



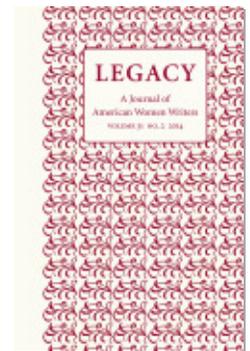
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## The Neighborly Christmas: Gifts, Community, and Regionalism in the Christmas Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman

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In her 1994 article “Not in the Least American’: Nineteenth-Century Literary Regionalism,” Judith Fetterley argues that women’s regionalist writing has been marginalized because of its “un-American” nature, by which she means its resistance to both national narratives and generic forms. Fetterley’s purpose is to critique the canon by exposing “how the term ‘American’ has been used to create a literary canon so hegemonic in the privileging of certain subjectivities” that the study of texts centering on non-white, non-male, rural, and lower-class subjectivities is tantamount to “treason” (879). Fetterley takes her essay’s title from Sarah Orne Jewett’s story “Danny” (1877), which focuses on a town described by the narrator as “not in the least American” due to its lack of excitement, bustle, industry, and multiculturalism (84). Jewett’s statement appears to support the belief that regional literature depicts places, people, and plots outside of national identity, a notion that has a long history in critical reception of literary regionalism.<sup>1</sup>

Elsewhere, however, Jewett describes in more detail what she sees as the relationship between regional stories and the nation. In a 22 May 1893 letter to one of her editors, Frederick Mercer Hopkins, Jewett outlines her philosophy of neighborliness that extends beyond regional communities: “You know there is a saying of Plato’s that the best thing one can do for the people of a State is to make them acquainted with each other, and it was some instinctive feeling of this sort which led me to wish that the town and country people were less suspicious of one another” (*Jewett Letters* 83). Jewett expanded on this philosophy in her preface to the second edition of her short story collection *Deephaven* later that year, not only noting the need for neighborly understanding both

within and beyond regional villages, but also pinpointing the problem more specifically as the rise in regional tourism. She was “possessed by a dark fear that townspeople and country people would never understand one another,” a fear driven by encounters between the moneyed urbanites who used Maine for vacations and the rural villagers who lived there year-round (1). While decrying the antipathy of the tourists to her home state, Jewett nonetheless optimistically hopes that someday the “aggressions and ignorances of city and country cousins” would turn instead to “compliments between the summer boarder and his rustic host” (1).<sup>2</sup>

Jewett outlines her hope for a neighborly reconciliation between country and city by way of introduction to a specifically regional text, one with a focus that is “not in the least American.” That longing for reconciliation supports my contention that literary regionalism’s un-American scenes and stories are not detached from or disinterested in more universal national narratives. Instead, literary regionalism as practiced by Jewett and her contemporaries actively resists the detrimental effects of homogenizing national narratives through the presentation of regional alternatives to national discourses.

In this examination of three Christmas stories by Jewett and three by Mary Wilkins Freeman, I argue that regionalist literature imagines an alternative to one specific national narrative: the “domestic Christmas” typically associated with the nineteenth century. In particular, Jewett and Freeman present an alternative to the domestic Christmas’s disruption of the social function of gift exchange; in the domestic Christmas, gift exchange becomes a sociopolitical tool used to sustain class divisions and promote consumption that benefits the individual or the family as opposed to the collective. The narrative that Jewett and Freeman construct, which I call the “neighborly Christmas,” redirects attention to the needs of community (both economic and social) and the moral obligation to recognize those who fall outside of the domestic family unit. Jewett’s and Freeman’s Christmas stories interrogate transformations in gift exchange at a key moment of economic expansion in American capitalism. While anxiety over the impact that the rising consumer culture would have on class and gender divisions drove attempts to mask the consumerist basis of Christmas gift exchange in the domestic Christmas narrative, the regionalist Christmas stories I examine demonstrate that the problem is not capitalism or consumer culture but rather the destructive loss of cycles of gift exchange that promote empathy and community well-being.

The significance of these narrative revisions of Christmas gift exchange is best understood in the context of gift theory, which originated with the publication of anthropologist Marcel Mauss’s *The Gift* in 1924. Through a systematic examination of the social phenomenon of gift exchange, Mauss concludes

that giving, receiving, and reciprocating enables individuals to locate themselves within society, while “to refuse to give, to fail to invite, just as to refuse to accept, is tantamount to declaring war; it is to reject the bond of alliance and commonality” (13). Mauss observes that the eventual rejection of a gift economy among the Romans came about because of the perception that the exchange of gifts was “overexpensive and too sumptuous, burdened with consideration for people, incompatible with the development of the market, commerce, and production” (54). Key to understanding the failure of gift exchange is this idea of wanting to be removed from the “burden of consideration” for people in the broader community. The movement away from reciprocal gift exchange marks a culture’s movement from prioritizing social or spiritual bonds to individual gain and opportunity.

Jewett’s and Freeman’s stories focus on the necessity of the burden of consideration for others, revealing the detrimental impact of failed gifts not just for marginalized individuals but also for the entire community (and, by extension, the national community). Although many of their texts depict marginalized figures excluded from the national portrait of domestic tranquillity, I argue that their focus on the loss of empathetic gifts and neighborly generosity is particularly apt in their depictions of Christmas, a holiday that by the late nineteenth century had already become synonymous with gift exchange.

Although critics have examined a few of the stories I focus on here, none have considered these stories in the context of the national narrative of domestic Christmas. In many cases, critics seem quick to dismiss Christmas stories by Jewett and Freeman because these stories were often solicited for holiday-themed magazine issues.<sup>3</sup> On one level, the critical dismissal of regionalist Christmas stories reflects general attitudes that assume literary regionalism’s minor status. However, the link between regionalism’s marginal standing and its depiction of marginalized figures makes this genre uniquely poised to examine the cultural values of domestic Christmas. Many of Jewett’s and Freeman’s stories center on characters who are outsiders in some way: widows, spinsters, orphans, beggars. In part, the fragmented families in these stories are realistic depictions of the impact on rural New England villages of the nineteenth-century migration of fit young people to more populous urban centers. But beyond their inherent realism, these “outsider” figures work to break open the traditional family unit central to the domestic Christmas and to give voice to characters that are, like regionalism itself, neglected and marginalized. Examining Jewett’s and Freeman’s Christmas stories specifically in the context of the domestic Christmas narrative reveals how their authors intervened in questions of national identity.

