

Criticism of Modernity in Freeman's *A Poetess*¹

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Abstract: Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman was a remarkable American writer who flourished for decades at the turn of the 18th and the 19th centuries. She was well-known for regionalism, for she set most of her stories against the New England area where she was born. As a penetrating writer, Freeman endowed her works with profound observations of life that go beyond the confines of local colorism, which enables readers to explore new components at different times. *A poetess* has long been taken as a sample of feminism since the theory achieved the greatest popularity in the 1960s. As a piece of great literary works is open to diverse interpretations, *A poetess*, in the light of Modernity Criticism, demonstrates Freeman's concerns for the modern development of human society and the adversities that go side by side with the process. Centering on the characterization of Betsy Dole as well as Mrs. Caxton, the minister, and the printer, the article aims at revealing the writer's contemplations on modernity in the short story.

Key words: *A Poetess*; Modernity; Betsy Dole

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1852-1930), one of the greatest American woman writers, made tremendous achievements in short stories among the literary forms she touched upon. She elaborately depicted the tranquility of New England villages, and her works were consequently a faithful account of New England area, for which she was attached the label of "regional writer." "Freeman drew widespread praise for her intimate portraits of women and her realistic depictions of rural New England life. [...] Her stories, [...] are remarkable for their unpretentious, sympathetic portrayals of their lives of ordinary New Englanders of Freeman's era. Many of the stories depict rebellion against oppressive social and private conditions" (Reichardt 430). "Freeman drew accolades for her portraits of the 'pathos and beauty of simple lives'; [...] and for her accurate depiction of rural and impoverished New England life" (Reichardt viii).

As what interested her most was the life of single and aged women, Freeman was explored for another time, with the rise of Feminist Criticism in the 1960s, as a sample to illuminate Feminists' claims after her decay for three decades since she died in 1930. From the 1960s on, critics have been approaching Freeman and her novels in terms of feminism and the latter do meet their requirements. "Freeman had been traditionally categorized as merely a local colorist, [...] whose primary talent lay on depicting the peculiarities of her New England Region. I saw, however, that Freeman's work demanded feminist analysis, and I recognized that her subject in fact had little to do with regionalism. With her focus almost entirely on

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women's struggles and concerns, their intricate forms of repression and rebellion, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman explored the psychology of women's conflicts as she knew them" (Glasser xiv). Being insightful, Freeman could never be confined into either regionalism or feminism. She kept an eye on the massive development and crisis of human civilization, but her "narrow" cut-in point is misleading for readers to be apt to lose sight of the macro-reflections under the mask of everyday trifles and ordinary characters. Reading her *A Poet*, the author of the article is impressed by the criticism of modernity.

2. INTRODUCTION TO MODERNITY

Matei Calinescu (1934-2009), the Romanian literary critic who emigrated to the United States in 1973, views "modernity as a stage in the history of Western civilization—a product of scientific and technological process, of the industrial revolution, of the sweeping economic and social changes brought about by capitalism" (Calinescu 41).

In terms of the origin and the manifestations of modernity, Calinescu states, "With regard to [...] bourgeois idea of modernity, we may say that it has by and large continued the outstanding traditions of earlier periods in the history of the modern idea. The doctrine of progress, the confidence in the beneficial possibilities of science and technology, the concern with time (a measurable time, a time that can be bought and sold and therefore has, like any other commodity, a calculable equivalent in money), the cult of reason, and the ideal of freedom defined within the framework of an abstract humanism, but also the orientation toward pragmatism and the cult of action and success—all have been associated in various degrees with the battle for the modern and were kept alive and promoted as key values in the triumphant civilization established by the middle class" (Calinescu 41-42).

As Anthony Giddens (1938-), the British sociologist, voices: "Modernity's reflexivity refers to the susceptibility of most aspects of social activity, and material relations with nature, to chronic revision in the light of new information or knowledge" (Giddens 20). And Giddens further elaborates the impact of modernity on each individual's everyday life, "Modern institutions differ from all preceding forms or social order in respect of their dynamism, the degree to which they undercut traditional habits and customs, and their global impact. However, these are not only extensional transformations: modernity radically alters the nature of day-to-day social life and affects the most personal aspects of our experience. Modernity must be understood on an institutional level; yet the transmutations introduced by modern institutions interlace in a direct way with individual life and therefore with the self. One of the distinctive features of modernity, in fact, is an increasing interconnection between the two "extremes" of extensionality and intentionality: globalising influences on the one hand and personal dispositions on the other" (Giddens 1).

