

Arielle Domingue
ENGL 3072
Dr. June Pulliam
November 15, 2011

Achievement of Female Sovereignty

According to feminist scholar Jo Freeman “No other minority lives in the same household with its master, separated totally from its peers and urged to compete with them for the privilege of serving the majority group. No other minority group so thoroughly accepts the standards of the dominant group as its own...” (qtd. in Kane 611). This idea that women are servants within male domains has circulated throughout American Literature for centuries. Louise Mallard from Kate Chopin’s “The Story of An Hour,” Louisa Ellis from Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s “A New England Nun,” and Janie Crawford from Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, for example, are women whose various struggles for autonomy reflect the female mentality of the 19th and 20th centuries. Throughout their stories, these three women courageously oppose many assessments made during that era about the relationships between men and women. One of the most prevalent of these assessments is that females were absolutely reliant upon men for stability social, economic, and intimate spheres. Though Louise, Louisa, and Janie discover their independence in various ways, their courage to defy predetermined gender roles as defined by a patriarchal society is a product of their ability to separate their personal identities from those of their dominant male counterparts.

Though Louise Mallard from Kate Chopin's "The Story of An Hour" seems to be the epitome of a submissive 19th century woman at the beginning of the story, her unexpected reaction to the death of her husband proves her to be a woman capable of achieving self-sovereignty. According to Emily Kane's article "Men's and Women's Beliefs About Gender Inequality: Family Ties, Dependence, and Agreement," women have been dependent on men for centuries because of the male ability to gain greater control over resources, social institutions, and construction of social meaning (612). These assumptions were the most potent contributors to the gender inequalities that bombarded mainstream society during the era in which Louise Mallard lived. During the 18th century, society necessitated that men exert this assumed dominion over communal establishments by remaining in complete control of his household and its inhabitants. In this patriarchal system, women were expected to strengthen their male counterparts' ascendancy by remaining mute and devoid of cognitive abilities. According to Mark Cunningham's article "The Autonomous Female Self and the Death of Louise Mallard in Kate Chopin's 'The Story of An Hour,'" the absolute authority that men were granted as rulers of this patriarchal system is apparent in the Mallard household for Louise is simply identified as "Mrs. Mallard" throughout the first half of the story. Also, Louise Mallard's face is described as possessing "lines" that "bespoke repression and even a certain strength" (Chopin 1). However, it is that "certain strength" in Louise Mallard's disposition that distinguishes her from other female victims of masculine tyranny.

Louise's reaction to the suspected death of her husband serves as evidence

that she is capable of disobeying the rules of a society that require her to rely on the compassion of her male counterpart. Louise's resilience is evident as she opposes Gerda Lerner's assessment that a woman who participates in gender stratification "...fears the threat of loss of communication with, approval by, and love from the man (or men) in her life" (qtd. in Kane 614). In fact, she becomes overwhelmed by joy when she believes her husband has died in a train disaster. Louise's lack of fear of this loss of communication with her husband is clearly visible when she expresses her gratitude for her newfound liberation and the opportunity to carry out a "long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely" (Chopin 2). Coincidentally, it is not until this revelation of personal freedom does the audience become aware of "Mrs. Mallard's" first name. Louise's ability to separate herself from a name that symbolizes her extended captivity by a patriarchal society allows her to "re-enter society as an independent individual" whose "thoughts are her own" (Cunningham 50).

Much like Louise Mallard, Louisa Ellis from Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's short story "A New England Nun," also effectively demonstrates her ability to defy societal gender expectations. However, Louisa Ellis is able to discover autonomy by separating herself from the assumption that women are unable to independently survive in an established economy. Fortunately, Louisa Ellis was guaranteed financial security after the deaths of her mother and brother provided her with land and a generous inheritance. Louisa's independently acquired wealth opposes the surmise in Kane's article that female dependence on male counterparts is generated from the male ability to provide economic stability (612). Louisa Ellis further

contradicts Kane's conclusion that "women's lesser labor force participation and labor wages" encourage females to identify themselves as products of patriarchal successes (612-613). On the contrary, Louisa is a highly interactive laborer in her own personal domestic economy that she has created and managed for herself during the extended absence of male authority. As examined in Lorne Fienberg's article "Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's 'Soft Diurnal Commotion': Women's Work and Strategies of Containment," though Louisa's work may not produce revenue that others are able to profit from, the rituals she has established within this domestic economy provide Louisa with not only an "ample subsistence (a self-sufficiency that the gospel of progress frequently derogates) but a means of self-fulfillment" (485-486). However, social decrees created by the patriarchy in which she lives threaten to diminish the significance of the fruits of her labor when her betrothed, Joe Dagget, makes a sudden reappearance into Louisa's well-defined domestic sphere. Joe Dagget's unexpected presence could possibly disturb Louisa's level of domestic productivity as she is expected to fulfill the role of subservient wife and mother (Fienberg 486).

