A New England Nun

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARY E. WILKINS FREEMAN

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman was born in Randolph, Massachusetts, a rural area south of Boston, to orthodox Congregationalist parents. Her family moved to Brattleboro, Vermont, for the prospect of more money, where Freeman worked as a housekeeper for a local family. She read much as a child and was given an education at Brattleboro High School and Mt. Holyoke Seminary. Freeman wrote poems in her youth—some published by a magazine in Boston—which helped solidify her interest in a career in writing. She found early literary and financial success when her short fiction was published in *Bazar* and *Harper's Monthly Magazine*. However, by 1883, Freeman's mother, father, and sister had all passed away, which left her without immediate family. She returned to Randolph at the age of 30. There, Freeman moved in with her childhood friend, Mary Wales, and Wales' parents, and they would live together for nearly two decades. Freeman enjoyed a sense of celebrity in her life, as her stories and books were widely read. At 49, Freeman (then Wilkins) married Dr. Charles Manning Freeman—prior to this, newspapers referred to Freeman as an "old maid," stigmatizing her for being unmarried. As Dr. Freeman began to drink more when liquor was outlawed during prohibition, their marriage disintegrated. Freeman was dedicated to writing until the end of her life, saying of her work "I feel that it is all I came into the world for." Freeman died in 1930.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"A New England Nun" was written near the turn of the 20th century, at a time when literature was moving away from the Romanticism of the mid-1800's into Realism. Freeman's stories seems to blend these styles with a reverence for nature and a detailed description of quotidian, daily life. "A New England Nun" is often referred to as a story that incorporates "local color," or Regionalism, as it situates the reader squarely within a rural New England town and details the nature in the area. Additionally, it is a story written during a time of great change in terms of gender—women's rights were a topic of debate and conversation, specifically women's economic freedom. This greatly influences "A New England Nun," since Louisa's financial autonomy is a necessary feature of her independent life.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"A New England Nun" was written around the same time that Sarah Orne Jewett wrote the short story "A White Heron." Though Jewett's story deals with the issues of industrialization vs. nature explicitly, and although Jewett writes stories set in Maine rather than Massachusetts, the two authors both write in a style that is grounded in place and the quotidian. Another work that is related to "A New England Nun" is Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth*—the novel is set in New York, but it similarly challenges gender roles and the notion of freedom for women in the US at the turn of the 19th century. Lastly, William Wordsworth's poem, "Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Room" shares a direct parallel with the themes of finding freedom and artistic liberation in constrains or confinement.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A New England Nun
- **When Written:** 1891
- **Where Written:** New England
- **When Published:** 1891
- **Literary Period:** Regionalism, Romanticism, Realism
- **Genre:** Short Story, Feminist Writing
- **Setting:** Rural New England
- **Climax:** When Louisa overhears Joe and Lily confess their feelings for each other.
- **Antagonist:** The institution of marriage
- **Point of View:** Omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

No Photos, Please: Mary E. Wilkins Freeman came to literary fame at a time when authors' likenesses were beginning to be shown alongside their work. Freeman didn't approve of this trend, though, and she would go as far as to refuse her publisher's request for a photograph. Still, her image was circulated in newspapers and magazines with her stories, largely without her consent.

Just For Laughs: Freeman had a flair for humor and irony that was sometimes overlooked. "A New England Nun" was written at a time when indirect humor was beginning to categorize a new movement of humor writing for women, which moved away from obvious humor.

PLOT SUMMARY

"A New England Nun" tells the story of Louisa Ellis, a woman engaged to be married to Joe Dagget but who feels ambivalent

because she has loved living alone for the last fifteen years. The story opens on a peaceful afternoon, where Louisa, having just finished working at her needlepoint, goes outside to pick some currants, and then happily steeps herself tea. She fixes herself dinner, which she eats contentedly, and she goes outside to feed her dog, **Caesar**, who lives in the backyard. As evening sets in and she washes her dishes, she takes pleasure in listening to the frogs and toads croak outside her window.

Later that night, Joe Dagget comes to visit Louisa. Joe has been coming to see Louisa twice a week—she and Joe got engaged fifteen years ago, but Joe was across the world, in Australia, seeking his fortune for fourteen of those years. Joe's presence inside Louisa's house is instantly alarming—he has a heavy gait, a large, "masculine" manner, and he upsets Louisa's little canary who begins to beat its wings against its cage. Louisa and Joe sit across from each other and have an awkward conversation, talking about the weather.

When Louisa asks after Joe's mother, he mentions his mother's caretaker Lily Dyer, and blushes. At one point, Joe picks up a stack of books and sets them down in the opposite order than he'd found them. Louisa gets up and sets the books back as they were, baffling Joe. On his way out of the door, he trips on a rug, knocks over the basket where Louisa keeps her needlework, and its contents spill everywhere. Louisa ushers Joe out of the house, assuring him that she'll clean it up. Once outside, Joe is extremely relieved to no longer be in Louisa's home—Louisa, inside, is similarly relieved to finally be alone again.

Louisa is dreading marrying Joe, terrified at the idea of giving up her home, her belongings, and her way of life. She is also very worried that Joe will let **Caesar** loose—the dog has spent the last fourteen years chained inside a hut in the backyard because, as a puppy, he bit a neighbor, and she worries about him roaming the town if he isn't kept in the yard. However, despite her concerns, Louisa does not want to break the vow of engagement she made to Joe.

One night, as Louisa is enjoying a stroll under a full moon, she notices two other people just on the other side of the path. Unable to leave without disturbing them, she decides to wait in the shadows until they are gone. When they begin to speak, she realizes that it is Joe Dagget and Lily Dyer. Thinking they are alone, Joe and Lily confess their feelings for each other. But Lily says that she'll be leaving town, because she would never expect Joe to break his promise to Louisa—in fact, if he did, she would no longer care for him. Lily at first appears curt, but she eventually softens, telling Joe that she'll never marry because she could never feel this strongly for another man. Joe is devastated that Lily is leaving but he, too, agrees that the engagement vow is the most important thing and says that he would never abandon Louisa. The pair likely kisses (Louisa hears a "soft commotion") before Lily says that she must go. Louisa is stunned by what she's just heard.

The next day, after doing her housework and meditating by her window, Louisa welcomes Joe into her home. Diplomatically, without ever mentioning Lily Dyer, Louisa manages to break off their engagement, saying she simply can't envision changing her life. Joe insists that if Louisa hadn't broken the engagement, he would have married her, but he admits that he does think it's better this way. They share a tender goodbye—with a warmth that they'd not shown each other in some time. That night, Louisa weeps a little. However, the next morning, she does her needlework with an air of perfect contentedness. Louisa feels like she is at once a "queen," with total control over her domain, and a "nun," allowed to live the rest of days out in peaceful solitude.

