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Carys Crossen

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A SHADOW THAT SHOULDN'T BE THERE: NEW ENGLAND, SPIRITUALISM AND THE FEMININE IN MARY WILKINS FREEMAN'S *THE WIND IN THE ROSEBUSH*

Carys Crossen

Independent Scholar, Manchester, UK

ABSTRACT

The New England writer, Mary Wilkins Freeman, wrote mostly literary fiction but also produced a collection of supernatural tales, titled *The Wind in the Rose–Bush* (1903). The stories all feature familiar New England settings, but they also contain numerous Gothic, ghostly elements. In her supernatural stories, Freeman focuses on women in uncertain societal positions – spinsters, orphans and widows – and complicates and interrogates both the domestic sphere and women's place within it. Simultaneously, spiritualism was wildly popular throughout the USA during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The summoning of spirits was an egalitarian practice, with women often functioning as the mouthpiece for the "spirits". The ghosts in Freeman's stories also serve the function of focusing attention on women side–lined by society and giving a voice to the voiceless (especially neglected children). This article will examine the role of ghosts and the supernatural in relation to women in Freeman's stories, and how the feminine connection with the spirit world serves the same function as spiritualism in giving a voice to women and the dead. The article will pose the question: do Freeman's stories empower women, give them a voice, merely reinforce gender roles or some amalgamation of all three?

KEYWORDS Mary Wilkins Freeman; spiritualism; New England; ghosts; the feminine

Mary Wilkins Freeman led a life that was, to our knowledge, devoid of supernatural content, and for the most part her fiction is the same. One of New England's most eminent and prolific writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, her reputation has endured primarily because of her depictions of frustrated lives, particularly those of women, in texts such as *A New England Nun and Other Stories* (1891) and *Pembroke* (1894). However, Freeman also wrote a collection of ghost stories, *The Wind in the Rose-bush and Other Stories of the Supernatural*, first published in

CONTACT Carys Crossen crossen_c@outlook.com

1903. The tales in this collection share numerous traits with Freeman's other published fiction: a New England setting, anxieties about the position of women in nineteenth and early twentieth-century American society (with particular concern about the demands and sacrifices of motherhood) and an emphasis on the social and familial bonds that sustain communities. However, the stories in *The Wind in the Rose-bush* represent a departure in their use of ghosts and uncanny events to explore these themes. As Monika Elbert and Wendy Ryden comment, "in Mary Wilkins Freeman's ghost stories, domesticity and maternity are embroiled in uncanny hauntings that reveal troubled gender roles for the protagonists".[1] All the stories are set in small New England towns, take place in confined locations (frequently within a single household) and almost always focus on women, with neglectful or absent mothers often the fulcrum for the frightening events that occur.

Freeman's fiction contains feminist elements. Kate Gardner notes her preference for heroines who are often elderly or middle-aged, unmarried, unbeautiful and poor who rebel against the patriarchal structures than govern their lives and assert their sense of self despite fierce opposition.[2] Freeman gives them a voice, telling their stories and emphasising their subversive power. Her work is broadly similar in this respect to the craze for Spiritualism that took hold in Europe and America in the late nineteenth century. Spiritualism, which originated in the USA, was "a new religious movement aimed at proving the immortality of the soul by establishing communication with the spirits of the dead".[3] Methods of communication included seances, spirit photography and automatic writing (which was writing without conscious thought). Although Freeman's characters in her supernatural fiction seldom wish to speak to the dead – the dead are often a source of terror to be shunned rather than encouraged – other aspects of Spiritualism resonate with her fiction. Ann Braude notes that "not all feminists were Spiritualists, but all Spiritualists advocated women's rights … "[4] In Alex Owen's seminal study *The Darkened Room*, she notes that Spiritualism in Victorian England was "a movement that privileged women and took them seriously".[5]

Although Owen's examination is focused on England rather than America, she also observes that Spiritualism officially started in mid-nineteenth-century America "in a region that had already witnessed decades of religious revivalism, sectarianism, and social experimentation".[6] Though Owen does not name the region, Spiritualism in America originated (or at least is rumoured to have done so) in rural New York State. Christine Ferguson asserts that the majority of accounts of the Spiritualism movement commence with the story of the Fox sisters, adolescent girls from New York State who came to prominence after a series of apparently supernatural happenings, first in their original home and then in their new lodgings.[7] Although not New England in the strictest sense, New York State – and thus

Spiritualism's original stomping ground – is remarkably close to the setting for the vast majority of Freeman's fiction.[8]

As a movement that supported feminism and originated near to New England, reaching its zenith in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Freeman was actively writing, it would be remarkable if there was not some dovetailing of the themes found in Spiritualism and Freeman's supernatural fiction, such as her short stories "Luella Miller", "The Shadows on the Wall" and "The Lost Child". This article will examine the similarities between Spiritualism and Freeman's paranormal stories and explore how extensive they are. It will also study the shared New England origins of Spiritualism and Freeman's fiction and whether this has resulted in common themes and imagery. And it will also ask the question: does Freeman's use of the supernatural – and the elements her texts share with Spiritualism – empower women, give them a voice, merely reinforce gender roles or are some amalgamation of all three?

