

## The Revolt of Female Appetite: Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Women's Literary Realism

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### INTRODUCTION

Food, indeed, constitutes a distinctive feature of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's authorship. Virginia L. Blum recognizes the delicious feature of her discourse by saying, "A Freeman story makes me hungry—her extensive elaborations of breakfasts and dinners and suppers, counting out the slices of bread, noting the quantity of damson sauce, rating the strength of the tea, reproduce in me the hunger of her characters."<sup>1</sup> Freeman treats every dietary moment in such detail as to make every little aspect of eating a matter of gravity. What to eat, how to eat, how much to eat, and even when to eat can be legitimate subjects for Freeman to write about. The supper scene with Louisa Ellis in "A New England Nun" is just such an appetizing case in point: "She had for her supper a glass dish full of sugared currants, a plate of little cakes, and one of light white biscuits. Also a leaf or two of lettuce, which she cut up daintily."<sup>2</sup> This spectacle of food is enough to make our mouths water, but Freeman does not stop there. By adding one more detail about Louisa's manner of eating, "She ate quite heartily, though in a delicate, pecking way; it seemed almost surprising that any considerable bulk of the food should

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vanish" (*NE* 8), Freeman turns this small but elaborate supper into an unexpected arena to display Louisa Ellis's gourmandism. Her "delicate, pecking way" of handling food notwithstanding, we cannot be distracted from her good appetite, which is actually big enough to relish each dish "quite heartily" and eat up a "considerable bulk of food."

Certainly well-rendered descriptions of food hardly fail to delight us, but the dexterity at staging a tasty scene does not exhaust all the ingenuity Freeman can devise with food. In fact, we can observe, more often than not, the way in which Freeman makes use of a character's dietary habit as a symbolic factor in deciding its destiny. On the one hand, those characters who know a savor of life, such as Louisa Ellis, Louisa Britton in "Louisa" and many others are also gastrocentric women who understand how digestive organs work so well that they never underestimate the importance of food. Those who are destined to taste the bitterness of life, like Betsey Dole in "A Poetess," are, on the other hand, anorectic women who think they can survive with little food or even without it.

Given that Freeman loved to use food as a motif, one urgent question to be answered will be what motivated her to do so. Biographical data speak to the fact that Freeman herself was a gastronome who loved cooking and eating. She is reported to have ascribed her academic failure at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary not only to the seminary's "too strenuous goadings of conscience" but also to its "monotony of diet."<sup>3</sup> She was also a reputed fan of a chafing dish, the latest innovation in cooking utensils of the time.<sup>4</sup> The cultural context of late nineteenth-century America also invites our attention. Namely, there was in the Victorian period a peculiar aversion to female appetite which not only generated numerous tragedies of young women called "fasting girls" such as Sarah Jacobs and Mollie Francher but also gave birth to the cult of "ladylike anorexia" in women's literature.<sup>5</sup> This cultural context of anorexia looks to be a suitable enemy for Freeman to fight with her appetizing discourse.

In this essay, however, I choose to look at a historical context to find a possible meaning behind Freeman's food motif. Blum illustrates how closely Freeman's deployment of dietary metaphor was related to her efforts to negotiate with the shifting taste in literature from sentimentalism to realism, especially with the growing tendency to privilege aesthetics over marketability in evaluating literature.<sup>6</sup> Her analysis suggests a strong possibility that Freeman's experiment with the language of food played a crucial role in her pursuit of professional career as a realist writer. I investigate this possibility and demonstrate how food serves for

Freeman as a discursive tool to deconstruct the cult of domesticity. By bringing dietary activity to the foreground of her text, Freeman not only unveils the cult of domesticity's repressive approach to food but also gives symbolic birth to a psychological model women can use to cross the boundary from a domestic ideology to a new territory of women's experience.

The nineteenth-century American domestic ideology was characteristically antagonistic to the dietary part of household activities, as my examination of popular domestic manuals, *The American Woman's Home* specifically, will show. Under the name of health and science, advocates of domesticity made a healthy relationship between women and food impossible and relegated the kitchen to an obscure corner of the American home. It is this marginalization of dietary activity from the realm of women's experience that Freeman tries to intervene through her dietary discourse. Freeman's career as a practitioner of literary realism went hand in hand with her gastronomic project to rehabilitate the American palate.

