theories and methodologies

Understudies: Miming the Human

SUSAN M. GRIFFIN

THE TITLE OF *UNDERSTUDIES*, MARY WILKINS FREEMAN'S 1901 SHORT STORY COLLECTION, SITUATES US IN THE REALM OF THEATER, OF PERformance—the space where actors and their seconds together learn the grammars of verbal and visual representation.[1] On the cover of *Understudies*, cameo portraits linked by garlands mimic the arrangement of actors' head shots on a playbill (fig. 1). But the profiles are those of a horse, a dog, a parrot, a monkey, a squirrel, and a cat. Freeman's book displays on its face the art of representing animals and humans—and animals as humans. And her title articulates a distinctly turn-of-the-century (if still unresolved) question: who are the understudies and who are the leads—animals or humans?

Understudies comprises six stories about animals and six about flowers. Freeman hesitated over the combination; as she wrote to her editor, "Somehow, the flowers and the animals seem to me not to combine very well. They are so essentially different, one being symbolic, the other psychological" (Kendrick 244).[2] In fact, Freeman's flower stories are essentially extended instances of simple prosopopoeia. The animal stories, on the other hand, do not propose a single or a simple rhetorical or biological relation between species, instead depicting animal/human identities that are both performative and relational. These stories are psychological, I argue, because they are centrally concerned with the representation of interiority. In meditating on how to depict the mind (of man, of woman, of beast), Freeman explores authenticity and mimicry, origins and originality.

Historians have traced the roots of present-day animal rights movements to the nineteenth century and, in particular, to female activism then. Using Freeman's narratives as an example, I want to suggest how literary writing in the second half of the nineteenth century addressed questions that structure animal studies today.[3] Freeman shows that, looking at animals, we can never see either wholly separate species or our intrinsic, "natural" selves. She traces the stories of individuals, animal and human, at the same time locating them in the long history of animals' and humans' mutual domestication.

SUSAN M. GRIFFIN is professor and chair, Department of English, and Justus Bier Professor of Humanities at the University of Louisville. She is the editor of the *Henry James Review* and author, most recently, of *Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge UP, 2004). Her current projects include coediting a volume on Henry James and Alfred Hitchcock, editing a collection of Colm Tóibín's critical writings on James, coediting two volumes of the new Cambridge University Press edition of James's fiction, and researching and writing a book manuscript, "Metamorphosis, Materiality, and Genre."

© 2009 BY THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.2.511 Published online by Cambridge University Press

If the collection's title suggests performance, it also signals engagement with popular theories of evolution and devolution, theories foundational in human and national self-definition in this period. Indeed, evolutionary discourse pervades these stories. For example, the loyalty of the lost dog to his old master hints at canine evolutionary progress: "But the dog followed him, faithful not only to his old master, but to a nobler thing, the faithfulness which was in himself—and maybe by so doing gained another level in the spiritual evolution of his race" (61).[4]

For many animal theorists—then and now—language usage crucially differentiates humans from beasts. Indeed, the evolutionary Protestant teleology that underwrote much nineteenth-century Christian social activism regularly invoked images of dumb animals as the responsibility of (more evolved) speaking citizens. The widely circulated journal of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, inaugurated in 1868 by George Thorndike Angell, was titled *Our Dumb Animals*. This philanthropic emphasis on animal's inability to speak for themselves helped foster the proliferation of animal "autobiographies," in which the animal is given voice. The most famous of these, Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty: The Autobiography of a Horse* (1877), a best-seller in America, engendered a literary formula soon applied to dogs (*Beautiful Joe* [1893], by Marshall Saunders), cats (*Pussy Meow: The Autobiography of a Cat* [1901], by Susanna Louise Patteson), and birds (*Dickey Downy: The Autobiography of a Bird* [1899], by Virginia Patterson). Further complicating the authenticity of animal speech in *Black Beauty* is the fact that the book's empathetic argument for the rights of animals was also, as Coral Lansbury and others have shown, an all-but-transparent brief for the rights of the working classes and of women. Katherine Grier has demonstrated how thoroughly the genre of the animal autobiography was entwined with the discourses of pedagogy, parenting, antivivisection, and temperance—deliberately assimilating animal psychology to that of humans (see also Mason).

Like these developmental narratives, *Understudies* is centrally concerned with language. However, Freeman's animals are not simple stand-ins for humans, nor do her humans speak for their dumb animals. Instead, Freeman produces changing scenes in which the roles of human and animal are scripted, improvised, and rescripted. Instead of elevating language as the sign of superiority or intrinsic difference, she foregrounds—and analyzes—representation as such, highlighting the semiotics of species.