The Female (Feminist?) History of Spiritualism

New England, excepting possibly New Orleans, is the most haunted region in America. From the Salem Witch Trials of 1692 to contemporary depictions of the supernatural in films such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *The Witch* (2015), witches, ghosts and monsters have lurked in New England popular culture and urban legend since the first Europeans arrived on its shores. As the citations here suggest, witchcraft and witches play a prominent role in this haunted history:

> The history of witchcraft in America has been dated back to the 1600s, most notably in New England due to the Salem Witch Trials. Since then, the phenomena around it, technological and scientific changes in the region have caused its reappearance in the 1900s.[9]

The Salem Witch Trials are perhaps the most famous witchcraft trials in Western history, and have had a lasting impact on both popular culture and New England society, ultimately leading to legal reform in the region and the decline of Puritanism as a moral force (though the region is still strongly associated with Puritan virtues such as hard work, thriftiness and self-discipline).[10] Salem itself has become a byword for witchcraft and spookiness in popular culture, ranging from the serious (Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, written as a critique of McCarthyism) to the fantastical (the 1993 cult film *Hocus Pocus*, in which three witches executed in seventeenth century Salem are resurrected and wreak havoc in the 1990s). It is noteworthy that of the nineteen people executed for witchcraft in Salem, not counting those who died in prison or under torture, fourteen were female, five were male. Witches are of course typically gendered as female in written fiction

and wider discourses. Although Freeman's work does not contain any witches, or at least no-one who is explicitly identified as such, her women characters exhibit a strong connection to the supernatural, whilst her male characters seldom demonstrate any awareness of paranormal events or uncanniness, often to their detriment. Women in Freeman's stories are particularly sensitive to ghosts, often perceiving them or communicating with them where others cannot, as I shall explore throughout this article.

Although seances and spirit rapping, which are common strategies for mediums attempting to communicate with the dead, are absent from *The Wind in the Rose-bush*, Freeman seems to have been aware of Spiritualism and its practise. This is confirmed by another of her short stories, "A Modern Dragon" (1887). The story focuses on a young man, David, who falls in love with a girl named Almira King. However, David's frail yet domineering mother forbids their marriage on the grounds that Almira's mother is a Spiritualist. Though Mrs King claims she was never a devout Spiritualist, only dabbling in it after the death of her husband, it is not until she mysteriously withers and dies that David finds the courage to defy his mother and promise to marry Almira. The story does not feature seances, ghosts, or messages from beyond the grave. However, it is implied there is something unnatural about Mrs King's precipitous decline in health, and it is suggested that it is self-inflicted, with Mrs King willing herself into illness and death for her child's sake. Her demise, fortunately or otherwise, removes the obstacles to her daughter's marrying David. Feminine weakness and poor health are recurring themes in nineteenth-century literature and will be explored in more detail later in this article. But what is intriguing about the story is its emphasis on female power. What starts as a story about star-crossed lovers rapidly turns into a ferocious struggle between two matriarchs, before concluding with the realisation of the power of love between a mother and her daughter, rather than between man and wife. "I will never love him as much as I did you. I promise you", Almira declares at her mother's deathbed.[11]

Mrs King is one of numerous women in Freeman's short fiction who do not abide by the tenets of their society and yet embody ideal feminine characteristics – rather like the Spiritualists themselves. Alex Owen comments that "wifely domesticity and sexual respectability remained prominent aspects of the spiritualist feminine ideal", and while the movement remained committed to women's rights, "spiritualists still identified closely with the image of 'the precious little woman'".[12] Mrs King is described as a "witch-mother" by Mary R. Reichardt, noted in her village for her eccentricity and for taking on traditionally masculine work such as ploughing the fields.[13] Nonetheless, her implied self-sacrifice to allow her daughter to marry is feminine in the extreme by nineteenth-century standards, when selflessness and self-abnegation, coupled with devotion to one's family,

were the standards imposed upon women in both Europe and the USA in response to unprecedented socio-political changes that challenged traditional gender roles.[14] This tension between fulfilling an ideal feminine role and yet defying public opinion and embodying power (even if it is the power to die) is a recurring theme in Freeman's fiction. Interestingly, it mirrors the tension between the acceptable femininity and dangerous female power of Spiritualism.

