The No-Man’s-Land of “A New England Nun”

by Ben Couch

Critics have held widely varying opinions on the quality of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s “A New England Nun,” the quality of the characters, and even whether or not Freeman liked the spinster Louisa Ellis who is, ironically, the protagonist in this sexually dynamic short story. As Mary R. Reichardt says, “It is a tribute to the artistry of ‘A New England Nun’ that various interpretations of the work have evolved over the years. The story, quite simply, is a masterpiece of ambiguity.” By way of illustration, Reichardt then contrasts Marjorie Pryse’s analysis of Louisa as “an ‘artist’ and a ‘visionary,’ ‘heroic, active, wise, ambitious, and even transcendent’” with David Hirsch’s view that the story is “a study in obsession and sexual repression, a ‘rejection of life’” (91). Glasser poses the question, “Is Louisa, the heroine . . . who has rejected the possibility of sexual fulfillment, as Hirsch suggests? Or is she the victorious, autonomous woman described by so many recent feminist critics . . . , a brave woman who has in fact chosen her singular definition of self-fulfillment through defiant spinsterhood?” (33).

It is certainly tempting to see the story as one detailing the sexual frustrations and struggles with marriage in Freeman’s life. The time in her own life most closely paralleling “A New England Nun” is that part including Hanson Tyler, a naval ensign upon whom Freeman apparently had a crush. He would be gone for long intervals of time, returning only when on leave (Reichardt 12). The long periods of absence and an assumed frustration at her apparently unrequited love may encourage biographically informed readers to read the story of Louisa and Joe as the story of Freeman and Tyler. Edward Foster says of this,

Hamlin Garland and Willis Boyd Allen, who knew the writer, have at least inferentially suggested the identification of Miss Wilkins and her Louisa Ellis. Knowing that her parents had died while she was relatively young and perhaps guessing at the Tyler episode, they found the speculation difficult to resist. (108)

It is, indeed, “difficult to resist” because, as readers, we want to know what prompted the writer to write. “In my opinion, they were mostly mistaken,” says Foster (108). Even if Garland and Allen were not mistaken in their inferences, I think that it would certainly be a mistake to look for nothing other than
biographical significance in this short story. Perhaps Freeman did draw from this relationship. Reichardt says, "Though little evidence exists that Hanson Tyler returned Freeman’s affection, he evidently occupied a place in Freeman’s romantic imagination for the rest of her life. In her last years, she wore his naval uniform buttons on her own clothing and once remarked to a friend, ‘If there is an afterlife, he [Tyler] is the one person I should like to see’ (Foster 194)” (Reichardt 76). She may have had this episode in her life partially in mind when writing the story. Additionally, Reichardt quotes a journal entry wherein Freeman recounts her discovery of an old dog that had been chained for 13 years because he bit someone when he was a puppy (93). This is, of course, the dog that would become Caesar in “A New England Nun.” However, this dog was brought to a much different level by Freeman. In her hands, he was transformed from a simple chained dog into a powerful image of sexuality. The story may function, at some level, as biographical, but if it is a recounting of her relationship with Tyler, it has been transformed: as a subtle tale of sexual tension and ambiguity, it has taken on a life of its own.

The heart of the debate revolves around Louisa, her role in the story, and her role in New England life. We are struck immediately by the title of the piece, a powerful indicator of Louisa’s unconventionality as well as her distinguishing qualities. A nun must give up sexuality and society in order to pursue a higher purpose, the service of God. Louisa gives up society in order to serve her own higher purpose, her autonomy. David Hirsch examines the story from a psychological standpoint, looking at a scene easily misconstrued as “‘dull,’ . . . embarrassed and awkward,” and seeing instead a scene pulsating “with tightly controlled dramatic tension” (125). He says,

Mrs. Freeman does not seem to deviate greatly from the subject matter and methods of her sister writers in the New England local-color tradition. . . . But what distinguishes the scene I have singled out, and, indeed, the entire story . . . is the undercurrent I have already referred to. (127)

This undercurrent Hirsch considers points out many passages in the text as indicating “an obsessive neurosis” (125) in Louisa. Hirsch points out the following passage as one of the more blatant examples of what he refers to as compulsive and unreasonable activity (125):

Presently Dagget began fingering the books on the table. There was a square red autograph album, and a Young Lady’s Gift-Book which had belonged to Louisa’s mother. He took them up one after the other and opened them; then laid them down again, the album on the Gift-Book.

