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 a 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 Arithmetician” 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.

Recommended Citation