## I. EARLY AMERICAN COOKERY

What is genuinely American about American foodways? Such a nationalistic question would have sounded strange to Americans right after the Revolution. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, things were quite different. As Mark McWilliams points out, a search for what constituted American cuisine was inaugurated in the field of literature: "As part of the emerging myth of republican simplicity, novelists like Lydia Maria Child, James Fenimore Cooper, and Catharine Maria Sedgwick introduced fictive representations of local food and reimagined the role of domestic labor—and, in the process, helped define American culture by encoding food with social and moral meaning."<sup>7</sup> At the hands of these writers, the "rustic abundance," as against the "sophisticated combinations of European cuisine," gained national currency as the image of the American table.<sup>8</sup>

Of all the novelists who are said to have promoted the idea of abundant simplicity in the early national period, Lydia Maria Child played an especially active role in opening the way for this culinary ideal to reach the American kitchen. Her *The American Frugal Housewife* (1832), the most popular domestic manual of the time, was originally designed to teach inexperienced housewives how to live economically, but the

recipes Child introduced for frugal living do not seem frugal at all. The stock-in-trade foodstuffs that constituted the traditional New England table are all found intact in her book: meat, whose variety was particularly counted as the symbol of American plenty (beef, mutton, lamb, pork, chicken, goose, duck, turkey, and pigeon); fish (cod, haddock, mackerel, halibut, clams, oysters, and lobster); and vegetables (beans, peas, potatoes, onions, parsnips, squash, asparagus, beets, tomatoes, celery, and lettuce). There are also in this manual of frugal living surprising numbers of recipes for pies and cakes: mince pie, pumpkin and squash pie, carrot pie, cherry pie, whortleberry pie, apple pie, custard pie, cranberry pie, gingerbread, cup cakes, tea cake, cider cake, election cake, sponge cake, wedding cake, loaf cake, caraway cake, dough-nuts, pancakes, fritters, short cake, and Indian cake. What a spectacle! Child's recipes, indeed, exemplify this characteristic belief of hers "that neatness, good taste, and gentility, are attainable without great expense."<sup>9</sup> It is, therefore, no wonder that as a domestic manual that proposed an inexpensive method to obtain a plentiful diet, *The American Frugal Housewife* was so cherished in antebellum America.

The same kind of respect for American "rustic abundance" characterizes Sarah Josepha Hale's *The Good Housekeeper* (1839). In it Hale emphasizes a consideration for good health, the knowledge of "*how to live well, and to be well while we live*,"<sup>10</sup> as the innovative aspect of her domestic system. Accordingly, she starts her cooking instructions by giving a general idea of good dietary habit under these headings: "Times of Taking Food," "Proper Quantity of Food," "What is the Proper Food of Man?" and "What Shall We Drink?" She certainly cautions against overeating, but her tips for a healthy diet by no means include dietary inhibition: "In truth, there are few articles of diet which a person in health, and leading a very active life, may not eat without feeling much inconvenience; still a preference should be given, as far as possible, to such kinds of food as are most in accordance with the natural constitution."<sup>11</sup> Her words almost sound as if it is health that is important for good eating, rather than diet being important for good health. Such an impression is, indeed, not necessarily beside the point as far as Hale's cooking instruction is concerned.

In fact, Hale's recipes are pronounced in their focus on animal foods. Her defense of animal foods against the prevailing advocacy of vegetable diet system is notable: "[W]e know that now in every country, where a mixed diet [of vegetable and meat] is habitually used, as in the temperate

climates, there the greatest improvement of the race is to be found, and the greatest energy of character. It is that portion of the human family, who have the means of obtaining this food at least once a day, who now hold dominion over the earth."<sup>12</sup> To make her point clearer, she ventures to add: "Forty thousand of the beef-fed British govern and control ninety millions of the rice-eating natives of India."<sup>13</sup> With this meat-loving spirit and the faith that "physical health, vigor of mind, and comfort of bodily feeling, depend, in a very great degree, on the manner in which animal food is used,"<sup>14</sup> Hale gives instructions on how to garnish meat dishes along with the basics of meat cooking. For boiled beef, she recommends to "garnish the dish with carrots and turnips. Boiled potatoes, carrots, turnips and greens, on separate plates, are good accompaniments,"<sup>15</sup> and for roasted pork, her recommendation is applesauce: "Apple-sauce is always proper to accompany roasted pork—this, with potatoes, mashed or plain, mashed turnips, and pickles, is good."<sup>16</sup> Hale even includes recipes for twenty kinds of gravy to make meat even more tasty.<sup>17</sup>

It would be wrong, however, to take these early promoters of domestic ideology to have been indifferent to the mischief food might inflict on a person's health, as well as morals. Not only did they share their concerns about overeating, they also expressed the need for early training in regulating appetite.<sup>18</sup> But even in their instructions regarding appropriate eating habits, they never used such intimidating expressions as "must not," "should not," or "ought not." The harshest words that I have found are Hale's warning to mothers on how to regulate children's appetites: "But never tempt their appetites by delicacies, when plain food is not relished."<sup>19</sup> They knew that health and morals were an important part of diet, but they did not use such knowledge to deprive Americans of the pleasure of eating, nor did they do anything to destroy the culinary icon of "rustic abundance."