Louisa kept eyeing them with mild uneasiness. Finally she rose and changed the position of the books, putting the album
underneath. That was the way they had been arranged in the first place.

Dagget gave an awkward little laugh. “Now what difference did it make which book was on top?” said he.

Louisa looked at him with a deprecating smile. “I always keep them that way,” murmured she.

“You do beat everything,” said Dagget, trying to laugh again. His large face was flushed. (4–5)

Here is an attempt on Freeman’s part to establish Louisa as a compulsive character and that personality trait as a motivating factor in her reluctance to marry Joe. Thus, it is essential that we see to what lengths Louisa will go to preserve order in her house. However, we are left wondering how we are supposed to feel about Louisa. Compulsivity is certainly not a trait to be admired in a person. It can be a debilitating force, keeping people from walking outside their houses without counting their steps, from going to bed at night without checking the stove five times, and, ultimately, from living. This may be a detraction from Louisa as a person, but not as a character. It enriches her since we now see her as a more multi-dimensional force. She is truly undergoing a desperate struggle to retain the essential Louisa. Her identity requires her to be a very neat and orderly person surrounded by her own idiosyncrasies. Thus, we are forced to ask ourselves, when does perfectionism go too far? Is Louisa compulsive or precise? Does her compulsiveness simply prevent her from wanting to marry Joe, or from living? And finally, if she is happy, does it matter what we think of her compulsiveness?

Louisa is a character far from living within the bounds of societal opinion. Her decision to remain a “spinster” indicates that fact clearly enough. If we criticize her for her way of life, it could be argued that we are no better than her gossipy neighbors who whisper about her daily use of china. While Louisa’s compulsiveness is important in understanding her motivations, Freeman is challenging us to rise above the role of the small-town busybody. Therefore, I cannot view her “neurosis” as being quite as essential to the understanding and interpretation of this story as Hirsch does. Louisa is precise and enjoys what she does. As Glasser says,

Freeman’s story actually captures the isolation and quiet that attention to one’s craft requires. Every gesture of Louisa’s work is described lovingly and quietly, as though her work is an extension of the landscape described in the first paragraph in its “premonition of rest and hush and night.” (34)

While Hirsch makes an interesting study of her character, he accepts the idea of the spinster, an idea bred by a male-dominated society, and is perfectly happy in joining the townspeople in putting Louisa’s defining characteristics
in a negative light. Glasser may present a more plausible interpretation when she asserts that “the major function of her [Louisa’s] work . . . is to offer her time for self-reflection, time for self-love. Her work . . . is not done out of necessity or to achieve any specific purpose” (35). It is, however, a kind of work that cannot be allowed within the bounds of marriage, an example of “the self-love that attention to a husband might destroy” (Glasser 34). Glasser reads the story as a celebration of “the unrecognized joy and worth of Louisa’s autonomy” (35) and an examination and celebration of the character of Louisa herself. Louisa is a woman who is content and happy, but still willing to sacrifice her very self for the sake of honoring a 14-year-old pledge. She is a quietly noble character.

I would, however, take issue with calling Louisa a “victorious, autonomous woman” (Glasser 33). While Louisa loves her autonomous life and is pleased, self-confident, and happy in being her own woman, she is willing to give all of this up for a man, Joe Dagget, with full understanding that she is giving up herself. One of the most striking passages describes her morning rituals as she prepares for the wedding:

Every morning, rising and going about among her neat maidenly possessions, she felt as one looking her last upon the faces of dear friends. It was true that in a measure she could take them with her, but, robbed of their old environments, they would appear in such new guises that they would almost cease to be themselves. (8)

She knows that “There would be a large house to care for,” “company to entertain,” and “Joe’s rigorous and feeble old mother to wait upon” (9). Perhaps the worst blow comes to those things that define her identity. She will no longer have ample time to distill fragrances or sew linen, essential actions if Louisa is to enjoy her life. The order valued so highly by Louisa will be continually disrupted. Realizing all of this, she accepts her suitor and continues work on her wedding dress. She does not break free in the name of her female individuality, asserting herself as a woman who loves who she is and who will not compromise herself for any man. Her “maidenly possessions” are a thinly disguised metaphor for herself. Louisa realizes that she will be losing her identity by marrying Joe. She is determined, however, to go through with the marriage in order to prevent breaking her promise and, as far as she knows, Joe’s heart.

