

Pembroke: A Script of Decadence

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Abstract: The article is an interpretation of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's novel *Pembroke* (1994). Even though it is set in the third decade of the 19th century, the year of publication suggests that it just as well refers to the condition of New England after the Civil War. Hit by a complex crisis, concerning demography, economy, and mores, after 1865 the region entered a stage of decadence. Wilkins Freeman diagnosed its symptoms, such as the collapse of interpersonal communication and the hypertrophy of individual will, showing that the portents of the decline of Puritan heritage had its roots in the first half of the century. With time, the symbolic system of New England culture collapsed and gave way to a new social order.

Key words: New England, crisis, symbolic system, *Pembroke*, Puritan heritage

Pembroke: scenariusz dekadencji

Abstrakt: Artykuł zawiera interpretację powieści Mary E. Wilkins Freeman *Pembroke* (1894). Choć jest ona osadzona w trzeciej dekadzie wieku XIX, rok publikacji sugeruje, że w istocie dotyczy również kondycji Nowej Anglii po wojnie secesyjnej, która przyniosła regionowi kryzys demograficzny, ekonomiczny i światopoglądowy. Wilkins Freeman diagnozuje jego symptomy, zwracając szczególną uwagę na załamanie się międzyludzkiej komunikacji i hipertrofię woli, wskazując zarazem, iż zapowiedzi zmierzchu dziedzictwa purytanów szukać można już w pierwszej połowie stulecia. Z czasem symboliczny system kultury Nowej Anglii uległ rozpadowi i został zastąpiony przez nowy porządek społeczny.

Słowa kluczowe: Nowa Anglia, kryzys, system symboliczny, *Pembroke*, dziedzictwo purytańskie

Decadence has not been a term often used in reference to American literature, regardless of its periodization. Usually applied to the second half of the 19th century in France and Britain, it has an ambiance that feels out of place in the United States, even though perhaps Poe, admired by Baudelaire, would qualify as a decadent if only for his drinking problem and literary necrophilia, not to mention his marrying a thirteen-year old cousin, which, however, did not cause any scandal. Still, Perry D. Westbrook

leaves little doubt that there indeed was a region and a period to which the seemingly Old World-only term corresponds well enough:

While members of historical societies were arguing about the origin of New England town institutions, the towns themselves in the rural regions were in very serious trouble. The realization of what was happening first appeared among the writers of fiction ... Authors like Rose Terry Cooke, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Edward Bellamy, and Edwin Arlington Robinson were writing about the New England rural scene in a mood of deep pessimism. The reasons for their gloom are complex and manifold. The years following the Civil War – the period in which these authors wrote – were a time of deep disillusionment.¹

The North won the Civil War but the death toll in the Union army was enormous. Many men fell on the battlefields; many more became permanently disabled and could not return to their previous activities. They were often replaced with good results by women, yet New England was hard hit by a social and economic decline – a crisis that lasted for decades until former sources of income were replaced by profit mainly from tourism. What’s more, Westbrook writes, “The emigration from the rural districts either to the West or to the manufacturing cities drained off large numbers of the population and left some towns virtually abandoned.”² As we know from a canonical nostalgic version of the local-color mourning fiction – Sarah Orne Jewett’s *Deephaven* and *The Country of the Pointed Firs* – the remaining residents of those towns were often mostly middle-aged or elderly women and old, mildly deranged sea captains and fishermen deeply immersed in memories. What are left for them are herbs and reminiscences – they are heirs to the alleged witches of the olden days and to the whalers whose time is up because demand for the products of the whaling industry had diminished.

Pembroke, published in 1894, is a rare case – a full-length novel focused on a fictitious small New England town, not the short story usually chosen as a genre by Wilkins Freeman. The author herself commented upon it in an introductory sketch added to the second, 1899 edition: “*Pembroke* is intended to portray a typical New England village of some sixty years ago, as many of the characters flourished at that time, but villages of a similar description have existed at a much later date, and they exist today in a very considerable degree.”³ Pointing at what has been considered the novel’s subject matter, critics usually concentrate on its narrative frame: the story of Barnabas Thayer and Charlotte Barnard, a young couple in love who were getting ready for their wedding, but as a result of an accidental quarrel between the future husband and the future father-in-law, the latter ordered Barnabas to leave the Barnards’ house and never return. Shocked

¹ Perry D. Westbrook, *The New England Town in Fact and Fiction*. East Brunswick, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1982, 161.

² Westbrook, 162.

³ Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, *Pembroke*, ed. Perry D. Westbrook. New Haven: College and University Press, 1971, 34. All the following quotations from this edition will be marked in the text as P and page number.

and offended, the young man exclaimed that he would never come back, no matter what, and it took ten years until he and Charlotte were eventually reunited. The emphasis falls on Cephias Barnard's and Barnabas' obstinacy – Wilkins Freeman deliberately intended it, prompting in her introduction a particular way of reading the novel:

Pembroke was originally intended as a study of the human will in several New England characters, in different phases of disease and abnormal development, and to prove, especially in the most marked case, the truth of a theory that its cure depended entirely upon the capacity of the individual for a love which could rise above all the considerations of self, as Barnabas Thayer's love for Charlotte Barnard finally did. (P 33)

In fact, there are several “set” characters in the novel: men and women who do not like to change their mind and adamantly impose their will on the others, in most cases their closest family members: spouses and children. In the Barnard family it is the father, Cephias, while in the Thayers it is the mother, Deborah, who dominates over her husband Caleb and terrorizes their sick son Ephraim, still a young child. Ephraim is not very bright and finds it hard to learn the catechism, which often leads to him being severely punished. At last, one day Deborah beats him up so unmercifully that he barely survives. A few days later he sneaks out of the house on a frosty night to enjoy some clandestine sledding on a nearby coasting hill. That, however, turns out just too much and his heart cannot bear it: back home, he suddenly collapses and dies, the only child character in the novel, significantly without a chance to grow up. His mother, in despair, believes that it was her who actually killed him. When she is told that the boy must have over-exerted himself, having had, for once in his life, a good time all by himself, she becomes so excited that her heart can not bear it and she dies, too. Thus the family collapses, with only Caleb and Barnabas left. Originally there was also a daughter, but Deborah mercilessly turned her out into a snowstorm, pregnant with a child out of wedlock. She did not die and eventually married the man she loved; however, the family ties were broken beyond repair.

To make one last reference to the author's introduction, Wilkins Freeman also draws the reader's attention to a specific duplicity characteristic of the “villages of which *Pembroke* is typical.” (P 34) She warns her audience that under the neat, whitewashed “surfaces” of New England houses and churches a keen observer may find much more than he or she expects – attitudes and habits which, although apparently similar to those of the seventeenth-century Puritan ancestors, in fact reveal irrevocable decay. It is not only that clashes of will make weaker, more sensitive individuals unhappy. The characters have emotions and desires, yet very often they find it extremely difficult or outright impossible to articulate them and communicate even with the dearest ones. The old, persistent habit of reserve and reticence, deeply ingrained, after two hundred years has devastating consequences. Cephias Barnard does not like to speak too much – he just

gives laconic orders and wants quiet obedience. Deborah and her husband do not have a common language either – sometimes Caleb feebly protests in defense of Ephraim, always in vain. Even though another local couple, Richard Alger and Sylvia Crane, love and miss each other beyond words, Richard is unable to propose to her despite many years of ritual weekly visits. (That situation is similar to the one described in Wilkins Freeman's best remembered story "A New England Nun," where the protagonists who were supposed to get married after a twelve-year waiting period can only exchange laconic information about the weather.) Fortunately, at the very last moment, when Sylvia, starved nearly to death, is on her way to the poorhouse, having run out of inherited money, the gentleman caller realizes what is going on and a miracle happens. Still, it is unlikely that they will ever have children, which makes one think about the stark demographic message of the novel. It is definitely too late for Richard and Sylvia to multiply while Barnabas and Charlotte have wasted their years of youth in separation because the man not only refuses to make peace with Cephas Barnard, but also hardly speaks with his beloved or anyone else who, with good intentions, wants to touch upon his predicament and help.

The multi-faceted crisis of the family is illustrated in *Pembroke* in a number of ways. The obstinate Cephas Barnard suddenly insists on baking "sorrel pies" with just a little flour added and almost no lard put on the pie plates, which results in a total failure. Whatever comes out of the oven turns out inedible and the common meal is ruined. Another stern patriarch, Silas Berry, owns a large cherry orchard. A notorious miser, under some pressure he lets his daughter invite several friends to enjoy the fruit and have a good time, but makes it clear that they can pick the cherries only from four poor trees, in the end demanding payment for all that they ate, although originally the get-together was supposed to be just a social gathering. If, according to the Puritan allegorical code based on the Bible, the orchard may represent paradise with Adams and Eves in it, the origin of humankind is unlikely to take place there since boys and girls are expelled too early, before finding their partners and starting relationships. The only one who misbehaves is the host himself – in consequence of Silas's inhospitality, the prospective parents will not have progeny.