Though at one time Louisa did view marriage as a "reasonable feature and a probable desirability of life," it was only because of her mother's "cool sense and sweet, even temperament" did she "accept him [Joe Dagget] with no hesitation" to be her husband (Freeman 4). Joe's absence, however, allowed Louisa the opportunity to live a life "full of pleasant peace" in which she "never felt discontented nor impatient over her lover's absence" (Freeman 4). Louisa viewed

his return as simply the “inevitable conclusion of things” in which she would be forced to sacrifice the “peculiar features of her happy solitary life” (Freeman 4-5). The time Louisa spent away from Joe Dagget allowed her to create a lifestyle independent from that of a male dominated economy. Joe’s entrance brings inside Louisa’s domestic economic sphere an “alien economy of an exterior landscape” that is filled with “depersonalized, unfulfilling toils and dubious fortunes” (Fienberg 486). Louisa recognizes that she risks upsetting the “well-ordered self-sufficiency” she has worked so hard to establish for herself if she allows Joe to conquer her domestic reign (Fienberg 486). Unable to surrender her identity as a self-sufficient individual, Louisa ultimately reaches the pinnacle of her quest for self-worth when she sets Joe Dagget free to marry Lily Dyer.

Louisa Ellis is content in maintaining the “alternative pattern of living” she has established for herself and is consequently submerged in her “ability to translate her own person into ‘peace itself’” (Fienberg 487). Unlike Kane’s observations that women live “dispersed” among men and that they are only able to survive while attached to their male counterparts, Louisa denies this assumed dependence on a dominant male figure (613). Louisa is successfully able to maintain the personal freedom she has acquired by removing herself from an economy that seeks to discredit the contributions she is able to make because she is a woman.

Though comparable to Louisa’s ability to separate herself from predetermined societal gender roles, Janie Crawford from Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* engages in a much more spiritual pursuit for personal identity as she searches for a love that is “natural” and detached from

society's shallow examination of a successful marriage. In order for Janie to successfully remove herself from the societal gender expectations projected upon her, she deliberately battles against the "intimate ties" that she should have with her various male counterparts. She also expresses her desire for independence as she defies the assumption that women are dependent on men's greater authority and power over decision-making in family and work places (Kane 613). Contrarily, according to the article "'Tuh De Horizon and Back': The Female Quest in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" by Missy Dehn Kubitschek, Janie refuses offers of marriage, "recognizing that their offers of 'protection' amount to no more than economic exploitation" (111). Unlike many women of her time, Janie does not allow herself to become attached to any one particular man simply because of the psychological ties usually generated by sexuality and intimacy. In Janie's case, "human life and love develop within the cycle of the seasons, assuming not only domestic and social but also a natural transcendent meaning" (Kubitschek 109).

It is when Janie encounters Tea Cake that she is able to finally commit to a relationship that allows her to not only remain detached from society's gender inequalities but also maintain her newfound sense of autonomy. Her success in becoming independent is evident for Tea Cake does not assume the stereotypical male role as "master" of Janie's self-discovery. Instead, he functions as a companion, allowing he and Janie the opportunity to "redefine their lives outside the usual social constructs" and "reject ordinary conceptions of dominant subordinate sex roles" (Kubitschek 111).

Louise Mallard, Louisa Ellis, and Janie Crawford symbolize the battles for independence and respect that American women have been fighting for centuries. However, these women's stories are not only meant to promote awareness regarding equal opportunities for women, but they also provide hope for justice throughout multiple American social institutions. This hope is apparent as Louise, Louisa, and Janie, though confined in a patriarchal society that relentlessly projects gender inequalities upon them, are able to powerfully assert their individual personalities and free themselves from female societal gender expectations.

Works Cited

Chopin, Kate. "The Story of an Hour." *Cummings Study Guides*. Michael J. Cummings (2010): n. pag. Web. 29 Aug. 2011.

Cunningham, Mark. "The Autonomous Female Self and the Death of Louise Mallard in Kate Chopin's 'The Story of An Hour.'" *English Language Notes* 42.1 (2004): 48-55. Print.

Fienberg, Lorne. "Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's 'Soft Diurnal Commotion': Women's Work and Strategies of Containment." *The New England Quarterly* 62.4 (1989): 483-504. JSTOR. Web. 10 Nov. 2011.

Freeman, Mary E. Wilkins. "A New England Nun." *Washington State University Databases for Literature*. Donna Campbell (2004): n. pag. Web. 29 Aug. 2011.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1937. Print.

Kane, Emily W. "Men's and Women's Beliefs About Gender Inequality: Family Ties, Dependence, and Agreement." *Sociological Forum* 13.4 (1998): 611-637. JSTOR. Web. 10 Nov. 2011.

Kubitschek, Missy Dehn. "'Tuh De Horizon and Back': The Female Quest in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *Black American Literature Forum* 17.3 (1983): 109-115. JSTOR. Web. 10 Nov. 2011.