CHARACTERS

Louisa Ellis – Louisa Ellis, the protagonist of "A New England Nun," is a woman who lives alone. She is engaged to Joe Dagget, and has been for fifteen years, although he was away in Australia until recently. Louisa has no immediate family—her mother and brother have passed away—which is why she lives on her own. In her years by herself, Louisa has developed an enjoyable daily routine of needlework, meditation, tending her garden, serving herself tea (with a china tea set), and even distilling fragrances. Louisa is a discriminating and organized woman—she even has a different apron, color-coded, for each activity around the house. Louisa's relationship to Joe is awkward and strained—he was gone for fourteen years, and the two seem like strangers now: they're uncomfortable around each other when Joe comes to Louisa's to visit, which he does two nights a week. One evening, when out on a walk, Louisa overhears Joe and Lily Dyer talking, and they confess to having strong feelings for each other. This gives Louisa the courage to end her engagement to Joe. She does so diplomatically, without mentioning Lily, simply saying that it would be impossible for her to change her ways after so many years of being on her own. At the end of the story, Louisa is completely at peace, looking forward to her future in sweet solitude.

Joe Dagget – Joe Dagget is a working man who lives in New England and is engaged to Louisa Ellis. The couple got engaged fifteen years ago, but Joe left for Australia to earn money, and he was gone for the first fourteen years of their engagement. Though he loved Louisa, things have been awkward between them since he returned: he visits her twice a week, but, with his heavy gait and large size, he seems ill-suited to her delicate lifestyle of needlework and drinking tea from china cups. Since he's returned, Joe has fallen for a woman named Lily Dyer, his mother's caretaker. Joe and Lily meet in secret one night, where they confess their feelings for each other, although Lily says she's leaving town and Joe says he'd never break his vow to Louisa. Unbeknownst to the pair, Louisa overhears the conversation and breaks up with Joe the next day. Joe swears

that he never would have left Louisa, that he would have stuck with her if she'd wanted him, but he does admit that he thinks they are both better off this way. Joe and Louisa part ways on good, tender terms, with both of their honor intact. Because of this, Joe is free to pursue Lily Dyer.

Lily Dyer – Lily Dyer is Joe Dagget's mother's caretaker. Lily is strong and proud, and well-liked around town. She and Joe have fallen for each other since Joe has returned from Australia, although neither is willing to break up Joe and Louisa's engagement. A week before the wedding is meant to take place, she and Joe meet at night along the same path where Louisa is taking a walk. Without knowing that Louisa can hear them speaking, Lily informs Joe that she is leaving town, that she won't "fret" after a married man, and that even if Joe were to leave Louisa for her, she wouldn't accept it. She says all this firmly, however she softens a little when she admits that she'll never marry, because she'll never feel about another man the way she feels about Joe. Lit in the moonlight, Louisa thinks Lily looks almost like a princess. The two women never disrespect each other over the issue of Joe's affection. Though the story does not follow Lily's fate, a reader can presume that she and Joe are free to marry after Louisa breaks off her engagement.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

GENDER ROLES FOR WOMEN

Louisa Ellis has an unusual life for a woman of her time: she lives alone. She treasures this solitary life, delighting in nature, needlepoint, cleaning her apartment, and making herself tea in fancy china cups. But when her fiancé, Joe Dagget, returns from working for 14 years in Australia, this life comes under threat: everyone expects that Louisa will give up her home to move in with Joe once she marries him, but she is afraid of losing her solitary pleasures when this happens. The major conflict of the story, then, is Louisa's struggle to find a way to fit into expected gender roles: she'd like to simply be a woman living alone, but there's not an acceptable category for her, since she's neither a widow nor a nun.

The story goes to great pains to associate Louisa with femininity, showing that even though she doesn't fit neatly into any societal role, she's still a woman. For instance, her habits and manners are coded as "feminine"—either directly (as when the story describes Louisa's tools for needlepoint as feminine) or indirectly, by association, with words such as "dainty" (Louisa's way of eating) or "graceful" (her way of serving herself tea). By contrast, Joe Dagget has a "heavy" and "masculine" way of carrying himself. Louisa is forever concerned that Joe's masculine presence will interrupt her calm, feminine lifestyle. The story doesn't cast Joe in a cruel light, but it does suggest that masculinity and femininity are at odds in a patriarchal society, since Joe's masculinity threatens to overwhelm Louisa's life at all times. Louisa is quite aware of the expectation that she will subordinate her life and personality to her husband, so her decision to break up with him is tied up with her instinct for self-preservation: she cannot be both a wife and herself, so she chooses to be herself.

Louisa is both a typically feminine character (in that all of her hobbies are gendered female) and an atypical female character, in that she has financial autonomy and ultimately succeeds in maintaining control over her life. Yet, as the story's title says, Louisa is branded as a nun, presumably because there is no other legible way for a woman to choose to spend her life alone. Louisa even brands *herself* this way, showing how deeply ingrained these societal roles for women are: Louisa knows she isn't a nun, but that category seems to fit better than wife, widow, or spinster, particularly since she finds such spiritual delight in her simple life.

HONOR, DECORUM, AND RESTRAINT

"A New England Nun" depicts people struggling with a conflict between happiness and virtue. Louisa Ellis, the story's protagonist, is engaged to be married to Joe Dagget—but neither one of them really wants to be married to each other. They've been living apart for 14 years while Joe worked in Australia, and during that time, Louisa became accustomed to living alone and Joe fell in love with another woman. Nonetheless, Joe and Louisa initially remain loyal to their engagement, not because they want to be married, but because they feel that keeping their word is the honorable thing to do. This creates an odd tension: they can honor a promise that will make them both miserable or break a promise and be happy, but they insist on choosing virtue over happiness, so they stay together.

Virtue and happiness are also in tension in Joe's relationship with the woman he loves, Lily Dyer. While Joe and Lily have explicitly discussed their feelings for each other, they are both steadfast in their insistence that they cannot be together because they cannot disrupt Joe's engagement to Louisa. Joe says that, morally speaking, he could never abandon the woman who waited for him for 15 years, and Lily says she could never love Joe if he broke his promise to Louisa. Because of this, they choose to forsake their love and happiness in order to behave virtuously.