Many scholars have strived to discover the embodiment of modernity on individuals. In his *What Is Enlightenment*, Michel Foucault (1926-1984) points out that modernity is a kind of attitude, a choice of free will of some people, a way of thinking, feeling, and acting.

To summarize, modernity can be defined as the mode of thought and behavior, and value orientation formed by people who have been exposed to the influence of both traditional west civilization and modern capitalism industrialization. The principal symptoms of modernity include the cult of rationality, which is the essential idea of modernity, and the inclination of pragmatism.

3. MISS DOLE: VICTIM OF RATIONALISM

The title character, Betsy Dole, a woman in her fifties, is an amateur poetess who takes only delight but no profit in writing. "She had never received a cent for her poems; she had not thought of such a thing as possible" (202). What results in the awkwardness? And what kind of poetry does Betsy compose? We may put her style under investigation.

The story begins with the visit of Mrs. Caxton, a neighbor, who calls on to ask for an obituary poem for her deceased little boy. Upon hearing Mrs. Caxton's request, looking at her grieving face, Miss Dole makes

an instant promise “tearfully” (199). The visitor can’t help bursting into tears in talking more about the little boy, and “The two women wept together for a few minutes” (199). Being of the same sex, Miss Dole senses every subtle turn of Mrs. Caxton’s feelings. Immediately after showing her neighbor out, the poetess indulges herself into drafting which begins from eleven a. m. and is not suspended until the twilight falls. And Betsey is dedicated to the creation so much that the planned simple lunch is eventually cancelled. When writing, she questions “[...] I can’t feel about it nor write about it anything the way I could if I’d had any children of my own an’ lost ’em. I s’pose it would have come home to me different” (200). And she finds a way out by reminding her of “That’s one trouble I’ve been clear of, anyhow, [...] an’ I guess I can enter into her feelin’s considerable” (200). She endeavors to identify herself with the mournful mother and recalls how the “dear little fellow” was playing with “a great pink shell” given by the hostess and how he was putting it “to his ear to hear the sea” when he was in the room with his mother. With a heartfelt sorrow, “she sobbed, and sat awhile with her handkerchief at her face” (200). In her minds’ eyes, she sees the boy “in a little straight white night-gown, with long, shining wings” (200). Throughout the writing, “Tears stood in her pale blue eyes; occasionally they rolled down her cheeks, and she wiped them away. She kept her handkerchief in her lap with her portfolio” (200). These detailed elaborations of the writing process reveal definitely what the poetess pours down into the small piece is true love and compassion, which is what she values the most and takes as the premise of a moving poem. Besides deep feelings and rich imagination, the poetess is characterized by meticulousness. “She lay awake nearly all night, thinking over her poem” and “altered several lines in her mind” (201). Hence Mrs. Caxton, shedding tears as reading the poem, declares “It’s beautiful, beautiful, [...] It’s jest as comfortin’ as it can be, [...]” (201).

Yet, “the pride and self-wonderment” of the poetess is broken into pieces before long, for she is informed by Mrs. Caxton that the country minister refers to the poem as a piece that is “jest as poor as it could be, an’ it was in dreadful bad taste to have it printed an’ sent round that way” (202). And the minister, who also writes poem and has got some pieces printed in magazines, claims that the poetess “had never wrote anything that could be called poetry, an’ it was a dreadful waste of time” (202). Denying the poetess and her works, the minister symbolizes the mode that is completely opposing to his counterpart’s in every regard, namely, the mode of rationalism/male. It is the minister’s poems rather than the poetess’ works that have been published, which uncovers the taste of the community and proves that Betsey’s mode of writing as well as perceiving is rejected by the society. And the contradiction between the minister and the poetess is really the embodiment of that between two systems of value orientation: rationality/male vs. sensibility/female, with the former being overwhelmingly superior.