Despite Louisa’s hesitations, despite her tendency to place the marriage “so far in the future that it was almost equal to placing it over the boundaries of another life” (7–8), there are indications that she is upset at Joe’s “betrayal.” After overhearing Joe’s conversation with Lily, Louisa “slunk softly home” (15) and seems more hurt than relieved by the initial impact of the blow. She has a hard time believing and accepting “that she had heard aright, and that she would not do Joe a terrible injury should she break her
troph-plight” (15). We can see the disappointment over this sexual rejection when we are told that “all alone by herself that night, [she] wept a little” (16). Though she overcomes her grief with joy, it would not do justice to the complexity of the story were we to ignore the fact that Louisa is a bit disappointed when the barbarian at her gate gives up without a struggle.

Glasser sets forth the apparent polarity of Louisa’s options: “[L]iving alone meant burying the sexual self; marrying meant burying the creative, independent self” (32). Two very separate worlds have been established: one that is portrayed as being full of life and vitality as well as control, and one filled with the intolerable small talk that takes place between Louisa and Joe, talk so unimportant that Freeman brushes over the vast majority of their time together with “He remained about an hour longer” (5). Hirsch discusses the apparent opposition of Louisa and Joe in terms of an order-disorder pattern:

To Louisa . . . . Joe represents a constant threat of potential chaos. He does not, indeed, cannot, belong in the established order of Louisa’s home life and his intrusion into that life brings inevitable discord . . . . After the impoverished small talk between Joe and Louisa has run its course, Joe literally upsets the established order of album and gift-book. Not only that—when Louisa attempts to restore order, Joe challenges her purpose in doing so. (127)

I would add that Louisa does not, indeed, cannot, belong in the established disorder of Joe’s home life, and her intrusion into that life would bring inevitable discord as well. Thus, we are left with two characters in two separate worlds. How do they manage a resolution of this relationship and find peace with each other and, more importantly, themselves? Caesar, Louisa’s dog and perhaps the most compelling symbol of the story, bridges the gap between these two opposing worlds, enabling each character, especially Louisa, to find contentment.

Joe is a sensual creature with stereotypical male sexual urges. In much the same way that Caesar is chained to the doghouse, Joe is chained to Louisa, a woman who, though “not quite as old as he,” “gave people the impression of being older” (4). A reasonably well-off man, Joe is bound to Louisa by a promise made in his youth, although he is now in love with the beautiful and socially accepted and admired Lily Dyer. Like Louisa, Joe is compromising his own character in his stubborn commitment to the fiancée of his youth. He never makes any sexual advances toward Louisa; it may be assumed that this is because of the fear and self-consciousness Louisa arouses in him. They would be incompatible sexually for the same reason that they are incompatible as partners in life: Joe would always be afraid of putting “a clumsy foot or hand through the fairy web, and he had always the consciousness that Louisa was watching fearfully lest he should” (6). Both would always be sexually frustrated and neither would ever be relaxed. It
certainly seems likely that Joe would always walk out of the bedroom feeling like that “innocent and perfectly well-intentioned bear . . . after his exit from a china shop,” and Louisa would always feel like “the kind-hearted, long-suffering owner of the china shop . . . after the exit of the bear” (5).

Whereas Joe is a gentleman in the presence of Louisa, we are given a hint toward the ending of the story that he is suppressing his sexuality while near her. After Lily’s passionate speech to Joe (“No, Joe Dagget, . . . I’ll never marry any other man. . . . I ain’t that sort of a girl to feel this way twice” [15]), we are told that “Louisa heard an exclamation and a soft commotion behind the bushes; then Lily spoke again. . . . ‘This must be put a stop to’” (15). From what we are told, we can only assume that they have engaged in a passionate embrace, a burst of physical activity brought on by emotions that are a far cry from those found in the tense and strained conversation of Louisa and Joe (3–5).

Although Hirsch suggests that the 14 years of Caesar’s imprisonment link him to Joe Dagget due to Joe’s 14 years away from home (129), and Reichardt says “her [Freeman’s] sympathy for the chained dog and her desire to release it were eventually worked into the character of Joe Dagget” (94), I would argue that the story shows Caesar to be a personification of Louisa’s sexuality.