## II. THE BATTLE AGAINST "A MORBID APPETITE"

We know that during the period of industrialization, domesticity crystallized its ideological identity by taking on the spiritual aspect of human life as against the materialism of the market economy. We are, however, comparatively unfamiliar with the impact the spiritualization of the home exerted on the dietary part of domestic activity. Among these staple items of domestic services—food, clothing, and shelter—food with

its innate affiliation with the animal instinct for eating betrays the most recalcitrant materiality, which, indeed, threatens the spiritual purity of the hearth in this harsh world. It was, therefore, necessary for domesticity's ideological maturity to scrutinize and rewrite the paradigm of American foodways promoted under the name of "rustic abundance." The cult of domesticity is by no means an indiscriminate idealization of domestic work. On the way to its ideological maturity, domesticity persistently condemned the act of eating altogether and relegated the kitchen to an obscure corner of the American home.

As the bible of the cult of domesticity, *The American Woman's Home* (1869) affords us a fresh insight into the anorectic psychology of American domesticity. *The American Woman's Home* includes three food-related chapters: "Healthful Food" and "Healthful Drinks" by Catharine Beecher, and "Good Cooking" by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Throughout these chapters, we can sense a vehement antagonism, or a phobic aversion, toward "a morbid appetite."<sup>20</sup> Catharine Beecher writes:

If mankind had only one article of food, and only water to drink . . . they would never be tempted to put any more into the stomach than the calls of hunger require. But the customs of society, which present an incessant change, and a great variety of food, with those various condiments which stimulate appetite, lead almost every person very frequently to eat merely to gratify the palate, after the stomach has been abundantly supplied, so that hunger has ceased. (*AWH* 127)

Appetite functions artificially with such external stimulants as "a great variety of food" and "various condiments," whereas hunger works according to nature. It is appetite that tempts an individual to overeating, a habit of eating merely to gratify the palate. In order to give an explicit idea of just how dangerous appetite can be, Catharine Beecher elaborates on a medical view of overeating as "one of the most fruitful of all causes of disease and death" (*AWH* 119) by writing, "Very often, intemperance in eating produces immediate results, such as colic, headaches, pains of indigestion, and vertigo. But the most general result is a gradual undermining of all parts of the human frame; thus imperceptibly shortening life" (*AWH* 127). The earlier generations of promoters of domesticity such as Child and Hale considered overeating to be a personal problem about self-control, but such an understanding is made obsolete by Beecher's science-oriented view. With her, overeating has

become a pathology of appetite, the symptom of a diseased craving for food.

Beecher's warning against appetite is, however, intended not just for medical purposes. Rather, her demonization of appetite disguises her desire to marginalize the kitchen from the legitimate sphere of domesticity. As we have already observed her criticizing cooking various foods or using spices to stimulate appetite, Beecher sees women's involvement with food behind the problem of overeating. In the background of her condemnation of appetite, there lurks her desire to devalue culinary activity. There is, in fact, a moment in which Beecher's discourse on appetite actually slips into a condemnation, not of dietary habits, but of the habit of cooking altogether: "How often is it the case, that persons, by the appearance of a favorite article, are tempted to eat merely to gratify the palate, when the stomach is already adequately supplied" (*AWH* 128). In Beecher's eyes, moreover, cooked food more than uncooked food carries strong potential to do much damage to the human body: "The most unhealthful kinds of food are those which are made so by bad cooking; such as sour and heavy bread, cakes, pie-crust, and other dishes consisting of fat mixed and cooked with flour. Rancid butter and high-seasoned food are equally unwholesome. The fewer mixtures there are in cooking, the more healthful is the food likely to be" (*AWH* 133). In the course of her argument, Beecher deliberately switches the problem of overeating to the matter of overfeeding. Now that cooking itself is found guilty as a fundamental cause of overeating, women have to refrain from dealing with food as much as possible. While the culinary ideal of "rustic abundance" encouraged women to exhibit their ingenuity in making full use of nature's produce, Beecher changes the direction of women's culinary mission one hundred eighty degrees in the direction of fending off the great varieties of food invading the American table. She clearly states "that it becomes the duty of every woman who has the responsibility of providing food for a family, to avoid a variety of tempting dishes. It is a much safer rule, to have only one kind of healthful food, for each meal, than the too abundant variety which is often met at the tables of almost all classes in this country" (*AWH* 127-28).

*The American Woman's Home* demolishes the icon of "rustic abundance." The paradigm of early American cookery is overwhelmed by the anorectic psychology of the cult of domesticity. Taking over her sister's argument, Harriet Beecher Stowe in chapter 13, "Good Cooking," finalizes the dismantlement of the myth of American plenitude by directing

a vigorous attack on traditional American cookery: “The abundance of splendid material we have in America is in great contrast with the style of cooking most prevalent in our country. How often, in journeys, do we sit down to tables loaded with material, originally of the very best kind, which has been so spoiled in the treatment that there is really nothing to eat!” (*AWH* 167). Stowe understood that the abundance of food was a blessing peculiar to America, but the way it was treated in the American kitchen seemed sinfully wrong to her eyes. Once they pass through the kitchen, foodstuffs are inevitably spoiled. There is nothing proper about the traditional way of cooking in her view, as she goes on to portray the deplorable condition of the American table by the use of every possible image of inedible food: “Green biscuits with acrid spots of alkali, sour yeast-bread; meat slowly simmered in fat till it seemed like grease itself, and slowly congealing in cold grease; and above all, that unpardonable enormity, strong butter!” (*AWH* 167).