As noted in the introduction, Spiritualism arguably has feminine origins. Although the story of the Fox Sisters has widely been decried as a hoax since Spiritualism fell out of fashion, it proved the starting point for a movement that spread across the globe and in which women played a remarkably prominent role – not least the oldest Fox sister, Leah.[15] In 1848, in rural New York state, the Fox family began to be plagued by disruptive noises: taps, cracks and knockings. The noises were at their loudest and most frequent in the presence of the two youngest daughters, Maggie and Kate. Word spread and curious neighbours besieged the house, convinced paranormal phenomena was taking place and that the noises were being made by restless spirits. Their sister Leah, summoned home by the pandemonium, quickly realised the "raps" were a prank being played by Maggie and Kate, who made the sounds by cracking the joints of their toes. Nonetheless, Leah espied an entrepreneurial opportunity and began charging people for attending seances with her sisters. Despite a healthy amount of scepticism directed at the sisters, their fame spread and "by 1850, 'rapping' had become a nationwide craze".[16] Although the Fox sisters later repudiated Spiritualism and admitted their "raps" and connection with the spirit world was a hoax, Spiritualism remained a popular phenomenon in the USA throughout the nineteenth century and at the beginnings of the twentieth.[17]

The story is remarkable, not merely because of Kate and Maggie's acting abilities and the credulousness of their audiences, but because of Leah's actions, without which Spiritualism may still have evolved, but in a different form. Spiritualism not only originated with women and girls but was brought to public attention by a female impresario who realised its financial potential before any men did so. As spiritualism spread throughout the USA and Britain, women retained their central role at the centre of the movement. Alex Owen observes that women were generally considered to play a vital role in spiritualist groups.[18] They formed spiritualist groups, served as mediums to connect with the spirit world and occasionally found fame as performers to wider audiences in theatres and other public settings. This was remarkable in the context of women's status in Britain and America in the late nineteenth century. Although first wave feminism and the campaign for women's suffrage were on the rise on both sides of the Atlantic during the latter half of the 1800s, women's rights, legal standing

and access to the public sphere were still severely restricted.[19] British women over thirty would not be enfranchised until 1918; American women had to wait still longer. Although more careers were made available to women in the latter half of the nineteenth century, notably in the arts and education (a development of some significance for Freeman's fiction) Kathryn Gleadle observes that the majority of middle and upper-class women continued to participate mostly, if not wholly, in "traditional" – and unpaid – activities such as homemaking, child care and charitable work.[20]

Spiritualism, with its emphasis on female participation, was therefore an opportunity for women to attain a voice and power, albeit in a limited capacity. Private seances could take place within the home and therefore did not necessarily violate the boundaries of respectability for middle and upper-class women – although Spiritualism was not necessarily considered a wholly respectable pursuit. Marlene Tromp argues that Spiritualism "broke all rules of decency and decorum in spite of the fact that it was nurtured and developed in the drawing rooms of the prosperous middle classes".[21] Nonetheless, this does not seem to have deterred female practitioners, with women serving as both adherents and mediums. Another aspect of Spiritualism that was strangely feminine within the context of the era was its emphasis on communicating with the dead. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their seminal text *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) argue that Victorian women were pressured to metaphorically (and sometimes literally) kill themselves owing to what they term "an aesthetic cult of ladylike fragility and delicate beauty",[22] something that is demonstrated in "A Modern Dragon" when the formerly hale and healthy Mrs King pines away and dies to allow her daughter to marry. Gilbert and Gubar suggest that women in Britain and the USA during the nineteenth century came under pressure to feign ill-heath and weakness, or in extreme cases actually induce it, owing to the cult of the Angel in the House (which required women to be passive, self-sacrificing, silent and almost otherworldly).[23]

Such a description is strongly reminiscent of the eponymous Luella of Freeman's short story "Luella Miller", one of the better-known stories from *The Wind in the Rose-bush*. Luella (described by the exacting narrator Lydia Anderson, her long-time neighbour) is a preternaturally graceful, appealing woman who is utterly helpless and incompetent at taking care of herself or others. Lydia describes her as a "doll-baby",[24] while other characters refer to her as a "poor little lamb"[25] and "a poor abused woman".[26] She is also prone to bouts of listless ill-health, in which she pines and withers away when she has no-one to care for her. However, she has a calamitous effect on anyone who *does* wait on her. A succession of maids, companions and her first husband and a subsequent fiancé look after Luella and each one gradually wastes away and dies, apparently of exhaustion. Eventually, no-one

in her small New England town is willing to take the risk of serving Luella, and she dies. Lydia, who alone had the courage to sit with Luella at her death, espies her ghost, presumably bound for the afterlife, being carried along by all those who took care of her during her lifetime.

Helpless, childlike, frequently an invalid and rarely venturing beyond the boundaries of her house and front yard, Luella is on the surface the epitome of the Victorian Angel in the House. Freeman lingers over descriptions of her golden hair and beautiful clothes, her "pretty way" of speaking and the devotion she seems to inspire in others (save the narrator, who strongly suspects Luella of feigning hysteria and helplessness for sympathy). However, Freeman subverts the ideal in her story through her presentation of Luella herself. Luella will never be a true Angel in the House as she is completely self-centred. At one point in the story, upon learning her latest helpmeet is stricken down, Luella's only concern is that there is no-one to make her morning coffee. Moreover, although Luella's passivity is an acceptable, ladylike quality by early twentieth-century standards, Luella carries it to an unacceptable degree. She is a poor housekeeper and unable to perform "feminine" chores such as cooking and cleaning with any efficiency – Freeman even subverts gender expectations by having her first husband do the housekeeping for Luella. Strongly reminiscent of Charles Dickens's "child-wife", Dora Spenlow of *David Copperfield* (1850), Luella is babyish in that she is entirely reliant on others for survival, in both a practical and some strange supernatural sense. Moreover, although Luella has the requisite feminine association with death and illness, her apparent leeching of health and vitality from other people mark her as something supernatural. When several of her companions have died, her neighbours begin to speculate that "the time of witchcraft has come again", a phrase that explicitly invokes New England's witch-ridden history.[27] Gina Wisker goes further, arguing that Luella is "possibly the first American female fictional vampire".[28] She identifies Luella as part of a tradition of "self-centred, duplicitous, voracious" women who are desperate for eternal youth and beauty.[29]