Importantly, none of the characters are portrayed as silly or wrongheaded for putting virtue first, even as they're pushing

onward towards misery. Louisa is moral for putting Joe's need for a wife before her own desire for independence, Joe is moral for putting loyalty to Louisa before his own desire for love, and Lily is moral for respecting Joe and Louisa's commitment, even if it means forsaking her own happiness. Everyone is behaving honorably, which results in a surprise happy ending: Louisa overhears Lily and Joe talking about their situation, and she realizes that the kindest thing she can do for Joe and Lily is break up with Joe. This means that each character gets what they want in the end, but they do so without anyone behaving dishonorably or prioritizing their own needs over the needs of others. So in this way, the story suggests that virtuous behavior leads to happiness, even if it comes by a circuitous route.

RESTRICTION, FREEDOM, AND ART

Louisa Ellis, the story's protagonist, relishes her solitude, which she's gotten by happenstance after her brother and mother died and her fiancé, Joe Dagget, moved to Australia to seek his fortune. When Joe returns, now prepared to marry Louisa, she is disturbed by the idea of changing her everyday habits and coexisting with a husband and his family. Louisa becomes increasingly worried about the changes that marrying will bring to her life, such as giving up her home, her possessions, and her peaceful way of living. By the end of the story, Louisa breaks off the engagement with Joe, which allows her to revel in her solitude and independence. From this angle, because Louisa is filled with a sense of peace after ending the engagement, the story clearly aligns marriage with restriction and remaining unmarried with cherished freedom.

However, "A New England Nun" also plays with the Romantic idea that someone in a restricted environment can actually find artistic freedom in constraints, because it helps them look inward and/or be more in touch with nature. Surely, this is true of Louisa, for whom the confines of her home and garden contain infinite artistic satisfaction. She is fully happy to spend the day needleworking, tending to her garden, making herself a well-prepared cup of tea, and even just keeping the house in order—practices she takes an artistic pride in. Most pointedly, Louisa finds great pleasure in the distillation of fragrances, an activity that is without immediate or obvious worth and, should she move into Joe's homestead, she would certainly have to give up, since Joe and his mother consider it "foolish" and "senseless." In this way, the pleasure that Louisa takes in distilling (which is akin to her artistic practice) is gravely threatened by the possibility of leaving the confines of her home.

The story makes this idea of contented isolation clear with the parallel between Louisa and her dog, **Caesar**, who lives a life that an onlooker might suggest is restrictive, but for Louisa is the ideal: he has his own hut in the backyard, is fed regularly, and by all accounts is a content hermit—a situation that Louisa sees as the most fruitful of existences. Louisa feels intense fear about Caesar being let out of his hut if she were to marry Joe, which mirrors the dread she feels about having to move out of her own home. In this story, marriage corresponds to unwanted restriction, but self-imposed seclusion (the type that a nun chooses) can generate artistic satisfaction. Thus, the story shows the constraint of marriage as a clear obstacle to freedom, yet suggests that certain constraints or restrictions can be artistically freeing.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

CAESAR

Louisa's dog Caesar symbolizes Louisa's belief that a hermetic life is a peaceful one. When he was a puppy, Caesar—then Louisa's brother's dog—bit a neighbor's hand (and the neighbor still has the scars). Given the choice of either putting the dog down or keeping him permanently away from the people of the town, the brother chained Caesar in the backyard and built him a little hut to live in. For the last fourteen years, this is where Caesar has lived, and Louisa feeds him a diet of corn mush so that his temper never flares at the taste of meat. Louisa is terribly fearful that, if she is to marry Joe, Joe will release Caesar from his small, confined home and he might be free to roam the town—and maybe hurt someone again. Louisa is certain that Caesar must stay in his "little hermit hut," or chaos will follow, and this matches her confidence that she is better off alone in her own home, rather than married to Joe. The story, then, suggests that Louisa's life as a "nun" and Caesar's life as a "hermit" assure each of them the most peaceful existence.

Of course, the symbol of Caesar in "A New England Nun" leaves potential for other interpretations. Unlike Louisa, Caesar is confined without having a say in the matter, and the story does list all of the things that the dog has forgone because of his detention. Caesar's punishment for a crime he committed at a very young age could read as unnecessary corrective punishment by Louisa, which would significantly change the meaning of the symbol.

THE CHINA TEA SET

The china tea set that Louisa loves symbolizes her willingness to remain unmarried and live alone even though it is not socially customary. Louisa is not particularly wealthy—although she lives by herself in her own home, she likely inherited that money after her family died. Louisa is "no richer or better bred" than her working-class

neighbors, which means that her china tea set is clearly an indulgence. The joy she gets from this indulgence mirrors the way that living alone might not be completely practical, since she'd probably be financially safer with a husband, but it is truly what she wants and desires. Louisa's neighbors "whisper" about her using the china—they use more practical crockery—which echoes th whispers the people in town must have about her situation as an older and unmarried woman. Louisa's insistence on doing what she wants regardless of the whispers ("still she would use the china," the story notes) indicates her willingness to break from the traditions of what is expected of her as a woman in 1800's Massachusetts. The story even describes Louisa preparing the tea with "as much grace as if she'd been a veritable guest to her own self," which shows that the entire process of making the tea is a form of self-consideration. Thus, the china tea set symbolizes Louisa's ability to avoid societal norms and do what is best for herself.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *A New England Nun and Other Stories* published in 200.

A New England Nun Quotes

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 feminine appurtenances, which had become, from long use and constant association, a very part of her personality.

Related Characters: Louisa Ellis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes at the beginning of the story when Louisa Ellis is alone in her home in the evening, and it sets up a number of things that are important to the story overall. Not only has Louisa been "peacefully" sewing, but she's been doing so "all the afternoon," which highlights the calm, meditative pleasure that Louisa takes in sewing. This emphasizes Louisa as an artist—or, at least, as someone who takes artistic pleasure in the work that she does. This quote also underscores the repetitiveness of Louisa's life—something she has no problem with, since her habits and routines are things she dearly treasures. She's acquired a deft skill at needlework over time, and even thinks that the practice of sewing has become "part of her personality." This foreshadows the difficulty Louisa will have when considering marrying Joe Dagget and leaving behind her peaceful routine.

This passage also sets up Louisa's multi-faceted gender identity—she is a woman working at a traditionally feminine task (sewing), but she is living alone, something uncommon for women at this time. Throughout "A New England Nun," Louisa's embrace of "feminine" tasks while rejecting marriage (which was seen as one of the only respectable paths for a woman) highlights the complexity of her character.