Significantly, several of Wilkins Freeman's short stories, especially the gothic ones, focus either on dead children, or children unborn. In "The Wind in the Rosebush," a Hawthorne-like allegory *par excellence* with a plain hint at the first chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*,⁴ the ghost of a girl neglected in sickness by a woman who agreed to take care of her haunts not the house where the victim used to live, but a bush that grows near it, thus drawing

⁴ For a comprehensive discussion of Hawthorne's influence on the New England women writers after the Civil War see: John L. Idol Jr. and Melinda M. Ponder, eds. *Hawthorne and Women. Engendering and Expanding the Hawthorne Tradition*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999.

the visitor's attention to her tragedy. In "The Lost Ghost," another ghost girl vainly keeps looking in the house for her mother who abandoned her to die alone of hunger after she left with her lover to start a new life. The child is allegedly saved by another woman who died as well and guided the ghost to heaven as a surrogate mother. In "Old Woman Magoun," with no ghosts starring, a girl whom her derelict father wants to sell as a sexual toy to his drinking companion is poisoned by her grandmother to save her from the trauma that would precede her inevitable death. All those dead children and the unborn children in *Pembroke* illustrate a biological aspect of the decline and fall of the traditional New England culture – the collapse of the social world originated by the Pilgrims and their followers on board the "Arbella." In a different variant of the same plight, "A Taste of Honey," a young woman has no time to find a husband and does not get married because she and her mother must save all their surplus money, cent by cent, to pay their mortgage after the father passed away. Inez, who cannot think about anything but their financial obligation, is another striking example of "abnormal development" and pathologically strong determination, typical of the decaying New England heritage.

On the one hand, Wilkins Freeman continued the sentimental vein of the antebellum domestic novel originated by Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *New-England Tale* (1822), a novel of the female ordeal with a happy end, and the early novels by Harriet Beecher Stowe, particularly *Oldtown Folks* (1869). Her settings are mostly rural; her characters fit backwoods villages and small towns, often as devastated as they are. However, the sentimental plots frequently serve as a misleading camouflage, concealing the desperate state of affairs in a region which used to be the "hub of the universe." Wilkins Freeman's fiction is often quietly apocalyptic – it shows that the potential of the post-Puritan civilization has been exhausted and even if her women, children, and few men may appear still alive, they are often already ghosts, no matter whether actual or metaphorical. Every now and then, the text of *Pembroke* demonstrates signals of the domestic gothic convention, with the supernatural handled in a Hawthornian way as half-real and half-imaginary, even though the author herself did not hesitate to use it explicitly in some of her short stories. Whenever Charlotte Barnard enters the north chamber of the family house, which used to be occupied by her long dead brother, she feels uneasy, and no wonder since the geometry of space there suggests the author's debt to Poe rather than Harriet Beecher Stowe:

Always when Charlotte entered the small, long room, which was full of wavering lines from its uneven floor and walls and ceiling and the long arabesques on its old blue and white paper, whose green open curtains with fringe dimity ones were always drawn, and in summertime, when the windows were open, undulated in the wind, she had the sense of a presence, dim, but as positive as the visions she had used to have of faces in the wandering design of the old wallpaper when she had studied it in her childhood. Ever since her brother's death she had this sense of his presence in his room ... (P 84)

In the ensuing conversation, Charlotte is consoled by her cousin Rose Berry that in the future she would be wearing her wedding gown as it was originally planned: "Rose's eyes were sharp upon Charlotte's face. It was as if the bridal robes, which were so evident, became suddenly proofs of something tangible and real, like a garment left by a ghost." (P 85) On another occasion, shortly before the incident in the cherry orchard, Rose has a vision of her father, as if she were anticipating his order to leave the "garden" given to the young people of Pembroke: "The vague horror of the unusual stole over her. A new phase of her father's character stood between her and all of her old memories like a supernatural presence." (P 118) Later on, when Barney Thayer was passing by Sylvia Crane's house, she recognized him as Richard Alger, whom she desperately wished to see: "The room was dim with candlelight, but everything in it was distinct, and Sylvia Crane, looking straight at Barney Thayer's face, saw the face of Richard Alger." (P 150) (A similar device was used by Wilkins Freeman in her horror story "The Southwest Chamber," where one character, a good, kind-hearted woman, is literally haunted by a ghost of her malicious aunt – instead of a reflection of her own face in the mirror, she sees the aunt's face and even starts thinking her evil thoughts.⁵) Ezra Ray, a minor character, recalls the moment when he saw Ephraim Thayer on his way toward imminent death: "In fact, the vision of Ephraim Thayer with a sled, coasting at eleven o'clock at night, was startling. ... He looked at Ephraim standing there in the moonlight almost as if he were a spirit." (P 186) In other words, anticipating what would happen soon, Ezra saw the boy as already dead. Finally, trying to persuade Barney Thayer to marry Charlotte Barnard after many years of separation, Thomas Payne, a college-educated, high-minded son of the wealthiest man in the village, turns out to be a close literary relative of a number of Hawthorne's protagonists, experiencing an apparent transformation of the interlocutor: "Thomas stared at Barney; a horror as of something uncanny and abnormal stole over him. Was the man's back curved, or had he by some subtle vision a perception of some terrible spiritual deformity, only symbolized by a curved spine?" (P 233) This is clearly an echo of Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" – in a similar way, Brown could not be sure, either, if he had met the devil in the forest and then witnessed an unholy parody of church service, or just had a nightmare. The gothic, combined with ostentatiously realistic, domestic settings, makes an almost ubiquitous underpinning of the novel's mimetic mode of representation. Consequently, Pembroke seems to be inhabited by figures which, although seemingly still alive, are at least to a certain extent defunct.