Not only the manner of food preparation, but also the taste of American cuisine come under Stowe’s attack in this chapter:

The recipes of our cookery-books are most of them of English origin, coming down from the times of our phlegmatic ancestors, when the solid, burly, beefy growth of the foggy island required the heat of fiery condiments, and could digest heavy sweets. . . . But in America, owing to our brighter skies and more fervid climate, we have developed an acute, nervous delicacy of temperament far more akin to that of France than of England. (*AWH* 190)

It was only a generation earlier that the “rustic abundance” was promoted as the virtue of distinctly American cuisine as against artificially sophisticated European cookery, but here by Stowe’s standard of good cooking, the same ideal degenerates into a sign of American immaturity, the sign of American dependence on England. Dismissing such recipes as “mere murder” (*AWH* 190) to Americans, Stowe urges women to look for alternative way of cooking which should allow every family of America to

sit down all at once to such a carnival! to such ripe, juicy tomatoes, raw or cooked; cucumbers in brittle slices, rich, yellow sweet-potatoes; broad lima-beans, and beans of other and various names; tempting ears of Indian-corn steaming in enormous piles; great smoking tureens of the savory succotash, an Indian gift to the table for which civilization need not blush; sliced egg-plant in delicate fritters; and marrow-squashes, of creamy pulp and sweetness; a rich variety, embarrassing to the appetite, and perplexing to the choice. (*AWH* 168)

Besides the great variety of vegetables, simplicity of culinary style characterizes this table. Except for “succotash” and “fritters,” basic food material, rather than the idea of cookery, dominates the image of this table. Also the presentation of each material such as “brittle slices,” “enormous piles,” “great smoking tureens,” and “creamy pulp” foregrounds the picture, rather than the taste or the flavor of each dish. This table reveals that, like her sister, Stowe was trying not only to simplify the process of cooking, but also to take flavor out of American cuisine. Naturally enough, she does not mention anything about seasoning or flavoring at all to advance her view that “a table where the butter is always fresh, the tea and coffee of the best kinds and well made, and the meats properly kept, dressed, and served, is the one table of a hundred, the fabulous enchanted island” (*AWH* 170). The absence of recipes constitutes one of the conspicuous characteristics of *The American Woman’s Home*, but Stowe did not need them. How to make good yeast, what the proper method of broiling or boiling meat is, and how to prepare palatable potatoes are all we need to know to make genuinely American food according to Stowe in this manual. Laura Shapiro identifies Catherine Beecher as the pioneering domestic scientist who transformed the American kitchen into a laboratory for women to engineer “lifeless palates.”<sup>21</sup> As far as *The American Woman’s Home* is concerned, however, her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe shows herself as a no less vigorous engineer of the senseless tongue.

### III. FREEMAN’S ANORECTIC ARTIST

The discovery of “a morbid appetite” in *The American Woman’s Home* mobilized the whole significance of women’s role in the kitchen. While Lydia Maria Child and Sarah Josepha Hale taught women that cooking meant the art of making full use of food, the two Beecher sisters unanimously preached that cooking, not food per se, was the catalyst of most diet-related diseases. Cooking was no longer regarded as an innocent sort of domestic activity. The cult of domesticity turns out to be an ideology that inspires women with the idea that the less time and effort women spend in the kitchen, the better American health will be. If we compare the strength of emphasis on food-related subjects between *The American Woman’s Home* and those earlier domestic manuals by Child and Hale, we are sure to be surprised to find how little attention the bible of the cult of domesticity pays to dietary topics. For culinary instructions including recipes, Child allots 40 pages out of 122 in total

and Hale 122 pages out of 144. But Beecher and Stowe spend only 55 pages on it in their 500-page book. The word order of the saying, “food, clothing, and shelter,” is literally inverted in their evaluation of domestic activity, that is to say, shelter is given the first priority, clothing the second, and food the last. In the cult of domesticity, in the architecture of the American home, there is not enough space for eating and cooking.