Caesar was a veritable hermit of a dog. For the greater part of his life he had dwelt in his secluded hut, shut out from the society of his kind and all innocent canine joys. Never had Caesar since his early youth watched at a woodchuck’s hole; never had he known the delights of a stray bone at a neighbor’s kitchen door. And it was all on account of a sin committed when hardly out of his puppyhood. No one knew the possible depth of remorse of which this mild-visaged, altogether innocent looking old dog might be capable; but whether or not he had encountered remorse, he had encountered a full measure of righteous retribution. Old Caesar seldom lifted up his voice in a growl or a bark; he was fat and sleepy; there were yellow rings which looked like spectacles around his dim old eyes; but there was a neighbor who bore on his hand the imprint of several of Caesar’s sharp white youthful teeth, and for that he had lived at the end of a chain, all alone in a little hut, for fourteen years. (Freeman 10)

Caesar’s life as a hermit closely parallels Louisa’s life as a spinster. Caesar is “shut out from the society of his kind and all innocent canine joys.” By remaining unmarried, Louisa, in effect, removes herself from society. She does not have many, if any, friends. Caesar has been kept from all of the things that a dog is supposed to enjoy, cut off from the world in his youth. Louisa is cut off in her youth by Joe. He proposes to her and then leaves her, presumably expecting her to keep her pledge to him. Thus, this “sin” she has
committed by keeping her engagement to a man who runs away has kept her from watching at woodchuck holes or begging for a stray bone “at a neighbor’s kitchen door,” very sexual images both. Joe has kept her from having a normal life, from experiencing the joy of having boyfriends, getting married in her earlier youth, and exploring her sexuality with a man who was willing to settle down with her. The narrator tells us that “No one knew the possible depth of remorse of which this mild-visaged . . . old dog might be capable; but whether or not he encountered remorse, he had encountered a full measure of righteous retribution.”

I argue that it is truly Louisa’s sexual self that suffers the remorse of having given her pledge too soon, thus leaving her sexual self chained, and scarring Joe with this pledge, leaving her indelible mark on him and preventing him from marrying the girl of his choice, Lily. This provides us with a sort of vicious undercurrent between the two in that Louisa has scarred Joe, implying that Joe may sub-consciously feel that Louisa has left a violent mark on him all these years, preventing him from exploring his own sexuality. The “bite,” though, is returned by what may be seen as Joe’s demand that she preserve herself for him. We are told that “for that [bite] he had lived at the end of a chain, all alone in a little hut, for fourteen years.” In a very real way, when the “neighbor” (Joe), demands “either Caesar’s death or complete ostracism” (10), he is demanding that Louisa either kill her sexuality or keep it on such a tight leash that “Caesar’s” spirit will be broken, thus assuring that she will remain true to him. When Joe returns, he finds that she has done exactly that. Though she has remained true to him, she no longer feels sexually attracted to Joe. This scene brings out the dynamic sexual tension between the two, as well as a bitterness and sense of loss felt on Louisa’s part, and a violent, albeit subconscious, undercurrent in the attitudes held by Joe and Louisa toward each other.

Hirsch points to the relationship between the myth of St. George’s dragon and the character of Caesar (129):

> One need not . . . try to push Mrs. Freeman beyond her natural depth by insisting that she was consciously manipulating . . . Jungian archetypes. . . . Neither will it do to insist that Joe is actually St. George. . . . Still, even a casual consideration of the comic association between Joe and St. George-Perseus may be illuminating. (130)

And: “Joe—without being St. George or a sun god—stands as a sexual threat to Louisa; and it is quite fitting that she should associate him in her fantasies with fertility figures and fertility-sterility myths” (131). As Northrop Frye has it in Anatomy of Criticism, “In the dragon-killing legend of the St. George and Perseus family . . . a country under an old feeble king is terrorized by a dragon who eventually demands the king’s daughter, but is slain by the hero.
This seems to be a romantic analogy... of a myth of a waste land restored to life by a fertility god” (Frye 137, qtd. in Hirsch 130). In the two myths mentioned, the sea-monster and dragon are instruments in keeping the “wasteland” barren. They are oppressing the people and are demanding what is presumably the most fertile, beautiful, eligible woman in the kingdom, the king’s daughter. Were she to die, the best chance for the renewal of life would be destroyed with her, thus plunging the wasteland into a darker time than ever. The hero is a figure of fertility, one who will bring life to the barren land. By killing the beast, he is killing a sort of famine in the land.