Louisa was slow and still in her movements; it took her a long time to prepare her tea; but when ready it was set forth with as much grace as if she had been a veritable guest to her own self…Louisa used china every day—something which none of her neighbors did. They whispered about it among themselves. Their daily tables were laid with common crockery, their sets of best china stayed in the parlor closet, and Louisa Ellis was no richer nor better bred than they. Still she would use the china.

Related Characters: Louisa Ellis

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes as Louisa makes herself tea, alone in her home, before Joe Dagget comes to visit her. This quote highlights the care and respect that Louisa has for her way of living, which is significant because typically an unmarried woman living alone in this society would be looked down on. Louisa's uncommon situation does not prevent her from treating herself well, which demonstrates Louisa's ability to go against the social norms. Louisa is also "slow and still in her movements," showing how she prefers to take her time. She sees making herself tea as a creative and meditative process.

This passage also introduces the symbol of the china tea set, which Louisa uses to serve herself tea. Louisa uses the china set "every day"—not just on special occasions, as one might

imagine—even though her neighbors "whisper about it among themselves." Louisa knows what others are saying about her indulgence, but she doesn't mind, because the tea set brings her joy. This parallels the way she feels about living alone as an unmarried woman—she understands that people will gossip about such a radical choice, but, in the end, living without being married is the only way that she can see to live a happy and fulfilled life.

> She had barely folded the pink and white one with methodical haste and laid it in a table-drawer when the door opened and Joe Dagget entered.
>
> He seemed to fill up the whole room. A little yellow canary that had been asleep in his green cage at the south window woke up and fluttered wildly, beating his little yellow wings against the wires. He always did so when Joe Dagget came into the room.

Related Characters: Louisa Ellis, Joe Dagget

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Joe Dagget pays Louisa a visit at her home, which he's done twice a week since returning from Australia. The quote is significant because it emphasizes the disruption that Joe Dagget causes to Louisa's routine. Louisa barely has time to fold and set away her apron before Joe walks in, which is the first time in the story that Louisa is rushing, breaking her normal peaceful routine. This symbolizes the greater disruption that Joe would cause Louisa if she were to marry him, forcing her to leave her house, her belongings, and, ultimately, her routinized way of life.

The story further depicts Joe as a force of disruption in Louisa's autonomous life by having the little canary wake up and become agitated when Joe walks into the room. This disturbance is an overt way of showing how Joe's presence is threatening to the peace that Louisa has cultivated for herself within the confines of her home. The story underscores this idea by saying that Joe "seems to fill up the whole room"—in other words, with Joe in the picture, there will be no space for Louisa's own desires.

> "Good-evening," said Louisa. She extended her hand with a kind of solemn cordiality.
>
> "Good-evening, Louisa," returned the man, in a loud voice.
>
> She placed a chair for him, and they sat facing each other, with the table between them. He sat bolt-upright, toeing out his heavy feet squarely, glancing with a good-humored uneasiness around the room. She sat gently erect, folding her slender hands in her white-linen lap.
>
> "Been a pleasant day," remarked Dagget.
>
> "Real pleasant," Louisa assented, softly. "Have you been haying?" she asked, after a little while.
>
> "Yes, I've been haying all day, down in the ten-acre lot. Pretty hot work."
>
> "It must be."
>
> "Yes, it's pretty hot work in the sun."

Related Characters: Louisa Ellis, Joe Dagget (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is the first dialogue between Louisa and Joe, as they sit together in Louisa's home. Right away, the pair does not seem to behave like a happily engaged couple: Louisa shaking Joe's hand with "solemnly" and "cordiality" shows that there is a tension or a distance between the two. Joe also seems uncomfortable: he sits "bolt-upright" and looks around with "uneasiness," which proves that theirs is an awkward relationship. The awkwardness intensifies when the dialogue begins: the pair starts to talk about the weather, which is often an indication that two people don't know what else to say to each other. Their unnatural discussion contrasts, later in the story, with Joe's heartfelt conversation with Lily Dyer, when the two confess that they love each other, which emphasizes how Louisa and Joe are staying in their engagement out of duty and obligation rather than passion.

Using dialogue here, rather than simply describing how the two are uncomfortable around each other, stresses the tension between the Joe and Louisa and directly contrasts with Louisa's previously calm and serene afternoon. This conversation illustrates precisely why Louisa wants to remain unmarried: she finds it more pleasurable—and more fruitful—to be on her own.

> He came twice a week to see Louisa Ellis, and every time, sitting there in her delicately sweet room, he felt as if surrounded by a hedge of lace. He was afraid to stir lest he should put a clumsy foot or hand through the fairy web, and he had always the consciousness that Louisa was watching fearfully lest he should.
>
> Still the lace and Louisa commanded perforce his perfect respect and patience and loyalty. They were to be married in a month, after a singular courtship which had lasted for a matter of fifteen years.

Related Characters: Louisa Ellis, Joe Dagget, Lily Dyer

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

This passage explains the relationship between Joe and Louisa and comes after the two have passed an uncomfortable evening together. At first, the reader watches their interactions without knowing exactly what their relationship is—but, here, the story clarifies why the two are willing to sit through all that uneasiness: their loyalty to the promise of engagement made fifteen years ago. Joe's worry that he might put a "clumsy foot or hand" through Louisa's "fairy web" of a life is a visual illustration of just how mismatched the pair is. By contrast, later on, Joe's true love Lily Dyer is described as sturdy and strong—clearly a better fit for Joe, since he wouldn't have to treat Lily like "lace."

Importantly, the story reveals Joe's point of view (in addition to Louisa's) in this passage, which shows that he is a sympathetic character—he, just like Louisa, is uncomfortable with the situation, but he firmly believes that sticking to the engagement is the right thing to do. By making Joe a sympathetic rather than antagonistic character, the story shows that it's not Joe causing Louisa's difficulty—it's the institution of marriage itself.

> In that length of time much had happened. Louisa's mother and brother had died, and she was all alone in the world. But greatest happening of all—a subtle happening which both were too simple to understand—Louisa's feet had turned into a path, smooth maybe under a calm, serene sky, but so straight and unswerving that it could only meet a check at her grave, and so narrow that there was no room for any one at her side.

Related Characters: Louisa Ellis, Joe Dagget

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

After Louisa and Joe have their uncomfortable evening together, this passage explains how Louisa's mindset has slowly changed over the last fifteen years. When she was younger, she agreed to marry Joe, but since he left for Australia and then her family members died, leaving her alone, her ability to exist on her own slowly but surely took form. By the time Joe returns to marry Louisa, Louisa's life is "smooth" and "serene" but also "so narrow" that it is impossible to imagine anyone else there beside her, indicating that her time alone allowed her to create an unexpected but welcome path for herself.