Luella's connection with death is evidently a strong one, as a total of seven people who take care of her die and an unfortunate eighth is driven mad. However, it is not the sort of feminine association with death glorified by late-nineteenth century art and culture. Luella does not actually connect with the spirit world or fade away romantically and piously as a slew of nineteenth-century fictional invalids such as Beth March of *Little Women* and Helen Burns in *Jane Eyre* did before her, causing as little trouble as possible to those around them. Like the Fox sisters, Luella exploits her devotees. But unlike the Fox sisters, Luella quite literally works her followers to death. As with Mrs King in "A Modern Dragon", Luella embodies a curious amalgamation of feminine fragility and a strong connection with death, and a compelling power over other people. Freeman portrays tension between ideal

womanhood and its subversion: the character of Luella Miller embodies both. It is a conflict Freeman returns to numerous times in her supernatural stories.

Another recurring theme in Freeman's stories is motherhood, or the missed opportunities to become a mother. Neglected children feature prominently in "The Lost Ghost" and "The Wind in the Rose-bush", as do negligent and cruel mothers or stepmothers. Initially this appears to be a deviation from Spiritualism's main concerns. Motherhood does not feature prominently in the story of the Fox sisters (although the oldest sister arguably had a quasi-maternal role, stage-managing her younger siblings and advancing their careers) and motherhood seems to have been incidental to Spiritualism in general. Mothers were not excluded or given prominence on the basis of their having children, an attitude in keeping with Spiritualism's feminist tendencies.[30] Nonetheless, motherhood was considered of paramount importance for women by American society during the nineteenth century. Mary McCartin Wearn observes that during the nineteenth century there was increased public attention on the sanctity of childhood, with women playing the key role in the formation of their children's characters and spiritual welfare. From being just one among several feminine duties, motherhood became the central role in women's lives.[31]

This expectation, of a life devoted to childrearing, is seldom fulfilled in Wilkins Freeman's supernatural stories – or else is realised in uncanny fashion, as in "The Lost Ghost". In this tale, a mother's neglect results in the death of her young daughter. The child's ghost lingers in the house where she died, searching ceaselessly for her mother. Later, two sisters purchase the house and take in boarders for a living and presumably encounter and grow familiar with the ghost-child whilst they are living there. One of them, Mrs Bird, is particularly affected by the plight of the ghost-child, and towards the end of the tale, her sister Mrs Dennison witnesses her outside, walking across the yard hand-in-hand with the little girl. Mrs Bird is found dead in her room moments later, suggesting that it was her ghost seen walking with the ghost-girl, having accepted the role of her mother and dying to achieve this. Mrs Bird is childless herself, and is widowed by the start of the story, which is recounted by one of their former boarders, Mrs Meserve, long after the events transpire. The narrator observes that "she [Mrs Bird] was most heartbroken because she couldn't do anything for it as she could have done for a live child".[32] The ending resolves the child's ceaseless longing for her mother, providing her with a loving, devoted maternal figure. The childless Mrs Bird meanwhile fulfils the maternal role denied her in life by assuming the role of the child's mother when she dies.

"The Lost Ghost" is at pains to stress that there is a penalty to be paid for shunning maternal responsibilities, and also spousal responsibilities. The

little girl's natural mother, it is eventually revealed, was having an affair with a wealthy man and cuckolding her husband, and it was her running off with her lover and leaving the girl behind that led to the latter starving to death. The neglectful mother is penalised for her transgression when the child's grief-stricken father hunts her down and fatally shoots her before disappearing, with his ultimate fate left unclear. However, the story emphasises the greater wickedness of the mother's maternal dereliction. The unfortunate husband and father, despite killing his wife, never undergoes any punishment for the murder (unless his grief is taken into account) and the story apparently considers his actions justifiable. The neglectful mother, more interested in dress and jewellery than her daughter, is evocative of the wicked stepmother in the fairy tale "Cinderella". She is a poor housekeeper, and the child is forced to do the housework as best she can after a succession of maids quit their jobs due to poor treatment. In short, the unnamed woman (she is only ever referred to as "the wife, the mother" or "the woman") is an anti-woman, who fails every standard of nineteenth-century womanhood. This is emphasised by her desertion of the domestic sphere and her self-absorption, with her prettiness and love of baubles and material wealth replacing the love and self-sacrificing tendencies expected of nineteenth-century homemakers. Such characteristics are epitomised in famous characters such as the saintly Marmee of *Little Women* and Agnes Wickfield of *David Copperfield*. Mrs Bird arguably possesses the same desirable qualities. The narrator observes that she "always seemed to be the happiest when she was doing something to make other folks happy and comfortable".[33] And despite her childlessness, Mrs Bird makes the ultimate sacrifice in offering up her life to care for the child, fulfilling the expectation of motherly selflessness.

