
Mary Wilkins Freeman and Sylvia Townsend Warner Crossing Boundaries

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Abstract

Mary Wilkins Freeman's capacity to impress, repel, shock, and motivate younger American women writers like Edith Wharton and Kate Chopin has been analysed by Candace Waid and Pamela Glenn Menke among others, but few have recognised that Freeman also intrigued the English writer Sylvia Townsend Warner. Townsend Warner was active from the 1920s until her death in 1978, more popular with radical lesbian fans than the British literary establishment, and recently framed as a "step-daughter" of her nation along with other women modernists by Jane Garrity. At a time in Townsend Warner's life when she was disenchanted with the literary establishment, she published a nonfiction appreciation of Freeman entitled "Item One Empty House" (1966) in *The New Yorker*. Although Michael Steinman calls this multi-generic piece an imitation of a "minor," "nineteenth-century" and "American" writer, the piece shifts from criticism to fiction, homage to parody. Townsend Warner seems less anxiously rivalrous of Freeman than is Wharton in her readings of Freeman. Associating Freeman not with meek isolation but a modernist stripping down of life to its raw essentials, Townsend Warner affirms her own power to pick and choose from literature predecessors and carve her own way, to read the isolated female artist rather than follow critical fashion. Just as Freeman drew sustenance from the wells of emotion underneath the respectable exterior of Emily Brontë, Townsend Warner migrated across temporal and geographical boundaries to find her own literary sisterhood.

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