## THE RISE OF THE DOMESTIC CHRISTMAS

During the antebellum period, cultural anxieties about the impact of consumer culture on national character and upper-class fears of mob violence helped produce the culture of domestic Christmas.<sup>4</sup> Prior to the 1840s, pagan and cult traditions that featured performances of gender, class, and age inversion dominated Christmas celebrations in the United States. Penne L. Restad notes that at Christmas, groups of people, primarily men, would assemble in the streets to “shoot off firecrackers and guns,” play musical instruments loudly, and roam from house to house “in garish disguise” to beg (10). These “maskers” would go away only if the often unwilling homeowners gave them food, drink, and even money. These public Christmas traditions also shaped rituals of gift-giving, which reflected earlier European practices such as wassailing, wherein figures of authority gave gifts to people of lower status. As the US population shifted to urban centers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, affluent citizens perceived riotous Christmas festivities as potential threats to social order.

The rise of the cult of domesticity and sentimentalism in the antebellum period fostered a cultural climate that encouraged a family-centered, home-based holiday as an alternative to the disorderly Christmas. Stephen Nissenbaum notes that “the creation of domesticity and of ‘childhood’ itself in the nineteenth century” assisted in slowly transitioning the public, street-based festival of Christmas to a private, domestic household celebration (110). Rich meals, decadent treats, luxurious toys, festively decorated trees, and other holiday traditions spring in part from attempts to reframe the public, interclass holiday as private and familial. But this domestic, family-centered turn essentially removes the social focus of Christmas gift exchange that Mauss describes as essential. In contrast, domestic Christmas rituals of gift exchange prioritize acquisitive self-interest, reinforce hierarchical social and gender divisions, and disregard the needs of the community.

In addition to counteracting the threatening public nature of prior Christmas celebrations, the domestic Christmas ideology responded to another dramatic cultural change of the nineteenth century: the rise of consumer spending on Christmas gifts.<sup>5</sup> The consumerist aspect of gift exchange introduced the pressure to imbue store-bought Christmas gifts with the appropriate sentiment and, crucially, to erase traces of the market from these sentimental presents. As Mark Osteen notes, one of the primary impulses of gift theory is “to distinguish gift exchanges from market exchanges, and thereby to discriminate between gifts and commodities” (“Gift” 229). Practices such as removing price tags or wrapping presents ostensibly allow these gifts to perform their proper cultural role: to remove the barriers between people and create non-hierarchical relationships based on empathy rather than reciprocity (Osteen, “Introduction” 8).

However, one crucial nineteenth-century invention serves dual purposes within the domestic Christmas narrative in the context of empathetic gift-giving: the figure of Santa Claus illuminates attempts to mystify the connection between the marketplace and Christmas gifts. In addition, Santa Claus's role in mystifying the market origins of gifts reveals deep-seated anxieties about the contaminating effects of gift exchange driven by consumer culture rather than by a desire to promote empathetic understanding. The figure of Santa Claus created a pseudo-historical filter that allowed practitioners of domestic Christmas to "believe that the holiday gift exchange was rooted in something deeper and more 'authentic' than the dynamics of the marketplace" (Nissenbaum 173).<sup>6</sup> Unlike the unruly gangs of Christmases past, who would demand goodwill via food and drink from the wealthy, St. Nick enters the house uninvited, not to request gifts but to give them benignly to children. St. Nick simultaneously undermines the older patron-client exchange of gifts and goodwill and transfers the site of gift-giving to the family unit.<sup>7</sup> The ritual of gift exchange surrounding Santa Claus became a means of conveying the message that sincere expressions of domestic intimacy had no connection to money and the market.

In addition to concealing Christmas gifts' origination in the consumer marketplace, St. Nick performs other important cultural roles. As early as the 1820s, Santa Claus reinforced "the importance of good behavior" and "endorsed parental punishment" by leaving a rod in the Christmas stockings of naughty children, presumably for parents' use (Restad 54). Nissenbaum also highlights the role these new gift-giving customs played in controlling children; he describes the shift from children's waking their parents to demand presents to their "waiting for the 'Christmas tree'" as "the difference between children playing the role of active agents in the gift exchange and their assuming the passive role of silent, grateful recipients" (214). In addition to the corrective influence of St. Nick's ability to judge worthy and unworthy children and to modify behavior, domestic gift-giving, notes Elizabeth H. Pleck, itself replicated and reinforced hierarchical family structures, with husbands giving more expensive gifts to wives because of their role as breadwinner, for example (53).

Beyond establishing gift-giving rules and rituals that enforce sentimental domestic bonds and hierarchical familial roles, the domestic Christmas promoted the distinction between gifts, which were given to family and friends, and charity, which was given to the needy and distributed by charitable organizations. Christmas charity during this time period was often a public spectacle, like the large-scale nineteenth-century Christmas dinners for the poor that the public were invited to watch.<sup>8</sup> Distinguishing between gifts and charity removes the disorderly Christmas's opportunities for cross-class gift exchange and also creates a hierarchy of giving, as Christmas presents more often tend

to be crafted handmade items or luxury goods rather than the necessary goods and services typically associated with charity.<sup>9</sup> In addition, family members and friends normally exchange their carefully chosen gifts privately and in person, while aid organizations that solicit and distribute charitable gifts typically remove any personal contact between giver and recipient.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the key features of the domestic Christmas were firmly in place. Christmas became a time for concentrating on the family rather than engaging in rowdy public celebration. Within these family celebrations, myths like Santa Claus obscured the economic origins of sentimental objects. Gift exchange in the domestic Christmas disciplined the community by establishing and affirming proper social hierarchies and behavior. And the domestic Christmas's family-based celebration and exchange of gifts firmly demarcated the distinction between gift-giving within one's own family or social class and charitable giving that worked outside of class and familial boundaries.

