins Freeman: An Autobiography," Saturday Evening Post (8 December 1917): 75.

34 Mary E. Wilkins, The Jamesons (New York: Doubleday, 1899), 177. Subsequent references in text.
CHAPTER 5

KNITTING AND COUNTING

Mary Wilkins' artists celebrate nature with their art; their rituals and routines are a form of worship. Louisa in "A New England Nun" is like an arcane priestess with her herbs and aromatic oils, "prayerfully" preserving the harmony of her days. Hetty Fifield in "A Church Mouse" gives thanks by hanging wool flowers and wreaths in the church. Their raptures separate these women from the ordinary townsfolk. From a familiar nineteenth-century mold--like Wordsworth's country savants--Wilkins' visionaries do not usually express themselves elegantly but rather with their blunt speech, household crafts, and incongruous "faculties," they celebrate creation with whatever they have.

These artists' attempts at expression are played out against pressures from a straight-laced, hard-working, no-nonsense community that will "laugh and frown down" their deviance and pressure them to conform to conventional women's behavior. If most of them escape Louisa's dilemma by being too ungainly or too old for proposals, many, like Hetty, still struggle against the village to establish both personal space and connection.
In describing their confrontation between individual needs and community pressures, Wilkins reveals paradoxes and ponders issues of women and art and relationships. She focuses on the separation/attachment, love/art issues also raised by other women writers, in particular Sarah Orne Jewett and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, whose artist novels Mary perhaps read in Randolph as she daydreamed about Hanson Tyler and set about her work. While her most anthologized story, "A New England Nun," shows the artist dealing with the love/art conflict by retreating to her ivory tower (a time-proven masculine strategy), in many of her other artist stories the central concern is how the artist mediates her creative drive with her emotional needs. In these stories Mary Wilkins realizes the need for both introspection and community, both privacy and connection.

In her early career, Mary Wilkins wrote out of a "local color" tradition that relied upon rural New England settings and typically expressed quaint manners and conservative values. However, Wilkins sometimes used setting and character from this genre to expound themes from woman-as-artist fiction. Wilkins' combination of these two literary types--local color setting and characters with woman-as-artist themes--enabled her to write about her experiences as an artist and as a woman. In some stories she moves beyond the concerns of both woman and artist to consider the artistic process itself in a way approximated among her
American contemporaries only by Emily Dickinson. I will examine the major themes of nineteenth-century woman-as-artist fiction before I go on to discuss the ways Mary Wilkins and other writers addressed love and work issues in their art.

The woman-as-artist story was a popular type in nineteenth-century magazines. In William Dean Howell's novel *The Lady of the Aroostock* (1879) a young man facetiously outlines the expectations of the artist story when he says a young woman singer might be compared to

...those vulgar little persons of genius in the magazine stories.... She would have been discovered by some aesthetic summer boarder.... Somebody would be obliged to fall in love with her, and she would sacrifice her career for a man who was her inferior....

What the young man repeats is actually the basic pattern of Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance* (1852), James's *The Bostonians* (1886), and du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894), all woman-as-artist stories in which the woman acquiesces to male power. His mock-plot also summarizes several popular themes evident in artist stories by women in *Harper's* and *The Atlantic Monthly*: the untutored "natural" and "little" genius, the discovery by a man, and the ultimate sacrifice of career for love. For example, in "Clemence" (1876) by Carroll Owen and "Sappho" (1877) by Mrs. C. V. Hamilton, girl geniuses are discovered by men and helped to become opera stars. "A Strong-Minded Woman" (1875) by Ella Farman, "A Country Chorister" (1875) by Mrs. Frank M'Carthy,
"A Southern Lady of Shallot" (1876) by Latienne, and "A Florentine Episode" (1892) by Ellen Olney Kirk, are all stories of women who are rescued from art careers by men and restored to the "only real life" for a woman--marriage.³

Publication in The Atlantic Monthly or Harper's was an impressive achievement. Stories in which the woman artist is discovered by a man, trained by a man, and gives up her career for a man--and there were many--were written by women who had obviously worked hard on their own to become writers. This apparent paradox is explained if we remember, as Virginia Woolf tells us, that in writing by women at least part of the story is devoted to anticipating and answering criticism.⁴ Anticipation of criticism is apparent upon a closer look at the themes of woman-as-artist fiction written by women: The artist is successful but at the very end of the story gives up her art for love, is injured or ill, or dies for love. The artist is not successful. The artist is a widow. The artist is rejected by a man, or he is untrue, or he dies. The artist supports her parents, her children, her invalid husband, with her work. The artist's work makes her more loving or more useful to more people. The artist is doing God's work.

These themes make it clear that if woman-as-artist fiction of the late nineteenth century can be said to have one theme, that theme is validation: showing it is all right for this woman to be an artist. Male writers in
Europe and America during this time--Ibsen, Forster, James, for example--often use a heroine to show the struggle for human autonomy: characters like Nora, Margaret Schlegel, and Isabelle Archer question tradition and act out of deep personal conviction. In contrast, women writers of the same period are more likely to demonstrate not the process but the costs of the struggle for female autonomy. Their heroines conform or die. In America, woman-as-artist fiction by women was most often a carefully orchestrated balance between saying what women were capable of being and saying what women could acceptably say.

Frequently, what women were capable of being--and what they were--could not be said. Women who wrote about artists were justifying their own lives. They were writing about the conflicts, confusions, compromises, and triumphs of their own experiences. Yet women like Augusta Evans, Louisa May Alcott, and Rebecca Harding Davis--all with successful writing careers--asserted that being a wife and mother was infinitely more desirable and more necessary than being a writer. Even for other writers less ambivalent about their art--Sarah Orne Jewett, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Mary Wilkins, for example--the underlying consideration behind scene, character, and plot was often the need to explain or to argue that it is acceptable to be an artist.

Because of doubts that their own experiences as women artists were appropriate material for fiction, women writers
frequently apologized for, downplayed, buried in a romance, or disguised as a genre story, their woman-as-artist themes. Many, many nineteenth-century texts by women can be reread in light of the hidden artist theme. As Gilbert and Gubar tell us, nineteenth-century women writers "may have attempted to transcend their anxiety of authorship by revising male genres, using them to record their own dreams and their own stories in disguise." In the words of Emily Dickinson, they could thus "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant--." At the root of their conflict and ambivalence about the artist role was a widely held attitude toward women and work.

The prevailing attitude in tracts and articles was that women could not both love and work. In "The Artist and Marriage" (1899), an anonymous writer explains that a woman "in most cases...cannot be both an artist and a wife." A man can be both husband and artist because, the writer tells us, a man "is by nature dedicated to labor," not love. But a woman is different because "the primal need of a woman's nature is to love." Love and art in a woman use up the same energies. Therefore she can devote herself to one or the other, but not to both.

Equally chilling to the woman artist's hope of living a balanced life of love and work was the popular attitude that if a woman does not love, she is not a true woman. Something is missing. She is cold, or a monster. If love
is not the central fact of her life, she is denying her true nature, she is masculine, she is not normal. The author of "The Artist and Marriage" makes this clear: the woman who sacrifices "the domestic ideal to what she considers higher obligations...is not then on natural ground, and her case is not that of the normal wife."  

Given this attitude, the woman who wanted to write about her own experience as an artist had to show that it was compatible with femininity for a woman have a serious career as a writer, painter, or musician. If she did not show love triumphant by the end of her story, she had to show how love and art could be compatible, or she had to explain why and how a true woman would choose art over love. Such disclosure could be perilous, for readers and critics in popular family magazines like Harper's and The Atlantic, often unwilling to have cherished illusions about women and love questioned, were quick to find and condemn "unnatural" themes.

Writers who showed a woman choosing art did so at their peril. Kate Chopin was blackballed from the St. Louis Fine Arts Club after the publication of her novel The Awakening, (1899) which showed a woman leaving her marriage to live alone and paint. Her biographer suggests that the negative reaction to this novel was responsible for the "creative paralysis" she suffered for the remaining five years of her life. And, earlier, what happened to Elizabeth Stuart
Phelps after publishing her brilliant woman-as-artist novel, _The Story of Avis_ (1877) warned women to be cautious when writing about their artist experiences. When Avis gives up painting because of domestic pressures, Phelps makes it clear that Avis' problem is not her painting, but her marriage. Critics could not forgive Phelps for saying that Avis should not have married. In _The Atlantic_ she was accused of basing her novel on a "wholly erroneous view of womanhood" that maintained "marriage was not a woman's best and highest destiny."

\[10\] _Harper's_ said the novel was "not altogether a wholesome story."

\[11\] According to Carol Kessler, rough treatment by critics after Avis may have set off the neuresthenic illness that plagued Phelps for the rest of her life.

The penalties the artist—and the woman who wrote her story—suffered for defying conventional notions of woman and love were severe. Louisa Ellis was whispered about for her aesthetics in "A New England Nun." In another story, "An Independent Thinker," Mary Wilkins shows the punishment meted out to the self-assertive woman, as well as the rewards given her for conforming. Esther Gay, an artist figure, stays home from church on Sunday and proudly knits in front of the window where churchgoers can see: "She held her knitting high, and the needles clicked loud, and shone in the sun." Since she is deaf, she judges that it is better to stay at home and knit than to go to meeting and
not be able to hear the sermon. While she cannot help her handicap, it conveniently makes listening to the lessons and admonitions of a preacher impossible. Thus Wilkins covertly portrays a dangerously rebellious woman—a woman who does not listen to men, a woman who thinks for herself.

Esther is truly a law unto herself; she has assessed the situation and decided on a logical course of action. She says, "'I'm a-goin' to do what's right, no matter what happens'" (305). However, as in "A New England Nun," the community disapproves. Esther's ancient neighbor across the street won't allow her seventy-year-old daughter to visit Esther because Esther "'ain't no kind of a girl'" (299). The old crone with her file-like voice implies by this phrase that Esther exhibits a lack of womanliness, even of morality, in "'stayin' home from meetin' an' knittin'" (299). In addition, Esther's granddaughter's lover stays away because his mother has a low opinion of a girl whose folks "'stayed away from meetin' and worked'" (304). In this story, as in many Wilkins stories, the artist heroine is paired with another woman who represents more traditional female roles: the assertive and independent artist thus is balanced by a conventional "other self," like Lily Dyer in "A New England Nun." In "An Independent Thinker" the granddaughter represents the traditional woman's role, and she is rejected for her grandmother's behavior. Using this split persona, Mary Wilkins makes her message clear: women
who decide for themselves and defy community rules cannot be loved. However, when Esther reveals that she has been knitting to earn money to help her neighbor, community attitudes toward her work change and her granddaughter's beau returns. Esther has validated her behavior.

Women writers similarly learned to explain and adapt their artistic themes to meet the approval of the community. They laundered their real experiences, or they denied them. They realized that their authentic questions and doubts, their aspiration for success and their fear of it, their desire for love and their fear of its restrictions, their need for meaningful work and their fear of its consequences in their personal lives, did not readily fit into the "happily ever after" formulas of women's fiction. They had to make their experiences fit in with the prevailing sentiment which ironically was apothesized by the nineteenth-century's most famous sexual libertine, Byron: "Love for men is a feeling set apart, 'tis woman's whole existence." If they could not, a whole world of doubt and fear and pain and triumph and satisfaction was blocked. Unless their experiences could be made to fit into the available formulas, these experiences could not be owned. Women had to have a good reason for knitting on Sunday.

Popular nineteenth-century novels and stories that show women as successful artists almost always show the woman succeeding after she has failed in love, her husband has
died, or because some physical deformity has prevented her from assuming a conventional woman's role. Thus Ruth Hall in Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* (1855) becomes a writer after she tries all other ways—sewing, teaching—to support her children when her husband dies. She says she doesn't enjoy writing—"No happy woman writes"—and "From Harry's grave sprang Floy [her pen name]."  

Domina in Harriet Prescott Spofford's *A Master Spirit* (1896) becomes a great singer only after her lover drowns. Olive, in Diana Mulock Craik's *Olive* (1850), becomes an artist because a spinal deformity makes her unmarriageable.  

In novels where the woman loves and is an artist, too, the strategy was usually to show her as an inferior artist. Craik in *Olive* describes the situation:

> No woman can be an artist—that is, a great artist. The Hierarchies of the soul's dominion belong only to man, and it is right they should.... But among those stars of lesser glory...among sweet-voiced poets, earnest prose writers...graceful painters and beautiful musicians...—among these, let woman shine! *(II 53-4)*

The message is clear, and clearly subversive: so long as the woman does not insist she is great, so long as she writes "women's art" and works within women's culture, she can get away with being an artist.

Craik also explains why women are inferior artists, and the explanation in 1855 was the same as in 1899—woman's nature. Woman, says Craik, is enfeebled "by the very spirit of love which in her own sphere is her chiefest strength"
Again, this thinking reveals the dilemma of the woman artist—and the woman writer who described her. For a writer to assert that a woman was a great artist was also then to suggest that she was not much of a woman. As Esther Gay knew, "She ain't no kind of a girl" was the most hurtful criticism of all. Women with talent and ability were often portrayed as short-haired, short-skirted, and homely if not manly. Conversely, to show a character as incompetent was to emphasize her femininity. Thus by characterizing a woman as a "lesser artist" a writer emphasized her womanhood. To assure publication and to avoid speculation about their own femininity, writers frequently adopted this strategy.

Showing the woman artist as a true woman and an inferior artist allowed women to write covertly about their own experiences. Writers produced what Gilbert and Gubar describe as the submerged text, writers apologizing for and limiting the scope of their heroines to allow their voices to be heard. Examples from The Atlantic and Harper's show this trend. The 1874 fictionalized life of Italian painter Angelica Kauffman maintains that Kauffman was a fascinating coquette but "no great genius." In "The Country Chorister" Dora is content to sing pleasantly "at a charity concert as the wife of...Miles Van Dorn." In "Penelope's English Experiences" (1893) by Kate Douglas Wiggin, Penelope concludes she is "no artist" when she falls in love.

Sometimes the admission of inferiority is a
transparently obvious way of highlighting womanly self-effacement while the submerged text asserts superiority. "Ten Beautiful Years" (1898) by Mary Knight Potter is an example. Rob, an artist, finds the diary of his dead wife and discovers how "heartbroken" she was when she was successful in art and he was a failure. "How," she asks in one entry, "could they praise my trash and slight such work as Rob's?" She writes how ashamed she is of the "stupid people" who prefer her work to his but she mentions their compliments again and again.\(^2\) She convinces the reader that her work is superior while at the same time she proves her womanliness by preferring his.

Many writers validated their artist heroines by showing how the woman artist could love through, or by means of, her work. They did this in two ways: they referred to the works of their heroines as their children or relatives, thus comparing writing to mothering or befriending; and they showed how through their texts their heroines could be better friends or lovers or helpers of others.

Thus Edna Earl in *St. Elmo* says, "My work is to me what I suppose dear relatives must be to other women."\(^2\) In *Little Women*, Jo says she is, "'a literary spinster ...[with] a family of stories for children.'"\(^3\) Elizabeth Stuart Phelps says of her heroine in "A Rejected Manuscript," she "had written the book as naturally as she had fallen in love. She had accepted her success as simply
as she sang to the babies." As these examples show, associating art with familial relationships made writing or painting seem like a comfortable and natural activity. Most often, women's works were shown to be "good works." Women writers were careful to show that art for their heroines was just a better way of being useful to others. Ruth Hall in Fanny Fern's novel not only works to support her children, she also has "influence" over "unknown sisters." Says one of these sisters, a reader who writes to Ruth, "Every week your printed words come to me, in my sick chamber, like the ministrations of some gentle friend." Edna Earl has influence over her pupil Felix, whose "Tales for Little Cripples" in turn helps countless crippled children. One of many who has been helped by Edna's writing, a "rejoicing wife," says her husband reformed after reading Edna's book. In Little Women, Jo, the writer, is educated to realize that her sensation stories are unworthy of the woman artist. Professor Bhaer helps Jo to see that these tales are doing harm to the young girls who read them, and harm to Jo as well. Eventually, after Beth teaches Jo "self-forgetfulness," Jo writes a "simple little story" which helps others as well as pleases them. Ultimately, Alcott's artist story eliminates Jo's art, for Jo finds a way to mother more directly. By the end of the book, Jo has "found the applause of her boys more satisfying than any praise of the world, for now she told no stories except to
her flock of enthusiastic believers and admirers."  

Mary Wilkins' "An Independent Thinker" also relies on the theme of a woman's art being part of her nurturing role. On one level this story asserts how difficult it is for a woman to think for herself, how her independent decisions are scrutinized and judged, how her womanhood is attacked for any deviance from the rules of conventional behavior. On another level, this story asserts how difficult it is for the woman artist to remain aloof from community judgement, as Louisa Ellis does. As an artist, Esther encounters the most severe form of censure her peers can give her, withholding of love--both from the neighbor she wants to help and, projected onto her granddaughter, from a lover. The neighbor, Lavinia, "a little, trembling, shivering figure," sobs that she must go to poorhouse rather than live, dishonored, with a woman who works on Sunday (309). The lover stops courting Esther's granddaughter Hatty because his mother "took on so he was afraid she'd die" over his association with the disgraced "Gay tribe" (304). However, once Esther reveals that her Sunday knitting has been for the purpose of supporting her poor neighbors and not for "selfish" reasons, she is accepted again. Lavinia moves in with Esther, crying, "'If I'd ha' known, I would ha' come. I wouldn't have said a word'" (314). And Hatty's lover's mother admits she had "been kind of silly to make such a fuss" (312).
But Esther's reinstatement in the good graces of the community has a price. The price the rebellious artist pays for conforming is perhaps better seen in a closely-related story, "A Modern Dragon"--one of Mary Wilkins' strangest and most powerful examinations of the unconventional woman. In this story, the appropriately named Mrs. King "works like a man" in the fields for her adored daughter, a "bewilderingly draped and pleated" creature. As in "An Independent Thinker," her daughter's admirer is deterred because his family objects to Mrs. King's nonconforming ways: She is a spiritualist and "an odd figure, short and stout, with a masculine width of shoulders" (63). Her calico dress is "'half-way up to [her] knees,'" her black hair is short, and she wears a man's straw hat and man's "'cowhide shoes'" (73).

Mrs. King's love for her daughter makes her acutely fearful of what others think. With a "demeanor like a hunted criminal" she hides lest her daughter's lover see her in her sensible farming clothes (74). When she learns why the young man is ignoring her daughter, Mrs. King puts a switch in her hair "'like other women'" and goes to meeting in "a decent long black dress and a neat bonnet" (74, 75). This conforming, which has no immediate results, destroys her. Shortly thereafter she declines and dies from "her wearing anxiety," a phrase which seems a deliberate Wilkins pun to verify that clothing and what it represents is the
cause of death (76). The taming of self to the narrow strictures of women's behavior destroys her will to live.

In contrast, in "An Independent Thinker" Esther responds to public opinion with defiance. She raises her elbows higher when people pass her windows to make sure they see she is knitting. But her defiance hides a concern for her granddaughter, who is more important to her than her independent thinking. Esther escapes the extreme fate of Mrs. King, but she, too, conforms. Mary Wilkins' intricate analysis of her situation is a commentary on the need to validate in woman-as-artist fiction.

In "An Independent Thinker," Lavinia, whom Esther has been secretly helping, spurns all overt offers of help from a woman who knits on Sunday. But when Esther admits the knitting had a higher end, to help the poor, Lavinia will not be disgraced by living with her. In the readjustments, however, Esther gives up a measure of her self-satisfaction, her sense of her own value. As Mary Wilkins tells us, people always said, "'Esther Gay does think so much of her own things!'" She views her little house as "a real palace." In fact, she has forced the tax assessor to value her place higher than its actual worth, and she frequently speaks of the "increased tax with cheerful pride" (300). Thus the male power structure of the town has been forced to accept her evaluation of her own worth—a rare accomplishment for a woman artist. However, when her
neighbor comes to live with her, Esther must sacrifice this sense of her value. To save money, she has her property reassessed. At the end of the story, Wilkins tells us that Esther, her pride swallowed, has gained her point. She now has too much work caring for the invalid to either knit or go to meeting. Like Jo, Esther has found contentment. Also like Jo, she is no longer an artist. She has paid a price—and that price is her sense of her value and her knitting. She worships by caring for others, but not by her art.

Esther Gay's experience shows the kind of justification women writers had to provide for their heroines who chose not to "go to meeting," not to accept patriarchal definitions of them and their lives. They had to demonstrate an alternative of service or usefulness underlying the defiance, a "higher" end to knitting on Sunday. But in validating their artist heroines' actions in this way, writers were also sometimes sacrificing their own values.

In the love/art dilemma, Esther makes one choice, and Louisa Ellis makes the opposite choice. However, some stories show the writer working out possibilities for artist heroines who do not have to choose either art or love, but who manage to have both. In "My Nephew's Crochets" (1877) by Lucretia P. Hale, for example, a music student will marry only if she can continue to study at the School of Art after her marriage. In "The Fate of a Voice" (1889) by Mary
Hallock Foote, a singer gives up potential fame when she marries a Westerner, but she continues to sing to provincial Western audiences. However distanced or romanticized, woman-as-artist fiction that attempts this compromise reflects the real concerns of women who hope to balance both needs in their own lives. Some of Mary Wilkins' artists achieve this balance also. In stories questioning the notion that it is woman's nature to love exclusively, Wilkins asserts the power and independence of creative human nature, without denying the need for human connection.

