1861–1865), powerful forces had emerged that would dominate life in
twentieth-century America. The industrial North had triumphed over the
agrarian South, and from that victory came a society based on mass labor and
mass consumption. Steam power began to replace water power, and ma-
chines driven by steam engines supplanted traditional hand labor in factories
and on farms. In the 1770s, Thomas Jefferson had voiced the hope that the
majority of Americans would never be “occupied at a work bench, for those
who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God.” But after 1865, the
United States ceased to be the simple agrarian democracy that Jefferson had
cherished. It became instead the most heavily industrialized nation in the
world, and its people in ever greater numbers ceased to “labor in the earth”
and moved to towns and cities to labor on the machines of new industries.

As industrialism spread, the nature of labor changed. Machines displaced
most of the hand labor previously required in manufacturing. Independent,
skilled handcraftsmen became obsolete, unable to compete with machines
operated by semiskilled laborers twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.
And the machines, with their great cost and high efficiency, came to be seen
by mill owners and factory managers as far more valuable and useful than the
workers who ran them. As a result, traditional relationships between employ-
ers and craftsmen weakened, grew more impersonal. In giant corporations
that employed hundreds, even thousands, the workers no longer knew their
customers, no longer even saw their employers. Nonetheless, great numbers
of men, women, and children—native-born and foreign—flocked to Amer-
ican cities, drawn by hopes for steady factory work and high factory pay.

In the cities—swollen with growing numbers of the poor, the ignorant,
and the unskilled—great political change was taking place. As more people
of the urban underclasses sought, and found, power at the polls, the centers
of political power shifted. Traditional political alliances weakened, and new
political groups emerged, taking their power from, and proclaiming their de-

Amid the upheaval of the time, the art of political patronage and graft
rose to new heights in the United States, causing the first grand age of Amer-
ican civic corruption. Confused and ignorant voters, new to the ballot box,
elected big-city bosses and their henchmen who flourished on kickbacks and
fraud, boldly collected their boodle, and scoffed at the law. In six years, dur-
ing the 1860s and 1870s, New York's "Boss" William Tweed and his "Tweed Ring" of municipal crooks cost the city of New York an estimated two hundred million dollars, equal to more than two billion dollars in the 1990s. And during the presidency of Ulysses S. Grant (1869–1877) the crimes of high federal officials were exposed in scandals unequaled in the history of the United States. The actions of Grant in protecting his political cronies and ignoring their blatant misdeeds led many Americans to conclude that the president of the United States was himself a common thief. Never before had American government, at all levels, seemed so overtin with rascals. Never before had civic virtue seemed to have fallen so low.

During the Civil War the power of the national government dramatically expanded. For the first time federal authority intruded directly into the lives of the majority of the people. The war brought the first national conscription laws; the first federal income taxes were levied, and the first national currency was issued—paper money backed by the federal government rather than by individual states and local banks. Rapid growth of federal power brought benefits and troubles: In 1865 the first official step toward nationwide racial equality was made when the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution was adopted, abolishing slavery within the United States. And the federal government used its powers to encourage business growth and the exploitation of natural resources, creating vast new wealth.

But great riches and economic power were increasingly concentrated in the hands of the few: bankers and industrialists who touted the glories of "business and bustle," business luminaries who revered the virtues of self-help. The laudatory term "captain of industry" was coined in the 1880s as business and financial tycoons came for the first time to be celebrated as national heroes, as models for young men who hoped to rise in the world through luck and pluck. It was the beginning of what Mark Twain called "The Gilded Age," an age of extremes: of decline and progress, of poverty and dazzling wealth, of gloom and buoyant hope—an age of gaudy excesses that one historian described as "The Great Barbecue."

In the last half of the nineteenth century, Americans ceased to be isolated from the world and from each other. Coast-to-coast overland mail service began in 1858—a letter could be sent from St. Louis to San Francisco in as little as four weeks. In 1860 the Pony Express cut that time to ten and a half days. And within a year a message could be sent from New York to San Francisco in seconds, on the new telegraph line that spanned the nation in 1861. A transatlantic telegraph cable joined America and Europe in 1866. Ten years later, Alexander Graham Bell patented his invention of the telephone. By 1900 the United States had 1,356,000 telephones—twice as many as all Europe.