In contrast to this shift from public to domestic observance of Christmas, Jewett's and Freeman's regionalist fiction presents a neighborly Christmas ideal that counteracts features of the domestic Christmas through displays of extra-familial beneficence. By focusing on how regional gift exchange affirms neighborliness, these stories demonstrate the power of gifts to create social bonds beyond the narrowly focused family unit. The neighborly Christmas narrative differs from the domestic Christmas in a number of ways. Santa Claus is largely absent, showing that, instead of concealing the connection between consumer activity and giving, the neighborly Christmas challenges the need for filters between the marketplace and gifts. Notably, these stories illuminate the relationship between gifts and the market economy. Consumer activity itself becomes a type of altruism here, not just through generous gift-giving but also via the *act* of choosing or creating those gifts, which is visible to the recipient and an enhancement of the gift's value. Through depictions of direct giving to community members outside the family and from different social classes, narratives of neighborly Christmas generosity interrogate the distinction that domestic Christmas rituals make between gifts and charity. In portraying such gifting, Freeman and Jewett remind readers of the social purpose of gift exchange. The neighborly Christmas shows that the health of both the community and the individual depends on successful, empathetic gift-giving.

#### SARAH ORNE JEWETT'S NEIGHBORLY PHILOSOPHY

One of the most prolific regionalist producers of Christmas works, Jewett published at least a dozen stories for children and adults in which Christmas is either the dominant theme or the setting. Published in newspapers and peri-

odicals such as *The Independent*, *Boston Evening Transcript*, and *Ladies' Home Journal*, Jewett's Christmas stories frequently unite thoughtful or moderate consumer activity, generosity that extends beyond the traditional family unit, and the primacy of social well-being or neighborliness. Many stories make the value of generosity clear by benefiting the main character in some way, through material rewards, social reconciliation, or a return to physical health, for example. Jewett's regional stories often depict homemade gifts or gifts of service alongside store-bought gifts. All gifts have clear monetary value and participate in the economic marketplace, flattening the distinction between gifts and commodities and questioning the notion that regional settings embody a pre-market ideal separate from the national economy. Jewett expands the boundaries of giving, uniting public and private generosity. Rather than evoking a strictly family-based, domestic Christmas, these stories broaden Christmas giving to include non-familial relations, showing that consumer activity and generosity are essential to forming community bonds. The close reading of three of Jewett's stories reveals her emerging philosophy of neighborly kindness and extravagance.

One of Jewett's earliest published Christmas stories, "Jack's Merry Christmas," published in *The Independent* on 15 December 1881, follows a simple edifying storyline that is common in Jewett's juvenile Christmas fiction.<sup>10</sup> Jack is an orphan who lives with Josiah Patten, his wife, and her sister, Aunt Susan. The Pattens are elderly and childless, and although they provide for Jack's physical needs, they do not meet his needs for friendship and family. Jack's life is transformed when he takes to heart the Christmas message delivered by his much-loved Sunday-school teacher, Miss Duncan, who encourages him and his classmates to renounce their selfish desires and focus on generosity. Jack devotes himself to Miss Duncan's mission, even going so far as to thaw the heart of the curmudgeonly, disabled spinster Becky Nash through his unexpected generosity. He spends his hard-earned money on gifts for his elderly caregivers even though they do not traditionally observe Christmas and, furthermore, are no longer able to care for him. Jack's ultimate reward for his generosity is that Miss Duncan welcomes him to live with her.

Miss Duncan's Christmas mission, which calls for the boys to "surprise" people on Christmas "by doing something to make them have a good time," shapes the idea of a generous, neighborly Christmas in a number of interesting ways (31). She encourages the boys to find a way to give gifts or provide services not only to "our fathers and mothers—whom I hope we shall give to anyway" but also to "outside people, whom we never thought of before at Christmas time" (31). Her emphasis on unexpected giving and anticipating what gifts or services would enable the recipient to "have a good time" aligns with theo-

retical notions of the empathetic gift and opens up the giving of Christmas gifts and services beyond the expected immediate family to “outside people” who are beyond the boys’ typical daily consideration. As an orphan, Jack is himself an outside person, and his reward for giving his attentions to another social outsider, Becky Nash, is a greater social role in the community.

In the context of gift theory, homemade gifts, gifts of service, and charitable donations at Christmastime become “counter-gestures” (Simonds 88). However, this is not the case for Jack, for whom chopping wood free of charge for old Becky Nash, gathering walnuts to give to his classmates, and spending his money on store-bought items for his caregivers all count as genuine gifts. The recipients of his gifts of labor and his store-purchased items seem equally moved by his care and generosity. This portrait of giving blurs the distinction between consumer objects and handmade or service gifts to demonstrate that, when given out of a desire for empathetic understanding, both types of gifts have legitimate value. Moreover, Jack’s reward for his generous efforts is the ability to participate more fully in the social and economic spheres: Becky Nash slips Jack a five-dollar bill after his generosity transforms her sullen disposition; the boys to whom Jack gives walnuts reciprocate by fetching him for an afternoon of “skylarking”; and an added benefit of moving in with Miss Duncan is her home’s greater proximity to school and friends (32).

“Jack’s Merry Christmas” introduces several tropes common to Jewett’s Christmas stories: the focus on generosity versus selfish greed accompanied by the idea that one’s generosity will be rewarded in turn; the notion of extending giving beyond the traditional family unit to “outsiders”; and the emphasis on social redemption as the ultimate value of generosity. While charity and generosity are traditional themes in early- to mid-nineteenth-century domestic literature, Jewett’s Christmas stories link generosity and economic participation to concepts of neighborliness and social well-being. This linkage mitigates arguments that a gift-driven Christmas and its attendant participation in consumer culture have alienating effects, instead contending that a generous spirit will both benefit the individual and aid in the building of local (and, by extension, to these stories’ readers, national) community.