In "The Old Arithmetician" Mary Wilkins argues that a woman's creative drive is a gift: it is destiny. Unlike "An Independent Thinker," where the artist justifies her work rationally, in "An Old Arithmetician" the justification comes from God. Just as in "A New England Nun" Mary Wilkins reverses the "birthright" argument, in "An Old Arithmetician" she ingeniously adapts her theme of divine justification from the argument used by other writers to show why women should not be artists. These other writers argue that sex is an inescapable destiny which ties women to reproducing and nurturing. In "A Wife's Story," for example, Rebecca Harding Davis insists that a woman artist cannot "live down" her "Nature"--her biological instincts--for her "nature"--her talents and abilities. Hetty, the narrator, describes how God shows her, through a dream of public disgrace on the stage, that "a woman has no better
work in life than...to make herself a visible Providence to her husband and child.  

Mary Wilkins uses essentially the same argument for Mrs. Torry, but argues to prove the reverse. Mrs. Torry was "born" an arithmetician; she cannot "live down" her creative drive to "cipher." When she examines her priorities in distress that she had ciphered so intently she failed in her obligations to her granddaughter, she concludes, "'Twas the way I was made, an' I couldn't help that."  

This kind of reasoning was used both for and against women's use of their talents. Some writers argued that women were made to be wives and mothers. Others argued that women were made human; they were given gifts by God to use, just as men were. Writers used a variety of strategies to "prove" that if a woman was "made" a certain way she should be able to fulfill the innate God-given law of her own nature. Mrs. Torry, in fact, affirms the positions of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps in The Story of Avis (1877) and Sarah Orne Jewett in A Country Doctor (1884), who both argue that God intends their heroines to be artists, not wives and mothers.  

Phelps insists God wants Avis to be an artist by showing her dedicating herself to art at sixteen after an "illuminated hour." When Phillip says marriage is part of God's plan for women, Avis answers, "I am different. And God did it" (195). Her argument is identical to Mrs.
Torry's "'Twas the way I was made..." (379). This insistence that marriage was not right for a talented woman was what critics attacked. In their view, Avis was both desireable and marriageable; hence she must marry or she was unnatural and Phelps was unnatural for creating her.

In *A Country Doctor* Sarah Orne Jewett, learning from Phelps' ordeal with critics, writes a disguised version of her own education as a woman artist. Responding to Davis' argument that God intends women to be wives and mothers, Jewett uses the same arguments as Phelps: God wants this for me so I must do it. However, since Jewett's "artist" has been transposed to a doctor, clearly useful to others, the idea of service implicit in Nan Prince's alternative to marriage makes her choice more acceptable. In addition, Jewett devotes a large part of the novel to explaining why Nan's career is the only option she has.

Even though Avis asserts that she is different and that marriage is not right for her, her circumstances are such that readers see her as eminently marriageable. In contrast, Jewett argues from heredity and genetics that Nan can only be a doctor and must not be a mother. Jewett carefully emphasizes that Nan is not "clipped back or forced in any unnatural direction" but grows up "naturally as a plant grows."34 Lest it be argued that such a rare bloom is going against nature by not reproducing, Jewett insists that the bad strain in the family which surfaced in Nan's mother
absolutely prohibits Nan from having children. To show that even if she does not reproduce, her excellence can be a blessing to others, we have the example of the English apple tree outside Nan's grandmother's door. This wonderful strain cannot be duplicated: its graftings are worthless, but its apples are the delight of the neighborhood. Thus Nan also will serve by her "fruit" in the sense of her work, not her offspring.

Throughout *A Country Doctor* Jewett argues that Nan is directed by God. In deciding she will study to be a doctor, Nan has the sense, as Avis had, that "God had directed her at last" (166). When George proposes, Nan refuses him. Like Avis, she insists her vocation is a gift from God and what God intended for her. She says, "'It is a splendid thing to have the use of any gift of God. It isn't for us to choose again, or wonder or dispute, but just work in our own places, and leave the rest to God.'" To sum it up, Nan tells George, "'God would not give us the same talents if what were right for men were wrong for women'" (282).

In "An Old Arithmetician," Mrs. Torry also says that art is a God-given destiny and that women, like men, must make the most of the gifts they are given. She goes one step further, though, when she tells her granddaughter, Letty, that men shouldn't be blamed if they don't measure up to women. Letty says of the schoolmaster, "'I don't think a man has any business to be school-teaching if he can't do
examples as quickly as an old lady'' (371-2). But Mrs. Torry tells her a faculty is something "'that growed, an' didn't have to be learned. I've got this faculty; I can cipher. It ain't nothin' agin Mr. Plainfield if he ain't got it; it's a gift'" (372). At the end of the story Mrs. Torry warns Letty not to marry a man with faculty. Wilkins thus reverses the usual warning to men not to marry women with interests outside the home (women like Dickens' Mrs. Pardiggle), and she also neatly affirms the equality of talent.

Mary Wilkins makes another, more important affirmation in "An Old Arithmetician." While Jewett insists that Nan's career is useful, Wilkins shows us that Mrs. Torry's faculty has transcendent significance. It is her religion, her way of praising God. She tells the minister:

"...what a blessed privilege it would be to count up all the beautiful things in creation. Just think of countin' all them red an' gold-colored leaves, an' all the grapes an' apples in the fall; an' when it come to the winter, all the flakes of snow, an' the sparkles of frost; an' when it come to the spring, all the flowers, an' blades of grass, an' the little, new, light-green leaves." (370)

As we have seen in "A Souvenir" and "A New England Nun," art objects in the stories often replicate the process and characteristics of Wilkins' art. Similarly, Mrs. Torry's art in "An Old Arithmetician" also suggests Mary Wilkins' writing. Reverently enumerating each leaf, flower, fruit, and flake is the realist's task. She "recounts" the details of nature. Such counting is non-hierarchical; it is noting
the existence of all things, and all things "count." Mary Wilkins herself says she feels "that I am not telling things exactly as they are, and making everything clear, if I don't mention everything." In her counting, Mrs. Torry will include everything, and what she numbers, "creation," is intrinsically beautiful. Mrs. Torry's vision of the riches of nature is similar to the wreath in "A Souvenir": like Nancy's wreath, her paean to things that count replicates the cycle of life from fall to winter to spring--from colored leaves to apples to snowflakes to flowers--from maturity through death to new life.

Comparing her faculty with singing or writing poetry, Mrs. Torry recognizes her counting as art. She also points to art's ultimate function. When she gets to "the other world," as she tells the minister, she wants to count: "'mebbe somebody does have to do the countin'; mebbe it's singin' for some'" (370). Thus Wilkins intends us to see Mrs. Torry as an artist in the highest sense--that of celebrating the beauty of creation. Like Dickinson's "Inebriate of Air" Mrs. Torry is enraptured by the physical details of the natural world. Her art expresses her joy.

Hetty, in "A Church Mouse," celebrates life in the same way. Hetty embroiders bright flowers in wool, and when she finally finds a home in the church, her "wreaths and clusters of red and blue and yellow wool roses and lilies hung as acceptably between the meeting house windows as
pictures of saints in a cathedral."

It is no accident that the house Hetty finds sanctuary in is a church. Here her gaudy Berlin-work flowers and mottoes achieve their true function. When she hangs her bright pictures and when she rings the Christmas bells, she is "prompted by pure artless enthusiasm and grateful happiness" (426).

Both Hetty and Mrs. Torry celebrate life. They are artists in the sense of Wordsworth's definition of art as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling." Their art has no commercial value. It is neither practical nor useful. In both "An Old Arithmetician" and "A Church Mouse," audience--the minister and the schoolmaster, the congregation--appreciate the artist's work (if not the artist), but audience response is not important to these artists. Hetty and Mrs. Torry create for sheer joy. Art is a service, involuntary and joyful. Like Emily Dickinson, who says of her poems, "I've nothing else--to bring, You know--/ So I keep bringing These--," Mrs. Torry and Hetty offer what they do best to the universe.

But in "An Old Arithmetician" Mary Wilkins also shows us the negative side of a "gift" or a calling. Freed from the necessity of explaining why this old deformed widow does not marry, Wilkins can look more closely and more dispassionately at the costs of "faculty." Like Phelps but unlike Jewett, Wilkins shows the amorality, even the selfishness, of talent. When Letty announces she is taking
a trip with a friend, Mrs. Torry is so possessed by her ciphering she does not notice that Letty fails to return. She "'didn't know nothin' but them figgers'" (376). After she discovers Letty has taken the wrong train and been carried out West, Mrs. Torry does some soul searching. She despises herself for "'a lettin' my faculty for cipherin' get ahead of things that are higher and sacreder.'" She learns a lesson from this fright that serves as the central insight of the story:

"It don't make no difference what folks are born with a faculty for--whether it's cipherin' or singin' or writin' poetry--the love that's betwixt human beings an' the help that's betwixt 'em ought to come first." (377)

Thus far the story seems to affirm the conventional nineteenth-century view that love is the law of woman's nature. But Mary Wilkins is too clear-sighted to leave this affirmation of love as the last word. Love is important to women, but it does not take the place of work. In "An Old Arithmetician" she asserts the power and independence of creative human nature. Mrs. Torry says that love comes first, yet in spite of what she says she has learned, she cannot resist the solace and diversion her art offers her. At the same time as she declares she has been "'wicked'" for "'thinkin' so much of this faculty I've had for cipherin' that I've set it afore everything,'" her hand is itching for slate and pencil. She can't resist working on her problem when Letty is missing: as she rationalizes her situation, "'If--I could--only work on that sum a little while, it does
seem as if 'twould comfort me more'n anything'" (379). When Letty finally walks in the door, Mrs. Torry has to slip her slate under her apron. While she knows her concern for Letty comes first, or ought to come first, in actual fact she has a hard time choosing one over the other.

It is no coincidence that "An Old Arithmetician" makes statements on themes that occur in The Story of Avis and A Country Doctor. When Mrs. Torry says, "'Twas the way I was made, an' I couldn't help that'" (379), she is repeating Avis' "'He has made me so. How can I help that?'" (195). In my view, the echo is deliberate. Both Mrs. Torry and Avis appeal to a higher power to justify full use of their talents, to show these talents are "natural" for them. The similarity of ideas and phrasing suggests that Wilkins was thinking of both The Story of Avis and A Country Doctor when she wrote her comic story of the old woman with the irrepressible faculty who saw that human love was important but demonstrated that creative desire has a life of its own. The truth of her story is that the old arithmetician loves to count, and she feels compelled to continue. The power of Wilkins' story lies in just this realization, which goes beyond the vision of Phelps and Jewett. Avis has high seriousness, but when the critics say she has lost her touch she stops being an artist. Nan Prince needs the assurance that she is helping the world with her craft. Only Mrs. Torry loves doing what she does, and so does it. In this
story, Mary Wilkins looks to the joy in the process itself and shows the artist who is satisfied with her faculty and her relationships. In "An Old Arithmetician" the artist heroine achieves a balance between love and art. As Mrs. Torry expresses her good fortune, "'If I have got that dear child safe, an' ain't lost my faculty, it's more'n I deserve'" (381).

Woman-as-artist fiction like A Country Doctor, The Story of Avis, and "An Old Arithmetician" challenged the widely-held assumption that it was woman's nature—her God-given destiny—to be a wife and mother, forsaking all other identities and roles in life. These works argue that God gives other gifts to women, and in using these gifts, talented women are fulfilling God's will.

Louisa Ellis foregoes love for the solitary pleasures of her craft and her imaginative vision. She looks ahead to "prayerfully numbering her days" as a New England nun (17). Also "numbering" her days, Mrs. Torry achieves the same kind of domestic satisfaction, but with an important difference. She asserts the value of love, not romantic love, not dominating love like Joe Dagget's, but "'the love that's betwixt human beings an' the help that's betwixt them,'" a dimension excluded from "A New England Nun." This supportive love enables the artist-figure to feel interconnected with other humans in other Mary Wilkins stories.


12 Carol Farley Kessler, *Elisabeth Stuart Phelps* (Boston: Twayne, 1982), 86.


19 M'Carty, 271.


21 Mary Knight Potter, "Ten Beautiful Years," Atlantic Monthly 82 (1898): 826.

22 Augusta J. Evans, St. Elmo (New York, 1867), 379.


25 Evans, 261, 262.

26 Evans, 420.

27 Alcott, 537.

28 Mary E. Wilkins, "A Modern Dragon," in A Humble Romance, 60. Subsequent references in text.


30 Mary Hallock Foote, "The Fate of a Voice," in The Last Assembly Ball (Boston: Houghton, 1889).


33 Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, The Story of Avis (Boston, 1876), 57-8. Subsequent references in text.


35 Letter to Mary Louise Booth, 17 February 1885, letter 5 in The Infant Sphinx: Collected Letters of Mary E. Wilkins


CHAPTER 6

PIECES

The stories previously discussed show the artist trying to reconcile love and art. Louisa retreats, Esther compromises, Mrs. Torry balances both, and Hetty, Sarah, and others establish relationships through an artful appropriation of space. Other Mary Wilkins fiction shows the artist achieving love and community through her art. This relation can be perilous, for while the artist can be encouraged by a positive response, she can be doubly devastated by an unappreciative audience. Exploring variations of the artist/audience relationship, two stories about storytellers, "On the Walpole Road" and "Sister Liddy," and a story about a quilter, "An Honest Soul," provide insight into Mary Wilkins' method of composing.

At the end of "On the Walpole Road," two women, Almiry and Mis' Green, approach the end of their drive in a horse and buggy along a country road. In response to her own statement that a threatened shower has "'gone round to the northeast,'" Mis' Green says, "'Well, my story's gone round to the northeast too.'" Her seemingly idle comparison between story and storm points to a quality stressed by
early reviewers—the apparent artlessness of Mary Wilkins' stories. Her stories, say reviewers, are "natural"; they are spontaneous utterances, simple and direct. These comments apply to "On the Walpole Road," in which Mis' Green's story, suggested by a storm, swells and then subsides as part of the atmosphere of a hot muggy summer afternoon.

Another story and another story teller in "Sister Liddy" represent another aspect of Mary Wilkins' creative identity. In "Sister Liddy" Polly Moss tells her story, not in response to nature and memory but in reaction to intense social and psychological pressures. The story Polly Moss tells about her mythical sister is a last-ditch attempt to assert self in relation to a rapacious audience. Her utterance is not spontaneous: it is a calculated version of all the things she knows will impress her audience of paupers. She describes a materialist's "heaven on earth."

These two stories about story tellers show two ways the artist approaches her craft and her audience. In "On the Walpole Road" the artist tells her story naturally, out of a desire to speak and be heard, and she shares her story with an appreciative audience. In "Sister Liddy" the artist is defending herself to an indifferent and perhaps hostile audience. These two approaches to art coexist as the two extremes of Mary Wilkins' view of the relationship between artist and audience in her early stories.
"On the Walpole Road" is a frame story: two women are driving along the Walpole Road on a hot summer day. They see a storm coming up, but the horse can't be urged to go faster. The road and the coming storm remind Mis' Green of a story, and to divert their thoughts from the possible storm she tells Almiry about her Aunt Rebecca.

The story that Mis' Green tells Almiry as they jounce along is unhappy and flat; it is a realistic account of marriage which denies all our romantic notions of love. Mis' Green begins by saying that the clouds remind her of her Aunt Rebecca's funeral. She describes how she and her husband, Israel, receive the sad news of her aunt's death. On the way to the funeral they get caught in the rain on the Walpole Road. Arriving at last, their good black clothes drenched, they find that Rebecca's house and barn have been struck by lightning, that the fire is out but water is everywhere, and that the funeral has been postponed. Most importantly, they find out that Rebecca's husband, Uncle Enos, has died, not Rebecca.

Mis' Green then gets to the heart of her story: Rebecca, who loved Abner, married Enos to satisfy her mother. Even though Rebecca spoke up and said she loved someone else, Enos married her anyway. Mis' Green remembers her mother telling her how during the ceremony Enos "'had his mouth kinder hard sot, as if now he'd got what he wanted, an' meant to hang on to it'" (144). Mis' Green thus
explains a complicated psychological state in very simple terms. She describes Enos' expression and offers a limited interpretation, leaving her audience to draw the conclusion about Enos' acquisitive nature. After this inauspicious start to married life, Mis' Green continues, Rebecca did her duty by Enos, but even though she never complained, Mis' Green had the sense that she was never really happy.

Abner, Rebecca's first love, was at Enos' funeral. Again, Mis' Green is careful to describe the facial expression. As Enos is buried, Mis' Green notices the "'curiousest expression'" on Abner's face: "'He didn't look glad reely. I couldn't say he did, but all I could think of was a man who'd been runnin' and runnin' to get to a place, an' at length had got in sight of it'" (146). Again, she describes and offers an interpretation in very literal terms, letting her audience draw the connection between "place" and Rebecca. Like Enos, Abner is intent upon possession. Within two years he finally achieves his goal, for at long last he marries Rebecca.

Strange to say, the union between Rebecca and Abner is not particularly happy. Abner had lived alone for so long, Mis' Green says, that he couldn't stop "'fussin'" in Rebecca's kitchen. They didn't have much time together: after five years Rebecca "'was took sudden with cholera-morbus from eatin' currants'" and she died (146).

Toward the end of "On the Walpole Road," Almiry says she
thinks she's heard the story before. She heard it, in fact, the last time these two friends traveled the Walpole Road. Almiry's comment identifies Mis' Green's tale as the Walpole Road story, a tradition, a story rooted in a specific locale, called up by a hot summer afternoon, a plodding horse, and dark clouds on the horizon. Nature and climate and place and people connect present to past in an easy continuity.

"On the Walpole Road" is the work of an aware artist, one of Mary Wilkins' finest stories. It contains most of her important themes: the old woman as artist, young lovers thwarted by a parent, New England country people conveying their homely, cross-grained wisdom. Most importantly, the story questions romantic expectations at the same time as it affirms an enduring affection between Mis' Green and her Aunt Rebecca, and the frame story shows a woman telling a woman's story to an appreciative woman audience.

The storyteller, "hale and portly" Mis' Green, is early identified as a seer, one of Mary Wilkins' visionaries. Wilkins' description establishes her humor and flamboyant style: "She had a double, bristling chin, her gray eyes twinkled humorously over her spectacles, and she wore a wide-flaring black straw bonnet with purple bows on the inside of the rim" (134). This unlikely prophet tells Almiry her version of the Millenium. She says it will occur "'kinder like the robins an' flowers do in the spring,
kinder meltin' right into everything else, sweet an' nateral like."
Almiry is more conservative. She thinks Mis' Green goes too far; this account, says Almiry, "'tain't accordin' to Scripture" (136).

To her objection Mis' Green replies, "'It's accordin' to my Scripture.'" She goes on to tell Almiry that people see differently. As she puts it,

"Thar ain't so much difference in things on this airth as thar is in the folks that see 'em. It's me a-seein' the Scripturs, an' it's you a-seein' the Scripturs, Almiry, an' you see one thing an' I another, an' I dare say we both see crooked mostly, with maybe a little straight mixed up with it, an' we'll never reely know how much is straight till we see to read it by the light of the New Jerusalem."(136)

Mis' Green realizes the relativity of vision, but at the same time she establishes the authority and rightness of her own vision--her "scripture"--for herself. This insight applies to the story she tells as well. Since Aunt Rebecca was never one to say how she was feeling about things, Mis' Green has pieced together her story from observation and thought. She tells what she surmises from what she knows. The story she tells is her version of reality, and her audience, Almiry, after Mis' Green has finished, supports Mis' Green's version by saying, "'I like to hear you'" (147).

Throughout the story Almiry serves an important role as an appreciative audience. She is established as a "plain featured and energetic" woman who jogs the horse along, slapping at him mechanically and listening to Mis' Green's
tale. To her admiring mind, at least, Mis' Green's way of seeing is "straight." This same kind of small and supportive audience occurs in other stories also. In "A Church Mouse," for example, when Hetty pleads from the church window for "'jest one word,'" Mrs. Gale calls out, "'Say all you want to, Hetty, an' don't be afraid.'" Mrs. Gale and the other women decide that Hetty can stay in the church. And in "Christmas Jenny" Mrs. Carey defends Jenny to the minister and the deacon. In all of these stories the supportive friend as audience bonds the artist to her community.3

In real life Mary Wilkins had at least two such friends. Mary Louisa Booth, the editor of Harper's Bazar who first published Wilkins' stories, was a friendly and helpful advisor, as can be seen from the many letters Wilkins wrote to her.4 Her closest lifelong friend, whose family she lived with for so many years in Randolph, was Mary Wales, called "Mary John" after the village custom of adding her father's first name to distinguish her from all the other Marys. Since no letters survive between the two friends, information about their relationship is scanty. Mary Wilkins' story "Eliza Sam" in The Winning Lady (1909) may be a portrait; Eliza Sam is a strong, friendly maternal woman who marries the male narrator of the story. Wilkins' friend Joseph Chamberlin told Thomas Schuler Shaw that Mary Wales was a "typical New England maiden lady, rather short in
stature and very sharp of speech” and not literary. Edward Foster, relying on a picture and information from Harriet Lothrop Belcher, Wilkins’ cousin, describes Mary Wales as "strong" and "maternal," and another Randolph friend remembered Mary Wales as an independent thinker. According to Foster, people could not understand what the delicate, literary Mary Wilkins saw in the "frumpish," heavy, anecdotal, talkative Mary Wales. But apparently the relationship was very close, to the extent that some Randolph people believed that Mary Wilkins’ success was a collaboration with Mary Wales: one Randolph woman suggested to Foster that Mary Wales made the snowballs and Mary Wilkins threw them. There may be some truth in this suggestion, at least to the extent that Mary John’s anecdotes and her common-sense responses may have helped Mary Wilkins’ writing. Clearly, as Wilkins grew away from the Randolph people her writing changed. It may be that Mary Wales helped Mary Wilkins rely on her own scripture, as Mrs. Gale does for Hetty and Almiry does for Mis’ Green.