If the telegraph and the telephone helped to bring Americans closer together, the United States were finally "united" by the railroads. The first railroad, the Baltimore and Ohio, began operation in 1830 with thirteen miles of track. In 1869 the first transcontinental railroad was completed, linking the Atlantic and the Pacific. Five years later railroad mileage exceeded 74,000 miles, and the United States had the most extensive railroad system in the world. By 1889, the trip across the continent that had taken as much as five months by wagon during the Gold Rush of 1849 could now be made in trains (with Pullman sleepers and dining cars) in 108 hours—little more than four days.

With the building of the railroads came rapid commercial development. New industries sprang up along rail lines, and even more successful ones moved to them. The production of livestock and wheat doubled, tripled, and even quadrupled. New Yorkers could now eat beef shipped in newly invented refrigerated cars all the way from the slaughterhouses of Chicago. Floridians could buy inexpensive flour from mills in Minneapolis.

Enterprising merchants like Richard Sears and Montgomery Ward created nationwide retail organizations that could undersell local shopkeepers. The clothing, housefbr breaking, and farm equipment once made locally by costly handwork were replaced by inexpensive, mass-produced goods made from standardized patterns in centralized factories. The nation was becoming a single giant marketplace, and retail stores that sold ready-made clothes and packaged foods began to resemble the stores of modern America, where the same goods, displayed in the same ways, were to be seen from one end of the land to the other.

The coming of the railroads changed how Americans worked, where they lived, how they ate, how they dressed. In 1883 the railroads even changed the way Americans kept time: when the more than twenty-six time zones in the United States were reduced to four, to promote greater efficiency in scheduling railroad traffic.

As transportation became better and cheaper, the nation's people became increasingly mobile. In the last surge of westward expansion, Americans and immigrant Europeans, lured by the promise of free land, settled the Great Plains and the mountain states. The United States now extended from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Vast areas were no longer unknown, unexplored; by 1890 the frontier—the westward-moving line of settlement begun three hundred years before or at the Atlantic Coast—ceased to exist, although its influence would long remain, shaping the life of the nation and inspiring the legends, novels, and western movies by which the world would come to know America.

Westward settlement brought great benefits but at great cost. Following the American Civil War, the unique culture of America's American plains Indians had reached its zenith, partly because they made use of the white man's horses, guns, and metal tools. But with the end of the 1880s, that unique Native-American culture had been ruined by the destruction of the buffalo and by the white man's land hunger, his gold fever, and his whiskey and diseases. The plains Indians were killed and displaced as other Native Americans had been before them. The surviving tribes became wards of the federal government, confined to reservations, where their life of forced dependency has continued through the twentieth century. Their lost world now largely survives only in popular distortions of romantic legend and myth.

The age that saw the final subjugation of the Indians and the ending of the frontier was also an age of steel and steam, electricity and oil. From the Civil War to World War I, steel production in the United States increased more than six hundred times, and steelmaking became the nation's dominant industry. Alternating electrical current was introduced in 1886. Incandescent
lamps illuminated the cities with electricity provided by giant, steam-driven dynamos. The tallow candles and whale-oil lamps of rural America were replaced by lanterns filled with inexpensive kerosene made from crude oil. The American petroleum industry began, and with it came the age of the automobile.

From 1870 to 1890 the total population of the United States doubled. Villages became towns, towns became cities, and cities grew to a size and with a speed that would have astonished the Founding Fathers. From 1860 to 1910 the population of Philadelphia tripled; that of New York City more than quadrupled, while the population of Chicago increased twenty times to two million, making it the nation’s second largest city.