Jewett revisits these themes in a Christmas story aimed beyond a juvenile audience. “Mrs. Parkins’s Christmas Eve” was published in two parts in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* in December 1890 and January 1891. The story focuses on the social redemption of Lydia Parkins, an elderly widow who is both miserly and isolated, qualities Jewett works to associate with each other. Mrs. Parkins experiences a conversion from stinginess to a reluctant generosity brought on by fear for her life and recognition of her own isolation. Although her miserliness at the beginning of the story (she refuses to contribute to the minister’s

Christmas gift) makes her appear impoverished, Jewett notes that “there was nobody so well off in town except Colonel Drummond, so far as money went” (1). Mrs. Parkins’s transgressions against the community are compounded by her not contributing to the local economy; rather than shop locally, she spends the day before Christmas driving over to a larger nearby town to buy a few provisions, deposit money in the bank, and visit her cousin. Although this venture will save her money, as “goods were cheaper in Haybury,” Mrs. Parkins also worries that her cousin and her cousin’s children will “[hint] for presents” as they often do (1). Mrs. Parkins is eager to avoid the sense of reciprocal obligation that she anticipates gift-giving will open up; although she “was really much attached to her cousin . . . she thought that if she once began to give, they would always be expecting something” (2). Jewett paints Mrs. Parkins’s reluctance to engage in gift exchange as a key reason for her social isolation.

Mrs. Parkins’s errand to Haybury negatively mirrors the kind of pre-Christmas festivities a late-nineteenth-century family had come to expect: she visits family but refuses to stay the night, knowing that to stay on Christmas Eve would require the giving of gifts and would “begin what promised to be the squandering of her carefully saved fortune” (2); she visits the bank, but rather than withdrawing money for Christmas purchases, she makes a substantial deposit; she brings a piece of salt pork to her cousin but nearly keeps it for herself. Mrs. Parkins feels “uncomfortable” witnessing Haybury’s Christmas preparations, and “cheerful cousin Faber’s happiness in her own pinched housekeeping was a rebuke” (2). But she has worked to convince herself that her frugality and her attempts to resist celebrating Christmas are virtues rather than dangerous failings.

Mrs. Parkins finally questions her stingy ways in the climactic scene at the end of part 1. Caught in a sudden, violent snowstorm on her way back from Haybury, Mrs. Parkins cries out: “Oh! I’d give a thousand dollars to be safe under cover!” (2). A “vision of the brightly-lighted Haybury shops, and the merry customers that were hurrying in and out, and the gayety and contagious generosity of Christmas eve” comes to Mrs. Parkins as she sits, helpless and bewildered by the storm (2). Her opposition to that contagious generosity and her current isolation combine, and she asks “what had she tried to do for God and man that gave her a right to think of love and succor now?” (2). Part 1 ends with the widow’s frugality leading to the isolation that will surely result in her lonely death.

Part 2, however, redeems Mrs. Parkins. The Lanes, the minister’s family whom she earlier scorned, rescue her from the storm. The scene that follows offers an active revision of the domestic Christmas. The family places Mrs. Parkins in a seat of honor in their sitting room, wraps her in Mrs. Lane’s red shawl, and then gives her a warm dress to wear. A shining Christmas tree

stands in the corner, and a fire blazes as the family gathers to hear a short sermon on the Christmas story—with a focus on the innkeeper’s meanness—and sing Christmas hymns (5). As an outsider in this domestic scene, Mrs. Parkins does not threaten the integrity of the family but, instead, heightens their sense of Christmas spirit by offering them new avenues of generosity beyond the domestic unit.

The scene transforms Mrs. Parkins as well. The sermon and hymns, the “pretty home-made trifles,” the gathered family, and the “real presents” (that is, store-bought ones) that “meant no end of thought and management and secret self-denial” all demonstrate to Mrs. Parkins the dangerous, isolating effects of her parsimony (5). She resolves to change her way of living: “She didn’t know why the tears rushed to her eyes: ‘I’ve got to learn to deny myself of being mean,’ she thought, almost angrily” (5). Notably, Mrs. Parkins’s awakening to neighborly generosity leaves her bereft and upset, signaling her incomplete transition from miserliness to munificence.

Although the story leaves Mrs. Parkins’s transformation incomplete (she still feels “secret pangs” at each moment of new generosity), her rescue changes her enough that she gives gifts and money to neighbors and even pays for the minister’s surgery (5). Rather than reinforcing the importance of the traditional family unit, “Mrs. Parkins’s Christmas Eve” uses consumer activity and gift exchange to emphasize the value of community bonds outside the family structure. In other words, the shopping for and giving of gifts becomes a sort of cultural shorthand for building social connections in the community. If, as Nissenbaum argues, the domestic Christmas gift exchange in the nineteenth century “was a ritual gesture” intended to convey the notion that the family surpassed consumer capitalism in importance (173), Jewett’s depiction of Mrs. Parkins’s neighborly gifts merge economic use and domestic intimacy to produce a larger philosophy of social well-being or neighborliness.

Neighborliness is even more central to Jewett’s 1894 Christmas story “A Neighbor’s Landmark,” subtitled “A Winter Story with a Christmas Ending.” Published in *Century Magazine*, “A Neighbor’s Landmark” revisits several themes from “Mrs. Parkins’s Christmas Eve,” including a thrifty older protagonist and a climactic scene that combines isolation with a conversion to generosity. But the story’s more complex attitude toward consumerism and economic activity distinguishes it from “Mrs. Parkins’s Christmas Eve.” Here, instead of equating gift exchange with a healthy domestic setting, the story judges consumer culture based on its benefit for the collective. Jewett shows that a healthy, thriving economy privileges the community’s financial well-being over the individual’s.