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman is always good at unveiling some unsound aspect of housekeeping. In just the same way as she skillfully rewrites New England women’s industry in household jobs as “a case of morbid conscientiousness,”<sup>22</sup> she reveals the anorectic tendency of domestic ideology, and for this particular purpose she uses a dietary motif. For example, “An Innocent Gamester,” a story in which Lucinda Moss’s preference for rich food wins over her niece Charlotte’s ascetic regimen of bread, butter, and milk, gives expression to Freeman’s criticism of the sort of health-oriented diet *The American Woman’s Home* promoted and her desire to replace it with gastronomic abundance. In the course of the story, Freeman has Charlotte’s “hygienic food” appear “rather poor” (*NE* 261) and also elicits a confession from her of regret for what she has been doing to her aunt: “I haven’t let her have tea when she wanted it, nor cake, nor cold pork and potatoes for supper, nor anything between meals. . . . I’ve been setting myself up, because I thought I knew more; and I knew the things weren’t good for her perhaps, but they were all her little comforts, all she had, and nobody ought to have taken them away, but God” (*NE* 262–63). Through Charlotte, Freeman makes her point that appetite is of a God-given nature, not a social construct as Beecher has it, and a vehicle of comfort rather than a seedbed of hideous diseases and sufferings. There is nothing wrong or shameful about indulging in the appetite for good food. Freeman has Charlotte continue her confession, “Oh, I’ve been doing a dreadful thing! I’ve been stealing from her. And I’ve done more than that. Oh, I have! I have! I’ve been stealing *her*. I’ve been taking the self out of her” (*NE* 263). To suppress a person’s desire for chosen foods is criminal, as such expressions as “stealing her” or “taking the self out of her” suggest. Condemning Charlotte’s way of “tyrannizing over goodness” (*NE* 256), “An Innocent Gamester” thus reflects Freeman’s view that appetite has to go back to its rightful place as part of one’s self.

Attention to Freeman’s dietary motif leads us also to a new reading of “A Poetess” as an allegorical story about the tragedy of domestic women’s

anorexia, rather than a tragedy about a female artist. Betsey Dole is an amateur poet. As Freeman writes, “She ate scarcely more than her canary-bird, and sang as assiduously” (NE 106), Betsey’s devotion to her poetry makes her anorectic. She depends on her own small garden for her scanty but whole supply of food, but she knows no better than to plant flowering beans much more than edible kinds. Once she starts working on poems, she apparently starts neglecting to eat. After she gets to work on obituary poems for Mrs. Caxton’s son, in fact, she gives up cooking a pan of beans fresh from her little garden and forgets eating at noon, when she originally planned to have “dinner-supper” (NE 103). Betsey is brought to make the choice between art and food many times in this short story. But only once out of these many chances, does she let food take precedence over work: “She had been obliged to stop work and cook the beans for dinner, although she begrudged the time” (NE 104).

Blum takes this way of Betsey’s putting poetry before eating as a ground to identify Betsey with the figure of the female writer who aspires to the aesthetic goal of realism, the “art for art’s sake,”<sup>23</sup> but the combination of her dietary asceticism and her identification as an artist, somehow, recalls another literary figure of a domestic woman. Betsey Dole, that is to say, looks unexpectedly like Eva Henderson in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Harry Henderson series, *My Wife and I* (1871) and *We and Our Neighbors* (1875). Eva Henderson, like Rachel Halliday in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, is a favorite domestic character of Stowe’s.<sup>24</sup> Not only does she call Eva by such artist-related names as “a little poet,”<sup>25</sup> “the Artist of the Beautiful” (with its direct allusion to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story),<sup>26</sup> “the home artist,”<sup>27</sup> and “domestic artists,”<sup>28</sup> Stowe also infuses her with a poetic mind as she has her heroine declare, “To make life beautiful; to keep down and out of sight the hard, dry, prosaic side, and keep up the poetry—that is my idea of our ‘mission.’”<sup>29</sup> On another occasion, Stowe emphasizes a poetic side of Eva’s domesticity:

There are artists who work in clay and marble, there are artists in water-colors, and artists in oils, whose works are on exhibition through galleries and museums: but there are also, in thousands of obscure homes, domestic artists, who contrive out of the humblest material to produce in daily life the sense of the beautiful; to cast a veil over its prosaic details and give it something of the charm of poem. Eva was one of these.<sup>30</sup>

In her characterization of the New England amateur poetess, Freeman seems to have recycled many of Eva's character properties. Just as Eva Henderson is an unpublished artist of domesticity who works at home on an obscure street in Manhattan, Betsey Dole is an unpublished amateur poet working at home in a nameless (therefore, obscure) rural New England town. Like Eva who tries to mask the "prosaic" side of domestic activities, Betsey also plays down the prosaic aspect of her home by her psychological orientation toward the beautiful and the ornamental. Eva's poetic housekeeping consists almost solely of home decoration, as Stow especially celebrates women's decorative skill:

Is not this a species of high art, by which a house in itself cold and barren, becomes in every part warm and inviting, glowing with suggestion alive with human tastes and personalities? Wall-paper, paint, furniture, pictures, in the hands of the home artist, are like the tubes of paint out of which arises, as by inspiration, a picture. It is the woman who combines them into the wonderful creation which we call home.<sup>31</sup>

Such an enthusiasm for interior decoration is also revealed in Betsey's room:

The light in the room was dim and green like the light in an arbor, from the tall hedge before the windows. Great plummy bunches of asparagus waved over the tops of the looking-glass; a framed sampler, a steel engraving of a female head taken from some old magazine, and sheaves of dried grasses hung on or were fastened to the walls; vases and tumblers of flowers stood on the shelf and table. (*NE* 103)

There is, indeed, something about Betsey's house, especially its association with "an arbor," that reminds us of the use of greenery in home decoration recommended in *The American Woman's Home*.