Right after Mis’ Green’s "lesson" on the relativity of vision, Almiry, clearly impressed, gives Mis’ Green's intellectual powers the highest praise a village woman can give: she tells Mis' Green that she should have been a minister. Not unduly impressed by ministers, Mis’ Green replies that she might have gone into the ministry if she had been a man, but she allows, "'I s'pose the Lord thought
there was more need of an extra hand just then to raise up children, an' bake an' brew an' wash dishes" (136). Thus she comfortably asserts her own worth and conveys her sense that woman's work is at least as important as minister's work.

Mis' Green asserts that truth is relative: "'You see one thing an' I another, an' I dare say we both see crooked mostly, with maybe a little straight mixed up with it'" (136). But the story she tells is a straight look at love. It reverses all the cherished myths of romance which hold that parent-sponsored marriages are deadly and that marriages must be based on love. In spite of the parental pressure that brought them together and the humiliating start to their marriage when Rebecca flatly stated she loved another, Enos and Rebecca manage to get along. More devastating to the myths of romance is the fact that Abner and Rebecca, even though their romantic expectations are fostered by early love and a long wait, have a rather disappointing relationship once they finally marry. Perhaps their lives would have been happier if they had married when they were young and first in love. But perhaps not. Mis' Green offers no platitudes. She tells what happened. Her language is direct, conversational, and concrete. She is a realist, like Mary Wilkins at her best.

This deflation of romantic love is not the only theme of "On the Walpole Road," however. The strongest emotion in
the story is the bond between Mis’ Green and Aunt Rebecca. "'I'd allers thought a sight of her,'" Mis' Green says. "'I couldn't get along without goin' to see Aunt Rebecca once in so often; I'd get just as lonesome an' homesick as could be.'" Even though Rebecca never talked about her feelings, we know the affection was reciprocated. Aunt Rebecca "'tuk right hold'" and nursed Sarah Green and her children through typhus fever, saving their lives, according to Mis' Green, who says she "'should ha' died if it hadn't been for her.'"

In speaking of this relationship, Mis' Green expresses deep feelings with blunt language; she avoids sentiment and conveys emotion figuratively. She says, "'For all Aunt Rebecca was so kind an' sympathizin' to other folks, she'd always seemd like a stone 'bout her own troubles'" (145). The family trait of reticence that she observes in Rebecca manifests itself in Mis' Green in concrete, homely expressions. To describe the depth of Rebecca's sense of family bonds, Mis' Green says, "'She was allers such an own-folks sort of woman'" (137).

Mis' Green's response when she hears the garbled account of Rebecca's death (really Enos's) conveys the depth of her feelings for Rebecca: "'I felt too bad to cry. I didn't, till I happened to look down at the apron I had on. It was like a dress she had on; she had a piece left, an' she gave it to me for an apron. When I saw that, I bust right out sobbin'"'" (138). Her feelings are called up by the apron.
Wilkins shows how a homely act, an exchange of cloth, an apron in the same material as a dress, expresses the deep bond between the two women. Sharing material, either scraps and pieces for quilts, or clothes "cut from the same cloth," was a unique act of female friendship which symbolized giving of oneself. It was particularly meaningful when the friends or family members did not see each other often. It became a way of keeping that friend nearby, a kind of a tangible "piece" of memory which in this case Mis' Green has pieced together with other memories and preserved as an emotional sign in a larger "piece," her story.

Mis' Green's story is about real human relationships, about Rebecca and Enos, Rebecca and Abner, Rebecca and Mis' Green. But while affectionate love between women is a strong theme, the entire story has a bitter undertone as a result of Wilkins' avoidance of sentimental language throughout. In addition, the modern, almost cynical mood arises from the reversal of romantic expectations and the ironical play on religion in Mis' Green's story. All the important rituals are strangely distorted. Mis' Green notes grimaces on the men's faces at both altar and grave; each man is set only on obtaining an object--Rebecca. Rebecca's "funeral"--really Enos'--makes Mis' Green "'kinder highstericky.'" As she describes it, "'I jest sot right down in the first cheer I come to an' laughed; I laughed till the tears was runnin' down my cheeks... '" (140). These
unexpected responses undercut the romantic and religious seriousness of the ritual occasions. By piecing together the occasions and responses, Mary Wilkins achieves an irony which becomes the dominant mood of the story.

Under cover of Mis' Green and her homely dialect, Mary Wilkins goes even further in confusing and deflating romance, religion, and even sex. In the beginning conversation between Mis' Green and Almiry she introduces the idea of the millenium coming, not with a masculine blast from Gabriel's trumpet, but as Mis' Green predicts with a decidedly feminine sexuality, "'kinder melting' right into everything else, sweet an' nateral like'" (136). Describing Enos' funeral, she continues to play on the millenium theme by subtly introducing fire and flood imagery. Enos' funeral is delayed by a fire in the barn, and as a result house and barn are flooded with water. A sense of disaster hangs over the scene, yet nothing happens. The millenium has not occurred; Gabriel does not sound his trumpet. The marriage that follows the death, fire, and flood is not heaven on earth. This real, anticlimactic love story is flat and a little bitter.

The story Mis' Green tells in "On the Walpole Road" is a Mary Wilkins paradigm. Like Mis' Green, Mary Wilkins often avoids sentimental language in her early stories, and relies on careful observation and sharp detail to convey emotion. At her best, Mary Wilkins wrote stories about
human affection which never quite satisfied conventional notions of romance and religion. At the heart of these stories is often an awareness of a reality inimical to human needs and desires. "Two Old Lovers," for example, tells of a man who courted a woman all his life and on his death bed whispers that he always meant to marry her.

Wilkins' anti-sentimental stories establish a world where women's values prevail. These early stories fit into the tradition of women's literary realism or "woman-identified fiction" defined by Josephine Donovan. The tradition as Donovan describes it culminates in Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, the story of an artist learning empathic skills from the wise woman, Mrs. Todd. "On the Walpole Road" likewise centers on a woman who possesses the empathic skills, the artist Mis' Green. Mis' Green's artistic vision enables her to "see" Rebecca with understanding, to read through Rebecca's reticence. Mis' Green "looks sharp" at Rebecca, and realizes that Rebecca will not show how she feels, for her "'troubles always stayed in her heart...an' never pricked through.'" Further showing her empathy, Mis' Green realizes the price that Rebecca's control has cost her and has a sense why Rebecca seems so unemotional: "'Though I don't know, maybe, ef she'd married the man she'd wanted, she'd cried easier'" (145). Mis' Green is an artist at the height of her powers, "hale and portly," wise and humorous, who sees life clearly
and doesn't expect too much, for she knows there is no heaven on earth, only other people and their flawed love.

"Sister Liddy" is another Mary Wilkins masterpiece. Like "On the Walpole Road," it is the story of a storyteller in the process of telling her story, but the process, the story, and the relation to audience are very different. Here Mary Wilkins dramatizes the artist who writes not out of an inner sense of a story to tell, but out of a need to construct a self that will earn her approval and recognition. Polly Moss dies from a falseness to herself and to her audience, a falseness personified in a vampire-like "sister" she creates to mediate with her audience. In describing this creation, Mary Wilkins is writing of a painful and destructive state which she knew something about.

Polly Moss is very different from Mis' Green. Like many of Mary Wilkins' heroines, she survives on the very edge. While Mis' Green is "hale and portly," Polly Moss is a "'dretful-lookin' cretur'" who limps and is bent over so "her little pale triangular face seemed to look from the middle of her flat chest." She lives in the almshouse, "deformed and poor and friendless" (92), lowest of all among those who are reduced to being little more than mouths. The world is defined by this institution, a new, fine building, standing alone in the glaring sun on a bare lot. The inmates are despondent and addled, or cruel and competitive.
One sardonic woman claims "'the signs are increasin'" for the end of the world, while the others mutter and complain. And in fact, the life described in this story does seem to foretell the end: the end of hope and joy. The almshouse is a microcosm of the materialistic world, separated from God and devoid of human love. Besides a clearly extraneous subplot of a "sick young woman" whose lover comes to get her at the end of the story, the only exception to this malaise is the gentle Polly Moss, who in spite of her deformity patiently plays with the children in the corridors.

The paupers practice a cruel oneupsmanship on each other when they talk about what they had in the past. As in many other Mary Wilkins stories, clothing—literally material, in this most material time and place—is crucial. For women, clothing is frequently the one permissible form of self-expression. Often, as in "On the Walpole Road," the giving and sharing of "pieces" or clothing expresses a strong bond; sisters and friends share and exchange clothing, as in "A Gala Dress" or "Lombardy Poplar." But instead of expressing a bond, in "Sister Liddy" clothing is a weapon, a symbol of superiority. Its use to make other women feel inferior is a measure of how dehumanized these paupers have become.

One by one the women recite their litany of clothing they used to have. One had a lace cap, another a good thibet, another "a handsome blue silk," another a white
drawnsilk bonnet with a feather and a "'black silk spencer cape'" (90-1). Even Sally, the confused old woman who tears up beds, once had "'a pink caliker gownd'" (92). But Polly Moss has had nothing, not one of the things by which female worth is reckoned in this materialistic age—not silk, lace, nor even calico, much less a home or household goods. As Mary Wilkins tells us, Polly has never had any space: "All her life the world had seemed to her simply standing-ground" (93). The other inmates' accounts of past glories gain "a gusto" from this silent listener who can not join in.

So Polly Moss invents a sister, Liddy, and tells her story. Sister Liddy is the quintessential sentimental heroine. She is a catalog of female fantasy. As Polly tells it, Liddy was blonde and fair. She could sing "'dretful loud an' sweet.'" She wore silk dresses, draped her form in cashmere shawls, and framed her face with "'a bunnit with a pink wreath.'" She had a feather fan and "'a whole chistful of clothes, real fine cotton cloth, all tucks an' laid-work, an' she had a pair of silk stockins, an' some white shoes.'" She married "'a real rich fellar from Boston.'" Liddy "'come out bride'" in full glory "'in a blue silk dress, an' a black lace mantilly, an' a white bunnit trimmed with lutestring ribbon'" (94-5).

After her marriage, Polly continues, Liddy lived in Boston in a big house decorated in high Victorian style. Polly, who has had no space of her own beyond the earth she
stood on, carves out a large space for Liddy, adorned with velvet carpets, big pictures in gilt frames, stuffed furniture "'kivered with red velvet,'" a piano, "'great big marble images a-settin' on her mantel-shelf,'" and a coach, and a hired girl, and a baby (95).

Polly creates this paragon for an audience of women. Unlike Almiry, Mis' Green's audience, Polly's audience is not going the same way she is. Her audience of paupers is hostile, calling her "'the wust-lookin' objeck'" (84), delighting in her deformity because it enables them to look down on her. Thus when Polly speaks of Sister Liddy, she gets back at the women in her audience: She says to a vain woman, "'She was jest as fair as a lily--a good deal fairer than you ever was, Mis' Handy...’" (94). Polly confronts her audience like a lion tamer with a whip. She expands and builds details on her story of Sister Liddy until she dies.

Mary Wilkins describes Polly as an artist. "Old Polly Moss, her little withered face gleaming with reckless enthusiasm, sang the praises of her sister Liddy as wildly and faithfully as any minnesinger his angel mistress" (96). Polly successfully asserts herself. Tired of being the passive listener to their boasting, she tells her story to compete with the other women. She earns the respect of her audience, as we know by the way they listen "with ever-increasing bewilderment and awe" (96). She is the artist who tells a tale to impress an audience, to project an image
of herself. She creates an idealized self, a persona, a self she thinks others will envy. Instead of recounting events as truthfully as she can, Polly manufactures grandiose details of impossible splendors, not to recreate but to impress.

Interestingly, the psychological pressures that motivate Polly Moss' storytelling more and more became the pressures that motivate Mary Wilkins' writing. Most important, the story Polly Moss tells bears many resemblances to the fantasies of female desires that Mary Wilkins started telling around 1900. Mary Cavendish, for example, in *The Heart's Highway* dresses as opulently as Sister Liddy in her silks and satins. Wilkins' later stories are full of young women who are wooed and won by handsome young men from out of town. Husbands like Doc Gordon and Captain Carroll are single-mindedly devoted to their wives; the Gordons and the Carrolls and the Andersons and Miss Lennox and other families in Wilkins' later stories live in handsome houses with statues and rugs and pictures.

With some notable exceptions, like "Old Woman Magoun," Mary Wilkins stops telling the Walpole Road story around 1900. For the most part, she no longer writes out of the tradition of women's realism. She no longer addresses the Almiries, the women who drive the horses along, who are plain and mature, skeptical but ready to be convinced by the realistic wisdom of Mis' Green. She instead turns to
another audience and gives them a formula-bound version of the sentimental novel, relying on sweet helpless young heroines and melodramatic plots. Mary Wilkins becomes Polly Moss, reflecting the values of an increasingly materialistic audience. In a later chapter, I will discuss why her sense of her audience changed and why she increasingly projects a sense of conflict with that audience, as in "Sister Liddy," rather than the accord projected in "On the Walpole Road."

These two stories of story tellers help to illustrate two views of the relationship between artist and audience in Mary Wilkins' early stories. In addition, "On the Walpole Road" and "An Honest Soul" shed light on Mary Wilkins' method in her early stories. The empathic, wise woman artist persona Wilkins achieves in Mis' Green, and in other characters in other stories, connects with her audience through her work. She pieces together memory and precept to create a narrative that expresses her version of life. Although she realizes that all truth is relative, she is confident about the general accuracy of her views. With the attitude of "here's how I see it" she tells what we recognize as a truthful story about men and women. She calmly accepts human nature and the realities of life in an imperfect world.

Mary Wilkins' early stories show her working in the Mis' Green mode. She seems to have written instinctively at first. If we can believe the accounts of her methods of
composing that appear in the early gossipy reviews, she wrote spontaneously. She began usually with a picture or a concept, like Mis' Green's thunderstorm. Just as Mis' Green has worked out her story to cover exactly the time it takes to get home, so Mary Wilkins figured exactly how her stories would end and then wrote them out.¹¹

At least in the beginning, Wilkins had some confidence that she was writing in her own way. She wrote about her method in letters to editors and literary friends and she transposed her method into a study of artistic process in her stories. Her initial impulse was close to what would be called in painting primitivism. She felt the need to include every detail, like the genre painters who tip the plane to show each knot of the planks in a floor. In an 1885 letter to Mary Louise Booth, editor of Harper's Bazar, who had apparently offered her some suggestion for improving her handling of detail, she says, "I suppose the trouble is, the uncomfortable feeling I have, that I am not telling things exactly as they are and making everything clear, if I don't mention everything."¹²

To Hamlin Garland in 1887 she wrote that "being true" was the one conscious goal of her work: "Yes, I do think more of making my characters true and having them say and do just the things they would say and do, than of anything else and that is the only aim in literature of which I have been really conscious myself."¹³ This insistence on being
precise and true is examined in "An Honest Soul," a study of
the self-directed compulsion for precise detail which is a
major reason for the excellence of Wilkins' early stories.

"An Honest Soul" documents Mary Wilkins' sense that her
compulsive need for "rightness" is part of her larger
vision, and her confidence that a sense of community with
her audience helps establish the artistic balance between
independence and connection. "An Honest Soul," published in
1884, is an early version of the themes of "A New England
Nun" which similarly concludes with the artist sitting by
her window. Once again we must remember that this story was
written at the beginning of Mary Wilkins' career, a year
after she had moved to Randolph, when she was struggling to
support herself with her writing. The story opens with
Martha Patch, who supports herself by doing "odd housewifely
jobs," who "wove rag-carpets, pieced bed-quilts, braided
rugs, etc.," figuring out what she will earn from piecing
two quilts and adding that on to her "dollar an sixty-three
cents" and the meager stores she has on hand.14 She eyes
the "pieces" in two bags that two neighbors have left for
quilts.

Martha's house has one problem. The front wall facing
the road has no doors and windows, "only a blank, unbroken
wall" (78), a legacy from her father, who abhored debt, and
would not finish constructing the house until he had money
to pay cash. Martha's house thus is the symbol of an
inherited lack of vision, the cut-off and closed-off woman's life passed along to her by patriarchal culture. Above all, Martha wishes for a "'front winder.'" She can see only cows and children from her back window; she can "'never get a sight of the folks goin' to meetin' nor nothin'" (80). She has a feeling for beauty and yearns for community with other people: "a window commanding a view of the street and the passers-by would have been a great source of comfort to the poor old woman, sitting and sewing as she did day in and day out" (81). It would have made up for lack of excitement in her life: "she was one of those women who like to see everything that is going on outside, and who often have excuse enough in the fact that so little is going on with them" (80).

Wilkins' inspiration for this story is obviously personal when we put together the anxiety over work with the fact, documented by Shaw, that she hated to work in her downstairs room because the window looked out on the blank wall of a neighbor's house. She always wrote upstairs where she had a view of the village. Some of the statements Wilkins makes about Martha Patch easily apply to Mary Wilkins herself and her work, such as the observation that Martha "seized eagerly upon the few objects of interest which did come within her vision, and made much of them" (81).

Her lack of a view makes the pieces Martha has to work
with all the more appealing. The "'French caliker'" with
"'leetle pink roses'" in one woman's bag inspires her. She
gazes at the pieces in admiration, saying, "'That jest takes
my eye'" (80). She sits down to her back window and
proceeds to piece her quilts, liberally working the pink
calico into one of them, with, we can be sure, a careful
sense of design, as "putting and keeping things in order was
one of the interests which enlivened her dulness and made
the world attractive to her" (86).

Martha mixes up the quilt pieces as she makes the
quilts. Once they are made, she finds to her horror that
she has put the pink calico in the wrong quilt. Ever
conscientious, she remakes the quilts, a long and exacting
process, repeated for a second time. But once again, when
she has finished, she fears she has made a mistake. This
time she visits the woman who commissioned one of the quilts
to ask if the pink calico is hers. Mrs. Bennet tells her
the pink is from Hattie's dress and urges her not to "'work
too hard on that quilt'" (84). Without revealing her
problem, Martha creeps home in exhaustion to cut up and
remake the quilts.

Meanwhile her food supply is depleted, and she
doesn't eat. The slow starvation she endures as she works
signals the lack of sustaining care from her community. She
says, "'I'll hev them quilts right ef it kills me.'" Her
need to get the quilts exactly right nearly does kill her.
But since she thinks making them over is right, "it was all that she could do" (86). Even at the point of collapse she thinks, "'I'm glad I got them quilts done right fust!'" (87). The intense inner drive for perfection forces her to make and remake the quilts until they are constructed according to her sense of rightness. Like Louisa Ellis in "A New England Nun," she has a "rage for order." Clearly, her audience, the women for whom she is making the quilts, do not have the standards she has, but Mrs. Bennet's delight over the quilt with the pink roses is Martha's recompense. After Mrs. Bennet's praise, Martha thinks, "'Ef I ain't thankful I did them quilts over'" (90).

And finally, the chain of events that leads her close to collapse finally results in that long-desired front window. Mrs. Peters, the kind neighbor who rescues her from exhaustion and hunger, proposes that her husband will put in a window in return for some sewing. This artist, then, strives for her own satisfaction in getting her work "done right," but she is gratified and nourished by audience response. Through the kindness of her friends, Martha will have a window to look out of. The window is a way of opening her personal space and sharing it with the people outside, a bond with the community, achieved without the sacrifice of her own strict standards. When Hetty tells Mrs. Peters, "'It's nothin' but play piecin' quilts. All I mind is not havin' a front winder to set to while I'm doin'
on't'" (89), she is saying she needs this contact with others for her work.