The “landmark” in the title refers to two old-growth pines that stand on

land belonging to Mr. Packer, who lives with his wife and daughter. Packer's pines function as "landmarks and sentinels" on a "dangerous bit of coast," and village residents view the trees as communal property and prize them beyond their value to the local economy (237). Jewett's loving personification of the trees as "friends" and "great live things" which "felt their responsibility" to the village demonstrates that their social value outweighs their economic worth (237-38).<sup>11</sup> Because of this value, the trees embody the idea of neighborliness and social health in the story, which revolves around Packer wrestling with his decision to sell the trees to Ferris, an unprincipled timber contractor.

Packer's initial decision to sell the trees represents his betrayal of both familial and community bonds. He resists his wife's and daughter's objections because he believes their concerns are purely social, and he resents the idea of the community's claim on his individual property, arguing with his wife that "if I ever do [cut the trees], 't is because I've been twitted into it, an' told they were everybody's trees but mine" (237). Balancing his desire for individual control is his need to please others; although he "liked to be cross and autocratic, and to oppose people . . . there was hidden somewhere in his heart a warm spot of affectionateness and desire for approval" (240). Like Mrs. Parkins, Packer resists living as part of a collective. His determination to act independently isolates him from his wife and daughter and threatens to turn the villagers against him. Packer's internal conflict between serving selfish individualism and communal interests is finally resolved when he takes heroic measures to stop Ferris from cutting down the trees.

Packer's neighbors reward him for saving the trees (and taking a stand on social grounds rather than in consideration of his individual rights) with the "Christmas Ending," a spontaneous party to thank him for his actions. This Christmas Eve surprise party notably recalls the social openness of the disorderly Christmas, bringing the village into the family home: the Packers' private home fills with uninvited guests; Packer descends to the cellar to fill "some pitchers from the best barrel of cider"; "guests were tramping to and fro overhead in the best room; [and] there was a great noise of buzzing talk and laughter" (242). Christmas in "A Neighbor's Landmark" is unusual; it makes no reference to gift-giving or the preparation of special meals in honor of the day. The Packers have no apparent holiday traditions; they spend the day before Christmas planning errands and performing their usual daily tasks. Only the "Christmas Ending" makes this a Christmas story, and that ending extols not the domestic, family-centered Christmas but a holiday based on celebrating social bonds within the community.

It is tempting to read this story as a socialist intervention into American individuality. While Packer's desire to live in communion with his neighbors

leads to his denial of individual gain and his conversion to the social sphere, reading “A Neighbor’s Landmark” as anticapitalist is too reductive. True, the profit-seeking Ferris is the text’s villain, and the community directs its petition to save the trees toward Ferris’s self-serving economic interests more than toward Parker. But financial concerns are not fundamentally evil; the Packer pines represent the ideal coupling of monetary and social concerns. Their value is not only sentimental but also economic; as sentinels on the shore, they support one of the local industries, fishing. They also embody the longevity of the village, standing as iconic symbols of human ability to tame or conquer the land. They symbolize the capacity of a local economy to flourish even during difficult financial times.

While “Jack’s Merry Christmas” and “Mrs. Parkins’s Christmas Eve” commend the broadening of social boundaries to include those outside the immediate family via the exchange of money, gifts, and consumer goods, “A Neighbor’s Landmark” eliminates the commercial Christmas entirely, moving straight to the primacy of building social connections within the community. Christmas without gift exchange is still Christmas, Jewett suggests, since it glorifies the larger moral of social well-being or neighborliness. In contrast to her well-known stories like “A White Heron,” in which a regional character must choose between the integrity of her rural environment and the promise of financial and domestic security, Jewett’s Christmas stories communicate a philosophy of neighborliness built upon scenes of gift exchange firmly embedded in the economic realm, as gifts and services alike are valued based on their monetary worth. Rather than a redemption of consumerism at Christmas, neighborliness is the ultimate purpose of Christmas consumerism and exchange.

#### MARY WILKINS FREEMAN, COMMUNITY, AND FAILED GIFTS

Freeman wrote hundreds of short stories for adults and children and published many of them in immensely popular collections. Critics recognize her skillful portrayals of not only the traditions and daily life of Massachusetts villages but also the inner lives of the frustrated women living in these villages.<sup>12</sup> As a consequence, Freeman’s exploration of neighborliness and social redemption in her Christmas stories critiques the failures of gift exchange to establish empathetic relationships even more explicitly than Jewett’s. She idealizes New England communities less than Jewett does; while the values of generosity and community are still present, Freeman’s stories frequently shed light not only on the characters who stand to benefit from neighborly generosity but also on those who are further marginalized by a broken cycle of gift exchange. Like Jewett, Freeman uses her Christmas stories to explore the damaging effects

of self-interested gifts, focusing on protagonists at odds with conventions or imprisoned by their outsider status.

The Christmas stories collected in *A New England Nun and Other Stories* (1891) focus on women who are marginalized by poverty and lack of familial support. The tales also draw attention to the necessity of neighborly bonds, particularly for people relegated to society's fringes. Christmas generosity enables these characters to find their place in society and to broaden neighborly bonds in their communities. In "A Church Mouse," Christmas comes in as a concluding scene, more of an afterthought symbolizing the way a community welcomes a character back to society than a catalyst for the action of the story. In "A Stolen Christmas," Christmas gifts (and, specifically, the lack of funds to buy gifts) perform a more central role in a character's development.

"A Church Mouse" focuses on Hetty Fifield, who, because her small town has no poorhouse, moves into the village church and functions as its sexton when she becomes homeless. Hetty's reputation for being sharp-tongued and strong-willed keeps the villagers from welcoming her into their homes, despite her direct requests for accommodation. Initially, the villagers appreciate some of her domestic touches, such as her superior cleaning skills and the "treasures of worsted-work" with which she decorates the meeting house (416). However, Hetty's failure to conceal her residence in this public space reminds the parishioners of her poverty and isolation, facts they would prefer to ignore. Hetty's little room in the church draws attention to the village's lack of neighborliness, calling to mind its embarrassing failure to take care of her. Hetty's village consists of families who keep to their own "company," a network of relatives and in-laws (412). Within this domestic framework and without the benefit of charitable organizations, the village has no place for an outsider like Hetty.