This passage is important because it confirms that, without time alone, Louisa wouldn't have come into her own the way that she has: hers was an unusual situation, since she was engaged but not forced to marry right away, and it was the decade and a half that she spent taking care of herself that allowed her to realize that marriage was not what she desires. This shows how a woman's place in 19th century American society was so often limited by the confines of marriage, but that given financial freedom and some time to herself, a woman might choose different, creative pursuits that do not include being somebody's wife.

> Joe's mother, domineering, shrewd old matron that she was even in her old age, and very likely even Joe himself, with his honest masculine rudeness, would laugh and frown down all these pretty but senseless old maiden ways.
>
> Louisa had almost the enthusiasm of an artist over the mere order and cleanliness of her solitary home. She had throbs of genuine triumph at the sight of the window-panes which she had polished until they shone like jewels. She gloated gently over her orderly bureau-drawers, with their exquisitely folded contents redolent with lavender and sweet clover and very purity. Could she be sure of the endurance of even this?

Related Characters: Louisa Ellis, Joe Dagget

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the story makes Louisa's fears about her

marriage to Joe clear. Louisa is very worried that she will have to live with Joe (and his mother) on his homestead, and that Joe's "masculine" behavior will get in the way of her doing all of the things that she loves so much, like calmly sewing or taking her time making tea. By setting Louisa's interests directly against Joe's "masculine rudeness," the story seems to be doubling down on Louisa as a radical female character: in other words, Louisa doesn't want to live alone because she is unfeminine, she wants to live alone because she enjoys it, and it is possible that a woman might want to remain unmarried, even if she is delicate and feminine.

The story also highlights the "enthusiasm" that Louisa has for her way of life, confirming that she takes artistic pride in caring for herself and her own home. In addition, all of these activities that Louisa cares so deeply about are chalked up as "old maiden ways," which again emphasizes the sexism that Louisa is up against if she wants to take care of herself and underscores how society can't take an unmarried woman seriously.

"If you should jilt her to-morrow, I wouldn't have you," spoke up the girl, with sudden vehemence.

"Well, I ain't going to give you the chance," said he; "but I don't believe you would, either."

"You'd see I wouldn't. Honor's honor, an' right's right. An' I'd never think anything of any man that went against 'em for me or any other girl; you'd find that out, Joe Dagget."

Related Characters: Joe Dagget, Lily Dyer (speaker), Louisa Ellis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation takes place between Joe and Lily when they are out for a walk at night, thinking that no one can hear them even though Louisa is hidden across the path. Lily and Joe both show that they are willing to put their own wishes aside because of the seriousness of Joe's promise of marriage to Louisa. Lily, especially, is so forcefully full of honor that she insists that if Joe were to break off his engagement, she would no longer have him—this emphasizes that Lily is attracted to and has respect for Joe's hard decision to go through with the marriage to Louisa, even if it means giving up Lily. This passage is important because it confirms the story's intention to keep all three of its main characters virtuous and sympathetic in order to emphasize that no one person stands in the way of Louisa's happiness—rather, it is the social expectation of marriage that is the obstacle she must overcome.

She sat at her window and meditated. In the evening Joe came. Louisa Ellis had never known that she had any diplomacy in her, but when she came to look for it that night she found it, although meek of its kind, among her little feminine weapons. Even now she could hardly believe that she had heard aright, and that she would not do Joe a terrible injury should she break her troth-plight. She wanted to sound him without betraying too soon her own inclinations in the matter. She did it successfully, and they finally came to an understanding; but it was a difficult thing, for he was as afraid of betraying himself as she.

Related Characters: Louisa Ellis, Joe Dagget, Lily Dyer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Louisa breaks off her engagement to Joe. The night before, she heard him and Lily Dyer confess their love for each other, and she realized that all three of them would be unhappy if Louisa and Joe went ahead with their marriage. It is significant that Louisa finds the courage to do so after meditating, because this shows how important—and how helpful—time alone to think is to her. Louisa categorizes the "diplomacy" that she musters as one of her "little feminine weapons," even though it is "meek": this means that Louisa might see the act of breaking off an engagement as challenging for someone who considers herself so delicate—maybe even a "masculine" act—but she does it, which further underscores that Louisa has a mix of masculine and feminine traits.

There is also a light humor in this scene that comes because Joe is worried about "betraying" himself, and so is Louisa, which means that both characters are trying not to act too excited about the fact that they'll no longer need to marry the other. The story uses dramatic irony, meaning that the reader knows something that the characters don't (that both Louisa and Joe want to end the engagement as badly as the other, for their own reasons). Because of this irony, this scene is somewhat funny, rather than sad or tragic, which emphasizes that it is perfectly normal that a woman

might want to live alone unmarried, even in a society that doesn't want her to.

She gazed ahead through a long reach of future days strung together like pearls in a rosary, every one like the others, and all smooth and flawless and innocent, and her heart went up in thankfulness. Outside was the fervid summer afternoon; the air was filled with the sounds of the busy harvest of men and birds and bees; there were halloos, metallic clatterings, sweet calls, and long hummings. Louisa sat, prayerfully numbering her days, like an uncloistered nun.

Related Characters: Louisa Ellis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is the ending of "A New England Nun," and it occurs the day after Louisa breaks off her engagement to Joe. The story ends on a triumphant note, with Louisa enjoying the peaceful solitude that she has so desired. The passage mirrors the opening paragraph—Louisa is again alone, at home, doing exactly what she wants to be doing, but now her future is clear and untroubled. The religious imagery in this scene ("days strong together like pearls on a rosary," "her heart went up in thankfulness," "Louisa sat…like an uncloistered nun") shows just how deeply Louisa values the life that she's chosen: it is almost a religious experience to feel that at peace with herself. The story is also making a bit of a joke—as it does with its title—because Louisa is not, in fact, a nun. She has found a way to live in solitary peace without having to commit herself to the church or to a marriage, which is an impressive, rare accomplishment for a woman of her time. Louisa's devotion to *herself*, and to her simple but meaningful way of life, ends up being the most important component of "A New England Nun."