As the population doubled, the national income quadrupled, and by the mid-1890s the United States could boast 4,000 millionaires. The rich prospered mightily, and prodigious fortunes were piled up by industrial and banking magnates such as John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and J. Pierpont Morgan. The growth of big business and big industry also widened further the gulf between the rich and the poor, giving rise to reform movements and labor unions that voiced the grievances of debt-ridden farmers and immigrant workers who lived in city slums and labored in giant, impersonal factories. Yet it was also an age of optimism; little heed was given to such gloomy skeptics as Henry Adams, who saw America as a land of unbridled power and flamboyant greed. It was a time of glowing visions, a time of radiant prospects, when ministers preached (and congregations believed) a gospel of wealth, suggesting that riches were at last in league with virtue, that an age of unlimited progress had finally dawned.

But progress had not reached all levels of American society. Following the Civil War, the Congress of the United States passed a stringent series of Reconstruction Acts to force its will upon the South and to protect black freedmen. Voting rights were established for blacks, along with the right to testify in courts, to serve on juries, to own property, and to hold public office. But by 1877, with the end of Reconstruction and the withdrawal from the South of the last, federal occupying troops, most of the newly won rights for blacks began to erode. Well before the end of the century, poll taxes and literacy tests were legalized and used to disqualify black voters. Separate and unequal schools and public facilities were created; legal rights were denied in both the North and the South. The great hope for liberty and justice for all began to fade. White supremacy was firmly re-established, and blacks were segregated to live of poverty and indignity that did not begin to change significantly for more than three-quarters of a century, until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Immigration dropped sharply during the Civil War, but after the 1880s a rising tide of foreigners, beckoned by the American promise of jobs and political freedom, came to the New World at such a rate that by 1910 more than a third of the population of America’s largest cities was foreign-born. Large-scale immigration and technical advancements in industry and agriculture increased the need for literacy, creating a demand for widespread public education. In the fifty years following the Civil War, the number of high schools in the United States increased thirty-five times. Colleges were established for women: Vassar in 1861, Wellesley in 1870, Smith in 1871. Higher education ceased to be a privilege limited to children of the well-to-do. Under the Morrill Act of 1862, millions of acres of federal land were given to the states for the establishment of public “land-grant” universities for “the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes.”

Increased wealth, and the desire for its conspicuous display, gave rise to a gingerbread era of American design whose prime function was to attract attention. American millionaires built Gothic and Romanesque mansions and decorated them with towers, domes, columns, stained-glass windows, and ornamental gimcracks of wood and iron. Their rooms were filled with art imported from Europe, as were most symbols of culture. Well-to-do Americans adopted European dress styles and manners, sent their sons to Europe for an education, and eagerly married off their daughters to European noblemen, many of them impoverished, some of them bogs.

America remained culturally dependent on Europe for drama and music. Touring English actors, playing in tents and “opera houses” throughout America, presented European plays and dramatizations of popular European novels. Symphony orchestras, which had begun to appear in the United States after mid-century, limited their repertoires almost wholly to European music. The nation lacked first-rate composers of serious music until the 1900s. And even in the twentieth century, America’s greatest contributions to the world of music remained its folk songs, its Negro spirituals, and the jazz music that spread from New Orleans around the world, after World War I.

After 1865, a strong native tradition in painting began to develop, apparent in the work of such artists as Thomas Eakins, who realistically portrayed the America he saw around him and who urged his students “to remain in America, to peer deeper into the heart of American life.” But numerous artists saw opportunity elsewhere and preferred to lead expatriate lives in Europe. Among them were the most renowned American painters of the period: James McNeill Whistler and John Singer Sargent. In a land of triumphant materialism, high culture had little impact on the mass of the people, who sought and found their entertainment in circuses, in vaudeville shows, in the new professional sports, and, after the 1890s, in motion-picture theaters named “nickelodeons” after their five-cent admission fee.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, women became the nation’s dominant cultural force, a position they have never relinquished. Ladies’ journalism began to flourish. In 1891, The Ladies’ Home Journal (founded in 1883) became the first American magazine with a circulation exceeding half a million; by 1905 its circulation had reached a full million. A new generation of women authors appeared whose poetry and fiction enlivened the pages of popular ten-cent monthly and weekly magazines. The greatest woman writer of the age, Emily Dickinson, was almost completely unknown; her first collection of poetry was not published until 1890, four years after her death. But Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852), had become an American institution and the most famous literary woman in the world. The American reading public’s appetite for sentiment and sensation was constantly fed by writers who seemed to be inexhaustible, spilling forth novels seething with romantic extravagance: ancestral curses, sudden passions, villains blasted, and heroes triumphant. Sales of such “mosses fiction” far exceeded the sales of works by such highly regarded writers as William Dean Howells, Edith Wharton, Henry James, and even Mark Twain.
Although Americans continued to read the works of Irving, Cooper, Hawthorne, and Poe, the great age of American romanticism had ended. By the 1870s the New England Renaissance had waned. Hawthorne and Thoreau were dead; Emerson, Lowell, Longfellow, Holmes, and Whittier had passed their literary zeniths. Melville, living in obscurity, had ceased to publish his fiction. Only Whitman continued to offer a new literary vision to the world, issuing a fifth edition of Leaves of Grass in 1870 and publishing Democratic Vistas in 1871. As New England's cultural dominance waned, New York replaced Boston as the nation's literary center, drawing writers from New England, the South, and the West to the publishing houses and periodicals of the nation's largest city.