A resurgence of community feeling, specifically from other women, rescues Hetty from homelessness. As the male authority figures who have served as vaguely ineffectual foils in the story band together to remove Hetty from the church, their wives unite to oppose their efforts. Having locked herself in the meeting house, Hetty pleads tearfully to remain, asking the gathered townspeople to consider how she has "always had a dretful hard time," and giving them a chance to offer her a small token of the charity they have withheld (424). Moved by her speech, Deacon Gale's wife takes charge, supported by the other listening women: "Mrs. Gale's voice rang out clear and strong and irrepressible. 'Of course you can stay in the meetin'-house,' said she; 'I should laugh if you couldn't'" (424). Freeman uses the cooperative efforts of the community's women to work against their village's conventional, domestic isolation, establishing the social advantage of collaborative friendships that extend beyond the family unit.

The Christmas ending of "A Church Mouse" further promotes the importance of community relationships developed in the rest of the story. Christmas Eve falls the day after Hetty's successful bid to stay in the church, when she has moved into the room where the parson used to hang his hat and has "reached what to her was the flood-tide of peace and prosperity" (425). The community that had previously ignored her now showers her with gifts: "Established in that small, lofty room, with her bed and her stove, with gifts of a rocking-chair and table, and a goodly store of food, with no one to molest or disturb her, she had nothing to wish for on earth" (425). The Gales also offer her some of their Christmas dinner. Hetty's minor comforts met, Freeman declares that "no happy girl could have a merrier Christmas than this old woman with her little measure full of gifts" (425). The gifts here are not only Hetty's new chair and table; they are her security and comfort, a nontangible measure of the community's support. Inspired by "pure artless enthusiasm and grateful happiness," Hetty reciprocates by sharing the only gift she has: she rings the church bell early Christmas morning and wakes "the whole village to Christmas Day" (426). Christmas in this story, as in Jewett's "A Neighbor's Landmark," illuminates the primacy of building community through generosity.

Another Christmas story collected in *A New England Nun* takes a different approach to Freeman's theme of neighborly bonds at Christmastime. "A Stolen Christmas" pits the poor Marg'ret Poole against her rich, boastful neighbor, Mrs. Luther Ely. Marg'ret cares for her three young grandchildren, left motherless after her daughter's death, while their father searches for work in a distant city. Destitute but always ambitious, Marg'ret sees Mrs. Ely as the representation of what her life could have been had she been only a little richer or more successful. Marg'ret's ambition is portrayed as reasonable; rather than coveting silk dresses and abundant carpets, she desires the more realistic achievements of Mrs. Ely, who "had been all her life the one notch higher, which had seemed almost attainable" (326–27). However close Mrs. Ely's social status seems to Marg'ret's, it is ultimately unattainable, making Marg'ret's inability to achieve even her relatively humble ambitions all the more disappointing.

The women are in some ways very similar: both are widowed, and both have one daughter with children. However, Mrs. Ely's daughter lives, while Marg'ret's has died. Mrs. Ely has kept her beauty into her old age, while Marg'ret "had lost every sign of youthful grace" (323). And Mrs. Ely is financially secure, while Marg'ret struggles to make ends meet for herself and her grandchildren. Most important for the story is the fact that Mrs. Ely is able to celebrate Christmas while Marg'ret lacks the financial means to do so. Marg'ret's moral compass is tested when in desperation she steals a parcel of Christmas toys from the White family's village store on Christmas Eve. For a week leading up to Christ-

mas, Marg'ret had regularly visited the store, a "very emporium of beauty and richness" decorated for the season with evergreen garlands and tempting displays of "cheap toys," to check the prices of the toys and candies (328). After her frantic attempts to find extra work sewing or cleaning houses prove unsuccessful, Marg'ret steals a package filled with toys and candies left unattended on the store's counter.

Marg'ret is tormented by guilt after her theft. She first attempts to make atonement through an act of generosity directed toward the Elys. After learning that her son-in-law has found profitable work and will be sending her twenty dollars a month (an astonishing sum), Marg'ret uses some of the money to buy the Elys new lace curtains when a devastating fire destroys their house. But this act of unexpected giving is not enough to settle her debt. Having lost the "defiant spirit" (335) that originally allowed her to justify stealing from the Whites, she attempts to make amends in two less obvious ways, first by offering to do work for Mrs. White without payment (an action White initially misinterprets as an impoverished woman's plea to work for food or fuel), then by leaving money anonymously at the store to cover the cost of the stolen items. Finally, she returns the items to the store and confesses, when to her shock she learns that the Whites had intended the package for her all along: Mr. White tells her, "I'd seen you looking kind of wishful, you know, and I thought I'd make you a present of them. I left the bundle on the counter when I went to supper, and told Henry to tell you to take it, and I supposed he did" (337). Crucially, Mr. White's language of intention to make the items "a present" rather than a charitable donation reinforces that the empathetic gift's purpose is to build neighborly bonds.

"A Stolen Christmas" differs from "A Church Mouse" in several important ways. The Christmas conclusion in "A Church Mouse" paints a picture of contentment prompted by the receipt of unexpected gifts and the promise of social fellowship. In "A Stolen Christmas," the illicitly obtained gifts prompt Marg'ret's further social isolation and feelings of guilt and shame. However, the text makes it clear that, had Marg'ret trusted in neighborly kindness and enabled the Whites to enact the cycle of gift exchange, she would have avoided shame. Interestingly, the story emphasizes the giving of unexpected gifts outside the family as an essential part of Marg'ret's penance; only by using some of her money to replace her neighbor's curtains can she begin to make amends for her theft. While the theme of avoiding envy is foremost in "A Stolen Christmas," Freeman also uses the story to highlight the significance of broad social bonds through her depiction of giving gifts outside the domestic unit.