"An Honest Soul" and the letters quoted earlier suggest that early in her career Mary Wilkins had a sense of what was important in her writing—her fidelity to detail and order, her feeling for the "truth" of characters and actions, and a sense of community. Other letters show that she knew how she should proceed. In 1885, for example, she wrote to Mary Louise Booth that her method of writing could not be forced, that she had to just let it happen: "I do not want to undertake any work for which I am unequal, and if waiting can make me equal to it, I want to wait. I have a feeling that with anything of this sort, it is more a question of natural growth, than of deliberate efforts though I suppose that is against all the rules and precepts."16

And in 1887 she again expresses the conviction that it is important for her to make her own way: "I begin to see very plainly that there are rocks ahead in my literary course that I may split upon; though I cannot just define their nature to myself. One of these days if I can find out my own rocks, I think I may acquire more decision of motion, but I shall have to find them out myself."17

These passages from letters show that her view of herself as an artist is close to the Martha Patch way, having to work it out herself, and close to the Miz' Green
way, believing that even if her method may not be according to the scripture, it is her scripture. She is aware of a "natural growth" in her work which goes against "rules and precepts," but the nature of which she must find out by herself. She also has a sense of a particular rural locale, like Mis' Green. As she tells Hamlin Garland in a letter, "So far I have written about the things of which I know the most." 16 She writes about what she has observed and experienced even if what she sees goes against romantic and sentimental stereotypes. She plods along at her pace. She makes and remakes, writes and rewrites. Her "winged horse of poesy" is a cart horse who will not be hurried, who takes her where she wants to go, and stops willingly at the end of the journey. Mary Wilkins thus early in her career had a sense that her method of composing was not easily categorized. She realized that she had to work out her own procedures of writing. She knew that the answers to her problems would be found within her, and that to solve her writing problems she had to write out of her own knowledge.

But in her later work instead of the Mis' Green approach to her art--writing the truth about what she knows--or even the Martha Patch approach--focusing on the truth as she knows it--Mary Wilkins turns more and more to the Polly Moss approach. Like many of Mary Wilkins' later stories, Polly Moss' story of her sister Liddy is a fantasy of wish-fulfillment. Polly Moss creates an unreal image out of the
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desires and wishes of her audience. Of course, the central irony of her story is that the paupers are impressed and subdued by the same distorted values that are used to label them as failures. Like the later Mary Wilkins Freeman, Polly Moss is the artist as magician who tricks her audience into respecting her by conjuring up a vision of all that she believes their limited minds can desire. This act of "trickery," however, for both Mary Wilkins and Polly Moss, is ultimately damaging. Like many later Wilkins stories, the Sister Liddy story illustrates all the values of a materialistic society: the husband from Boston, the grand house, the coach, the hired girl, and above all the clothing--the almost palpable materials--the tucked cottons, the heavy silks, the cashmeres, laces, and furs. The inmate who at the beginning of "Sister Liddy" watches for signs of the coming millenium is by the end of the story granted her vision: truly here with all its ironic implications is an American "heaven on earth."


5 Thomas Schuler Shaw, "A Nineteenth Century Puritan, Being a Biography of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman," (1931), Unpublished Biography, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 42.


8 For the woman with emphatic skills as artist see Marcia McClintock Folsom, "'Tact Is a Kind of Mind-Reading': Empathic Style in Sarah Orne Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs," Colby Library Quarterly 18 (1982): 66-78.

9 Mary E. Wilkins, "Sister Liddy," in A New England Nun, 84. Subsequent references in text.


11 According to a review in The Bookbuyer 8, no. 2 (March 1891): 54.

12 Mary Wilkins to Mary Louise Booth, 17 February 1885, letter 5 in The Infant Sphinx: Collected Letters of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, ed. Brent L. Kendrick (Metuchen, N.J.):
Scarecrow, 1985), 61.

13 Mary Wilkins to Hamlin Garland, 23 November 1887, letter 28 in Kendrick, 83.


15 Shaw, 53.

16 Mary Wilkins to Mary Louise Booth, 21 April 1885, letter 6 in Kendrick, 63.

17 Mary Wilkins to Mary Louise Booth, 5 November 1887, letter 27 in Kendrick, 82.

18 Mary Wilkins to Hamlin Garland, 23 November 1887, letter 28 in Kendrick, 83.
CHAPTER 7

THE LOST VOICE

Hawthorne's often-quoted scoff about the "damned mob of scribbling women" bears witness that many women were writing in the last half of the nineteenth century and that men were uneasy about the competition. But while many women were writing (and painting and composing), many talented women never attempted creative work and many attempted and then gave it up, both because of their own sense of role conflict and because of the attitude implicit in Hawthorne's remark--the disapproval, censure, and even ridicule of the world at large.

It is true that this world at large, especially in America, tended to disapprove of artists in general, male as well as female. In Hawthorne's own story, "The Artist of the Beautiful," Owen Warland struggles to "keep his faith in himself" in the "atmosphere of doubt and mockery" generated by people who value practical "main strength and reality" and the "dusty prizes" that "lie along the highway." But add to the man's struggle to validate his vision in a materialistic society the gender-related doubts of the woman artist, and it is a wonder any survived to tell her tale.

The silencing of women--from within and without--is a
frequent theme in woman-as-artist fiction. While in some fiction the silencing of the woman artist can be merely an innovative way to solve the love/art dilemma, in other works it can be a painfully accurate rendering of actual experience. Two of Mary Wilkins' great early stories, "A Poetess" (1890) and "A Village Singer" (1891), are testaments to the dual vulnerabilities of the woman artist. Both the poetess, Betsy Dole, and the singer, Candace Whitcomb, are silenced by other people's judgment of their work. Both are silenced as well by a complex emotional state compounded of guilt, anger, injured pride, and what Gilbert and Gubar call "anxiety of authorship," a sense that in being women artists they are violating social and psychological laws and that therefore they deserve adverse judgements of their work. In these two stories Mary Wilkins reveals her own conflicts as a woman writer. In "A Poetess" she both ridicules and honors traditionally "feminine" writing, and in "A Village Singer" she both supports and punishes rebellious "masculine" assertion of talent and worth. In these stories, Wilkins' descriptions of how audience pressure and internal conflict destroy the artist point to the ways she herself was silenced as a serious writer.

So long as the artist heroine is satisfied with performing her craft for her own pleasure—sometimes a form of limitation in itself—she is able to circumvent or ignore
criticism. Like Hawthorne's Owen Warland, some of Mary Wilkins' heroines realize that "the reward of all high performance must be sought within itself or sought in vain" (1154). Hetty's wool pictures in "A Church Mouse," Louisa's embroidery and distilling in "A New England Nun," Mrs. Torry's ciphering in "An Old Arithmetician" may cause local whispering, but these artists have no need of outside approval to help them value their work. They can retreat and create; their art is a private celebration. They are truly "New England nuns" who work for their own spiritual satisfaction.

However, as women artists they are allowed their vocations only as long as they do not compete with men. When Hetty attempts to fill the sexton's role, when Louisa protests Joe's definition of her space, both these artists have to face down critics who attack their vision. More often, to avoid confrontation, women deprecate and disown their "masculine" skills. When Mrs. Torry's granddaughter compares her abilities with the schoolmaster's, Mrs. Torry insists there's no special merit in having talent like hers—it's a gift, she says. Ann Douglas Wood describes how women "mask[ed] and hallow[ed]" their ability by insisting their writing was hardly writing, was instinctive and artless musing very different from men's rational exposition: thus, Wood explains, Harriet Beecher Stowe claimed "God wrote" Uncle Tom's Cabin. In the same vein,
Madeline in Mary Hallock Foote's "The Fate of a Voice" claims she is "only the tenement in which a precious thing is lodged." With this strategy, the woman artist can appear in a feminine role: that of the receptor of a divine--or male--power; as in George Du Marier's popular novel, she can be a Trilby to the man's Svengali.

Cheryl Walker and Ann Wood point out that a favorite nineteenth-century metaphor for the woman artist was a flower or a bird. Again, the impulse is to soften and defuse the woman artist's presumption of a male role. Thus, in an early review Mary Wilkins the caustic realist is called a "mayflower," and praised for her "meekness" and "modesty of mind." And Susan Dickinson said of Emily, "Her swift poetic rapture was like the long glistening note of a bird...." A flower blooming, a bird singing has no conscious, rational volition, and is not serious competition for men. A flower has no ambition and does not expect recognition, fame, or money. A bird, like Emily Dickinson's "most triumphant bird," sings "...for nothing scrutable/ But intimate Delight."

In her lifetime, Emily Dickinson played the role of the poet as bird who sings out her own joy and pain. In what we see now as a painfully negotiated decision to withdraw, she opted for the "reward...within itself," the position of writing "letters to a world/ That never wrote to me" (#441). Realizing if she heeded his kindly advice that Higginson's
"surgeries" would cripple her, and perhaps fearing that if she listened to him and to other readers she might stop hearing her own voice, she did not attempt to publish her poetry.

The alienation of a retreat like Emily Dickinson's underscores the difficulties faced by women artists who had neither Dickinson's faith in her own genius nor her financial security. These women wanted to be taken seriously as artists. But if a woman's art is the natural outpouring of spontaneous feeling like a bird's song or a flower's bloom, by what standards can it be evaluated? The unfortunate point of these metaphors is that such "natural" effusions should not be judged at all—precisely the view of many nineteenth-century critics. An Atlantic Monthly reviewer of Alice and Phoebe Cary finds the poets so "touching and elevating" he doesn't want to judge their work. Another reviewer says of another woman poet that her art is so "blameless" he doesn't care "if it is not very lofty or profound." 10

The unsaid message in these gentlemanly observations is that the art, if it were judged, is probably inferior—but why state the obvious? After all, they imply, such art exists to be enjoyed, like nature, like a pretty face or a sunny afternoon. This critical stance also implies that the desire for serious evaluation is like the desire for fame and recognition. These desires are selfish, aggressive,
ambitious, competitive—in short, they are male. A woman, so the story goes, has no more relation to such desires than does a bird singing its heart out in the rosebush.

For women like Mary Wilkins, writers who had to make a living with their work and who wanted approval from audience and critics, the socially acceptable pose of the "natural" and "artless" artist contained many painful contradictions. Mary Wilkins' "A Poetess" explores the frustrations inherent in the idea of the woman artist as blooming flower or singing bird. In this story, Betsy Dole, the village "poetess," composes an obituary poem on the death of her neighbor's son. Her neighbor, Mrs. Caxton, and others in the village are impressed with Betsy's poem, which Mrs. Caxton has printed up with a black border and distributed throughout the village. Betsy is gratified by the village response. She feels like a celebrity, but her feelings of fame are shortlived. She hears that the minister, who also writes poetry, has said that the poem is bad, that the printing is in poor taste, and that Betsy has never written any real poetry. Betsy's reaction to this blow is not to affirm like Mrs. Torry, "'This is the way God made me,'" but to cry, "'Had I ought to have been born with the wantin' to write poetry if I couldn't write it...?''"11

Throughout the story, in comparing Betsy to her flowers and to her canary, Mary Wilkins makes the point that Betsy has been writing as instinctively and naturally as these
metaphors traditionally associated with women's art suggest. Wilkins compares Betsy to the "old perennials" in her garden and says "she ate scarcely more than her canarybird, and sang as assiduously" (151). By having the canary respond when Mrs. Caxton twice calls out "'Betsy, you there?'" she insists on the identification of the canary with Betsy. The first times Mrs. Caxton calls, the canary answers with a "chirp and twitter," and on her second call of "'Betsy?'") the canary begins to "trill and sing" (140-1). When Betsy hears of the minister's cruel remarks the identification is made once again: Betsy immediately thinks of her art in terms of the canary and her flowers: "'Would it be fair if that canary-bird there, that ain't never done anything but sing, should turn out not to be singin'? Would it, I'd like to know? S'pose them sweet peas shouldn't be smellin' the right way?'" (155).

The title of this story, "A Poetess," suggests why Betsy responds as she does to the minister's criticism. Betsy lives in a world in which the poet is the norm and the poetess is the derivation, the aberration, designated by a suffix denoting inferiority, "ess." Betsy, the poetess, accepts the male, the poet's judgement even though she knows it does not fit her definition of poetry. She accepts his judgment that her "singing" is not singing, even though in terms of her culture's definition of women's poetry, his judgement is absurd. How can a flower not smell "right"?
How can a singing bird be not singing? The minister has violated logic, seen in terms of what Betsy knows about art. Yet instead of concluding that he is wrong, Betsy finds the fault in herself, her poetry "'wan'n't worth nothin'" (158). She can't imagine questioning the poet's, the minister's, judgement, even though it invalidates her own and the village's.

Criticism kills Betsy. But why? Mary Wilkins' fire and torture imagery is a key to Betsy's response. As Mrs. Caxton relays what the minister has said, Betsy's look is "ghastly" and she turns "white as a sheet." She looks at Mrs. Caxton "as a victim whom the first blow had not killed might look at her executioner." Her back, Wilkins tells us, "was as stiff as if she were bound to a stake" (153-4). Betsy's reaction seems excessive--after all, the villagers have admired her writing, newspapers have published it, and she herself derives her sense of identity from her work. She has positive proof of audience approval, for Mrs. Caxton, who commissioned the poem, has praised it highly. Nevertheless, Mary Wilkins' imagery of public, formal torture, of a woman executed or burned at the stake, clearly suggests that Betsy does not feel attacked--she feels punished.

Betsy's sensation that she is being publicly punished by the minister's criticism signifies her--and Mary Wilkins'--underlying guilt and unease in attempting to challenge the
masculine function of writing poetry, even in the sentimental genre she practices. She has competed with the minister. She has felt ambition, pride, and fame. In short, while she has imagined herself as writing the way a bird sings and a flower blooms, she has not been satisfied with the bird's or the flower's reward. She has hungered for approval; she has felt "the pride and self-wonderment of recognized genius" (150). And she is accordingly punished.

On her deathbed she asks the minister to write a poem about her. She says, "'Mebbe my--dyin' [will]...make me--a good subject for--poetry'" (159). In asking the minister to write about her, she is asking to be returned to her woman's place, as one who is written about, not one who writes. Betsy's deathbed atonement for the sin of ambition is a request to return to the conventional role as an object in the man's version of the world. As an artist, she is silenced.

The themes of Mary Wilkins' story—confused injury, guilt, frustrated ambition, gender anxiety, unfair criticism and disapproval, inability to define and accept women's art—are the forces that destroy the woman artist's identity, that cause her to neglect her talent and give up the practice of her art, that undermine her health and sanity.

In woman-as-artist fiction, I call the theme of the diminishment and destruction of the woman artist the "lost voice" theme because in most of these novels and stories the
woman singer, writer, or painter "loses her voice": she is silenced. When she loses her voice, she loses her ability to speak for herself and thus in a sense she loses her ability to be herself. Since lost voice is lost self, many lost voice stories end as "A Poetess" does with the death of the artist.

I will return to my discussion of "A Poetess" after looking at other examples of this pervasive "lost voice" tradition in women's artist literature. In some fiction the lost voice theme is simply a way to complicate and then resolve the love/art conflict. In these stories artistic failure enables the writer to make another point: the woman can not have success both in art and love without threatening her man with competition, without feeling guilty about neglecting others, and without being herself vulnerable to criticism. The writer can assert that art is important; her heroine is, after all, well on her way to a successful career when she falters. At the same time, the writer shows love is important also as the lover "makes up for" the loss of the artist's art. Since he is not responsible for her failure, he stays clear of her role ambivalence and conflicted feelings. For example, after some 400 pages of dedicating herself to her successful writing, Edna Earle in Augusta Evans' St. Elmo "loses her voice." She develops a heart problem which prevents her from further study. Her disability is timely, as it means
once married she will simply devote herself to St. Elmo and good works and she will not have to reconcile married life with the writing that has heretofore been her mission.\textsuperscript{12}

Such convenient maladies are frequent in nineteenth-century artist stories. In "Clemence" by Carroll Owen the singer who has a brilliant career thanks to a man who discovered her, loses her voice in a chill, and the loss of voice in turn enables her sponsor to marry her. In "The Fate of a Voice" by Mary Hallock Foote, Madeline loses her voice when the man she refuses falls off a cliff. She regains her voice eventually. But realizing that she cannot live without him, she marries and lives in the West where "the voice was lost" to the world, confined to campfires and gravesides.\textsuperscript{13} In these stories the "lost voice" allows the author to show her heroine conforming to the woman's role and forgetting about her "selfish" needs to publish or perform. Writers who wanted to establish that women did have ability and were serious artists could thus end their stories with marriage without minimizing their heroine's abilities and without suggesting that their heroines would neglect their families or compete with their men.

In Rebecca Harding Davis' "The Wife's Story" (1864) the lost voice theme has a grimmer side, revealing what Tillie Olsen calls "woman's conflict between the commitment to other human beings and the need to carry on serious work."\textsuperscript{14} In "The Wife's Story" loss of voice indicates loss of
serious work and more. By the end of the story Hetty has lost not only her voice but also what voice stands for—literally her ability to speak for herself, metaphorically her self—since speaking for oneself represents being oneself. Like Betsy, Hetty becomes an object in a man’s story.

Hetty, married to an older man who already has a family of children plus a ward, composes an opera and is offered the chance to perform in it. Sending her newborn daughter out to nurse, she considers leaving her family for this work. But a dream of her performance "sent by God" convinces her to give up her career. In the dream, as she stands on the stage in front of a hostile audience, she realizes her voice is gone. All she can manage is a "weak quaver."15 The audience hisses her. She is unable to act in her own drama. After several more degrading episodes, she awakens to find the family gathered around her bed. As a sign of her salvation, she asks for her baby. After this dream, she says, she learns to loathe "the Self I had worshipped so long" (17).

In the final scenes of "The Wife’s Story" we see that the dream was prophetic: Hetty has indeed lost her voice. Her husband and stepson take over her speech with her full approbation. When Jackie, the ward, asks what she has dreamed about, her stepson tells Jackie, speaking for Hetty, "'Mother, here, will tell you a woman has no better work in
life than the one she has taken up: to make herself a visible Providence to her husband and child'" (19). Hetty has become "Mother": she no longer has a name and she no longer speaks for herself. She has lost her voice. Like Betsy, she allows the male to determine her place in the world. Like Betsy, she is punished for daring to perform her own script. To atone, she becomes a performer in her husband's drama, not her own.

Women were silenced in real life, and often the women who were silenced were not, like Hetty, rewarded with the love of a good man and a ready-made family. The lost voice theme reveals the real anguish of the woman artist who is never fully granted a voice. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps uses a compelling image in The Story of Avis (1877) to illustrate the lost voice as a form of the death of self. Her image is derived from a marble statue by Benjamin Paul Akers, "The Dead Pearl Diver" (1858), first mentioned in literature in Hawthorne's artist novel, The Marble Faun (1860). In Kenyon's studio, Miriam, the independent artist with a mysterious past, admires this statue of a diver tangled in a net on the ocean floor, dying with his treasure. Miriam suggests to Kenyon that the pearl the diver sought is a symbol of her secret, a secret never revealed in Hawthorne's novel: "he might drown himself in plunging after it."16 Thus the diver is a symbol for the failed artist. He is unable to bring "pearls" up to the light of day and scrutiny
of an audience. In *The Story of Avis*, after Avis realizes Phillip will not support her efforts to paint as he had promised, Phelps describes her sitting with her child in her lap, "like a forgotten diver, sitting in strangled desolation." The woman trying to fill two roles, artist and mother, is "strangled," silenced. She is unable to surface and show her "pearl"--the secret she cannot tell, which is her secret, Miriam's secret, the real experiences of women transformed into art.

Betsy, Hetty, and Avis have all been silenced. Betsy cannot speak, Hetty no longer wants to speak, Avis tries to speak but is strangled. These artists are all silenced by a complex mix of inner conflict and outer pressure, including the failure of audience to understand. The woman speaks but no one hears her. It may be that her voice does not carry simply because it is a woman's voice. It may be that the audience does not think women's experiences other than courtship are worth listening to. Or it may be that the woman's message is too unusual or that it is told in too unusual a form. The response to Emily Dickinson's poems is an example of all three of these possibilities. Many readers could not hear her because the real woman's voice and the undisguised woman's experiences were so different from anything they had ever heard. We are now amused or aghast at Higginson's suggested "Surgeries," and at the inability of readers to understand her grammar and
punctuation. Even in their early edited form, Thomas Bailey Aldrich said of her poems, "The incoherence and formlessness of her--I don't know how to designate them--versicles are fatal."\^18

In fact, what happens to the artist heroine of an 1876 Rebecca Harding Davis story, "Marcia," resembles what might well have happened to Emily Dickinson if Dickinson had been forced to seek her own way in the world and had thus to choose between earning her living by her writing or by marrying. As a writer, Marcia is silenced because no one hears her. The narrator of Marcia's story, a kindly male editor who wants to help her, says her writing is terrible. Besides faulty spelling and grammar, she also commits, he tells us, an "occasional gross indecency," which I interpret to mean she speaks frankly about sexuality. But in spite of these flaws, he is impressed with her work. This is the way he describes it:

...none of the usual talk of countesses, heather, larks, or emotions of which she knew nothing. She painted over and over again her own home on the Ya Zoo, the hot still sunshine, the silence of noon, the swamp, the slimy living things in the stagnant ponds, the semi-tropical forest, the house and negro quarters, with all their dirt and dreary monotony.\^19

Even filtered through the editor's genteel point of view, the reader is convinced he is describing an artist--the crude and powerful genuine article--and a realist, mining her own experience. Like Emily Dickinson, she has faith in her own instincts and sees no need to study the
conventions of writing as her editor says she must. She spends her savings and resorts to hack writing and knitting to support herself. Half-starved, sick, she is finally rescued by a suitor from home, Jack Biron, who comes to marry her and bring her back to the South. He says, "'She'll come home to her own now, thank God, and be done with rubbishy bookmakers. Mrs. Biron will live like a lady'" (928). Marcia asks the narrator to burn all her papers. As she leaves with Jack, she sits bolt upright in the carriage, and, the editor reports, "She did not say a word, even of farewell" (928). She too is silenced and will live out the man's version of her life, a lady.