However, this is not presented as wholly positive within the story. Her sister opines that Mrs Bird was too caring and self-forfeiting: "'it's lucky Abby [Mrs Bird] never had any children', she [Mrs Denison] said, 'for she would have spoiled them'".[34] And even the narrator comments "Mrs Bird was always very easy to put in the wrong".[35] Although the story arguably concludes to Mrs Bird's satisfaction, as she has the opportunity to become a mother, it is a conclusion that kills her. This tension, however subtle, is characteristic of Freeman's female characters. Jeffrey Weinstock, in an analysis of Freeman's fiction, suggests that "these stories demonstrate yet another way in which American women put Gothic conventions to use in order to express anxieties about the circumscribed roles for women in nineteenth and early twentieth-century American society".[36] Despite the focus on the ghostly child, Freeman establishes a very limited setting for her tale, which consists solely of two houses: the house where the now-married narrator lives as a wife, and the house in which Mrs Bird and Mrs Dennison live and take in boarders. It is worth noting that neither house contains any

men: although the narrator's husband, Mr Meserve, is presumably still alive, he never appears within the story. The narrator, Mrs Meserve, is unmarried when living with Mrs Bird and Mrs Dennison, both of whom are widowed. Mrs Bird and Mrs Dennison, unable to fulfil the role of wife and with no child to dedicate themselves to (at least, none that are alive) are left impoverished by the deaths of their husbands. The narrator explicitly states that Mrs Dennison had no money, and while Mrs Bird has a limited amount, it is insufficient to support herself and her sister. However, social constraints ensure that they have no means of making a living other than providing a temporary home to other unsettled people. The house, a literal prison for the neglected child, becomes a metaphorical prison for the adult women who purchase it. As noted, no scenes take place outside the house and its garden, and Mrs Bird and Mrs Dennison apparently have no other occupations than the traditionally feminine ones of homemaking and cooking. Although the future Mrs Meserve arrives to live with the sisters to take up paid employment, her job is teaching at a local school, one of very few respectable professions available to women in late nineteenth-century America. Moreover, it is a job involving the care and instruction of children, another occupation closely linked with the feminine.

These straitened circumstances make all three women vulnerable to the machinations, however innocent, of the ghostly child. They have no means of escaping the haunting and must endure it until Mrs Bird sacrifices her life. Although not malevolent, the ghost child gains power through the bonds imposed by conventional, respectable womanhood. Her natural mother, a "bad" woman by the standards of the time, is geographically mobile and unconstrained by domesticity. It is small wonder her child cannot find her, either in life or the afterlife. Instead, a substitute mother must be found – and in a house filled with women, who are unable to find sanctuary elsewhere, it is only a matter of time before someone steps into the breach.

This intertwining of the domestic and the supernatural is yet another aspect of Freeman's fiction that demonstrates similarities to Spiritualism. Although the haunted house is a staple of horror and the Gothic and not necessarily linked to the spiritualist movement, Spiritualism placed great emphasis on women as homemakers. Also, Spiritualism could be conducted within the home and thus operated in a traditionally feminine sphere. A woman, married or single, could participate in seances and "rapping" without violating the boundaries of decorum. Bret E. Carroll observes that

> According to the ideology of domesticity which pervaded middle-class culture in Victorian America, the home was a warm, nurturing, pious and friendly environment that served as a refuge from the impersonal, amoral and competitive commercial world outside of it. Spiritualists similarly understood the spirit world as the moral reverse of earthly society, a utopian place of cooperative living and a permanent refuge from the tribulations of an ephemeral terrestrial existence.[37]

However, Freeman's fiction, whilst using the home as supernatural location, allowing women to reach and be reached by the spirit world, does not uphold this benign domestic ideology. Although the sisters in "The Lost Child" do their best to create a warm, welcoming environment within their house, the home is a source of terror due to the presence of the ghost. "It was lucky I wasn't nervous, or I never could have stayed there, much as I liked the place", confesses the narrator.[38]

A similar threatening atmosphere is evoked in the titular room of another house in the story "The Southwest Chamber". The scenario is similar to "The Lost Child": two sisters in a large, rundown house (inherited rather than bought in this instance) take in boarders in order to make ends meet. However, the malevolent ghost of a deceased aunt makes her presence felt, especially in the southwest chamber she died in. Unlike the ghost-child she cannot be appeased by love, and eventually frightens her nieces into selling the house. Although the houses in both stories serve as a conduit to the supernatural and the spirit world, the domestic in Freeman's fiction is a trap, not a refuge. In both tales, the inhabitants have invested all their money in the haunted houses, and to leave would mean financial ruin. The house in "The Southwest Chamber", even before the ghost makes its presence felt, is "a doubtful blessing. There was not a cent with which to pay for repairs and taxes and insurance".[39] The only escapes are leaving the home, or alarmingly, through death. Nonetheless, the conclusion of "The Lost Child" arguably upholds the vision of the spirit world as a sanctuary, as Mrs Bird and the child are seen walking happily together. The ghost of the child never appears again following Mrs Bird's death, suggesting that now she has found a mother, the child's spirit is at peace.