Freeman develops this theme further in "Friend of My Heart," published in *Good Housekeeping* in 1913. Featuring a strong central character who relin-

quishes her claims on a male figure for the benefit of a weaker, more conventional female character, "Friend of My Heart" builds the notion of self-denial introduced in "A Stolen Christmas" and imparts the moral that those who practice self-sacrifice will be rewarded. The story focuses on the practical and efficient Catherine Dexter, who ultimately chooses to sacrifice her chance to marry Lucius Converse; instead, she encourages him to pursue her friend Elvira Meredith, who deeply dreads the outcast status of spinsterhood. Rather than portraying the two women as competitors for an eligible, desirable bachelor, Freeman highlights their friendship and honors their neighborly relationship as the ultimate goal of generosity.

The story achieves much of its power by demonstrating the destructive effects of failed gifts. In a scene stressing Elvira's lack of self-worth due to her outsider status as an unmarried woman, Elvira and Catherine walk home from the Sunday-school Christmas tree event. Elvira's gifts from her Sunday-school students include multiple blue head-ties, several pincushions, and a worsted lamp-mat, each of which Elvira angrily throws in the snow as Catherine looks on, aghast. The problem is not simply that the quantity of domestic items exceeds Elvira's need but that they are failed gifts: "Catherine, they *knew* I did not want these things! They *knew*, and they did not care! We have things we do not want because nobody cares" (205). Elvira knows that the gifts are given out of a sense of obligation, not sincere care. Freeman highlights here the inability of Christmas gifts given by rote to fulfill the true function of gifts: to forge or build bonds between people. These gifts fail because, as Lee Anne Fennell argues, a "true gift embodies and perpetuates empathetic dialogue between giver and recipient," opening up new pathways for communication and identification with another (93).

Catherine ultimately gives Elvira a true empathetic gift, one of the "gifts of life that matter," as Elvira later explains to Catherine (206). Although the story opens with the exchange of more traditional Christmas gifts between the two women (Catherine presents Elvira with a poem titled "Friend of My Heart," copied into an album; Elvira reciprocates with a "sweet little note of thanks, written on gilt-edged paper, and a beautifully embroidered black silk apron"), an offer of marriage from Lucius was the true gift Elvira desired (197). Like Marg'ret's gift to her neighbors in "A Stolen Christmas," Catherine's true gift to Elvira requires sacrifice. In this case, Catherine sacrifices the possibility of her own marriage to Lucius, ensuring instead that Elvira will net her former beau.

The moralizing conclusion portrays Catherine standing alone in her home, gazing out the window after Lucius has left. Although she feels lonely, she comforts herself, saying "Elvira has got the Christmas present she wants" in a voice of "utmost womanly sweetness, and yet a high courage" (211). Like Louisa Ellis

in Freeman's well-known story "A New England Nun," Catherine feels uplifted despite having lost her own hope for marriage: "She did not even dream of the truth: that the gift of the Lord, the true Christmas gift, is, for some of his children—the more blessed and the nearer Him—self-renunciation. She did not know that, by giving, she had received a fuller measure than she had given" (211). Catherine is comforted by the vision of Elvira, "that friend of her heart . . . standing before her, radiant, and blessing her" (211). Elvira's blessing stands in for reciprocity, fulfilling the cycle of gift exchange. Notably, Freeman portrays Catherine's divine status not by depicting her being blessed by God or communicating directly with heaven but by reemphasizing the deep friendship between neighbors. "Friend of My Heart" contrasts scenes of failed material Christmas gifts with the successful, intangible gifts of friendship and romantic relationships. While on the surface the successful marriage plot appears to conform with the domestic narrative's veneration of the traditional family unit, individual sacrifice in the name of neighborly well-being facilitates this marriage. Catherine's benevolent refusal of Lucius reveals Freeman's ultimate promotion of neighborly relationships even in an ostensibly domestic tale.

#### NEIGHBORLY CHRISTMAS AS NATIONAL ALTERNATIVE

Each of these six stories by Jewett and Freeman works to correct the violations of domestic Christmas to the cycle of gift exchange. They interrogate the domestic Christmas's focus on the primacy of the family and neglect of the social function of this transaction. The domestic Christmas's private, family-centered rituals of giving disregard the gift cycle's empathetic purpose by reinforcing hierarchical divisions and roles within the family and society. As Mary Douglas states in her foreword to Mauss's *The Gift*, "[a] gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction" (vii). By focusing on gift exchange that repairs the social bonds within the community, Jewett and Freeman offer an alternative, "un-American" narrative of Christmas rooted in solidarity that encourages empathy for all people.

Tempting as it may be to align the neighborly Christmas with dismissive assessments of literary regionalism that characterize both the neighborly Christmas and regionalism as isolated and idealized, Jewett's and Freeman's depictions of neighborliness in reality function on multiple levels to address the domestic Christmas's abuses of gift exchange. In response to discomfort with the rise of consumer culture, the domestic Christmas uses figures like Santa Claus to protect a false sense of authenticity. As Nissenbaum notes, the popularity of these invented traditions shows "how powerful was the need to keep the relationship between family life and a commercial economy hidden

from view—to protect children (and adults, too) from understanding something troublesome about the world they were making” (319). The neighborly Christmas, in contrast, reveals the connection between gifts and the market. There is no shame in buying, giving, and enjoying material goods at Christmastime, these stories claim, as long as those goods are given in a spirit of empathy and in the service of neighborliness.

Additionally, the neighborly Christmas exposes the destructive self-interest at the root of distinctions between charity and gifts. Mauss’s observations led him to conclude that giving and receiving gifts is part of a cycle that promotes bonds among people. In his understanding of gift exchange, reciprocity is essential in order to preserve social ties. Charitable giving removes recipients from participation in reciprocity, thereby preventing their participation in community. While the domestic Christmas distinguishes between gifts and charity as a way to fortify class distinctions, the neighborly Christmas erases the line between charity and gift-giving, encouraging readers to be empathetic and community-minded. The neighborly Christmas’s focus on generosity that exceeds the boundaries of the family fulfills the requirement that gift exchange work to build social and spiritual ties. By highlighting the essential relationship between the individual and the larger community at a time when the family reigned supreme, these stories demonstrate each author’s commitment to an alternative narrative of national identity devoted to communal values rather than individual advancement.