Betsey Dole's anorexia is a pathological expression of dietary inhibition that Stowe's "domestic artist" develops without knowing it. The Harry Henderson series focuses on Eva's home making as interior decoration so much that there is only one scene of eating throughout the entire series.<sup>32</sup> Betsey's death portrayed without consolation or pathos is, therefore, Freeman's rebellion against the subjectivity in which the nineteenth-century domestic ideology held American women captive. In the literal sense of the story, Betsey dies a tragic death because the minister Mr. Lang's insult to her poetic talent traumatizes her so deeply that

the shock aggravates her consumptive constitution. A closer reading of the ending of the story, however, confirms Blum's speculation that "she dies of what appears to be self-starvation,"<sup>33</sup> since immediately after she was informed of the minister's harsh criticism, Betsey not only actually skips supper by saying, "I guess I don't want any supper to-night" (*NE* 109) but also becomes insensible to all physical sensations except for her desire to see the very minister who insulted her: "Betsey had talked very little all her life; she talked less now. . . . Betsey never complained; but she kept asking if the minister had got home" (*NE* 109). If the shock, as the story informs us, aggravates her "old-fashioned consumption" (*NE* 109), the meaning of this "consumption" should be twofold, one is tuberculosis from which Betsey has suffered for a long time, and the other is her habitual anorectic way of not eating. A story that problematizes the status of the female writer in late nineteenth-century American culture, "A Poetess," reveals itself to be a tragedy of domestic women subjected to domesticity's kitchen politics. Freeman's amateur poetess dies a martyr to the regimen of domestic ideology.

#### IV. THE REVOLT OF APPETITE

In the world of Freeman's dietary discourse, those who conform to an abstemious diet like Betsey Dole are destined to live out unfortunate lives. But it is true that she reserves a very different kind of life for those who can get along well with appetite. In "An Honest Soul," for example, Martha Patch obtains the long-wished-for front window for her house after she overcomes her dietary inhibitions and gives herself up to her appetite for the first time in her life of seventy years: "Pretty soon Martha was drinking her cup of tea and eating her toast and a dropped egg. She had taken the food with some reluctance, half starved as she was. Finally she gave in—the sight of it was too much for her" (*SS* 24). Similarly, Rebecca Reddy in "The Horn of Plenty" realizes a happy married life after she awakens to her long-repressed attraction to Thomas Dean through the spectacle of the food he brings on Thanksgiving Day. "Chickens and turkeys, and roasts of pork and hams were lying all around," Freeman writes in a long catalogue of food:

And there were bunches of celery everywhere and stacks of pies and cakes and puddings, and nice little glass dishes of jelly, and bowls full of nuts and raisins, and vegetables. There were bushels of onions and turnips and pota-

toes and beets. There were hubbard squashes and pumpkins. There were baskets of apples and oranges and eggs, and paper bags full of goodness knew what.<sup>34</sup>

These stories illuminate Freeman's creative deployment of food as a catalyst of women's self-realization. We cannot help feeling that, even after their wishes are fulfilled, Martha Patch and Rebecca Reddy are tamed within the confines of conventional domesticity with the prospect for happier housekeeping for Martha and marriage for Rebecca. But there are female characters who develop gastrocentric psychology and go beyond conventional domesticity successfully. To elaborate on this point, "The Revolt of 'Mother'" is worth extensive attention.

"The Revolt of 'Mother'" is about Sarah Penn's rebellion against her husband Adoniram's long negligence in keeping his promise to build them a new house, a promise that was actually made at their marriage forty years earlier. Sarah obtains a new house during her husband's absence by literally usurping the barn he has just started building. On returning from his business trip, Adoniram Penn first is puzzled as to what Sarah is really intending by such a strange move. Finally, however, Adoniram realizes how he has been unjust to Sarah and complies with her request to make the barn habitable for the family. While this story celebrates Sarah Penn's courage in challenging patriarchal authority, Freeman invites us to see that Sarah Penn's victory is actually earned through her culinary skill, that is, her control over her husband's appetite.