The tension Freeman creates in her limited domestic settings implies a critique of the restraints placed on women in the late nineteenth century. Few of the respectable women in the stories are able to leave the home to pursue careers or to travel – geographic mobility is the prerogative of "bad" women such as the adulterous wife and neglectful mother of "The Lost Child". Even the women with employment outside the home, such as the schoolteachers who come to board in the haunted homes in "The Lost Child" and "The Southwest Chamber", are in a profession closely connected with childcare, and one that apparently does not generate sufficient resources to allow them to live independently. Interestingly, organised religion does not play a significant role in Freeman's ghost stories: it is unknown if any of the characters in "The Lost Child" or "The Southwest Chamber" attend church. Mrs Dennison in the former teaches Sunday School, while Mrs Bird has an interest in missionary work (both respectable feminine occupations) but there is never any suggestion that their Christian faith can serve either as explanation or defence regarding the ghost-child. In "The Southwest Chamber", there is a scene in which a minister attempts to

enter the infamous chamber – only to be barred from it by an unseen force. Despite his position within the Church, his masculinity and his comparative freedom and independence compared to the women of the house, he is powerless against the supernatural force residing there. The spirit world in Freeman's texts is resistant to all human interference or opposition, and although it does occasionally promise respite from a tumultuous and cruel living world, it is equally likely to prove malevolent. Caught between a potentially threatening spirit world and the limits of domesticity, Freeman's women are doubly entrapped. And they are further restricted by the locations of the stories: all of Freeman's stories are set in the haunted environs of New England. What implications does the New England setting have for both the women and ghosts of Freeman's fiction?

New England, Hauntings and Spiritualism in Freeman's Fiction

Charles L. Crowe observes that "after the South, New England is the most evoked site of American Gothic".[40] I have already explored the origins of Spiritualism in a region which, if not New England in the strictest sense, is very close to it. Moreover, New England is the site of some of the most infamous witch trials in history: those held in Salem in 1692. The Salem Witch Trials exert a powerful hold over popular culture to this day, providing the setting for Arthur Miller's seminal play *The Crucible* (1952) and its 1996 film adaptation. More recently, the spectre of Salem was invoked by the TV series *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013) in which the witches forming the titular coven are descendants of those hanged in Salem. However, there are other beliefs and events haunting New England. Faye Ringel describes one of the most morbid as follows:

> The darker aspects of Gothic medievalism are exemplified in New England's obsession with the dead … archaeological evidence from Griswold, Connecticut had confirmed that bodies were exhumed and mutilated to prevent them from returning as vampires.[41]

Ringel notes that the New England vampirism is a possible inspiration for the life-draining character of Luella Miller in Freeman's short story, as Gina Wisker also argues. She then goes on to describe how, when Freeman was active as a writer, "popular magazines of the 1890s portrayed rural New England as a backwater whose population had become inbred and sinister".[42] With such strong Gothic and supernatural influences, perhaps it is surprising Freeman did not produce *more* fiction featuring hauntings, vampires and communications with the dead.

Freeman's fiction is set almost exclusively in New England, which marks her out as a regionalist writer in the view of most critics. "Regionalist" in this context is defined as what Sherrie A. Inness and Diana Royer refer to as "local colour", stories produced by American authors at the turn of the nineteenth

and early twentieth century that incorporated authentic local dialogue, dress and customs, actual geographical locations and characters who could conceivably exist in real life.[43] Inness and Royer note that some critics dismiss regionalist writing as a less serious form, suggesting that it exploited stereotypes and paid attention only to appearances. However, I would argue that despite the obvious New English settings and dialect in her ghost stories, Freeman is never anything other than serious in depicting her setting. I have already argued that Freeman uses the setting of the haunted house and the exaggerated helplessness of the character Luella Miller to critique the limited roles of women in late nineteenth-century New England. Jennifer Ansley makes the argument that "regionalist fiction, such as Wilkins Freeman's, explicitly critiques the dominant discourses that attempt to approach questions of space, kinship, labour and gender during this period".[44] She suggests that such fiction takes a particular interest in people living on the boundaries between past and present, indoors and outdoors, the rural and the city centre – and in the short stories I analyse here, the boundary between the everyday, living world and the supernatural, ghostly world.