Avis's final silencing is also related to failure of an audience to understand and respond to her work. If Marcia resembles Emily Dickinson in her sureness about her genius and her determination to write in her own way, then Avis is typical of many other artists--Mary Wilkins included--who internalize critics' judgements and are silenced by their own lack of faith in themselves.

After her husband dies and she rejoins her daughter, Waitstill, in her father's smoothly running household, Avis is in an ideal position to paint. She has her studio, and her aunt looks after the house and Waitstill. But Avis's work has changed as a result of her experiences. She has had a dream-vision in which she saw the lives of women in all their pain and joy, and the spirit of womanhood said
"'Speak for me'" (149-50). She has visited tenements with John Rose where "she felt that, when she was at work again, they [the sights of the tenement houses] would syllable themselves, of sheer necessity, in some form" (291). In addition, she has been exposed to life experiences that will inevitably become part of her painting. She has borne two children and buried one; she has endured an unhappy marriage and gone through estrangement, travel, reconciliation, renewed love, and death of her husband. She has a "conviction that she might have painted better pictures--not worse--for loving Philip and the children; that this is what God meant for her, for all of them, once, long ago" (447).

We can assume, I think, that Avis is no longer an idealist, as her mentor Maynard had described her. She is disillusioned. She has experienced and suffered and survived, and her art must show the struggle. It seems likely that she no longer paints Sphinxes. She must be painting what life has been for her: her version of Marcia's "hot still sunshine" and "slimey living things." Phelps doesn't tell us what she paints. All we know is that after she "creeps home" to Waitstill and her family home, she paints for a year and then gives up. The critics don't like what she does. She tells her father:

"My pictures come back upon my hands. Nobody wants them- now. They tell me my style is gone. Goupal says I work as if I had a rheumatic hand--as if my fingers were stiff. It is true my hand has been a little clumsy
since--Van--But the stiffness runs deeper than the fingers, father." (446)

Avis's "they tell me" is significant. She relies on the judgement of Goupal, not on her own instincts. Her reference to "stiffness" is ambiguous. It is clear she no longer has the virtuosity she once had; her "style is gone." But more than facility, art is vision. Is the "stiffness" which "runs deeper than the fingers" an inability to please, to paint to satisfy her critics? Is she no longer "pliant" and "flexible"--those favorite nineteenth-century adjectives for the ever-adaptable woman? Is she now attempting to paint the real experiences of womanhood--the secret--the story that Philip's castoff girlfriend, Susan Wanamaker, referred to when she told Avis, "The worst of being a woman is what you go through can't be told" (300)?

At the end of The Story of Avis, Avis sits down to read the Grail legend to Waitstill: "'...This is he by whom the Sangreal shall be achieved....'" (457). Ironically, although she hopes that Waitstill, with a more enlightened education and sturdier nerves, will continue the quest that she herself gives up, Avis cannot find a woman's quest story to read to her daughter. The only version of experience available to show determination, dedication, and autonomy is told in terms of male experience. Just as in the other stories I have discussed, the woman artist cannot tell her own story; even to help her daughter Avis cannot tell what she herself has been through.
Elizabeth Stuart Phelps describes a world in which art is male, the quest for the ideal is male, and the woman is an anomaly. The woman internalizes this viewpoint. She comes to see herself as aberrant. She internalizes the view of her activities as being somehow ridiculous or strange, and this attitude prevents her from faith in her own vision. "A Poetess" also describes this problem. When the minister criticizes Betsy's poem, Betsy feels as if her life has been a mockery:

"Had I ought to have been born with the wantin' to write poetry if I couldn't write it--had I? Had I ought to have been let to write all my life, an' not know before there wa'n't any use in it? Would it be fair if that canary-bird there, that ain't never done anything but sing, should turn out not to be singin'? Would it, I'd like to know? S'pose them sweet-peas shouldn't be smellin' the right way? I ain't been dealt with as fair as they have, I'd like to know if I have." (155)

Betsy cries to the universe, why can't she be what she is. She has a confused sense of existing in two parts. She is the poetess who obeys a narrow definition of her powers, who struggles for acceptance and shrinks from criticism, who feels meager and absurd. And she is the poet that she is by inclination, by instinct, by work, the poet that identifies with the male--the poet's--point of view and dismisses the poetess. Betsy is unable to reconcile her feelings of inadequacy as a poetess with her legitimate feelings of success as a poet.

In Betsy, Mary Wilkins shows us the quintessential sentimental poetess, inheritor of a genuinely feminine
literary tradition. She makes fun of the tradition, just as Mark Twain did in his portrait of Emmeline Grangerford in *Huckleberry Finn*. Wilkins describes Betsy as "the very genius of gentle, old-fashioned, sentimental poetry" (146). Her portrait of this poetess is at times mocking:

She was fifty years old, but she wore her streaky light hair in curls like a young girl. The curls hung over her faded cheeks and almost concealed them. Once in a while she flung them back with a childish gesture which sat strangely upon her. (143)

Wilkins thus distances herself from the feminine genre of Lydia Sigourney (1797-1865) and other women writers a generation before her. Given Betsy in her old delaine frock and her room with its "sheaves of dead grasses...," says Wilkins, "one ...could easily deduce what she would write, and read without seeing those lines wherein flowers rhymed sweetly with vernal bowers, home with beyond the tomb, and heaven with even" (146-7). Betsy imagines Willie Caxton "decked in the paraphernalia of the resurrection" but she "doesn't even have the imagination to change the features," Wilkins adds. Wilkins emphasizes the weaknesses of the sentimental writers--their girlishness and posed femininity, their predictability, their limited imagery. She mocks the narrow, formal woman's tradition in which Betsy writes, but she also goes on to establish Betsy's genuine poetic identity. She makes fun of the sentimental tradition, and then shows its power and effectiveness.

For in spite of Mary Wilkins' satire of Betsy's genre,
the reader knows Betsy is a poet. Even though the obituary poem Betsy writes does have a useful purpose, Betsy, like Owen in Hawthorne's "The Artist of the Beautiful" and like Louisa in "A New England Nun," has an instinct for beauty, not utility. Like Owen and Louisa, she is chastised by more practical townspeople for her insistence that beauty is more important, for planting her garden mostly in sweet peas and flowering beans and gourds instead of vegetables. Her composing process is authentic, developed over a lifetime of writing and publishing poetry. She composes on scraps of paper and lies awake at night thinking of her poem and altering lines in her head. She is so caught up in her creating that she forgets to eat.

Wilkins uses a metaphor similar to Dickinson's in "This is my letter to the world" (#441) to express Betsy's relationship to her audience. As an artist, Betsy's feelings are deep and genuine: a woman who has "talked very little all her life," Betsy has never had a lover, but her poetry is "all the love letters that had passed between her and life" (155). Betsy thus is another woman artist figure who expresses her womanly nature to love through her art. The metaphor of a poem as a love letter to the world at large expresses the intensely personal nature of Betsy's art, and further illustrates the need to feel legitimate—a "love letter" is an acceptable vehicle for a woman to use to express deep and personal feelings. Mrs. Caxton deprecates
Betsy's ability to feel intensely when she says Betsy can't identify with her feelings about her dead son. "'Oh, you don't know anything about it, Betsy,'" she says. "'You never had any children'" (144). But as readers we see Mrs. Caxton is wrong, and Mrs. Caxton later admits her mistake as well. We see Betsy's face unconsciously take on the expression of Mrs. Caxton's and see how she enters into Mrs. Caxton's grief with the true "empathic" sense of the woman artist.21

Betsy works within a limited nineteenth-century form, the obituary poem, which obeys the formulas of a well-established literary stereotype. Mrs. Caxton outlines the conventions to Betsy: "'You could mention how--handsome he was, and good, and I never had to punish him but once in his life, and how pleased he was with his new little suit, and what a sufferer he was, and--how we hope he is at rest--in a better land'" (144). Within these restrictions, Betsy composes a poem which pleases all her readers but one--the minister. Mrs. Caxton, who had sobbed, "'Nobody can do anything, and nothin' amounts to anything, poetry or anything else--when he's gone,'" wipes her eyes when she reads the poem and pronounces it "'beautiful, beautiful,'" and says, "'It's jest as comfortin' as it can be'" (150). Others admire the poem also. Mrs. Caxton tells Betsy, "'Mr. White said he never read anything more touchin.'" Betsy is gratified by this praise, "quite overcome by innocent
pride." When Mrs. Caxton has the poem printed up with a black border, "it was to Betsy like a large edition of a book." This publication is for Betsy a landmark of professional recognition: "It was to her as if her poem had been approved and accepted by one of the great magazines. She had the pride and self-wonderment of recognized genius" (150). For Betsy, who has never received any money for the poetry she has published in newspapers, this publication is "worth more to her than its words represented in as many dollars" (151). She feels the gratification of the artist when her work is appreciated. Her work has achieved its purpose in helping a grieving mother and contributing to the mourning ritual of the community. In Betsy's and Mrs. Caxton's eyes, it has immortalized little Willie.

Even though her composing process, her empathy, and her relation to her community show that Betsy is an artist, when her work is criticized by the minister she feels she is not an artist. As reported by Mrs. Caxton, the minister has told a friend that Betsy's poem "'was jest as poor as it could be, an' it was in dreadful bad taste to have it printed an' sent round that way.'" Mrs. Caxton also says that the minister said Betsy "'never wrote anything that could be called poetry, an' it was a dreadful waste of time'" (153).

But a closer look at the minister reveals his bias. Just as male critical jabs at "scribbling women" may have
been partly generated by the uncomfortable fact that these women were often very successful, so too the minister’s criticism of Betsy’s poetry is influenced by her unforgiveable act of competing with him, the cultural and spiritual leader of the village. Betsy’s minister, described as a "country boy" who is "sturdy" but "impetuous," has published his poems in magazines, putting him in the rank above Betsy, who publishes in newspapers. Yet when he sees the popularity of Betsy’s published poem, he responds the way many male writers reacted to the sentimental writers: he says she is not a real writer, implying not a real writer like he is. Not only does the minister criticize Betsy’s poetry, he also criticizes the way it was printed and circulated, a sure sign that no congregational member had seen fit to print and distribute his work. Predictably, the "literary" writer sneers at the work of the "popular" writer. In addition he also feels challenged as a minister. Mrs. Caxton has said that nothing could make her feel better, yet Betsy’s poem has comforted her. Betsy has competed with the minister as a healer of affliction and she has won. She has usurped his most basic ministerial function.

After Mrs. Caxton relays her dreadful gossip and departs, Betsy, in a travesty of the obituary ritual she follows so scrupulously in her writing, burns all her poems. She first carefully cleans out her parlor stove and clips
out her poems from the newspapers she has saved. These clippings and her rolled-up manuscripts she sets on fire "watching them as their edges curled and blackened, then leaped into flame." Wilkins makes it clear that Betsy is herself burned, cremated, with her poetry. Earlier described as feeling "bound to a stake" as Mrs. Caxton repeats the minister's criticism, now as Betsy watches her poetry burn, "her face twisted as if the fire were curling over it also." Thus Betsy, "in agony of heart," burns her "love letters," and preserves the ashes in a covered sugar bowl like a burial urn—as if they were the ashes of a beloved (155). After this ritual burning, she is herself destroyed by her thwarted ambition in the form of "old fashioned consumption," a more private version of burning at the stake.

Yet even though she will not live if she is not a poet, Betsy retaliates. Because he lacks Betsy's empathic skills, the minister never understands what has happened. When he talks to Betsy to prepare her for death he has no glimmering what is going on in her soul: "It seemed now to the young man that this elderly maiden, drawing near the end of her simple, innocent life, had indeed her lamp, which no strong winds of temptation had ever met, well trimmed and burning" (157). He has no sense of her pride and ambition, nor of his own role in destroying her sense of her life's accomplishment. The "well-trimmed" lamp he imagines is a
far cry from the twisting flames of Betsy's ceremonial burning.

Just as he has no sense of Betsy's inner state, this modern poet dismisses the old-fashioned obituary poetry Betsy writes. But she insists on its continuing relevance and exacts a promise from the minister that he will struggle with its formulas himself. On her deathbed she says:

"I've been thinkin'--if you would jest write a few--lines about me--afterward--I've been thinkin' that--mebbe my--dyin' was goin' to make me--a good subject for--poetry, if I never wrote none. If you would jest write a few lines" (159).

He promises he will, and immediately the bird in its cage "trilled into a triumphant song." The canary, which Wilkins earlier has gone to some pains to establish as signifying Betsy, is thus "triumphant" at the minister's acquiescence. The scene is a little *Tableau Vivant* which could be entitled "Vindication." Holding the sugar bowl containing "sacred relics" of the sweet poetry he had maligned earlier, the minister, "pale with bewilderment and sympathy," pledges, "'I'll--do the best I can, Miss Dole'" (159). He is now in the position Betsy was in when Mrs. Caxton asked her to write a poem about Willie. He must struggle with the same formulas and attempt to write for the same audience as Betsy. While Betsy has accepted her punishment for daring to compete with a poet, she insists on the validity of her sentimental "feminine" genre. Thus Wilkins' final scene attempts a synthesis: Betsy will be
immortalized by the minister's poem and the canary "trills triumphantly." However, I see an undertone of anger in this ending too pronounced to be consistent with a happy ending, although Wilkins is clearly playing with an ambiguous aside about Betsy's "immortal soul." The "red light" which glows along the horizon echoes the flames which burned the poetry and ate into Betsy. She has become the subject of a man's poem at the cost of the destruction and silencing of her own voice.

Readers may feel that Betsy too readily accepts the minister's judgement of her work. After all, she has the support of Mrs. Caxton and the others who say her poem is beautiful and touching. Clearly, Betsy falls apart because as a poet she is guilty of usurping male perogative and as a "poetess" she has no faith in her own work. Like Avis, she feels "anxiety of authorship," the strain of a woman daring to step outside prescribed sex roles, which makes it easy for authority to convince her that her work is not valuable. This issue of self-validation is one that Mary Wilkins struggled with in her career and that she turns to again and again in her writing. For Wilkins, the woman artist dependent upon the approval of audience or critics faces a dilemma. Her successful artists are unconcerned with audience and create for the joy of creating, or if they perform for others, their audience is small and supportive. But once the woman comes forth from her walled garden or her
one-horse cart, she is vulnerable. If she does not trust in herself she is hurt, and if she does trust in herself, sometimes her self-assertion hurts her.

In "A Village Singer" Candace Whitcomb has faith in her own skill as a singer, but she is still destroyed by village rejection. Candace feels guilt and anxiety not for being an artist, but for asserting, against unfair criticism, that she is a good artist. In her angry attempt to prove she is a good artist, she becomes a bad woman--bad, because she oversteps the boundaries of women's behavior. Like Betsy, she suffers and dies for her deviance.

Because they think that Candace's voice has "grown too cracked and uncertain on the upper notes," the villagers take away her paid position as lead soprano in the village choir and replace her with another, younger singer, Alma Way. But Candace does not accept the villagers' judgement. Wilkins makes it clear that Candace has a "fine voice" which has not changed. Accordingly, Candace refuses to accept her forced resignation. She tells the minister, "'My voice is jest as good as ever 'twas; there can't anybody say it ain't.... My voice is as good an' high today as it was twenty year ago....'"(25). To show her defiance of public opinion, Candace stays home from meeting and sings and plays her parlor organ loudly during Alma's solo. Since she lives next to the church, her powerful voice drowns out Alma's timid singing.
Candace knows why she is being replaced, and she tells the minister so. It is not so much for her age, for both the minister and the choirmaster, William Emmons, are also old, and they are not dismissed. It is for the double fault of being a woman and growing old. And even more, we suspect, it is because of the kind of woman Candace is—hard nosed, sharp, and ambitious. Candace knows she is rejected because she is an aging, unattractive woman with an assertive manner, and to make her rejection even more painful, the heavy hand of William Emmons is implicated. William had "walked out" with Candace in the past, and gossips wondered if he would propose. But now he says her voice has "'shockingly'" deteriorated and he wants to replace her with the younger, prettier Alma (20). Candace sees all too clearly why she is asked to leave, but she accepts neither the rejection nor the way it is done. She defies convention by fighting back instead of meekly yielding. She demands to be accepted on her own terms for her voice and what she does with it. She objects to the ageism and sexism of her dismissal and the saccharine dishonesty of her critics who held a party at her house and left her an album and a note dismissing her. As Candace says, if they had asked her to leave "'fair and square'" it wouldn't have been so bad, but "'to go an' spill molasses...all over the threshold'" infuriates her (27).

Unlike Betsy, Candace defies her critics. She knows
they are wrong. She knows she sings better and more strongly than her rival, and she demonstrates her superiority to the whole town. She also knows in human terms that she is right and the rest of the town is wrong.

As she tells the minister:

"I'd like to know if it wouldn't be more to the credit of folks in a church to keep an old singer an' an old minister, if they didn't sing an' hold forth quite so smart as they used to, ruther than turn 'em off an' hurt their feelin's.... Salvation don't hang on anybody's hittin' a high note, that I ever heard of...." (26)

Of the two artists--Candace and Alma--Candace is the superior singer. Wilkins tells us Alma "could never emulate" Candace's "wonderful fire and expression" (30). Wilkins uses fire and burning imagery to convey Candace's internal drive. She has "smouldering fires of ambition and resolution" (30). This imagery is similar to the burning and torturing images used to describe Betsy. In both stories the inner fire is related to the artist's ambition for fame and recognition.

Like Betsy's, Candace's passion is fatal. When Candace is wronged, her fighting spirit is aroused: "Singing in the village choir had been as much as Italy to Napoleon--and now on her island of exile she was still showing fight" (30). But this "fight," indeed this fire and passion, is from a model of male behavior (Napoleon), not female, and violates the village rules. Even Candace, with her "ambition and resolution," cannot sustain this kind of flagrant rebellion. Her "fight" and "passion" deplete her, a process which
parallels the creative act as described by Emily Dickinson: "Essential oils--are wrung...It is the gift of Screws" (#675). Candace's rapid deterioration and death after she outsings Alma and defies the minister show how intensely she feels she has violated the laws of feminine behavior.

Candace burns from within. She has always treated men with "dignity" but now in her anger she rails at the minister and refuses to pray with him. Wilkins shows how Candace is gradually consumed by her anger. When the minister tries to reason with her, "her black eyes had two tiny cold sparks of fury in them, like an enraged bird's" (23). In comparing Candace's eyes to a bird's, Wilkins evokes the traditional woman artist as bird imagery, but the unusual addition of rage adds a startling dimension of violence which is supported by other imagery. The spread of the fury from Candace's eyes is rapid: Wilkins uses the metaphor of a forest fire, sparked in Candace's eyes and reflected in her red cheeks and in the fever which comes on after her second out-singing performance during the afternoon church service. Candace has "red spots on her cheeks." Like the forest fire which spreads a "red light" over the woods and consumes the "soft sylvan music" and "tender harmony" of new leaves described in the first paragraph, Candace's rage and defiance consume her. The flames of the forest fire "roll up, withering and destroying the tender green spring foliage" (33), and Candace herself
is "in the roar of an intenser fire; the growths of all her springs and the delicate wontedness of her whole life were going down in it" (33).

Violence threatens the town in "A Village Singer." From the original injustice against Candace by the villagers, to her outsinging, to her death, ripples from the disturbance grow wider and deeper until they endanger the whole town. The women in the congregation have a mixed response when Candace begins her loud singing to "drown out" Alma. As in "A Church Mouse" some of them seem sympathetic toward her outrageous behavior, suggesting that perhaps Candace has planted the seeds of rebellion. They are "half aghast, half smiling" with tremulous admiration at her audacity (19). Then Wilson Ford, Candace's nephew and Alma's fiance, rages into Candace's house and threatens to "'pitch that old organ out of the window,'" board up her window, or "'break that old organ up into kindling wood'" (22, 31). He will silence his old aunt with violence. These threats, along with images of drowning and burning, hint at passions and fears just below the surface. Candace's rebellion, Mary Wilkins tells us, is like a "floodgate" and "the power which it releases is an accumulation" (28). This orgasmic image suggests the feared power of female sexuality, and along with fire, flood, and violence imagery it is a clue to how intensely disruptive was the prospect of a woman defying the restrictions of women's behavior. Candace threatens the
status quo. She fights. Wilkins here hints at the chaos and confusion that would result if women wrote and acted out of their own self interest.