Technical improvements in printing, lower costs for paper, and the rise of national corporations that could pour money into newspaper and magazine advertisements caused the growth of a great variety of low-cost, general-interest publications. From 1865 to 1905 the total number of periodicals published in the United States increased from about seven hundred to more than six thousand, all trying to satisfy the appetites of a vast new reading audience that was hungry for news articles, essays, fiction, and poems.

A host of new writers appeared, among them Bret Harte, William Dean Howells, and Mark Twain, whose background and training, unlike those of the older generation they displaced, were middle-class and journalistic rather than genteel or academic. Influenced by such Europeans as Zola, Flaubert, Balzac, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy, America's most noteworthy new authors established a literature of realism. They sought to portray American life as it really was, insisting that the ordinary and the local were just as suitable for artistic portrayal as the magnificent and the remote.

As in most literary rebellions, the new literature rose out of the authors' desire to renovate the literary traditions of a previous age. Realists had grown scornful of artistic ideals that had been trivialized, worn thin by derivative writers eager to supply the "great popular want" for sentiment, adventure, and "tingling excitement." In contrast, the realists had what Henry James called "a powerful impulse to mirror the unmitigated realities of life." Earlier in the nineteenth century, James Fenimore Cooper had insisted on the author's right to avoid representations of "squalid misery" and to present instead an idealized and "poetic" portrait of life. But by the end of the nineteenth century the realists, and the literary naturalists who followed them, had turned away from the portrayal of idealized characters and events. Instead, they sought to describe the wide range of American experience and to present the subtleties of human personality, to portray characters who were not simply all good or all bad.

Realism had originated in France as réalisme, a literary doctrine that called for "reality and truth" in the depiction of ordinary life. Realism first appeared in the United States in the literature of local color, an amalgam of romantic plots and realistic descriptions of things immediately observable: the dialects, customs, sights, and sounds of regional America. Bret Harte in the 1860s was the first American writer of local color to achieve wide popularity. He presented stories about western mining towns populated by colorful gamblers, outlaws, and scandalous women. Thereafter editors—ever sensitive to public taste—demanded, and writers such as Harte, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Kate Chopin, Joel Chandler Harris, and Mark Twain provided, regional sto-
Military realism and naturalism were products of the nineteenth century, their final triumph came in the twentieth century, with the popular and critical successes of such writers as Edwin Arlington Robinson, Willa Cather, Sherwood Anderson, Robert Frost, and William Faulkner. The triumph of realism, even in the twentieth century, did not bring an end to the extremes of romanticism, for romanticism in all its varieties still abounds in popular novels, movies, and television shows with heroes and heroines of unspotted virtue and dazzling accomplishments. Nonetheless, realism, with all its limitations and in all of its forms, permanently transformed American culture by depicting a “real” America, by commemorating the lives of ordinary men and women, and by celebrating the commonplace truths of a new land and a new people.