Sarah is in the habit of baking mince pies twice a week because her husband loves them so much, but after she usurps the barn, she astutely prepares for her husband's return by fixing a supper of his favorite dishes: "Sarah Penn had supper all ready. There were brown-bread and baked beans and a custard pie; it was the supper that Adoniram loved on a Saturday night" (*NE* 322). Because these dishes are her husband's favorites, Sarah is able to secure her desired end. Adoniram had been a husband who turned a deaf ear to whatever his wife said, just as he was completely impervious to Sarah's verbal accusations concerning the barn issue, dismissing her harsh words by reiterating the phrase "I ain't got nothin' to say about it." But Sarah's choice supper brings about his conversion admirably: "All through the meal he stopped eating at intervals, and stared furtively at his wife; but he ate well. The home food tasted good to him, and his old frame was too sturdily healthy to be affected by his mind" (*NE* 324). His final acquiescence to Sarah's demand for a new house comes right after this meal scene. It is as if

Adoniram's egoism to put his own desire for a new barn before Sarah's longing for a new house and his misgivings about Sarah's extreme conduct were both digested along with the food. If Adoniram is likened to "a fortress whose walls had no active resistance, and went down the instant the right besieging tools were used" (*NE* 324), the story tells us that Sarah's supper is the best among "the right besieging tools."

"The Revolt of 'Mother'" is, in this sense, a story that exemplifies the power of diet. Though Freeman playfully describes Sarah's handling of food as in "She handles the peas as if they were bullet" (*NE* 321), Sarah's revolt literalizes such description. For Freeman, then, it is this ability to turn seemingly innocent food into a powerful weapon that leads women to a territory of new experience. Freeman describes the minister Mr. Hersey's perplexity over Sarah's usurpation of the barn: "He could expound the intricacies of every character study in the Scriptures, he was competent to grasp the Pilgrim Fathers and all historical innovators, but Sarah Penn was beyond him" (*NE* 322). This reaction by the minister shows that Sarah's culinary manner of triumphing over her husband brings her to see a new horizon of personal possibility, not just as a woman, but as a human being. Her familiarity with food has enabled her to unfold herself in a radically unparalleled individuality. Or, to put it another way, by virtue of her culinary skill, Sarah Penn becomes entitled to be "the Mother" who has the unheard-of authority to turn a common noun into a proper noun.

#### CONCLUSION: TOWARD A DIETARY UNDERSTANDING OF WOMEN'S LITERARY REALISM

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman overcame the domestic tradition of sentimental literature and moved forward to devise a method to give realistic expression to women's lives by exploring women's relationship with food. As is demonstrated in the character of Sarah Penn, Freeman's memorable heroines regenerate themselves into new identities through their positive attitudes toward food. Louisa Ellis in "A New England Nun" obtains her new identity as "an uncloistered nun" (*NE* 17), which images a solitary but liberated state of being, on condition that she is not a woman who regrets exchanging her birthright for a cup of pottage like Esau: "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" (*NE* 17). Through her relationship with food, in other words, Louisa has learned that it is far more important for her to retain her own

tastes in life than to have the right to marry Joe Dagget.<sup>35</sup> In the story “Louisa,” Louisa Britton is permitted by Freeman to continue to dream “her sweet, mysteries, girlish dreams” (*NE* 281), instead of engaging in marriage, because she is able to have an unconventional approach to food like “a European peasant woman, sacrificing her New England dignity” (*NE* 273).

We may understand Freeman’s dietary discourse in association, for instance, with Louisa May Alcott’s effort in her anonymously published thrillers to deconstruct domestic ideology by unveiling the fictitiousness of true womanhood. It is, however, more suggestive to know that Freeman’s investment in dietary motif was by no means an isolated gesture for women’s realism in late nineteenth-century America.

Kate Chopin in *The Awakening* (1899) also employs a dietary metaphor to describe Edna Pontellier’s individuation. During her one-day trip to the island Chênrière Caminada with Robert Lebrun, which stages Edna’s first awakening into her desire for him, Chopin makes Edna feel hungry: “She was very hungry. . . . Edna bit a piece from the brown loaf, tearing it with her strong, white teeth. She poured some of the wine into the glass and drank it down.”<sup>36</sup> She also sets Edna’s first rebellion against her husband, Léonce Pontellier, at a dinner table (*AW* 51-52). Even on the final occasion, she has Edna stop by the Lebrun cottage and ask the dinner time before conducting Edna to her suicidal swim: “‘What time will you have dinner?’ asked Edna, ‘I’m very hungry; but don’t get anything extra’” (*AW* 112). Like Freeman, Chopin not only characterizes her heroine as a hungry woman but also puts crucial moments of her heroine’s subjective growth in dietary settings. In the case of Chopin, particularly, such use of dietary motif could be considered a convention of naturalism. Suggestively enough, however, Freeman and Chopin shared a cultural context in which “the fact that eating is something more than animal indulgence, and that cooking has a nobler purpose than the gratification of appetite and the sense of taste” gained national currency.<sup>37</sup> In such a cultural atmosphere, it is not utterly improbable that their everyday life that was permeated by bland food drove them to plunge their characters into a fictional world of delicious experiences and find vicarious satisfaction for their own palates that has been abused in real life. What these hungry women of late nineteenth-century America suggest is, in short, a possibility that women’s realism in literature was, in a certain sense, the revolt of female appetite against the sentimental tradition of domesticity.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Virginia L. Blum, "Mary Wilkins Freeman and the Taste of Necessity," *American Literature* 65, no. 1 (March 1993): 88.