Candace is herself terrified by her anger and overwhelmed by guilt. The doctor calls her sickness "a light run of fever" but Candace "gave up at the first" (33). Her mixed defiance, rage, and anger make her ill, but she dies because she has fought back. She is distressed mentally. She doesn't speak much, but "her eyes followed everyone with an agonized expression" (33). At the first sign of conciliatory behavior from any of those who have wronged her, she is pathetically grateful. As the old Candace would say, all the starch had gone out of her. When the minister calls, she apologizes to him. She tells him, "'I--hadn't ought to--spoke so.'" She refuses the minister's suggestion that she had spoken out of turn because she was ill. She knows all too well that she railed at him because she was angry, and it is this unfeminine anger that she hopes to atone for, as she adds, "'I hope the Lord will--forgive me'" (34). Like Betsy, she places herself back into her subservient position in the patriarchal world.

Finally, as a sign she has relinquished her resentment, Candace asks Alma to come in and sing to her. Alma, the "'little soft-spoken nippin' thing,'" has all along been the only person who expresses sympathy for Candace. Like Betsy,
Alma possesses the empathic skills. She early felt "'kind of guilty, taking her place'" (22). As Marjorie Pryse notes, Candace realizes Alma's situation is like hers: both are vulnerable to town caprice. Both are artists trying to live in a world that is reluctant to support its artists. Both have been strung along by men; Candace had hoped to marry William Emmons, and Alma is engaged to Wilson Ford with no prospect of marriage until his vigorous mother dies. Now Candace will help Alma marry. Like Fidelia Almay in "A Patient Waiter," Candace will enable another woman to attain what she herself wanted and never got. She will leave her house to Wilson, thus giving him a house for his bride and enabling him to leave his old house for his mother. And Candace says, "'Alma can have--all--my things'" (35).

In dying and leaving her "things" to Alma, Candace in a sense "becomes" Alma, just as Fidelia Almay becomes Lily. Candace will continue to live through Alma. In the person of Alma, her heir and spiritual daughter, Candace, the passionate artist, becomes the modest conventional woman who is acceptable to the community, the gentle "feminine" artist who achieves marriage and continues to sing. In her own life, Mary Wilkins managed the same metamorphoses.

At the end of "A Village Singer" Candace has lost her voice. No longer singing for herself, she asks Alma to sing for her. As Alma sings,

Candace lay and listened. Her face had a holy and radiant expression. When Alma stopped singing it did
not disappear, but she looked up and spoke, and it was like a secondary glimpse of the old shape of a forest tree through the smoke and flame of the transfiguring fire the instant before it falls. "You flatted a little on--soul," said Candace. (36)

Pryse sees this passage as showing Candace’s final lesson to her community: the village must emulate Candace and show more "soul" in their dealings. I think another meaning is present as well. The "old Candace"--the raging, unregenerate, defiant artist, the "old shape of a forest tree"--can still speak with unerring honesty about "flats." Even though her defiance has caved in, she will still refuse the village molasses spreading. She will offer a fellow artist specific and honest criticism about technique. She has said earlier to the minister, "'Salvation don't depend on hittin' high notes.'" But here on the point of salvation, the crucial spiritual moment, the artist in her knows that high notes are important. Even though she has lost her voice, Candace has the last word. Her artist self speaks. Technique is important. For a brief moment, she regains her voice and passes her possessions and even more important her artistic knowledge on to another woman.

Both "A Poetess" and "A Village Singer" tell the story of a woman artist who loses her voice. Both women are destroyed by a complex mix of guilt, ambition, hurt, and gender anxiety. In both stories there is a small consolation that the dying artist will have influence on
another artist: Betsy will "live" in an obituary poem and Candace will "live" in Alma's work. Both these stories and other "lost voice" stories address the artist's need for supportive and intelligent response. Anger over roles and expectations dominates the imagery of these lost voice stories--hissing audiences, floods, red light, fire, strangling, torture, sickness, and death. I will discuss related violent and disturbed imagery in Mary Wilkins Freeman's later works in my next chapter.


4 Wood, 7-9.


7 "Miss Mary E. Wilkins," *The Book Buyer* 8, no. 2 (March 1891): 53.


12 Augusta Evans, *St. Elmo* (New York, 1867).


18 [Thomas Bailey Aldrich], "In Re Emily Dickinson," *Atlantic Monthly* 69 (1892): 144.


20 For this "female" tradition see Emily Stipes Watts, *The Poetry of American Women from 1632 to 1945* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), 63-120; and Walker, 21-69.

21 Marcia McClintock Folsom discusses the "capacity to anticipate and grasp another's feeling" as essential to artistic vision in "'Tact is a Kind of Mind-Reading': Empathic Style in Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*," *Colby Library Quarterly* 18 (1982): 66-78.


24 Pryse, 70, 74-5.
CHAPTER 8

CRAZY QUILTS

In 1938, eight years after Mary Wilkins Freeman died, sculpted bronze doors were installed in her memory at the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in New York. Inscribed "Dedicated to the Memory of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and the Women Writers of America," the doors depict two androgynous, draped "writer" figures, above whose heads float cherubic personifications of "Imagination" and "Thought." On the tympanum, a large naked male figure, arms outstretched, a sunburst behind him, dazzles smaller, crouching, naked women and the men behind them. This figure personifies "The Spirit Triumphant" and "The Genius of Immortal Fire."¹

While the dedication suggests that Freeman was considered important enough and representative enough to stand for all American women who wrote, the doors themselves suggest ambivalent attitudes toward the accomplishments of those same writers. A caption begins with generic "man"--"Deep in the soul of man flows the well of thought..."--and the most prominent symbolic figure on this door honoring women is male. While on the one hand these doors
commemorate women writers, on the other hand they imply that spirit, imagination, thought, inspiration, and genius are masculine.

Such subtle devaluation has a profound effect on the woman artist's self-perception, as I have already shown in my discussion of "A Poetess," who died because a minister scorned her poetry. Like Betsy, Mary Wilkins felt the self-doubts of a "poetess," a woman writing in a world that reminded her women were not really writers. She listened too respectfully to critics and was too easily swayed by the opinions of friends and readers. As she became well-known, she succumbed to pressures to conform to the prevailing public taste, and she became overly conscious of what we would today call her image. Neither widely read nor deeply educated, an unmarried woman well aware of the stigma of the "unchosen," a talented, unusual personality unsure of what her difference from other women meant, she became more and more eager to be admired as a woman and more and more willing to discount the qualities that constituted her rare distinctions as a writer--the very ambition, thought, and imagination that her culture defined as masculine.

Although she continued to write outstanding stories until the end of her life, many of Mary Wilkins' later works, particularly her novels, are syrupy, melodramatic, and inconsistent.² After her first collections, A Humble Romance and A New England Nun, Mary Wilkins wrote fewer
artist stories. Her strong old woman artist figure, whose ambitions and conflicts often mirrored her own, gives way to a fashionable, romantic young girl whose childishness reflects many of Wilkins' own despairing personal solutions to the problem of the place of the woman artist in American culture. Some of her later work painfully reflects a society that devalues woman's wisdom, ambition, and energy while it values her youth, beauty, and passivity. Viewed in terms of coherence and theme, many of these later stories and novels are failures. But viewed in another way, their bizarre imagery, misplaced violence, weird plots, and perverse sexuality provide an ironically fitting and painful commentary on the situation of the woman artist. Spanning the years of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, years of questioning and reaffirming traditional attitudes towards women's work, Mary Wilkins Freeman's career demonstrates the struggles of a woman artist in a climate that reinforced her self doubts and often subtly undermined her accomplishments. I will show how the forces that threaten women's art in her early stories overwhelm her later work, limiting my discussion to works that address the artist theme, however obliquely.

The devaluation of women's art which destroyed Betsey Dole reinforced Wilkins' extreme susceptibility to critical suggestion. In a rare commentary about writing, a 1913 article, "The Girl Who Wants to Write: Things to Do and to
Avoid," she warns of the "mistake" of being "swayed" by critics, cautioning that "the girl who has real talent" is apt to be "extra sensitive" and too easily influenced by others' opinions. Unable to follow her own advice, Wilkins was greatly influenced by critics and friends, and her career as a whole, in fact, eerily affirms the wisdom of Howells' early warning not to "look down on Camelot." I have already cited the strong positive responses her early stories received from Scudder and Howells. But like Betsy, Wilkins focused on the negative reviews countering these: for example the Spectator said her stories were too much alike, and the Athenaeum complained about the danger of her "settling down to a fixed manner and of exaggerating the quality which brought her success." Accordingly, she turned to historical subjects and began to write more about the upper classes, people with comfortable incomes and servants who represented a new and enviable lifestyle which she attempted to make her own.

Eager to prove herself equal to forms beyond the short story, Mary Wilkins experimented with drama and, more successfully, with story cycles based on tree and animal symbolism, collected in Understudies (1901) and Six Trees (1903). Most of her experimentation, however, was in the novel. As early as 1885 she says, "I am wishing...to undertake some larger work." Although she wrote many novels, she never mastered the longer form. Jane Field
(1893) and Pembroke (1894), her first and most consistent novels, are considered her best, but the direction of subsequent novels seemed to be determined by the reviews she read. Because of complaints that these first novels were like drawn-out short stories, she began composing books with intricate, improbable plots. When critics complained about her unhappy women, she wrote more stories about the conventional romantic heroine who marries happily. When critics complained about her flat, spare style, she obliged with more abstract, more self-consciously poetic sentences: "walk whither she did not list" is a particularly irritating example from Madelon. As Pattee observes, "She obeyed her critics and worked for ornament."7

Wilkins' lack of confidence in her work also made her rely heavily on the support of friends. Stories of the woman artist encouraged by a close female audience—for example, "A Church Mouse," "An Honest Soul," "On the Walpole Road"—show the emotional importance of relationships with women in Mary Wilkins' life. At first, the sensible and unliterary Mary Wales was her advisor, close to a collaborator in the early stories. But as Wilkins' work became popular, she turned to new literary colleagues for suggestions. Edward Chamberlin states that she sent her novels to him for corrections and criticism, chapter by chapter.8 In a Harper's Bazar feature article, Margaret Hamilton Welch reveals how a circle of friends passed around
her work-in-progress and gave her advice. Shaw's unpublished biography also mentions this circle of critics. According to his sources, Mary Wilkins Freeman's friends in Metuchen became very reticent with adverse comments, because she would immediately throw out anything they objected to. Charles Freeman's direct influence on her work was considerable. According to friends, Foster says, her husband was Mary's "most severe critic, destroying many tales before they could be submitted." In addition he managed her career and her diversions and provided her with suggestions as she wrote.

Although Mary gradually moved away from Mary Wales as she became a popular writer and visited new friends in Boston and New York, her actual move from Randolph had a profound effect on her work, apart from the change in literary advisors. Because of this move, she lost contact with her literary roots, her New England subject matter. Subsequently, she never made successful use of New Jersey subject matter, although several novels and many stories are set in New Jersey—Doc Gordon and The Debtor, for example. When she moved to Metuchen, a suburb of New York, she moved into a sophisticated, modern lifestyle, but this change of place involved more than fashion. Josephine Donovan says a persistent theme in late nineteenth-century women's writing is the loss of the "female sanctuary." In Wilkins' stories, according to Donovan, "the woman-centered, matriarchal world
of the Victorians" is dying. Mary Wilkins' move from Randolph and Mary Wales to Metuchen and Charles Freeman actually enacts that movement out of the "sanctuary" which was predicted and averted in "A New England Nun."

A strange and loosely connected early episode of *The Portion of Labor* (1900) shows some of the implications of Wilkins' move from Randolph to Metuchen. Significantly, this novel was completed just before Wilkins married Charles Freeman. Her heroine, Ellen Brewster, as a young child is kidnapped by a wealthy society woman. Held for two nights and a day, she is introduced to luxurious surroundings, indulged, and pampered. She is dazzled by "gleams of crystal and shadows of bronze in settings of fretted ebony, with long swayings of rich draperies" and "a flying marble figure in a corner."

This passage predicts the impact of Mary Wilkins' move from Randolph to Metuchen, from her frugal New England habits and modest rooms in the old Wales farmhouse to the elaborate houses of suburban New Jersey. In the expensive dining room of her kidnapper, with its "glitter of glass and silver and the soft gleam of precious china," Ellen thinks she is in a store (24). In a way she is right. She is in a place where objects are stored because of their expense, their beauty, and their "tastefulness," but placed together with little sense of their emotional meanings. Confronted with her beautiful silk-gowned captor in this expensive
decor, Ellen is "filled with undefined apprehensions of splendor and opulence which might overwhelm her simple grasp of life and cause her to lose all her old standards of value (41)." Similarly, in the process of her transition from spinster to wife, from apartment to mansion, from Massachusetts to New Jersey, Mary Wilkins' "simple grasp of life" and her "old standards of value" were indeed shifting.

When she moves, Hetty, the churchmouse, imposes her art and her values on the "masculine" meeting house. But the opposite occurs gradually as Mary Wilkins moves away from her village orientation and her relationship with Mary Wales. Strangely, her writing takes on a masculine orientation: she incorporates male characters as idealized heroes--Harry in *The Heart's Highway*, Robert in *The Portion of Labor*, Horace in *The Shoulders of Atlas*--and sees life from their point of view. Indeed, the name of the house the Freemans built, "Freewarren," a combination of Mary's husband's last name and her father's first name, symbolizes how far she travels from the women's house and the women's art that nurtured her.

Advisors that pulled her in different directions, loss of her New England roots and female sanctuary, a new subject matter and point of view--all of these affected Mary Wilkins' later work. Her major problem as a novelist, however, was her inability to construct a reasonable plot. "Mother" in "The Revolt of Mother" imagines the spacious
upstairs apartments in the barn, but Mary Wilkins could not adapt her household art from small rooms to large houses. Like many other nineteenth-century women writers, she was unable to "write beyond" the romantic, marriage ending, to "depart from formerly conventional structures of fiction and consciousness about women." According to Rachel DuPlessis, "quest" and "love" plots are contradictory, and the nineteenth-century novelist usually "repressed" the "quest" aspect of her plot in its resolution. Once she begins a novel with a strong heroine, she is unable to imagine any ending other than the conventional one. And even in working out a conventional ending, the work unravels: she warps patterns and bends scenes. Her vision becomes distorted. The dynamics of this distortion are illuminated in A Room of One's Own when Virginia Woolf explains the effects of a woman writing in a world where masculine values prevail.

The mind of the woman, says Woolf, is

...slightly pulled from the straight, and made to alter its clear vision in deference to external authority. One has only to skim those old forgotten novels and listen to the tone of voice in which they are written to divine that the writer was meeting criticism; she was saying this by way of aggression, or that by way of conciliation. She was admitting that she was "only a woman," or protesting that she was "as good as a man."  

Mary Wilkins' stance as a writer, as she moves from the "female sanctuary" of Randolph and her bond with Mary Wales, shows the strain of trying to pull together her life as a writer with her new role as a married woman. Inevitably,
this contradiction of "quest" or "work" and "love" informs her writing. Her voice becomes more and more deprecatory--more and more conveying, to use Woolf's phrase, "I am only a woman," more and more reflecting a flattering view of men and their ideas about women, less and less focused on women and their striving for self-expression.

Inevitably accompanying this self-deprecation, resentment and unexpressed anger further twist her plots and distort her characters. An examination of selected novels will illustrate this change. In early stories like "A Poetess" and "A Village Singer," Mary Wilkins shows women fighting for artistic recognition. In her third novel, Madelon (1896), also, despite its structural flaws and distracting style, Wilkins writes compellingly of a woman's struggle to be heard. But a look at Madelon in relation to The Heart's Highway (1900), shows how her view of the woman's drive for expression changes. What is a passion to speak and to be listened to in Madelon becomes, as I will show, an ingredient of feminine allure in The Heart's Highway and later novels--but it is a feminine allure so contorted and clogged with Wilkins' secret frustration and anger that most modern readers find it appalling.

In response to critics who complained about her old women and about the lack of action in her fiction, Wilkins created Madelon, an exotic of French and Indian ancestry, who comes from "unpruned tangle of wood and undamned course
of streams, from all primitive and untempered love and passion and religion." Madelon, her brothers, and her father are musicians, regarded suspiciously by villagers as "mountebands, and jugglers with sweet sounds" (12). At a ball where Madelon lilts with her "great voice" like "warm honey," her lover, Burr Gordon, arrives with the parson's daughter, Dorothy Fair. Reacting to Burr's infidelity, Madelon stabs his look-alike cousin, thinking he is her faithless lover. Her rage dominates the early chapters of the book, and the violent action she takes suggests the danger implicit in woman's anger. A true gentleman (cheating does not count), Burr accepts guilt for the stabbing to shield Madelon.

The subsequent plot centers on Madelon's inability to speak and be heard. Her lilting--singing without words--is significant, for what she says is indeed unimportant. No one believes her when she insists she stabbed Burr's cousin. Her father, brothers, and the townspeople dismiss her with, "She's a woman," implying "She doesn't know what she is saying" (70). This refrain, repeated over and over, echoes the standard response to women's writing.

Madelon is enraged and frustrated because no one listens to her or believes her. Like Jane Field in Mary Wilkins' first novel, Jane Field (1893), who feels compelled to assert over and over who she is, Madelon goes from person to person attempting to get someone to listen to her version of
what happened. She is, in effect, the woman artist, surrounded by men who either protect her or who don't hear her. Having finally expressed her anger, she resents even more the fact that her expression is considered irrelevant. She has "spoken," but she has not communicated. Her father's view of his only daughter is illuminating:

His sons were to him as words of one syllable in straight lines; his daughter was written in compound and involved sentences as her mother had been before her.... Her word had not the weight with him that one of his sons' would have had. It was as if he had visions of endless twistings and complexities which might give it the lie, and rob it, at all events of its direct force. (55)

Her father's view of his daughter's complexities contrasted with his sons' directness is an acute observation on Wilkins' part. It suggests the differences Carol Gilligan and others have found between women's and men's values: women tend to weigh all the personal and social ramifications of an act, whereas men tend to decide according to a clear cut deductive system.17 Further, her father's sense of the "endless twistings and complexities" and "compound and involved sentences" with which his daughter is "written" suggests Mary Wilkins' own sense of being "pulled from the straight." This passage acknowledges the "twistings" involved in writing to an audience who cannot imagine that the woman's story could relate anything other than conventional "womanly" behavior.

The men in Madelon are unable to read the women, but Mary Wilkins eventually works out a romantic ending for her
novel. After Burr is released from prison and after a number of incredible twistings and complexities of plot, Madelon finally finds a way to communicate with her lover. On a Sunday morning when she is singing in church, she sings to him, and he makes a corresponding effort to hear: he overcomes "the scruples which hampered and blinded him like thorns," and he recognizes in her song "the divine call of love to worship which simplifies all perplexities" (318). Finally, she communicates through her art.

In Madelon the reader's attention is at least partly focused on Madelon's attempts to speak and to be understood. Not so in later novels. The fact that Mary Wilkins became engaged to Charles Freeman in 1897 is a significant factor in her withdrawal from even such qualified self-assertion as Madelon represents. After Madelon the woman's struggle to speak is shown from the man's point of view, not the woman's. Unlike Burr, the men in later novels do not work to understand. In all Wilkins' subsequent novels, the man sees the woman who attempts to express herself as adorable but unreasonable, and he loves her all the more for her unreason, her "twistings and complexities." Her struggle to speak is trivialized by what can only be characterized as a "you're cute when you're mad" point of view. The woman's voice as artist is thus annihilated, as her passion for self-expression is reduced to sex appeal. The "she is only a woman" response which so enrages Madelon becomes the
dominant attitude towards women's self-expression from The Heart's Highway on. As Harry Wingfield, the male narrator, says:

It surely seems to me that part of man to deal gently with [women] at all times, even when we suffer through them, for there is about them a mystery of helplessness and misunderstanding of themselves which would give us an exceeding patience. And it seems to me that, even in the cases of those women who are perhaps of greater wit and force of character than many a man, not one of them but hath her helplessness of sex in her heart, however concealed by her majesty of carriage.19

I take this passage to be Mary Wilkins' apology for being one of those "of greater wit and force of character than many men," or of specifically Charles Freeman, who by 1900 was pressing for marriage. Wilkins is apologizing for her intelligence and ability. She is denying her "masculine" artistic abilities and insisting that she is "only a woman" in spite of her success. Such a stance was inevitably destructive to art and woman. But why did Wilkins go to such extremes to deny her accomplishment? The answer can be found in the dynamics of the Wilkins/Freeman relationship.

After a four-and-a-half-year engagement and numerous cancellations, Mary Wilkins married Charles Freeman in 1902 when she was almost 50, yet reported her age as 35. He was 42. Educated as a doctor, fired from his job as medical examiner because of lack of application and drinking, Charles Freeman ran the family lumber business in Metuchen, New Jersey. According to Foster, he had a reputation for
drinking and high living and was popular with women. The picture in Kendrick's *The Infant Sphinx* shows a handsome, mustached man. Kendrick offers evidence that the marriage was happy at first, and few surviving letters show evidence to the contrary.

However, Charles Freeman had serious problems, and we can surmise from current knowledge about addictive behavior that his personality affected Mary and inevitably her work. Charles was an alcoholic, a gambler, and a drug addict; he was hospitalized for alcoholism and addiction in 1909, 1919, and 1920, and Mary had to institutionalize him in the New Jersey Hospital for the Insane in 1921. When released, he disinherited his wife and his sisters and shortly before his death in 1923 moved in with his chauffeur. At the trial to break his will, friends and business associates testified that he was constantly drunk, violently superstitious, a perverse practical joker (his favorite prank was lacing drinks with purgatives), and probably a megalomaniac. Despite these problems—or more likely, in denial—Mary Wilkins defends marriage and reiterates a male view of women in her later novels.