Betsey’s “gentle, old-fashioned, sentimental poetry (200)” is despised by the minister, the incarnation of the rationality-oriented social taste, and the negative recognition implies the marginalization of the female by the male, of feminine way of thinking and expressing by the society, and of sensibility by rationality. The binary opposition may be traced back to the origin of west civilization which separates human from other creatures and the universe to be the subject that is contradictory with the object. As a natural consequence, human civilization is set against nature, matter against mind, male against female, and rationality against sensibility. Viewing the universe as an object, man is determined to, with no efforts saved, seek for a talisman with which the whole body of human would be sure to take the upper hand in the battle. Rationality meets man’s demand. Defining themselves as exclusively the reasonable creatures, human beings are thirsty for knowledge; taking it as a vehicle, they aim at putting the universe under control and conquest. Socrates originated the logic activities of conception, judgment, and inference, and in the following centuries from then on, logic and reasoning have been pushed onto the peak of human abilities, being respected as the most advanced mental activities and the most appreciated gift. Rationalism has predominated in the western culture, and all of the transcendental category, such as intuition and imagination, have long been attached the label of irrationality and thus been deprived of legitimacy. As the Eco-feminists ascribe human’s control over nature and men’s oppression over women to logic-centralism, in this case, the poetess is unfavorably coupled with sensibility by the man-centered and rationality-centered society. The criticism made by the minister is final and destructive so that neither the poetess nor Mrs. Caxton, who is essentially the most authoritative judge but taken away the right, could not disregard it, which exactly demonstrates the power of rationality. Ever since the historic movements of Renaissance and Enlightenment swept the European world and escorted rationality to mount unto the altar, rationality has been occupying God’s place and controlling people’s mentality and behavior. The rapidly-developing scientific technology has consummated rationality by satisfying man’s egotism of being

the strongest and undefeatable. Science has taken over the role of God and become man's firm belief, and rationality, as the base of science, has been given utmost respect. The hazard of rationality-oriented thinking is, as Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) worries in his *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, having been shaped by particular history and culture, rigorous scientific methods become the shackles of existential experiences and truth. In the case of the minister, his disvalue of a piece of artistic works of love and sympathy indicates rationality has been embedded in his minds. As long as the poetess sticks to the "gentle, old-fashioned, sentimental" method, she is doomed to be alienated from the mainstream of a "historically-effected consciousness."

4. THE PRINTER: THE PRAGMATISM DIMENSION OF MODERNITY

Another character, in spite of being minor, is worthy of investigation. It is the printer of Mrs. Caxton's obituary poem, who never utters a word directly but conveys his ideas through his customer. In describing the printer's response to the poem, Mrs. Caxton says, "Mr. White said he never read anything any more touchin', when I carried it to him to print" (201). The poetess is tremendously flattered by the accolades. But later his commendation is proved to be of no worth when Mrs. Caxton complains indignantly, "I put considerable money into 'em. I think Mr. White was pretty high, myself" (202). Both the poetess and the reader realize, sadly and awkwardly, that Mr. White generously sings high praise for the poem only to induce his customer to get more sheets printed. In the eyes of a profit-oriented businessman, nothing counts except money. And neither art nor beauty would surpass a cent to be his top concern.

The characterization of the printer indicates Freeman's keen observation of the impact of the rising commodity economy upon art. With the boom of economy, festering mammonism was permeating into the corners of the country, with tranquil small villages of the New England area no exception. And the intense materialism is art-devouring monster. Although money-worship does not really kills beauty in the story, Freeman insightfully predicts the unfavorable position of art confronting with materialism of her era in which artistic creation has been helplessly involved into the mechanism of capital operation and is subject to the latter.

5. MRS. CAXTON AND THE ROGERS: THE BLINDLY-FOLLOWING MASS

Mrs. Caxton is the only one that appreciates the poem. And her request for Betsey to compose the obituary poem for her son is essentially a positive recognition of the poetess. So is this woman the poetess' soul-to-soul companion? To highlight the conformity of the two, Freeman deliberately elaborates their similarities in sentences such as "Her [Betsey] face took on unconsciously lines of grief so like the other woman's that she looked like her for the minute (199)" and some others of this kind. But more details show how different the poetess is from her neighbor.