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

A NEW ENGLAND NUN

It is late afternoon in New England, and a gentle calm has settled in. A cowbell chimes in the distance, day laborers head home with shovels over their shoulders, and flies "dance" around people's faces in the "soft air." Louisa Ellis sits peacefully alone in her home. She had been calmly sewing by the window, and now she gently tucks her needle into her work and folds it "precisely" before putting it away in a basket. This is clearly part of a routine she's done many times before.

The story begins with a feeling of peace and calm—the gentle descriptions of nature match the inner peace that Louisa Ellis feels when she is alone in her home and has time to do what she loves, like her needlework. This opening image sets up the contradiction that the story sets up over Louisa's role as a woman: Louisa, carefully and "precisely" attending to her needlework, reads as a classically feminine housewife of this time period—however, she is alone (she does not appear to be anybody's wife), which is untraditional and foreshadows Louisa's desire to forgo certain gender norms.

Louisa puts on a green apron and a hat with a green ribbon. She goes outside to her garden, picks currants for her tea, and sits on her back steps to take off the stems. She then carefully gathers the stems into her apron and tosses them into the hen coop, making sure no stems have fallen out of place onto the grass outside of the coop. She takes her time doing each of these things.

Louisa's matching apron and hat signal her attention to detail and her interest in keeping her life orderly and organized. The fact that her daily tasks, like picking herself currants and stemming them, are done so slowly and carefully indicate the relaxed, meditative routine that Louisa has created for herself. Freeman also takes her time describing Louisa's movements, which mirrors the slowness and serenity of Louisa when she is home alone.

Once inside, Louisa—still calmly and slowly—steeps her tea. When it is ready, she prepares herself to drink it with "as much grace as if she had been a veritable guest to her own self." Each item in the kitchen seems to be exactly where it should be: a small square table in the precise middle of the kitchen, the clean and starched linen tablecloth set on top of the table, a napkin placed next to a **china tea set** that sits on a tea-tray atop the table. Louisa notes that her neighbors whisper about the fact that she uses china, rather than more practical crockery, but she does not seem to care.

Again, the story describes Louisa's movements as meditative and thoughtful. The fact that Louisa steeps her tea with as much care as she would use if serving a guest indicates the respect that Louisa has for herself and for the things that she takes joy in in life. The fact that she uses a delicate china tea set—even though the neighbors don't approve—further signifies that Louisa prioritizes her originality instead of worrying about what the townspeople think of her.

Louisa then eats some sugared currants, a plate of little cakes, one white biscuit, and a few pieces of lettuce for dinner. She thinks how much she enjoys eating the lettuce, which she grows "to perfection" in her garden. She eats "heartily" but "delicately." When she finishes her meal, she brings a plate of corn cakes, which she's baked herself, out to the back yard and calls to her dog, **Caesar**. A large white and yellow dog, chained inside a small hut in the back yard, appears at the door to eat the corn cakes. Louisa pats him on the head and goes back inside.

Again, Freeman shows Louisa taking pride and joy in the labor she does—however simple—like growing herself lettuce and preparing herself a meal. Louisa eating "delicately" again codes her as highly feminine, even as she lives a rather "unfeminine" life in that she is not living with a husband.

Once back in the kitchen, Louisa carefully polishes the **china tea set**. Night has set in now, and she hears a "chorus" of frogs (and the odd toad) through the window—sounds that she very much enjoys. Louisa takes off her apron, revealing a smaller one underneath. She lights her lamp and sits down to pick her sewing back up.

This scene highlights the habituality of Louisa's life—her days and nights have an ordered rhythm, and she is perfectly capable of caring for herself on her own. It also further underscores the pleasure Louisa takes in living alone—doing everything from polishing her tea set to calmly listening to the frogs outside of her window.

A half hour later, Joe Dagget comes to the house. Louisa hears him approaching because of his "heavy step" on the way up to the house. She takes off her apron to reveal another one underneath—the apron she only wears for company. She begins to perform the same ritual of folding her needlework into the drawer as before. She finishes doing so just before Joe Dagget opens the door.

Louisa finishes putting away her needlework only just before Joe arrives, signifying that his presence is a break from the pleasant, orderly routine that she has settled into. His "heavy" gait contrasts with the way that Louisa's life has been described: precise and delicate.

When Joe comes into the home, Louisa feels like he "fills up the whole room." There is a small yellow canary in a green cage next to the window, which had been asleep, and it wakes up and begins to frantically beat its wings against the wires of the cage. The bird has this same reaction every time Joe Dagget comes over.

Again, Joe's presence is clearly alarming and not well-suited to Louisa's lifestyle, which the story emphasizes by having the canary become agitated. Here, the reader gathers that Joe is likely there as a suitor, since it is unusual that Louisa lives all alone as a woman in this time period.

Louisa and Joe greet each other with strained cordiality. She brings him a chair, and they sit across from each other, both of them upright and a little uneasy. They begin to talk about the weather. Their conversation seems stilted and a bit forced. Louisa asks about work and about Joe's mother. When Louisa asks after Joe's mother's caretaker, Lily Dyer, Joe appears to blush. They each exchange positive words about Lily Dyer, about her work ethic and her looks.

At this point in the story, the reader is not sure of the relationship between Louisa and Joe, only that they live in separate homes. Their behavior together suggests that they are familiar with each other, but it does not indicate any deep excitement or romance between them. In fact, Joe's blushing at the mention of Lily Dyer foreshadows that his he may have feelings for someone other than Louisa. Louisa's lack of interest in Joe again emphasizes her uncommon status in society—a single woman, living alone, with no particular desire to change her situation.

Joe begins to fiddle with some books on a table—an autograph album and a Young Lady's Gift Book. He picks them up, opens them, and sets the books back down opposite to how he'd found them. Louisa fidgets in her seat until she has to get up and rearrange the books so that the Gift Book is on top, as it was before Joe had touched them. Joe laughs uneasily, asking what difference it makes which book is where, to which Louisa replies that she always keeps them this way. Joe shakes his head, amused but also a little bewildered—he finds this behavior very peculiar.

Again, Joe and Louisa seem incompatible—for Joe, moving the books is inconsequential, yet for Louisa, the order of the books reflect the autonomy that she has come to cherish in her life and so their order is incredibly important. Joe might come off as a little careless, Louisa might come off as a little stern, but the story isn't suggesting that one character is necessarily right or wrong—just that the two have fundamentally different priorities and are mismatched as a couple.