At the end, both Richard Alger and Barney Thayer, about to marry their brides and, according to the norms of their culture, become "heads of the

⁵ See "The Southwest Chamber," in: Mary E. Wilkins-Freeman, *Collected Ghost Stories*. Arkham House: Sauk City, 1974, 155-156.

family,” husbands and fathers well anchored in the patriarchal world order, admit to a strange, perhaps unexpected condition: “[Richard] stood still and let Sylvia pin the shawl around his neck. Sylvia seemed to have suddenly acquired a curious maternal authority over him, and he submitted to it as if it were merely natural that he should.” (P 223) Likewise, Barney instinctively or, shall we say, unconsciously, accepted the authority of Charlotte thanks to whom he recovered from a serious sickness:

One contingency had never occurred to Barney in his helpless clinging to Charlotte. He had never once dreamed that people might talk disparagingly about her in consequence. He had, partly from his isolated life, partly from natural bent, a curious innocence and ignorance in his conception of human estimates of conduct. He had not the same vantage-points with many other people and indeed in many cases seemed to hold the identical ones which he had chosen when a child and first observing anything. (P 251)

Certainly, on the one hand, the unusual attachment of both bridegrooms to their future wives anticipates what will happen in New England about fifty or forty years later due to the change of social roles of the genders after the Civil War, but on the other, it may as well be interpreted in Lacanian terms⁶ as a retrogression to childhood or, more precisely, a return to the imaginary stage of personal development – the dual relationship between the child and the mother. That would be a symptom interpretable as a collapse of the symbolic order accessible through the Name of the Father, i.e. the end of the Puritan or post-Puritan culture rooted in the colonial 17th century. Marked also with the gothic subdominant, then, *Pembroke* is a diagnosis, a dirge – quiet and constrained, yet dramatic enough. To make a revival possible, Wilkins Freeman seems to be saying in the reader-proposed Lacanian idiom, it is necessary to reconstruct the symbolic order, rewrite the Name of the Father in a much less restrictive version.

The homespun, down-to-earth realism of *Pembroke*, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s short stories, and the fiction of other New England women writers of the period, is a disguise. The socio-historical background it stemmed from was the unprecedented trauma of the Civil War – a confrontation with the Real that, as the title of Daniel Aaron’s classic study, *The Unwritten War*,⁷ suggests, remained for the most part unarticulated by American literature or at least hardly represented directly. The most successful canonical attempt to do so was penned by a writer of the next generation – one that did not witness the atrocities. In *Pembroke*, unlike in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s therapeutic bestseller *The Gates Ajar* (1868), the war trauma is apparently absent, with its absence conveyed by a combination of domestic melodrama, traces of Hawthorne’s allegory, and reference to the antebellum

⁶ For a Lacanian reading of Sarah Orne Jewett’s fiction see: Joseph Church, *Transcendent Daughters in Jewett’s Country of the Pointed Firs*. London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1994.

⁷ See Daniel Aaron, *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War*. New York: Knopf, 1973.

history. Whatever happens in the fictitious small town is supposed to be a prelude to the miserable future, while in fact it is a postlude or perhaps, paradoxically, both. The portrayed decadence of New England has two facets: one past, the other present. Borrowing Maurice Blanchot's term "writing of the disaster," one might say that Wilkins Freeman's writing is double: one, long-lasting disaster was the decomposition of the Puritan heritage, the other, only five years long, the crisis of the Union which inflicted demographic and economic breakdown on New England. For centuries New Englanders were taught to use few words and never complain: the author of *Pembroke* and "A New England Nun" keeps her language under control and remains rather taciturn, preferring short narratives to long ones. Thus, some of her home tradition has been saved, serving the purpose of recording its own waning.

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