In their seemingly-trivial chat, the reader is informed that the poetess has "got more flowerin' beans than eatin' ones" (198). Mrs. Caxton is confused with the poetical behavior and directly states her disapproval, "'If I was in your place [...] I should 'most have thought when you didn't have any more room for a garden than you've got that you'd planted more real beans and peas instead of so many flowerin' ones. I'd rather have a good mess of green peas boiled with a piece of salt pork than all the sweet-peas you could give me. I like flowers well enough, but I never set up for a butterfly, an' I want something else to live on. 'She looked at Betsey with pensive superiority" (198). Contrary to the poetess' stress on spiritual welfare, Mrs. Caxton represents the trendy obsession with sensory pleasure, one of the essential components of modernity. Her superiority shows the poetess' style is out of the main stream. Miss Dole's "old-fashioned" style is not confined into her writing; rather she is the epitome of tradition. Betsey's costume is "obsolete" and "thinnest." And "Nobody knew how frugal Betsey Dole's suppers and breakfasts and dinners were"

(201). She eats for a meal “scarcely more than her canary-bird.” And “Betsey wrote her poem upon backs of old letters and odd scraps of paper” (200) and uses “an old black portfolio.” Her income “was almost infinitesimal” (202). She is characterized by ascetic tendencies. She works in her flower gardens, cares for her canary, and writes amateur poetry. She lives a simplest life and is contented with it until her inner peace is broken by the minister’s harsh criticism and she fades out. The poetess embodies an “outdated” life attitude, standing alone to be a solitary “backward” and “reactionary” warrior to be contradicted with the trend of modernity that is bustling and fast-paced. In this sense, Mrs. Caxton is Betsey’s opponent instead of comrade.

When she decides to let Betsey know the minister is bitterly critical of the poem, Mrs. Coxton states, “Well, [...] I’m goin’ to, anyhow. I think you’d ought to know, an’ it ain’t so bad for you as it is for me. It don’t begin to be. I put considerable money into ’em” (202). In Mrs. Caxton’s view, loss of money is the only cause for a broken heart. And she is not aware what the fatal review means to the poetess. The pragmatism of Mrs. Caxton’s value system differs from, though sharing something similar with, that of the printer. Mr. White takes a businessman’s thinking that is dominated by unrestrained desire for money, while Mrs. Caxton represents the massive populace who is far from elites’ state of mind which is beyond the mass’ reach and understanding. Mrs. Caxton and Betsey achieve no more than temporary commonality that is derived from shared maternity. Otherwise, Mrs. Caxton is likely to surrender her views to that of the minister in the same way as that of the Rogers mother and daughter. The difference between Mrs. Caxton and the Rogers lies not on the essence but on the extent.

Commercialization, accompanied by industrialization, entails not only money-worship orientation, but also the vulgarity of arts. Taking the massive citizens as audience, the pop culture has achieved its greatest popularity with the rising of the class of the citizens. And the expansion of the audience renders pop culture to take over more and more territory of elite culture, the hazard should not be underestimated, evidenced in the accessory Rogers mother and daughter who are responsible for the withering of the poetess. The Rogers, characterized by unthinking obedience, lack the elementary discernment. They are servile to the minister, viewed as the most educated man of the community, and echo the authority readily. Modernity has assimilated all except the poetess who can think independently and critically, yet one who dares to step out of the main stream has to pay a price.

CONCLUSION

Betsey is tragic in that she is the only one that fights against the overwhelmingly powerful modernity that has been represented by not only the male minister and printer, but also the female neighbors, who embody different dimensions of modernity. Her tragedy is also the symbol of the fate of fragile art in the face of modernity and the symptoms of the extremely-appreciated morbid rationality in modern western world. Being penetrating, Freeman exceeds the confinement of regional and female issues, and she, under the mask of narrow and trivial subjects, expresses the observations and meditations of the existential circumstance of the human beings. In *A Poetess*, Freeman knits her consideration of the modern society into an appearingly ordinary and familiar story and transfers her worries about increasingly rampant modernity.

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