New England is not suffering from famine. While Louisa may subconsciously fantasize about being the beautiful princess who can bring fertility to the land (as can be seen in her disappointment over Joe’s love for Lily Dyer), she knows that, in reality, she is not. She is the one who restrains Caesar in a dramatic role-reversal. In wishing, underneath that suppressed exterior, to be the princess about to be swallowed by the sea-monster, she has actually become the monster and Caesar has become her image of fertility that is to be rescued by the hero—in this case, Joe. Because she needs someone to restrain her sexuality for the fantasy to be fulfilled, she must do it herself and pretend that Caesar is the one holding her back. As opposed to the Perseus and St. George myths, the beast is contained and takes on a radically different role. Hirsch hints in this direction when he writes:

Louisa views her own “salvation” from spinsterhood as a prelude to the destruction of society. Joe intends not to kill the dragon but to release him. And it is this possibility, precisely, that terrifies Louisa, though, apparently, she does not apply the consequences of Joe’s projected deed to herself alone, but to the town and the townspeople, that is, to society at large. Andromeda’s salvation goes hand in hand with the slaying of the monster, Louisa’s with the freeing of him. (130)

When Joe says, “Some day I’m going to take him out” (11), he is threatening the reign of the monster (Louisa) over the sexual icon (Caesar). Louisa represses her sexual urges creating the monster of barrenness inside herself. Her fear is that sexuality (specifically her world of sexual fantasy) is the real monster, that Andromeda is more dangerous than Poseidon’s serpent. Were she to give in to her sexual urges (personified, I would argue, in Caesar), it would endanger a society in which sexuality is kept behind closed doors. We see, therefore, Louisa’s fear about “innocent children bleeding in his path” (12), a fear of her society gone wrong because Joe Dagget has let out the sexual beast within her. This is what leads me to disagree with Pryse’s assertion that “Louisa’s real fear is Joe’s dominance rather than her own sexuality” (293). Rather, Louisa is afraid of and enchanted by her own
sexuality, even to the point of constructing a Perseus fantasy around her life, and, ultimately, projecting these fantasy roles onto the characters around her.

Pryse also discusses the role of Louisa’s aprons as they are presented in the following scene:

Louisa took off her green gingham apron, disclosing a shorter one of pink and white print. She lighted her lamp, and sat down again with her sewing.

In about half an hour Joe Dagget came. She heard his heavy step on the walk, and rose and took off her pink-and-white apron.

Under that was still another—white linen with a little cambric edging on the bottom... (3)

I agree with Pryse when she says “She wears not one but three aprons, each one suggesting symbolic if not actual defense of her own virginity” (293). I cannot, however, agree with her when she submits that “In Joe’s absence she [Louisa] replaces the additional two aprons, as if to protect herself from his disturbing presence” (293). It seems odd to me that, if this were the case, Louisa would not put on additional aprons as company arrives. The text supports a reading that allows us to see Louisa letting down the guard on her virginity with the man she is about to marry. I believe that she is, in a subtle way, offering herself to Joe Dagget, wanting him to make a “soft commotion” (15) with her as he does with Lily Dyer.

We see only one adventure into the wildness of the world on Louisa’s part. When she goes out for a walk one night, the scene is described as follows:

There was a full moon that night. About nine o’clock Louisa strolled down the road a little way. There were harvest-fields on either hand, bordered by low stone walls. Luxuriant clumps of bushes grew beside the wall, and trees—wild cherry and old apple-trees—at intervals. Presently Louisa sat down on the wall and looked about her with mildly sorrowful reflectiveness. Tall shrubs of blueberry and meadow-sweet, all woven together and tangled with blackberry vines and horsebriers, shut her in on either side.

She had a little clear space between them. Opposite her, on the other side of the road, was a spreading tree; the moon shone between its boughs, and the leaves twinkled like silver. The road was bespangled with a beautiful shifting dapple of silver and shadow; the air was full of a mysterious sweetness. (12–13)

This is the most sexually charged setting of the story. Outside her house Louisa cannot control what happens. It is in this seductive setting that she is hurt because she is not in control of any leash, including Joe Dagget’s or Lily Dyer’s. She realizes that her own sexual energy, Caesar, is the only thing she can control, and this is the task she takes on for the rest of her life. She
permits herself the fantasy that her sexual drive could go so far as to destroy the society in which she lives. However, Caesar’s chain is never released: the leash is never dropped. She elects to retain her sexual self as it now stands, having become too afraid of her sexuality to ever let it out in the sensual setting where Joe and Lily passionately embrace. Louisa does not, however, choose a life of devotion to her work that will exclude the possibility of any sexual contact.