But why did Wilkins marry at all? Her situation at the Wales farmhouse seemed ideal for a writer, and stories like "A New England Nun" show Wilkins' awareness of the effect of a man on her art. Perhaps the answer is simple: Charles was attractive and she fell in love. *Madelon* bears witness
to her belief that "the divine call of love...simplifies all perplexities." But, in addition, perhaps she felt increasing pressure to conform to her readers' and publishers' expectations for a woman. Her biographer observes that she must have been aware of the "'old maid's' vaguely humiliating position in a New England community."21 While she uneasily enjoyed success as a writer, she wanted conventional success as a woman as well.

As Wilkins herself became more and more identified as an "old maid" she retreated from the close identification with her resolute old women that characterized early stories. Critics observe an increasingly negative attitude toward independent living. Alice Brand argues from the many barren courtships in Freeman's stories that she "resented her long single status."22 Similarly, Michele Clark notes that Mary Wilkins begins to portray unmarried women as unfit and bizarre after the stories of 1891, thus indicating ambivalence about her own unwed status.23 Often in later fiction, the old woman in the decaying house is not a heroine but a witch, like Goody Crane in "Silence" (1898) or Margery Key in The Heart's Highway. The alacrity with which Mary changed her professional name once she was married must be an indication of her delight in her change of status. Her heroines in fiction after her marriage are often attractive, well-married matrons, such as Mrs. Carroll in The Debtor (1905). Like Polly Moss, then, she worked at
creating a Sister Liddy—a desirable, fashionable woman she thought would impress her audience—only in Mary's case her creation was herself.

Once she married, Wilkins' identification with the conventional view of women is almost total. In *By the Light of the Soul* (1906) Ida Sloan marries "because she felt a degree of mortification on account of her single estate."24 In *The Shoulders of Atlas* (1908) being unmarried is called "a cruel life for a woman."25 Stories like "The Secret" (1907) in which marriage is called "the best this life has for an woman" (225) and "The Liar" (1918), which shows that women are weak and need man's guidance, are examples of what Mary Wilkins would have liked her readers to believe about her marriage.26 But, unfortunately, it is probable that the dark vision of "Old Woman Maguon" (1910), in which alcoholic males barter for a fourteen-year-old girl, may have been closer to Mary Wilkins Freeman's experience, as I will discuss later. However, like Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, who wrote in 1903 to Harriet Prescott Spofford that she would never have been able to write her *The Story of Avis* (partly about the drawbacks of marriage for an artist) if she had been married, so Mary Wilkins Freeman, once married, could only write good things of marriage.27 Thus Wilkins felt constrained to present herself as a woman who was non-threatening, who knew her place, who, although successful, needed a man to take care of her. As a strategy of adaptive
behavior, she became that model of American femininity, the little woman.

There is abundant evidence for this view. Henrietta Silzer, a New Jersey friend of the Freemans, wrote to Shaw that Mary was "spoiled" and "babied" by Charles Freeman. In her view, this "babying" began with the Alden family (Henry Mills Alden was editor of Harper's) and was continued by her husband. Silzer supposed that Doctor Freeman was over-indulgent because it was his way with women and because he wished to "keep her creative genius undisturbed." Another letter about the Freemans says, "He [Charles]...was rather interested in all girls, even adolescent ones." If, as this guarded comment suggests, Charles Freeman had an eye for young (even very young) women, and if Mary Wilkins had the sense that a strong, intelligent, talented writer might be too threatening for his unstable character, it seems that the Freeman relationship may well have depended upon her infantilization, a behavioral mode which her reluctance to reveal her true age and her willingness to be thought much younger than she was indicates she found useful even before she met Freeman. The pose of girl in a culture that is threatened by strong women has a complex precedent in American literature, as witnessed by the protective coloration of Emily Dickinson. With Mary Wilkins Freeman, however, the pose was more than a strategy that allowed her to write. It became a way of life that made it difficult
Wilkins' later novels and stories chart the rise of the little woman, and the corresponding loss of woman's voice. In early stories and novels, the passive young girl is a foil to the dominant old woman, but in later work this figure becomes more important as she becomes less capable, taking over the position of importance held by the strong older woman. Dorothy Fair in Madelon is the type of the later Mary Wilkins heroine. She is "fair" with a pink innocent face. Most important, she is weak. Her hand clings to Burr's "like a baby's" (9). She is swayed by instinct and feelings; as Wilkins tells us, "Therefore was she in a manner innocently helpless and docile before her own emotions and her own destiny" (324).

This ethereal heroine, the "artist as a young woman" in Wilkins' two autobiographical novels The Portion of Labor (1901) and By the Light of the Soul (1906), is an idealized version of the young Mary Wilkins described by Foster's and Shaw's informants. According to these sources, Mary was small, slender, blonde, clinging, and childish. Indeed, Alden's pet name for her, adopted by Brent Kendrick for his collection of her letters, was "the infant sphinx." In her later novels, Mary Wilkins Freeman's young heroine has a definite infantile sensuality. Both men and women want to caress her and care for her. Frequently, a male lover and an older, maternal woman compete to baby her in a regressive
replication of early family patterns: for example, Horace, Sylvia, and Rose in The Shoulders of Atlas; Raldolph Anderson, Mrs. Anderson, and Charlotte in The Debtor; or Robert, Miss Lennox, and Ellen in The Portion of Labor. As a result of all the complex pressures on the strong woman as artist and all the apparent simplifications inherent in accepting the "only a woman" pose, Wilkins more and more retreats from her earlier old woman heroine and projects the young, pretty, childish girl as a heroine closely identified with herself.

This woman-as-child pose frequently is seductive. I interpret the often bizarre sexuality which results as manifesting Wilkins' strain and buried anger. In The Heart's Highway (1900), for example, Harry Wingfield, hero and narrator of this historical romance, falls in love with Mary Cavendish, when he is a teenager and she is a baby, and Wilkins' use of her own name for the heroine is surely significant. Harry describes his loved one's attractions:

All in white she was, and of a stuff so thin that her baby curves of innocence showed through it, and the little smock slipped low down over her rosy shoulders...and down from her head, over all her tiny body, hiding all save the merest glimmer of the loviness of her face, fell the most wonderful shower of gold locks that ever a baby of only two years old possessed. (35)

When this baby kisses him, he says, he "felt her soft lips on mine, and, looking, saw that baby face all clouded about with gold, and I loved her forever" (35). The sexuality in this passage is certainly strange, if not
perverse, and seems clear evidence of Wilkins' frustrated and angry espousal of attitudes that belied the values of her own maturity. She says, in effect, if men want helpless young women, she will carry the image to its reductio ad absurdum—a seductive baby. The theme of woman's helplessness is nearly as disturbing and is also carried to extremes: although the fictional Mary grows up to take part in a colonial plot, she still periodically collapses, "as only the citadel of a woman's will can do through some inner weakness" (22).

The twisted denial of women's strength in The Heart's Highway represented a clear departure in Mary Wilkins' fiction. At least one critic noticed the sudden shift of values. Frank Norris said that Mary Wilkins had discrowned herself by writing this "colonial romance," which he saw as a "deliberate capitulation to the clamour of the multitude." While Norris did not specifically refer to changes in the Wilkins heroine, he objected to the overall shift from truth to romantic fantasy. Norris saw Wilkins as a traitor to the cause of realism: "She was one of the leaders. It is as if a captain, during action, had deserted to the enemy."30

Wilkins' strategic "desertion" exacted a painful price. Among her later works are two artist stories that reveal she understands on some level the destructiveness of her new sweet young heroine. "Louella Miller" (1902) and "Old Woman
Magoun" (1905) offer powerful commentary on the mechanism of the childish woman and her deadly feminine success. In "Louella Miller" the helpless, childish young woman passively extracts life from the men and women who serve her. Finally, she destroys even the old woman storyteller, Lydia Anderson, a realist with "the gift of description" who "never spared the truth." As described by Lydia, Louella is a beautiful "slight, pliant" woman with "little, slender, clinging hands" incapable of doing any work (78). One by one men and women become enthralled with her, live with her and do all her housework, cook for her and serve her, and one by one they sicken, fade away, and die: First the student who does her teaching for her when she is employed by the district school, next her husband, then her husband's sister, then her aunt. When neighbors bring in custard for the invalids she creates, Louella greedily eats "everythin' that was carried in" (83). Finally the young doctor and another woman who come to coddle her, "fade away," and die (94). Lydia Anderson provies acid testimony to the destructive power of the sweet and helpless heroine. She characterizes her as utterly passive in her malevolence: "like a baby with scissors in its hand cuttin' everybody without knowin' what it was doin'" (97). With no one daring to go near her, the vampire is unable to survive on her own. On the night of Louella's death, Lydia Anderson sees a troupe of ghosts, her still-willing
victims, tenderly leading the ghost of Louella from her house.

Lydia Anderson dies prostrate in front of Louella's door, a final victim. "Hale and hearty" until the age of 87, "one bright moonlight evening," Lydia cried out, ran across the street, and was found "stretched on the ground before the door of Louella Miller's deserted house," dead. Wilkins thus testifies to the destructiveness of this figure. Even realists who "never spared the truth" cannot resist her—Mary Wilkins among them. So powerful is her attraction she ultimately overcomes the strongest storyteller.

In "Old Woman Magoun," also, Mary Wilkins Freeman writes about the very forces that seemed to be overpowering her as an artist. However, in this story the childishness and passivity of the artist destroy not others, but herself. In describing the change from Wilkins' early fiction to her later, critic John Macey says "The young Mary Wilkins died...." I think the end of the artist noted by Macey is enacted in "Old Woman Magoun," where the death of a young girl dramatizes the failure of artistic imagination. Lily is a poetic girl of "nearly fourteen" in a decadent village of shiftless idlers and drinkers. Her grandmother, Old Woman Magoun, who is raising her after her mother dies and her father rejects her, tries to keep Lily a child by dressing her in little girl dresses, allowing
her to carry around an old rag doll, and encouraging her dependency. The fourteen-year-old Lily has "in her the making of an artist or a poet," which, says Mary Wilkins Freeman, is proved by "her prolonged childhood" and "her retrospective blue eyes...which seemed to see past all that she looked upon" (170).

However, something goes very wrong in Old Woman Magoun's plans. In terms of the Demeter/Persephone myth, Demeter does not transmit her wisdom to her daughter; in failing to arm her with the knowledge that will allow her to become a woman, Old Woman Magoun fails truly to nurture Lily. The ruse of keeping Lily childlike and dependent only increases her attractiveness to potential violators. Lily's blue eyes and visionary gaze prove to be highly seductive to a man titillated by her glance and her innocence who seeks to buy her from her corrupt father. Lily in turn is responsive to this man she meets on the way to the store. She makes eye contact and when his hand grasps "her little childish one hanging by her side," she smiles up at him (172). She has not learned how to take care of herself, so she is fair game for any adult.

While the sexuality offered Lily by her father and his friend is unattractive and exploitive, Old Woman Magoun's own actions have contributed to the situation by preventing Lily from self-reliance. She treats Lily like a much younger child and has not allowed her to "run with the
other children" or take part in social events (168). In fact, she has nurtured the innocently seductive dependency that attracts the wrong man. She helps create the same kind of little girl artist pose that Mary Wilkins Freeman herself adopted. Old Woman Magoun, understanding what is happening and feeling powerless to handle it, seeks to restrain her granddaughter's sexuality in the only way she can. She allows Lily to eat the berries of deadly nightshade, berries which any normally self-sufficient country child would have known were poisonous, and which, of course, constitute part of the herbal lore of Demeter. As Lily lies dying, her grandmother soothes her with fantasies of the beautiful land where she is going:

"You will come to a gate with all the colors of the rainbow... and it will open, and you will go right in and walk up the gold street, and cross the field where the blue flowers come up to your knees, until you find your mother, and she will take you home where you are going to live. She has a little white room all ready for you, white curtains at the windows, and a little white looking-glass, and when you look in it you will see... a face like yours, only it's an angel's; and there will be a little white bed, and you can lay down an' rest." (187)

The artist who does not experience life on her own is left the stale promises of a stunted, childish Paradise. In psychological terms, the nurturing "mother" self, because of distrust of audience, cannot allow the instinctive creative self to flourish. I see this story as reflecting Mary Wilkins Freeman's consciousness of the way she was boxing in her creative vision by denying her own abilities and
strengths, restricting her "house of life" to a tiny sterile room. Undoubtedly both the alcoholism and the theme of dissipated men being attracted to little girls who can not challenge their behavior comes from her experience with Charles Freeman. Perhaps her portrait of Lily reveals how helpless she feels, perhaps it indicates how inadequately the "female sanctuary" prepared her for her subsequent experience. Certainly, she reveals in this powerful story her knowledge that the little girl pose represents a kind of death for the artist.

The death this pose represents is evident in Wilkins' most ambitious autobiographical novel, The Portion of Labor (1901). In this attempt to deal with serious contemporay issues, the inadequacy of the little girl pose is even more obvious. The heroine, Ellen Brewster, starts off strong but ends in a collapse of weakness and protestations of ignorance, finally as childish and weak as Mary Cavendish in The Heart's Highway. In Ellen, Wilkins creates a woman of both ability and beauty for whom she is unable to devise a believable destiny. The Portion of Labor thus exemplifies what Rachel DuPlessis calls the "disjunction" between romance (stories of courtship) and quest (stories of accomplishment) plots. Since, by DuPlessis' analysis, our culture has "no alternative community" for "female energy," a strong woman with a sense of mission like Ellen has an "inappropriate relationship to the 'social script'
or 'plot'--always the marriage plot--that culture imagines for women. She has no "place" other than "wife" in male-dominated culture.

In the early chapters of this novel, Ellen's story is the portrait of the artist as a young woman. Petted and admired, she nevertheless has the nerve and the talent to deliver an impassioned valedictory address at her high school graduation. Because she is angry over the way mill workers are treated, her topic is the unfairness of capitalism, delivered with "poetic fire" (192). Her declaiming attracts the attention of the mill owners, who admire her style and intelligence if they do not agree with her message. Ellen is initially strong and determined, set on bettering herself and her family, passionately devoted to her mill-working friends. Her creative ability is obvious from her speeches, and from an experimental novel that she writes and her father illustrates. A girl of courage and integrity, Ellen gives up her college plans when family circumstances are strained by layoffs, and goes to work in the shoe shop. When her admirer, the new mill owner, reduces wages, Ellen uses her extraordinary speaking skills to urge the workers to strike. In the strike scenes, Wilkins shows Ellen's leadership qualities, to the extent that Perry Westbrook calls her "a virago" for her speech against capitalism and "a grotesque" for her leadership of the men. Westbrook's response to Ellen underlines the
monumental task Mary Wilkins faces in this novel: if a modern critic has difficulty accepting power in the woman's story, we can assume an nineteenth-century audience would be even less likely to find it appropriate.

Thus in spite of Ellen's strengths, Mary Wilkins cannot allow her to triumph in other than rigidly "feminine" ways--i.e. marriage. However, the only way she can imagine Ellen's marriage is to destroy her as a character, just as Old Woman Maguon kills Lily, and with similar compensations. Strike underway, Wilkins suddenly reverses the plot. She undercuts the characterization she has been building of Ellen as a poetic speaker, careful thinker, and strong woman. As it turns out, she reveals, Ellen does not really understand the labor situation. She had been influenced to call for a strike by "childish impulses" (492). Forgetting her anguish over the injustices of capitalism to her millworking friends, Ellen marries the mill owner, who lives in comfort while his operatives suffer. Her father concludes that the portion of labor is to be content with one's work and, apparently, to ignore the vast differences in standard of living between capitalist and laborer which Wilkins has carefully established with detailed descriptions of families and homes. With this conclusion, after Ellen has radicalized an entire work crew of seasoned workers, Wilkins destroys Ellen's credibility as a character. Motivated by pressures outside the novel, she insists that Ellen is "only
In *By the Light of the Soul* (1906), according to Foster her most autobiographic novel, Mary Wilkins strains for a different solution for a heroine, some "alternative community" for "female energy." Written four years into the Freeman marriage, this novel shows Mary's sense of women's emotional power, and it also shows her inability to channel this power in other than grotesque situations. Like *A Portion of Labor*, *By the Light of the Soul* shows woman's difficulty finding a place outside marriage in male-defined culture. Almost surrealistic, the plot is too convoluted to explain fully, but it centers on a young woman, Maria (again Wilkins uses her own name), who is excruciatingly aware that women can hurt men—are superior to them, can "dwarf" and even kill them. Her step-mother, for example, may have killed her father:

A subtle physician might possibly have reached the conclusion that Ida, with her radiant superiority, her voiceless but none the less positive self-assertion over her husband, was actually a means of spiritual depression which had reacted upon his physical nature. (997)

Despite this theme, Maria is herself twisted by one bizarre relationship and "dwarfed" in another by the end of the novel. She is doubly hampered and powerless because of a preposterous early "accidental" marriage, never consummated or acknowledged, which remains a shameful secret causing her to become "abnormal" (1069). When her sister falls in love with her "husband," Maria eventually stages
her own death and escapes conventional life by running away to Europe with a wealthy dwarf woman she meets on a train. An entirely different kind of "little woman," this dwarf, Rosa Blair, tells Maria, "I bloom beyond the pale." In Miss Blair's apartment everything is deformed but Miss Blair "no longer seemed a dwarf" because the furniture is as deformed as she is (1358). As in "Old Woman Magoun," the resolution is framed in a room which suggests a cramped or distorted life.

By the Light of the Soul is swamped with feelings of guilt over Charles' Freeman's condition. Like many of those close to alcoholics Mary may well have felt on some level that she was responsible for his sickness. And this novel reveals as well her desire to escape her troubled marriage and troubled identity as a woman in a man's world for a place "beyond the pale." Certainly the elaborate restrictions forbidding marriage for young Maria, point to a wish that Mary Wilkins had made another choice. Perhaps Europe and Rosa Blair represent her longings for an artist's existence--life beyond convention in an environment which could reflect her own twists and turns like the household art in Rosa's apartment. But perhaps Maria's "marriage" to a dwarf is also a nightmare recognition of Wilkins' denial of her own real stature.

Inevitably resulting from such denial, an angry corruption of talent smoulders in several other works Mary
Wilkins Freeman published during her marriage. Written the same year as *By the Light of the Soul*, *The Debtor* (1905) glorifies the infantile woman and at the same time reveals underlying themes of destruction, frustration, and rage. An entire family, in this novel, live "beyond the pale." The focal characters, the Carroll family, move from town to town running up bills and then leaving. Mary Wilkins Freeman excuses their behavior by showing they are people of taste and breeding in contrast to the New Jersey hicks and bumpkins they cheat. In one scene the women smash the colored glass windows and rustic furniture of a gazebo on their rented property because they think it is ugly. The town lawyer-turned-grocer (Charles Freeman was doctor-turned-lumber man) adores one of the Carroll daughters, mainly because of her lack of common sense:

He felt as if he were facing some new system of things, some higher order of creature for whom unreason was the finest reason. He bowed before the pure, unordered, untempered feminine, and his masculine mind reeled.\(^{36}\)

The "pure and sweet unreason" of the Carroll women is presented throughout the novel as the basis of feminine charm. Even Perry Westbrook, who objected to Ellen's strength, calls the heroine of this novel "a simpering nincompoop."\(^{37}\)

The absurdity of Mary Wilkins Freeman's pose in this novel points to the strain she was under in attempting to live with her alcoholic husband. Captain Carroll's device
for saving his family from financial ruin introduces a new theme into the novel which gives some insight into her state of mind. Totally degrading himself for money, he dances incognito blackface in a minstrel show. Captain Carroll sings "absurd sentimental songs" for which he has great talent. His audience is "the commonest American type whose praise and applause mean always a certain disparagement" (465). The themes of art as divorced from the real self and of audience as a vulgar crowd to be amused by absurdities are indications of Mary Wilkins Freeman's painful state.

An artist story, "Noblesse" (1910), also expresses a frustrated and angry view of the artist's role during these difficult years. In this bizarre tale, Margaret Lee, a fat woman, is so grotesquely huge she has to go through doors sideways. Refined and sensitive, she lives with her half-sister, a flashy, insensitive young woman, and with this sister's husband, a flashy, insensitive man, in the family mansion. Her relatives sell off the family treasures and move to a "horrible, tawdry little flat" in the city, where her brother-in-law's new friends laugh at Margaret's bulk.