<sup>2</sup> Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, *A New England Nun and Other Stories* (La Vergne, TN: Aegypan Press, 2006), 8. All subsequent quotations from this edition will be cited in text in parenthesis as *NE* with a page number.

<sup>3</sup> Brent L. Kendrick, ed., *The Infant Sphinx: Collected Letters of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1985), 324, quoted in Leah Blatt Glasser, "Legacy Profile: Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1852–1930)," *Legacy* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1987):38.

<sup>4</sup> On Freeman's enthusiasm for the chafing dish, see Blum, "Taste of Necessity," 85; Laura Shapiro, *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 221.

<sup>5</sup> Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 20. For an extensive analysis of anorexia, see Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The Emergence of Anorexia as a Modern Disease* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988). Yoshiko Uzawa finds another nineteenth-century context in which fasting was actually recommended as a "healthy," "masculine," and "intellectual" practice. See her "Tabenai gihou: Shinshi to chishikijin to Samuson no tameno shokujihou" [Diet as fasting: Proper diet for gentlemen, intellectuals, and Samson] in *Shokuji no gihou* [Ways of diet], ed. Suzuki Akihito and Ishizuka Hisao (Tokyo: Keio Gijuku Daigaku Shuppankai, 2005), 67–86.

<sup>6</sup> Blum, "Taste of Necessity," 69–94.

<sup>7</sup> Mark McWilliams, "Distant Tables: Food and the Novel in Early America," *Early American Literature* 38, no. 3 (2003): 365.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 378.

<sup>9</sup> Lydia Maria Child, *The American Frugal Housewife* (New York: Dover, 1999), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Josepha Hale, *Early American Cookery: "The Good Housekeeper," 1841* (New York: Dover, 1996), 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>17</sup> See *ibid.*, 62–63.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, *ibid.*, 14–15 and 144; Lydia Maria Child, *The Family Nurse: Or Companion of the American Frugal Housewife* (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1997), 5 and 42. Especially for Child, moral harm comes more from reading than from eating. She, in fact, uses the imagery of overeating to talk not about dietary habits but about reading: "They [the best of novels] are a sort of literary confectionary; and, though they may be very perfect and beautiful, if eaten too plentifully, they do tend to destroy our appetite for more solid and nourishing food." See Child, *The Mother's Book* (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1992), 87.

<sup>19</sup> Hale, *Early American Cookery*, 14.

<sup>20</sup> Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home* (Hartford, CT: Stowe-Day Foundation, 1994), 128. All subsequent quotations from this edition will be cited in text in parenthesis as *AWH* with a page number.

<sup>21</sup> Shapiro, *Perfection Salad*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Marjorie Pryse, ed., *Selected Stories of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman* (New York: Norton, 1983), 21. All subsequent quotations from this edition will be cited in text in parenthesis as *SS* with a page number.

<sup>23</sup> Blum, "Taste of Necessity," 72.

<sup>24</sup> Identifying Rachel Halliday's Quaker kitchen as the sanctuary of the cult of domesticity, Gillian Brown promotes viewing Rachel Halliday as Stowe's ideal domestic woman. See the chapter 1, "Domestic Politics in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," of Gillian Brown's *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 13–38.

<sup>25</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *My Wife and I* (New York: AMS Press, 1967), 448.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 448.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 479.

<sup>28</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *We and Our Neighbors* (New York: AMS Press, 1967), 45.

<sup>29</sup> Stowe, *My Wife and I*, 448.

<sup>30</sup> Stowe, *We and Our Neighbors*, 45.

<sup>31</sup> Stowe, *My Wife and I*, 479.

<sup>32</sup> This one exceptional scene of eating happens on the day Harry and Eva move in. Meaningfully, moreover, Stowe puts this sole dietary moment in one sentence: "When we all gathered about Mary's cooking-stove, in the kitchen, eating roast oysters and bread and butter, without troubling ourselves about table equipage, we seemed to come closer to each other than we could in months of orderly housekeeping." See Stowe, *My Wife and I*, 474.

<sup>33</sup> Blum, "Taste of Necessity," 81.

<sup>34</sup> Mary R. Reichardt, ed., *The Uncollected Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 142.

<sup>35</sup> For a more extensive argument on Freeman's allusion to Genesis, see Michael Tritt, "Selling a Birthright for Pottage: Mary Freeman's Allusion to Genesis in 'A New England Nun,'" *ANQ* 19, no.4 (Fall 2006): 34–41.

<sup>36</sup> Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (New York: Norton, 1976), 38. All subsequent quotations from this edition will be cited in text in parenthesis as *AW* with a page number.

<sup>37</sup> Shapiro, *Perfection Salad*, 67.