From the Salem Witch trials onwards, New England has exhibited a fascination with the idea of death and what follows, as well as the concept of magic and witchcraft. Spiritualism is one of the most obvious manifestations of this, but the widespread belief in witches, vampires and ghosts also influences Freeman's fiction. However, I would argue that it is Spiritualism and the possibility of communing with the dead that has had the strongest impact upon her texts. Monika Elbert and Wendy Ryden, in an analysis of American Gothic, suggest that "the most essential trope of Gothic in New England is necromancy, the true 'secret sin' of the region".[45] Spiritualism, a worldwide phenomenon, was hardly a secret sin: nonetheless, in stories such as "The Shadows on the Wall" the supernatural is depicted as something almost shameful, that should not be discussed. The story takes place in the Glynn household, comprised of three sisters and their brother, Henry. The youngest brother, Edward, has died shortly before the story commences, after a fierce quarrel with Henry about money and Edward's share of the family inheritance. Although nothing is spelled out in the text, it is heavily implied that Henry, a doctor, had a role in Edward's death – Edward suffered mysterious stomach pains before he died and there is no autopsy performed. Following Edward's death, a strange shadow appears on the study wall, as though cast by a man standing in the room. The shadow proves stubbornly resistant to all efforts to dispel it, with no lights having any effect upon it. Despite this, first Caroline, one of the sisters, and later Henry, make strenuous efforts to dismiss it as cast by something in the room. The subject is avoided until the climax of the story, when *two* shadows appear upon the study wall – followed moments later by a telegram with the news that Henry has died.

Although the New England setting is not made explicit within the story, which takes place entirely within the Glynn house, the presence of the shadow – and by implication Edward's spirit – invokes the concept of necromancy, the "sin" mostly closely associated with the region. In a recounting of the final argument between the brothers, their sister Rebecca repeats Edward's defiant statement that "he would stay here as long as he lived and afterward too, if he was a mind to … "[46] Although at first glance an angry statement merely intended to provoke his brother, subsequent events cast it in a different light. Edward almost invokes his own spirit, allowing himself to linger beyond death in the household. Later, when discussing their brother's untimely death – all the while hinting that it might not have been from natural causes – Freeman writes that "the three sisters' souls seemed to meet on one common ground of terrified understanding through their eyes".[47] Although they are not holding a séance, the implied communion of souls in this sequence is strongly suggestive of Spiritualism, of trying to connect with and comprehend the dead. The sisters' shared "understanding" regarding their brother's death, which is never spoken aloud, is forbidden knowledge that has the potential to be dangerous if they reveal it. The "secret sin" is both the implied murder and the returning spirit: the knowledge of both must either be suppressed or explained away.

The dark secrets at the heart of an outwardly respectable family is yet another trope common in (though not exclusively) the regionalist fiction of New England. Charles L. Crowe, when analysing the fiction of the region, comments that

> Americans also idealised the New England small town as a locus of traditional democratic virtues and simple honest living. This idealisation can be reversed to Gothic effect, the apparent simplicity, so appealing to busy urbanites, concealing the uncanny secret or threat.[48]

This is an analysis that could be applied to any of Freeman's supernatural tales, all of which focus on apparently honest individuals with straightforward lives becoming enmeshed in the paranormal, usually in the form of a ghost but arguably also a vampire in the case of "Luella Miller". However, it is particularly appropriate regarding "The Shadows on the Wall", in which the uncanny threat (the menacing shadow) and the uncanny secret (the possible murder of Edward) are combined to eerie effect. Another example can be found in the story "The Vacant Lot", in which the Townsend family move from running a small-town inn called the Blue Leopard to property in Boston (very much a New England city). They are driven away by mysterious events, including strange shadows, a brooding atmosphere and the breaking of all the mirrors in the house, something Mrs Townsend declares is "a sign of death".[49] When quizzing the estate agent about the property, Mr Townsend learns that it once belonged to a person with the

surname "Gaston", and recalls that someone named Gaston was murdered in the Blue Leopard, with their killer never apprehended.

Despite their outward respectability, or at least their efforts to conform to society's expectations, Freeman's characters, her New England citizens, often exist on the metaphorical margins of their towns and villages. The Townsends run an inn for example, and so have a constant stream of strangers coming and going, rather than a network of friends and family. As I have already noted, Freeman's fiction tends to focus on women in precarious social and financial positions: they are unmarried, or widowed, and none are especially prosperous. Even the women who have a masculine protector, such as in "The Shadow on the Wall" where Henry Glynn reigns as family patriarch, are vulnerable. Not for nothing do the Glynn sisters enter in a conspiracy of silence when Edward suddenly dies. Freeman's work also features numerous neglected or forgotten children, who like the unmarried or widowed women they share the text with are worrisomely dependent on others for survival. In many instances, the simple honest living regarded as emblematic of the region is unobtainable – the women who do attempt to earn their own living encounter numerous obstacles, both mundane and supernatural. There are few careers available to them and in *The Wind in the Rose-bush* ghosts and other paranormal phenomena manifest and trouble the women and children who are also at the mercy of a society that strictly limits the feminine sphere. The sisters in "The Lost Child" are haunted by the ghost of a little girl, who while not malevolent is nonetheless disturbing, and a dark presence haunts the home in "The Southwest Chamber". It is perhaps small wonder that children and women are placed in similar, vulnerable positions in Freeman's fiction. Although single women in nineteenth-century America had *some* legal standing, e.g. they were permitted to buy and sell property or initiate lawsuits, for the most part, married or unmarried, their rights and freedoms were severely curtailed. Single women were unable to vote or hold public office, while married women lost all rights and had no legal identity separate from that of their husbands.[50] The "traditional democratic virtues" referred to by Crowe as characteristic of New England are therefore largely absent from Freeman's texts. Women and children are at the mercy of forces greater and more powerful than themselves in all the stories, and these forces are seldom benevolent.