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman 1852–1930

In the years following the Civil War, derelict villages and abandoned farms marked the landscape of rural New England. Cheap land in the West and the lure of jobs in growing industrial centers to the south drew off the stronger, younger, and more adventurous. Those who remained behind often lacked the opportunity or the will to leave. A substantial portion were unmarried women. They were so numerous that the strong-willed New England spinster, the stern old maid, became a public institution, the object of poems, jokes, songs, and newspaper cartoons. It was just such women, waiting idly in fading New England villages, who became the subjects of Mary Wilkins Freeman’s best stories.

Until her marriage in middle age to Dr. Charles Freeman of Metuchen, New Jersey, Mary Eleanor Wilkins lived in Randolph, Massachusetts, and in Brattleboro, Vermont, small towns in decline, with empty stores along the main street and silent mills along the river. She was in frail health as a girl, and in her solitude she turned naturally to reading. As a teenager she wrote and published a number of poems for children, but she decided to make writing her career when she was in her early twenties and needed a vocation to help support her family. Her love of books was equaled by a curiosity about the towns of Vermont and Massachusetts. She studied their histories, their distinctive buildings, and the dialect and character of their people.

In 1881 she received ten dollars for a poem published in a children’s magazine. Her first book was a collection of children’s verse, Decorative Plaques (1883). Her first success in writing fiction for adults came in 1882 with “A Shadow Story,” which won a prize of fifty dollars from a Boston weekly. Two years later, when Harper’s Bazar accepted “Two Old Lovers” for publication, her career was launched, and her stories were soon in demand by editors of major magazines. She drew the admiration of such literary notables as James Russell Lowell and Henry James. Her stories were republished in England, and from France came requests for permission to translate her stories into French. In all she published thirty-nine volumes. Her best were A Humble Romance and Other Stories (1887), A New England Nun and Other Stories (1891), tales of stolid village and farm people in remote New England.

Mary Wilkins Freeman aimed “to preserve in literature” the “old and probably disappearing ways of New England character.” Her stories mix elements of romance, realism, and naturalism. She wrote of strong-minded people whose individualism earns them wrath of friends and village neighbors. She depicted the pinched and stagnant lives of hesitant lovers whose endlessly prolonged courtships are destined never to conclude in marriage. Her work is frequently compared to that of Sarah Orne Jewett. Both were spinster ladies, describing the lives of the men and women of small-town New England. Both have been identified with the local color tradition in American literature—writers whose stories and sketches emphasize the characteristic types, customs, settings, and speech of a region. Both were identified with the local color tradition in American literature—writers whose stories and sketches emphasize the characteristic types, customs, settings, and speech of a region.

Yet Mary Freeman’s writing was less concerned with locale, more concerned with character. Her writing had a sharp, ironic edge to it that Sarah Orne Jewett seldom attempted. Freeman’s stories are written with greater detachment, less sympathetic musings at the dilemmas of her characters. Her view could be harsh, critical, unsparring. Lacking the tender lovingness that Sarah Orne Jewett exhibited for the people she described, Mary Wilkins Freeman achieved a realism that is modern eyes more clearly portrays the strength and folly of the people she lived among, a realism that justly brought her recognition as “the most truthful recorder in fiction of New England life.”


Text: A New England Nun and Other Stories, 1891.

A New England Nun

It was late in the afternoon, and the light was waning. There was a difference in the look of the tree shadows out in the yard. Somewhere in the distance cows were lowing and a little bell was tinkling; now and then a farm wagon tilted by, and the dust flew; some blue-shirted laborers with shovel over their shoulders plodded past; little swarms of flies were dancing up and down before the people’s faces in the soft air. There seemed to be a gentle stir arising over everything for the mere sake of subsidence—a very premonition of rest and hush and night.

This soft diurnal commotion was over Louisa Ellis also. She had been peacefully sewing at her sitting-room window all the afternoon. Now she quilted her needle carefully into her work, which she folded precisely, and laid in a basket with her thimble and thread and scissors. Louisa Ellis could not remember that ever in her life she had mislaid one of these little female auxiliaries, which had become, from long use and constant association, a very part of her personality.

1Daily.