Then, we are told, because this is the time of "humiliating spectacles of deformities" and "exhibitions of sad freaks of nature," Margaret's brother-in-law decides to put Margaret's girth to some practical use (377). He coerces her to join the sideshow at the circus. Since she
is "the one financial asset, she and her poor flesh" she feels she has no choice but to submit. Margaret displays herself to "crowds screaming with laughter." She is a ridiculous figure:

... seated in two chairs, clad in a pink spangled dress, her vast shoulders bare and sparkling with a tawdry necklace, her great, bare arms covered with brass bracelets, her hands incased in short, white kid gloves, over the fingers of which she wore a number of rings. (378)

As her audience screams, Margaret feels "that there was nothing forevermore beyond those staring, jeering faces of silly mirth and delight at the sight of her" (378). Again, Wilkins mentions the vulgar crowd, and the brother-in-law, a drinker and a gambler, seems close to being a portrait of Charles Freeman. It seems possible that Mary Wilkins felt that her writing, grinding out stories to please an undiscerning public, was "the one financial asset," particularly as Charles Freeman continued to drink and leave his business more and more in the hands of subordinates. In a 1912 letter Mary hints at what must have been a massive resentment: she writes that she is home working while Charles and friends are motoring on "expensive tires, which are a considerable drain on my small income...."39

In spite of an improbably romantic ending (Margaret is rescued by a fat man who offers to take her place because he sees she is a lady), "Noblesse" describes artistic despair. Margaret is voiceless and powerless before the crowds. The "tawdry" decorations and "vast" bare flesh suggest a
degrading exposure; in fact, at this point the image of artist-as-prostitute sums up the state of Mary Wilkins Freeman's career. No longer starving in obscurity, the artist is bloated and cheapened by her display.

As Kendrick and others point out, a major problem in assessing Wilkins' later work is that she wrote so many "pot-boilers," stories and even novels that she knew were poorly done. The fashionable life in Metuchen demanded more and more money and apparently Mary provided it. As she writes to a publisher in 1906, "I am building a house, and have a great many demands upon my pocket book." Like Margaret Lee, she feels forced to perform. In letter after letter, she takes orders for holiday stories as if they were merchandise. She justifies bad work by intimating that her readers prefer it and that it enables her to reach a wider audience. For example, a 1906 letter to Alice French mentions a "frightful" novel, which she fears is "very bad" but "will very likely outsell my better ones." She later says she wrote Doc Gordon because she "thought of the advertising, and the reaching a new public."

Clearly her "prostitution" distressed her. That she felt degraded by the push for money is apparent in her last novel, The Butterfly House (1912). Here Mary Wilkins Freeman creates her final solution to the love/art conflict by splitting her artist heroine into two characters. Annie Eustace is the little woman as artist. Because she is
completely selfless, this good artist/woman dismisses fame, ambition, money, and glory; she cares nothing for "advertising" and "reaching her public." In contrast, Margaret Edes is the artist manque, a "self-lover" who values art only for the fame, money and glory it brings. Thus Margaret, who shares a name with the reluctant "prostitute" of "Noblesse," embodies qualities Wilkins secretly deplores in herself. But ambition for women was--and is--complicated: Margaret also reflects the healthy energy, drive, and ambition that society is likely to characterize as "masculine," to the detriment of the artist who, like Mary Wilkins, happens also to be a woman. Thus in creating and destroying her "evil" artist, Wilkins destroys not only vanity, selfishness, and aggression, but also many of her own more positive qualities, such as her ambition, energy, and pride.

Playing to patriarchal values in this novel, Mary Wilkins Freeman again glorifies the childish woman and disparages women's strengths and women's arts. As in The Heart's Highway and The Debtor, the dominant point of view is masculine: The male protagonist is a handsome cultured minister who dislikes women, considering them "self-centred in the pursuit of petty ends to the extent of absolute viciousness."43 Besides disliking women, the minister dislikes women's novels because they are "sloughs of oversweetened sentiment and of entirely innocent
immorality" (209). Another man describes these novels as "womanish, hysterical, sentimental" (202). Women's clubs, even though they have stimulated the young artist heroine, are characterized as petty and gossipy, the "pathetic attempt of village women to raise themselves upon tiptoes enough to peer over their centuries of weedy feminine growth" (110). Superficial, competitive club women write and read dull papers, recite with "shrieks and groans," and sing with no comprehension of music (38-42). To help their wives upstage each other, husbands pay exhorbitant sums to secure professional performers for club meetings.

Women's traditional arts do not escape attack. As evidence of her superior capabilities, Annie, the young writer, is inept at the household arts practiced by Hetty in "A Church Mouse" and Louisa in "A New England Nun." She carries around a soiled piece of embroidery which she is unable to complete. The minister reacts to her embroidery as as he would to "a disagreeable insect" and wonders "with mild scorn and bewilderment" how anyone could enjoy such work. Annie herself considers her embroidery "dreadful" (116-18).

While other women and their arts are disparaged, Annie is an artist whose genius even the minister belatedly recognizes. Annie is another passive child heroine, but Wilkins may have begun her novel with another protagonist in mind. Alice Mendon, a "magnificent" spinster who is
presented as too accomplished and intellectual for this cultural backwater (a jab at Metuchen) and who seems a destined mate for the minister, is dropped a third of the way into the novel. After dropping Alice, Wilkins introduces Annie, an afterthought who takes over the novel. Annie has no egotism at all: she has "the face of a creature entirely capable of asking an enemy's pardon for an injury inflicted upon herself" (93). Yet she is a "gifted creature": although a "child," this "young flower" somehow "writes as if something was driving [her]" (177). This prodigy has published a novel anonymously, and now that her book is popular she has been warned by her publishers not to admit she wrote it. She is thus "pure" talent, unsullied by pride and egotism. As Alice comments, her "'little halo'" is hidden from the world (189).

Vain and selfish Margaret Edes represents the other side of the artist--her aspiration and drive divorced from talent. Like Candace in "A Village Singer," Margaret has a "Napoleonic ambition" (59) which she seeks to fulfill by manipulating other women and by competing with them to have the most successful speakers at club meetings. The "house" of The Butterfly House is, in fact, not a cocoon or sanctuary like the houses in many early Mary Wilkins stories, but rather the house of Margaret Edes, where women are trapped and oudone by Margaret's schemes. When this jealous, competitive woman learns of Annie's secret novel
she feels the bitter envy of a person "with the burning ambition of genius but destitute of the divine fire" (179).

In Margaret, Wilkins creates a character who is angry, ambitious, and strong—who, in effect, embodies many of the qualities Mary Wilkins Freeman could not acknowledge in herself. Margaret and Mary share many qualities. Like Margaret Edes (and unlike Annie) Mary Wilkins was avidly interested in clothes. Both women demonstrate their artistic taste in elaborate outfits: Margaret, for example, wears "black China silk" with "an undersilk strewn with gold disks," "a yellow silk petticoat," and a black hat with a yellow rose (128). In a letter, Mary describes searching for a "rose-colored slip" to complement a gray dress and "a rose-colored scarf and my gray hat lined with rose." Both Margaret and Mary have a keen eye and artistic sense of interior design: both decorate their homes to match their own coloring. Margaret's gold and white color scheme, we are told, matches her golden pompadour. Similarly, Mary decorated Freewarren to match her own blonde hair, with yellow pine woodwork, flooring, piano—and even a blonde cat. The most important resemblance between Margaret and her creator, however, lies in their identical attitudes toward suburban New Jersey. Margaret is driven "to the verge of madness" by the petty mentality of Fairbridge (131). Similarly, as Kendrick points out, Wilkins detested Metuchen, her real-life model
for Fairbridge. Thus, in this novel, Wilkins shares important traits with her evil artist.

We understand the psychological implications of this portrait when it becomes clear that Wilkins creates this character only to destroy her, and in so doing she exorcises her own "secret terrible self-love and ambition" (131). Margaret commits a disreputable act of artistic thievery. She reads a chapter of Annie's novel, The Poor Lady, aloud at a meeting of the Zenith club, implying that she wrote it, and receiving fame and adulation for the writing. Like Polly Moss she tells a lie to impress her audience. She steals her sister's art, Annie's book, not to preserve it as Charlotte does in "A Souvenir," but to pass it off as her own. In effect, Margaret Edes steals that part of writing which was such a torment to Mary Wilkins Freeman. In projecting ambition, greed, and the need for recognition and money onto an "evil" character, Wilkins reconciles her childish woman stance with the artist's role.

With ambition and pride projected onto Margaret, Annie can remain a good child, a true woman. Thus Wilkins portrays a woman achieving success as a woman and as a writer but avoiding pressures and self-doubts about the propriety of desiring or enjoying success. Unlike the poetess, she does not want approval, money, or fame. Because she has no greed, no ambition, and no public voice-
indeed no public name and hence no public identity--she is not threatening to men. Unlike Mary Wilkins, who felt compelled to write with an eye on the marketplace, Annie is completely indifferent to the money from her book. To protect Margaret's reputation, she diverts her book's income to Margaret's bank. Thus while Annie writes like a man--the minister declares her work "altogether too logical for the average woman writer" (215)--she allows another woman to have her fame and money. She is an artist, but remains a little woman. She is truly a bird warbling in the rosebush.

However, while Annie is not rewarded for her writing, she is rewarded for being a little woman. Because she disowns fame and ambition, people tell her that what she is as a young woman is more important than what she does. Alice Mendon says, "The book is wonderful, but my Annie is more wonderful because she can be told so and never get the fact into her head" (189). For the minister, who switches his interest from Alice to Annie, "this exquisite little Annie...had accomplished much more in simply being herself, than had Margaret Edes with her much blazoned book" (253). Even her grandmother says, "Annie has done something a deal better than write a book.... She has found a nice man..." (275-6). Annie feels only pity for Margaret. She quickly writes another novel, "for the child was a creator" (245). As the ultimate reward for her selflessness, the minister
falls in love and marries her.

Unfortunately, this resolution is as strained as the conclusions of most of Wilkins' novels. She introduces several subplots--besides the Alice Mendon distraction, an abducted gypsy baby and a young woman writer from the West appear and disappear with little connection to Annie's story. But perhaps we can see these "twistings and complexities" in another way. Woolf's image of the woman's mind "pulled from the straight" calls to mind the "crazy quilt" phenomenon of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Jonathan Holstein sees these quilts as evidence of Victorian pretentiousness, a "rejection of simplicity and the right angles of unadorned geometric form." In the crazy quilt, according to Holstein, "The design is cluttered, incoherent..." with "little thought spent on the overall design; it is a nearsighted view of minute, sectional effect ..., rather than the longer-range view of the total effect--as in a painting."48

But this popular quilt motif could well be a stage in the women's art tradition, roughly expressing the "disjunction" between romance and quest stories DuPlessis observes and Mary Wilkins Freeman lived. The "longer-range view" is obscure for women like Mary Wilkins who are unable to put together art and love in their lives. Crazy quilts, so embellished yet often incoherent, may signify women's passage from the secure traditions of the nineteenth-century
"women's sphere" to the uncharted modern world. Elaine Showalter makes this connection when she says of the local color writers, "Their quilts are crazy quilts, moving away from the comforting design traditions of the past and unsure of their coherence, structure, and form."

Mary Wilkins' later work bears evidence that her mind was "pulled from the straight" and diverted from an over all scheme to a minutia of details which fail to hold together. Testifying to the powerful forces that threaten women's art, many of her later novels are indeed "crazy quilts" where the writer is "pulled from the straight" to answer objections, to insist she is really staying in her place, or to avoid direct expression of her anger. Typical of these, A Butterfly House is a crazy quilt, an irregular pattern of plots and subplots with pieces expressing the instinct for artistic creation, the need for financial security, the hunger for love and community, and the desire for recognition. Although she seldom confronts artist themes as directly and effectively as she did in her early work, many of Mary Wilkins stories and novels after the first two collections show the strain the woman artist felt in a man's world. Often considered failures, these later works are significant for what they tell us about the experience.

For evaluation of Mary Wilkins' later work, see Perry Westbrook, 118-172. However, Mary E. Reichardt believes critics have discounted her later work because of prejudice against her "feminine" subject matter. See "Mary Wilkins Freeman: One Hundred Years of Criticism," *Legacy* 4, no 2 (Fall 1987): 31-44.


*Spectator* 67 (1891): 449; *Athenaeum* 98 (1891): 93.


Letter from Joseph Edgar Chamberlin to Thomas Schuler Shaw, 30 November 1931, unclassified green scrapbook, Rare Book and Special Collections, Library of Congress.


18See Leah Glasser’s analysis of this novel as a portrayal of Mary Wilkins Freeman’s divided self in "'In a Closet Hidden': The Life and Work of Mary Wilkins Freeman" (Ph. D. diss., Brown University, 1983), 183-223.

19Mary E. Wilkins, *The Heart's Highway: A Romance of Virginia* (New York: Collier, 1900), 168. Subsequent references in text.

20Kendrick is the best source for details about Charles Freeman and the Freeman marriage: 201-09, 361-69.

21Edward Foster, "Mary E. Wilkins Freeman: A Biographical and Critical Study," diss. Harvard University, 1934, 139-40.


28Letter from Henrietta Silzer to Thomas Schyler Shaw, unclassified black scrapbook, Rare Book and Special Collections, Library of Congress.

29Kendrick, 495, n. 4.


Mary E. Wilkins, "Old Woman Magoun," in *The Best Stories of Mary E. Wilkins*, 168. Subsequent references in text.

DuPlessis, 15-16.


Westbrook, 162.


Letter to Frederick Atherton Duneka, 24 August 1906, letter 375 in Kendrick, 316.


Letter to Frederick Atherton Duneka, 24 August 1906, letter 375 in Kendrick, 316.


Kendrick, 14.

Letter to Marion Boyd Allen, 23 April 1926, letter 474 in Kendrick, 408.

Kendrick, 14.
47 Kendrick, 276.


CHAPTER 9

VALUE RECEIVED

A final story represents Mary Wilkins Freeman's last word on women's art. Written in 1916, "Value Received" is a nostalgic look at women's arts and crafts as artifact. Mary Wilkins Freeman returns to search for the woman's story and again finds it in the connections between generations. In the process she affirms the value of a women's art tradition, as she does so often in early stories. But while the message of "A Souvenir" is to take back and restore the value of women's art, the message of "Value Received" is to publish, to broadcast, to give that art to an appreciative audience. This giving to a young couple is a hopeful gesture to the future. It suggests unity and fruitfulness, and it celebrates the contribution that women's art has made and will make to humanity.

"Value Received" is a fitting title for a last artist story, for the gift of art is wholeheartedly accepted. In addition, the title encourages us to look at the value we receive from this writer's work. Foster, Westbrook, and Donovan all find Wilkins' value primarily in the way she "distills" the "essence" of New England, just as Louisa
Ellis does in "A New England Nun." Kendrick regards her as "a true literary genius," Westbrook says she "represents regionalism at its very best," and Pryse calls her "one of the finest short story writers in our literature." Donovan and Pryse, in feminist readings, find additional value in the way Mary Wilkins Freeman portrays the women's world of late nineteenth-century America. Looking at both early and later works, Donovan sees her major theme as the death of "the woman-centered, matriarchal world"; looking primarily at her early "great" stories, Pryse sees it as "the revolt of mother."

My own reading of Mary Wilkins builds on all these studies. Certainly, New England essences, female bonding, and rebellion all figure in the artist's story I trace. In addition to these important themes, the artist story, blurred as it often is, offers another kind of significance as we attempt to decipher the "woman's story" of the past, disentangling it from the dominant story.

In her early work, Wilkins shows us the part that could not be written directly: Betsy's ambition, Candace's artistic rage, Martha's "rage for order," Louisa's retreat, Mrs. Torrey's worship. Her stories help us hear what they had to say--our mothers and grandmothers who did not have a public voice. Because she makes their perishable art accessible, we can read their lives. For us, at the end of the twentieth century, in a culture that seems to value
only youth, beauty, and money, she reveals the value of old
women, their wisdom, their grace and reason that endured,
even flourished, on very little. She shows us their
talent, their resourcefulness, and their spirited
independence. Even in her later work, she tells us what it
was like to try to be both woman and artist, and many
things are not different today. This woman's story is the
"value received" of her work.

In Wilkins' final artist story, "Value Received," two
old spinsters bequeath their household art to younger women
in the forms of a bonnet and a wedding gift. Sarah
Edgewater's elderly aunts, Dora and Ann, who are "helped"
by her (although the bread of charity is bitter), think
that Sarah should have a "bonnet" not a modern "hat" for
her niece Margey's wedding. Inspired by her sense of
tradition, Dora creates a daring and original bonnet, and
Sarah has to wear it. The old aunts also want to give
Margey a gift. Resisting the idea of buying something for
her with Sarah's money, they give her a bouquet of wax
flowers, sculpted long ago by Dora. They abjure money and
turn to handwork.

Both these works of art, the bonnet and the wax
flowers, reaffirm themes revealed by art objects in earlier
Wilkins stories. When Dora decides to make a bonnet for
Sarah to wear to the wedding, Ann regards her determination
as "the extreme daring of genius" worthy of "the founder of
a new school of art." The resulting bonnet is "a graceful affair of flowery black and shimmering silver and long floating black ribbons." It is trimmed with "grasses dipped in alum-water" to crystallize them, and decorated with precious real old "black thread lace." The bonnet defies modern fashion, yet it is attractive in its own way: "The curious thing about it was, if one could divest it of associations, it was intrinsically pretty." When Sarah wears it to the wedding, the bonnet is rumored to have come from Paris and provides a "delicious note of discord" (97-99).

To achieve her "Parisian" effects, Dora combines natural grasses and antique lace in a "shimmering," impressionistic creation. However, more importantly, her whimsical bonnet also makes a serious statement about independence. As a response to Sarah's well-meaning generosity, which keeps the elderly sisters alive but injures their pride, the bonnet teaches Sarah "what it means to take" (88). It humbles her, who had not realized she needed humbling. A vital kind of communication happens: the bonnet teaches the sublime "lesson" of empathy, the "what it is like to be someone else." When Dora wears to the wedding a bonnet similarly trimmed with the same precious black lace, the sharing of material represents subtle bonds re-established. Thus Wilkins restates two themes from her earlier work: empathy leads
to artistic insight and shared material represents close relationships.

The other gift also suggests an enduring value in Wilkins' work. Dora and Ann give Margey a "glass shade containing a stiff group of wax flowers--tuberoses and lilies-of-the-valley" as a wedding gift (87), an artifact that suggests a Mary Wilkins story. This work of art had been hidden in a drawer when the "man from New York" came and bought up all the other wax flowers and funeral wreaths Dora had made long ago. After that man from New York bought the other flowers and wreaths, the two sisters fell on hard times. Piece by piece, they sold the family treasures. They "undecorated," divested themselves of their household art. By the time of Margey's wedding, all but three of the rooms of their old house stand empty, shuttered and locked.

The image of the old artist, with many empty rooms in her house of life--treasures sold off to keep the house together--suggests Mary Wilkins Freeman at the end of her career. For Wilkins, both in her fiction and in her life, selling family possessions signals major emotional upheaval. Family furniture is sold in "Noblesse," and rooms are emptied in The Debtor. A reminder of her "early broken-up home," the selling of furniture represents spiritual emptiness, and perhaps years of marketing her art may have left her feeling depleted and used, like the
New England families who sold their precious souvenirs to city antique dealers. Since "Value Received" seems to be a return to earlier themes, it may not be too fanciful to note that most of Mary Wilkins' works were published by Harpers'--a "man" in New York. Yet in spite of the bankruptcy which sold furniture and art signifies, in "Value Received" the remaining artwork speaks of a final integrity, now finally brought to light.

Not just morbid curios, these resurrected wax flowers are really rather attractive, we are told:

If one could banish one's opinion concerning false art, the whole was in reality not unpleasing. Those wax flowers had been very well and daintily made. The small symmetrical pyramid of waxen bloom beneath the crystal shade, although obsolete and probably bound to awaken merriment, was no worse in effect than many gifts....(93)

Wilkins insists that this art, like the bonnet, be seen apart from "fashion" or "trends." "If one could banish one's opinion concerning false art...," she repeats. "If one could divest it of associations...." She wants us to look at the art object itself apart from fashion and trends. Both the old-style bonnet and the "obsolete" wax flowers, in fact, suggest the now--in 1916--somewhat "old-fashioned" form of the woman's story that Wilkins wrote years before. The revival of bonnet and flowers perhaps suggests that this story form has survived the critical downswing of popularity and will be henceforth seen for its own merits.
But critics within the story pass judgement on old-fashioned art. As in The Jamesons a "lady from Boston" dismisses wax flowers as a "most decadent feature of a decadent age of household decoration," part of an "appalling list" which also contains "worsted mottoes" and "funeral wreaths" (90). But Ann asserts the personal value of the funeral wreaths and the other art the woman despises by saying, "'If she had funeral wreaths associated with her loved ones who had departed, she could not have spoken so'" (91). Thus Wilkins reiterates the power of household art and also by implication of the unique woman's story written in the late nineteenth century by the "local color" writers.

Finally, Wilkins also wants us to consider the message sent by the wax flowers. They are pointed out at the wedding as "the gift which Margey valued most, because wax flowers are so very rare nowadays" (100). Significantly, the new generation of young women instinctively grasps what this art means with "intense goodness and ready understanding." Margey says, "Poor old souls,...they gave me all they had" (95). Without the condescension of "poor old souls" this is a fitting epitaph for our mothers and sisters of the past. In their art they truly gave all they had. Mary Wilkins' artist stories help us realize what a gift it is.


Donovan, 119; Pryse, lx.

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