Given Louisa’s tendency toward compulsive neatness, it strikes the reader as odd that Caesar’s doghouse would be “half hidden among the tall grasses and flowers” (2). The “tall grasses and flowers” may be taken as metaphors for male and female genitalia. She has preserved a semblance of her sexuality, a very private and “chained up” sexual self at the door of Caesar’s hut. She has not unleashed her sexuality upon the town, or upon any men, but has, rather, kept her own private patch of it.

I would suggest that by portraying Caesar as a male, Freeman implies that behind the spinster image, Louisa has a very powerful sexual drive. Perhaps our own prejudices about the spinster character make it hard for us to see Louisa as a sexual being, thus limiting our perception of the story. Louisa is not giving up her sexuality. She retains her reign over Caesar and preserves her sexual fantasy, her idealistic vision of her overpowering sexuality, which must be contained lest it destroy mankind. If anything, Louisa has an overdeveloped perception and awareness of her own sexuality. As we realize that she does not give up her sexuality and her fantasies, and as we begin to investigate the story for clues as to how Louisa releases this built-up sexual energy, we are led toward one of the most startling discoveries about Louisa’s character: that Louisa lives out her sexual fantasies by masturbating. This shocks our sensibilities for several reasons. Masturbation is still a tender topic over one hundred years after the publication of this story. Traditional notions of propriety about spinsters and about women in general make it difficult for us to accept that Louisa, an unmarried spinster, could seek sexual satisfaction by masturbating. It is difficult enough to accept Louisa as a sexual entity, let alone as a woman who explores her own sexuality as intimately as I believe she does. Yet Freeman gives us this picture of Louisa:

Louisa dearly loved to sew a linen seam, not always for use, but for the simple, mild pleasure which she took in it. She would have been loath to confess how more than once she had ripped a seam for the mere delight of sewing it together again. Sitting at her window during long sweet afternoons, drawing her needle gently through the dainty fabric, she was peace itself. (9)

Just as Louisa is “loath to confess” her masturbation, Freeman hides this facet of her character deeply within the text. The passage is, however, a powerful
representation of this sexual act.\textsuperscript{1} The significance of the marriage is then brought to a new level in the following sentence: “But there was small chance of such foolish comfort in the future” (9). While Joe would release Louisa’s sexuality, freeing her to experience this part of herself with another human being, he would, at the same time, be taking away her personal fantasy. Were she to discover that “Caesar” would not tear apart children and destroy the village, she could no longer masturbate. Thus, the preservation of her distorted Perseus-St. George fantasy is vital for Louisa to continue with her personal sexual pleasure. We can see her awareness of this when we are told that “Louisa had very little hope that he [Joe] would not [let Caesar out], one of these days, when their interests and possessions should be more completely fused in one” (11). We see here that marriage is not necessarily linked to sex for Louisa, and that she is not relying on Joe Dagget to fulfill her fantasies. Rather, she is worried that once they are married, Joe will make a much more forward request to let Caesar off the chain. As we are told, Joe is “afraid to stir lest he should put a clumsy foot or hand through the fairy web, and he had always the consciousness that Louisa was watching fearfully lest he should” (6). This “fairy web,” Louisa’s hymen, is the supreme indicator of her virginity, and will be the “maidenly possession” most obviously out of place within the bounds of marriage. An added pressure is placed upon Louisa in needing to work out a way to preserve her “fairy web” within an institution that expects Joe to break it.

Despite critics’ claims that Louisa must choose between sexual pleasure (marriage to Joe) and autonomy, we see that marriage to Joe actually involves giving up both sexual pleasure and autonomy. Therefore, Louisa’s choice is not between one thing or the other; it is between all or nothing. Consequently, her resolution to keep her word and marry Joe is even more noble, the breaking of this engagement even more of a relief. She retains her autonomy and individuality, everything that is precious to her, while achieving a personal sexual pleasure without relying on a man to fulfill that sexual need.

Louisa feels safe because she controls her sexuality by permitting it to live in this wild zone around the hut while keeping it firmly chained lest it venture out into the wildness of the world. Glasser says that “For many women of her time, denying one’s sexuality was the price of autonomy” (37). While this may be true for the women in general of Louisa’s time, it is not true for Louisa. She is empowered by her masturbation because it allows her to find happiness in a role that lies outside social expectations; it allows her to find happiness without the help of a man: a bold social statement in Freeman’s day and not yet a commonplace in ours.

\[1\] I am indebted to Frank Bergmann for this suggestion.
WORKS CITED