An hour later, Joe is ready to leave, but on his way out he trips over a rug. Trying to regain his balance, he knocks over the basket where Louisa keeps her sewing. He makes an effort to try to pick everything all up, but Louisa stops him, insisting that she'll clean up once he's gone. Joe is uncomfortable, and Louisa is uneasy—Joe's discomfort and clumsiness are making *her* nervous. When Joe finally walks out the door, he sighs as soon as he's alone in the "sweet evening air." Louisa, too, feels incredibly relieved to again be alone. Joe feels like he was a "bear in a china shop," and Louisa feels as though she were the owner of a china shop that had just had a bear in it.

Once again, the interactions between Louisa and Joe are painfully uncomfortable, even though neither party is intentionally upsetting the other. Louisa's desire to be alone again signifies that she is unusual for a woman of her time, in that she has built a happy life for herself outside of marriage or the church. The fact that the story incorporates Joe's point of view as he exits Louisa's house signals that the story has sympathy for both Joe and Louisa, even though it is Louisa's things being spilled—this emphasizes that both characters are acting respectably to the best of their abilities.

Louisa puts all of her aprons back on and collects her things—the "scattered treasures"—that have fallen to the ground. She places her sewing materials back into their basket, straightens the rug, and begins examining the dirt on the carpet that Joe tracked in. She gets a dustpan to sweep it up.

Louisa immediately wants to set things as they were before Joe entered her home, highlighting how eager she is to live a life that does not involve Joe's presence. Living alone as a woman is not a traditionally feminine experience for the time period. However, Louisa's "treasures" are her needlework, and sewing is a traditionally feminine pastime in this setting. So, once again, the story highlights the duality of Louisa, who both embodies and pushes back against traditional feminine roles.

Although Joe comes to visit Louisa twice a week, he is still not comfortable in her home, since he feels clumsy and uneasy when he visits, as though he is "surrounded by a hedge of lace." However, he and Louisa are engaged and will be married in one month, so he feels absolute and fervent loyalty to her. Their engagement was unusual: it began fifteen years ago, and Joe has been away in Australia, seeking his fortune, for fourteen of those fifteen years. Joe has now returned to marry the woman who has been "unquestioningly waiting" for him.

The story confirms that Joe and Louisa are engaged to be married but also adds that it has been an unusual engagement, since it's lasted fifteen years and fourteen of those years were spent on opposite sides of the world. Now, the reader can more fully understand Joe and Louisa's behavior, since it's clear that they are two people acting out of duty to their old agreement and not placing their own desires before their promises. Still, the story is being ironic and a bit humorous by suggesting that Louisa has been "unquestioningly" waiting for Joe—clearly, Louisa has serious reservations about the prospect of marriage, and she is uncomfortable even being around Joe.

Back then, Louisa, for her part, had encouraged Joe to travel. She and Joe had kissed good-bye, with Joe promising that it wouldn't be long—then fourteen years passed until he returned. In that time, Louisa's mother and brother had died, leaving her alone. But greater, internal changes had also taken place—Louisa had developed the ability to live alone, and she'd gotten so accustomed to her way of doing things that there was no longer "room for anyone at her side." In fact, her first reaction when she heard that he was coming home was not excitement, but dismay. She had never cheated on him nor ever thought unkindly of him—and she had believed that she'd loved him when she accepted his engagement—she had just begun to imagine his return as something that would happen in another life.

Joe and Louisa are planning to go through with their engagement not out of passion or romantic love, but out of a sense of honor to the promises they made fifteen years ago. Louisa's solitary life has changed her in a way that is irreversible—she now sees living alone as a source of freedom that she cannot imagine going without. Her inability to imagine a life with Joe confirms her strong desire to stay unmarried.

Joe, too, had begun to feel apprehension just after he returned. Though he still found himself attracted to Louisa, the "winds of romance" eventually began "singing" another name. For Louisa, these winds had hardly ever really been there.

Again, both Joe and Louisa are concerned about their impending marriage, since neither feels romantically attached to the other anymore. But, although Joe is no longer *in love with Louisa, it is noteworthy that the story adds that Louisa had* never *really felt the "winds of romance" for Joe, since this adds to the idea that Louisa accepting Joe's proposal was only out of the societal expectation that a young woman marry.*

Louisa knows that if she marries Joe, she will have to leave her home and go to live at Joe's homestead with his mother. She feels as though the "maidenly possessions" in her house are her friends, and she is distraught at the idea of leaving them. She also fears that she will no longer be able to use her still—where she distills fragrances, which she takes great pleasure in doing—because Joe and his mother would see distilling as a "pretty but senseless" hobby, meant for those who do not have husbands and houses to look after. In addition, she worries that she won't be able to keep the new house clean and orderly, something she takes satisfaction in doing in her own home.

Louisa's fear over losing access to her means of creating beauty and meaning in her life (like her still) speaks to the artistic intensity that she feels about the work that she does at home—whether that's sewing, distilling, or even keeping the house clean. Louisa's certainty that moving into Joe's homestead would put an end to all of these activities underscores the difficulty that married women of this time period might have keeping up the activities that they enjoyed doing.

Louisa is also particularly concerned about the issue of **Caesar**, her dog. Caesar is now a sleepy and older dog but, in his youth, he bit the hand of a neighbor, who still carries the scars. That neighbor demanded the dog either be killed or "completely ostracized." Louisa's brother, alive at the time, had built the dog a small hut in the backyard and tied him up. Since then (for fourteen years), Louisa has kept the dog in this state—tending to him fondly but never releasing him. The dog has a terrifying reputation around town, as everyone remembers the bite. Louisa only feeds him corn-mush so as to never set off his "dangerous temper" with the taste of meat. Louisa is convinced that Joe will let Caesar loose and that the dog might "rampage" through the village.

Louisa's feeling that Joe will let Caesar loose indicates that, after marriage, the husband's choices overtake the wishes of the wife. Louisa wants to remain autonomous and make her own decisions, but she understands that she won't be able to do this if she marries Joe. Louisa feels security and satisfaction in the confines of her home, and she believes Caesar is at his best alone in his hut, too.

Yet, despite all of Louisa's concerns about the marriage, she feels like she cannot betray Joe by going back on her promise to marry him. So, she continues to sew "exquisite little stiches" into her wedding dress.

Again, Louisa displays traditional feminine behavior by sewing stiches into her wedding dress but comes across as an untraditional woman of her time because she would rather live alone than marry. The story is also building sympathy for Louisa here by showing that, despite all of Louisa's fears and concerns, she won't hurt Joe and go back on her promise.

One night, just a week before their wedding, there is a full moon, and Louisa goes for an evening walk. She takes in the cherry trees, apple trees, and blueberry shrubs. She admires the moon, "twinkling like silver," and the shadow it casts on her path. She feels a sweet, mysterious feeling in the air and wonders to herself what a particular fruit off to the side might be.