## NOTES

1. For example, as Crow notes in his introduction to *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America*, pre-1960s critical assessments assumed that “regional literature was inherently minor, an art of the miniature, the commonplace, the local, and often the feminine. The term ‘local color’ was used dismissively, as a diminutive,” in contrast to themes believed to be of national importance (1). Similarly, Howard states in “American Regionalism: Local Color, National Literature, Global Circuits” that “realism has sometimes been defined as literature of general significance, and regionalism as limited” (123). A number of critics echo the idea that traditionally, regional literature has been neglected and dismissed as limited in scope and significance.

2. Critics including Renza and Ammons state that Jewett masks the historical impact of tourism and industrialism in her native Maine. I believe Jewett recognizes capitalism’s influence in more nuanced ways. Similarly, in “Unraveling Regions, Unsettling Periods: Sarah Orne Jewett and American Literary History,” Howard argues that Jewett’s portrayal of regional hospitality in “A Late Supper” is influenced by her knowledge of the modern stock market.

3. Cary, for example, has criticized some of Jewett's holiday stories because they were commissioned by newspaper or magazine editors: "As is the proclivity of such pieces written to order, they glorify the cultural import of the day, far too often at the expense of esthetic imperatives" (xiv). Similarly, Reichardt refers to the inferior nature of most of Freeman's holiday-themed writing in her introduction to *A Mary Wilkins Freeman Reader*, describing the "solicitations from numerous publications for holiday tales" as one of the "mixed blessings" that came from Freeman's immense popularity in the first part of her career (xii). Some of these "bread and butter" stories are "formulaic and trite," Reichardt claims, while others "succeed *despite* their holiday themes" (xiii, emphasis added). Other critics, however, have questioned the dismissive impulse Cary and Reichardt display. In "Mary Wilkins Freeman and the Taste of Necessity," Blum similarly puts to the test the persistent critical belief that aesthetic taste and financial necessity are mutually exclusive. Kinsey's recent note on a recovered Freeman Christmas story for children, which she describes as "imagistically rich" for critical analysis, illuminates the significance of Freeman's range of writing styles and publication venues (270). Perhaps most notable is Johanningsmeier's excellent analysis of Jewett's and Freeman's publication in newspaper syndicates, which demonstrates that each writer's pragmatic reasons for publication should not inherently remove commissioned stories from critical consideration.

4. For more on the domestic Christmas, see especially Nissenbaum; for general analysis of Christmas, see Frodsham. Recent critical works focusing solely on the American holiday include Waits, Restad, and Horsley and Tracy.

5. Critics differ on when store-bought Christmas gifts gained popularity over home-made handicrafts, but Nissenbaum's examination of the Sedgwick family letters, which tracks the transformation in family Christmas celebrations over the course of about forty years (from roughly 1800 to the 1840s), shows that commercially produced goods became part of Christmas gift exchanges almost from the domestic Christmas's inception. See chapter 4, "Affection's Gift: Toward a History of Christmas Presents."

6. The figure of Santa Claus owes its popularity in the United States to two nineteenth-century literary sources. The first is Washington Irving's *History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty*, a work popularly known as *Knickerbocker History of New York*, published in 1809 under the pseudonym Dietrich Knickerbocker. Irving familiarized St. Nicholas, a sort of satirical patron saint of the Dutch settlers of New Amsterdam; the second literary source popularized him: Clement Moore's 1822 poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas," known more commonly by the name under which it was later published, "The Night before Christmas."

7. For more on Christmas's patron saint and his complex history, see Schmidt 134–47 and Nissenbaum 61–64.

8. Spectacles of charity were not limited to Christmas events during this period. As Harris notes in *The Cultural Work of the Late Nineteenth-Century Hostess*, social cru-

saders like Annie Adams Fields witnessed and eventually organized charitable events similar to Christmas dinners at other times of the year. Clearly, regardless of the season, these types of large charitable events were meant to produce a phenomenon of exhibition or display as well as evoke genuine emotional response. Fields herself was drawn to social reform after touring the slums of London with Charles Dickens in a series of carefully organized encounters designed to elicit sympathy and the emotional outpouring of goodwill. This charitable tourism is more deeply examined in Harris 132–41. I argue that because of societal expectations for Christmastime and its domestic, family focus, charitable spectacles were particularly important at Christmas.

9. When gifts are given in charitable situations, they are often large lots of the same item, such as when Louisa May Alcott accompanied Anna Rice Powell (wife of the reformer Aaron Powell), James Gibbons, and his wife, Abby Hopper Gibbons to Randall's Island, the site of the charitable Convent of Mercy. In a letter to her family written 25 December 1875, Alcott notes that she carried "a great box of dolls" while a young reporter with her took "a bigger box of candy" to the unfortunate children in the island's hospital and "idiot house" (211). Each child received the same gift—a doll and some candy. The lack of individualized tailoring of the gifts emphasizes the charitable nature of the giving.

10. Only one story appeared earlier: "Patty's Dull Christmas," which also was published in *The Independent* in 1875 and was later collected in 1878 in *Play Days: A Book of Stories for Children*.

11. This personification and value Jewett ascribes to the Packer trees resembles Jewett's description of the pine Sylvia climbs in her well-known story "A White Heron." That familiar pine, which "made a landmark for sea and shore miles and miles away. . . like a great main-mast to the voyaging earth," is said to feel Sylvia's "determined spark of human spirit wending its way from higher branch to branch" and to protect her as she climbs (234, 236).

12. Fetterley and Pryse note in their introduction to Freeman in the anthology *American Women Regionalists* that Freeman's position as a second-wave regionalist author enabled her to build on the foundational work done by authors like Jewett and Rose Terry Cooke: "Freeman in writing her fiction could indicate her region with a few generic brush-strokes. . . . Able to identify region and establish dialect with relatively little effort, Freeman could choose to focus her attention on narrative form" (303).

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