It could be argued that women gain power through their connection with the supernatural in Freeman's short fiction by following a specific New England tradition. It is worth remembering that both the Salem Witch trials and the rappings experienced by the Fox sisters, were prompted by teenage girls. The former occurred when several adolescent girls in Salem began to suffer from strange fits and bouts of hysteria, occurrences blamed on witchcraft, while the latter, from which Spiritualism originated, was

initiated by a prank played by the Fox sisters. In both instances formerly helpless and overlooked girls gained power. The afflicted girls of Salem became the centre of a sensational trial and their accusations were literally a matter of life and death for those unfortunate villagers alleged to be witches. The Fox sisters became celebrities and made their fortunes, although they eventually recanted their statements about communicating with the dead. But what of the women in Freeman's fiction? There are arguably some instances where her side-lined women attain power through paranormal means. The eponymous Luella Miller has an uncanny ability to make people fall in love with her and literally work themselves to death for her. By contrast, in "The Shadow on the Wall" the Glynn sisters are largely passive observers to the uncanny events that transpire, while the women in "The Southwest Chamber" are eventually hounded out of the house by a sinister apparition. What power women attain through the supernatural in Freeman's short stories is, like their mundane existences, strictly limited. Although Luella Miller drains the life out of numerous willing victims, eventually she is abandoned and left to die, while even the female ghosts in stories such as "The Lost Child" and "The Southwest Chamber" have the power to frighten, but are ultimately incapable of changing their grim fates.

Conclusion

Freeman's fiction shares many similarities with Spiritualism: women's special connection with death and the deceased, the emphasis on supernatural events taking place within respectable houses and the New England tradition of communing with the dead. There is also arguably a feminist element in common: Spiritualism granted women a voice, albeit a limited one, as mediums and leaders of seances. Likewise, *The Wind in the Rosebush* is noteworthy for the number of women who are permitted to tell their own stories. The women either function as narrator, as in "Luella Miller" or else the story focuses on women to the exclusion of men (excepting "The Vacant Lot", in which husband and father Mr Townsend is subject to the same supernatural disturbances as the women in his family). However, as this article has explored, women's roles and lives remain constricted in Freeman's fiction. They have little security unless married, cannot pursue careers of their own outside of teaching or taking in lodgers, and seldom venture beyond the boundaries of their houses. Yet I would suggest that although Freeman depicts her women as restricted, her texts do not reinforce these gender roles. Criticism of the nineteenth-century feminine ideal – passive, self-sacrificing, silent – is implicit throughout Freeman's tales. From the lovely but deadly Luella Miller, whose helplessness is so extreme it drains the energy of all who go near her, to Mrs Bird of "The Lost

Child", whose self-sacrificing tendencies result in her death, women who conform to nineteenth-century proscriptions for femininity seldom end well. There is a certain defiance also in Freeman's choice of subjects: widows, children and single women feature prominently. Although seldom empowered, they are spotlighted in a way seldom permitted in nineteenth-century American society.

Spiritualism likewise offered its female adherents limited power. Like the Fox sisters, they could supposedly commune with the dead and pass on messages. However, unlike the Fox sisters, most women practiced Spiritualism within the respectable confines of their home. Although a movement that privileged women and women's voices, Spiritualism had a limited effect on changing the legal and material parameters of women's lives during the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, as Ann Braude observes, Spiritualism as a movement took women seriously and "women were in fact equal to men within Spiritualist practice, polity and ideology".[51] This is yet another thing Spiritualism has in common with the work of Mary Wilkins Freeman: although writing about women, ghosts and New England, she always takes her subjects seriously. The result is a series of stories that, while not acknowledging or referring to Spiritualism, mirrors its central tenets and the role of women to a startling degree. Freeman may not have practiced Spiritualism, but the essence of the movement is apparent throughout her ghost stories, in their New England setting, and most of all in the voices of her female characters, who may be constrained, but like Freeman's restless apparitions, can never truly be suppressed.

Notes

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on Contributor

Carys Crossen is an independent scholar and qualified librarian, active as a researcher in Gothic studies, monster theory, gender theory and especially werewolves. Her monograph *The Nature of the Beast: Transformations of the Werewolf from the 1970s to the Twenty-First Century* has been published by University of Wales Press.