Again, as in the beginning of the story, Louisa is alone and feels at peace, a mood mirrored by the calm, beautiful New England evening. Louisa seems to have more of a capacity to take in the beauty of the nature around her when she is on her own, which again underscores her preference for being alone rather than married.

Just before she is about to leave, Louisa hears voices. She thinks she'll stay hidden and let the people pass, but they take seats along the path, so she isn't able to go on without being seen. Then, she recognizes one of the voices: it is Joe Dagget's. Louisa realizes that Joe is with Lily Dyer. Lily is lit by the moonlight, and Louisa notices how lovely Lily looks, full of "rustic strength and bloom."

Throughout the story, Louisa is complimentary of Lily's looks, which signifies a level of good-will from Louisa to Lily. Lily and Joe, alone together under the moonlight, are clearly hoping to share a private moment together. But the story evades more clichéd love-triangle dynamics—where those in "competition" might resent each other—by showing each character's continuous desire to maintain a sense of honor and decorum.

Thinking they are alone, Lily and Joe begin to speak. Lily says that she'll be leaving town, and Joe replies, with feeling, "I ain't got a word to say." He then says that he's not sorry about what happened yesterday, when the two of them had "let on how [they] felt about each other." But he also says that he can't break the heart of the woman who's waited for him for fourteen years. To this, Lily responds that if Joe *were* to leave Louisa, she wouldn't love him anymore, and Joe insists that this would never happen. Lily responds: "honor's honor, an' right's right," again insisting that she'd never accept any man who left another woman for her.

Joe and Lily show fierce loyalty and sacrifice during this conversation by putting their own wishes after what they think is right. There is, of course, a light ironic humor to this scene, since the reader understands now that both Louisa and Joe feel as though they'd be better off if they weren't married to each other, but they both worry about hurting the other's feelings. The story is not mocking their concerns, but it is showing how constraining (even absurd) marriage can be as a social expectation.


Joe again insists that he is not leaving Louisa. He and Lily's emotions are heightened and their voices "almost angry." Louisa continues to listen. Joe does admit that he wishes Lily wasn't going away, but she insists that it's best. Joe asks her if she'll "fret" much over him, to which Lily says that she won't be worrying over a married man. However, her tone changes, and she says kindly that she won't ever marry another man, promising "I aint that sort of girl to feel this way twice."

Joe and Lily clearly have more passion between them than Louisa and Joe ever did, yet they still are determined not to break up Joe and Louisa's engagement. Their profession of love is moving, because it shows just how much they're willing to sacrifice in the name of honoring a promise.

After Lily says this, Louisa hears a "soft commotion" from where Joe and Lily are sitting. Then Lily stands up and insists they "put a stop" to what they're doing and says she is going home. Louisa is "dazed" by what she's heard, and she makes her way home.

The story insinuates that Joe and Lily kiss, but the tone does not denounce them for it, simply calling it a "soft commotion," which is both a light joke and a gentle way to make sure this suggestion of a kiss does not ruin either of their senses of honor. Louisa, Lily, and Joe have so far all put their promises first and their true feelings second.

The next day, Louisa goes about all of her house chores, but she does not work on her wedding dress. She meditates by the window. Later that night, Joe comes by. Louisa summons all the "diplomacy" she can muster and breaks up with him. She is still a little stunned and is almost unsure if she heard them correctly the night before. Nonetheless, she does not want to betray the fact that she is happy to break the engagement, and she does not mention Lily Dyer, only saying that she couldn't see herself making such a change as to marry Joe, seeing as she'd lived for so long in one certain way.

The fact that Louisa continues going about her chores after overhearing Lily and Joe shows how attached Louisa is to her routine, even when she is grappling with a life-changing decision. Louisa acts "diplomatically" during the breakup, assuring that both her honor and Joe's honor are kept intact—this is a humble move by Louisa, which stresses how much she does value respect and honor, even as she values her own sense of freedom and happiness, too.

Joe responds honestly, saying that he does agree it might be better this way. But he underscores the fact that it is Louisa, not he, backing out of their marriage. He says, "I never shrank, Louisa…I'd have stuck to you till my dying day." She replies that she knows. When the two say goodbye that night, it is "more tenderly" than it had been for a long time. The two are both moved by their parting.

The story casts Joe in a sympathetic light and emphasizes his desire to act honorably above all else. He finally gets his reward—he is no longer obligated to marry Louisa, but crucially, he did not have to be the one to end it. Both he and Louisa are relieved by the decision not to marry each other, and they find a newfound respect and closeness in admitting to each other that their marriage was not going to work.

Once alone again in her home, Louisa weeps briefly. However, the next morning she feels "like a queen" who now, finally, has full and permanent control over her domain. Now, she thinks, she will be able to tend to her tasks as she pleases, **Caesar** won't cause any harm and can remain in his hut, and even the canary in the cage won't be disturbed.

Louisa cries at saying goodbye to Joe, showing the respect that she feels towards him and that her decision to end the marriage was more based on her needs than on Joe as a person. However, Louisa now finally has what she's desired the whole story—a guarantee that she may go about her life on her terms. She feels content and peaceful—even regal—in her home, emphasizing the luxury she feels simply in having a place to herself.

Later, Louisa does her needlework completely at peace. Lily Dyer passes Louisa's window, and Louisa feels no ill-will towards her. She sees the days ahead of her now like "pearls on a rosary." Outside, the air is busy and sweet: there is the sound of bees, birds, and men at work. Louisa sits in her home "like an uncloistered nun" contentedly thinking about her future.

In the end, each character gets what is best for them, which they have all earned by behaving with unimpeachable honor. It is noteworthy that Lily Dyer walks by in this final scene, as this emphasizes that while Louisa feels happy for herself, she also feels happy for Joe and Lily. Louisa can now live out her days in her own home, with her own things, as unbothered as a nun without having to actually go to a nunnery. For Louisa, this is the perfect, ultimate freedom.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Tilden, Alexandra. "*A New England Nun*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 26 Apr 2022. Web. 26 Apr 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Tilden, Alexandra. "*A New England Nun*." LitCharts LLC, April 26, 2022. Retrieved April 26, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/a-new-england-nun.

To cite any of the quotes from *A New England Nun* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Freeman, Mary E. Wilkins. A New England Nun. Penguin. 200.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Freeman, Mary E. Wilkins. A New England Nun. New York: Penguin. 200.