So, for example, Freeman's narrator claims that the dog who has lost his master becomes "not even a dog . . . a wandering intelligence only," whose "yelp would have been unintelligible to another of his species" (54). "The Doctor's Horse" also parses the language of ownership and identity. A doctor's stern mastery of a horse's (and, we infer, his own) wildness in the discipline of civilization is told not only by naming ("the doctor's horse") but also in the language of the body: the horse's "head and neck describing a long downward curve, so expressive of submission and dejection that it might have served as a hieroglyphic for them" (86–87).[5] At times, language does serve to mark species difference: "he and the Cat looked at each other across that impassable barrier of silence which has been set between man and beast from the creation of the world" (16). But even in these instances the situation is less one of evolutionary hierarchy and more one of alien, other selves. Thus, the same Cat speaks to a different man, albeit in a foreign tongue. The human "halloo of despair and entreaty" is answered by an animal who says "all that was essential quite plainly to his own comprehension. There was in his cry of response inquiry, information, warning, terror, and, finally, the offer of comradeship" (8). But this complex and full animal "response" is not understood. In another story, man and

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.2.511 Published online by Cambridge University Press

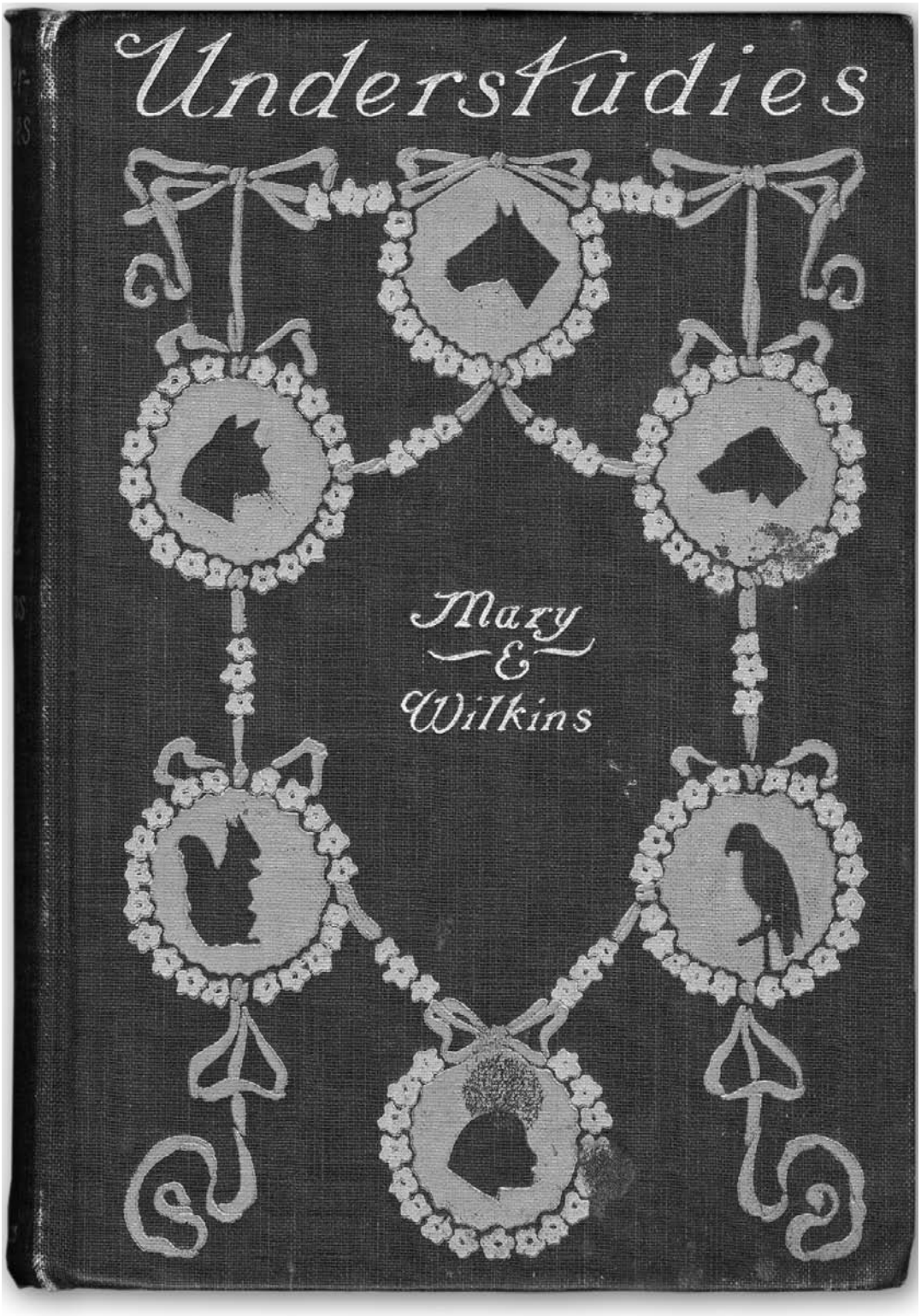


FIG. 1
Front cover of *Understudies*.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.2.511 Published online by Cambridge University Press

squirrel face off, each, unintelligibly, calling the other "thief" (49).

The importance of these plays of call-and-response is underscored by their visual representation. Freeman describes, and the illustrations for *Understudies* depict, scenes of facing, of recognition and misrecognition: "he and the Cat looked at each other," "He looked hard at the dog, and the dog looked piteously at him" (55), "He [the Farmer] looked for a long time, and finally spied him [the Squirrel] sitting on the stone wall, eying him with the wariest eyes" (48). These flawed mirrorings raise the question of imitation—an issue that split nineteenth-century animal studies (e.g., the nature-fakers controversy [see Lutts]) and that vexes animal-language studies to this day. When we look at animals, do we see only imitations of ourselves? Is animal speech simply an echo? The mimic cannot originate thought, words, or action. Mimicry is, on the one hand, a mirror image that reveals the self and, on the other, a lesser version, a copy, of the self. Lesser also in that the copy must be imperfect to be recognizable as a copy. Hence the comic potential of animal speech, depicted repeatedly in cartoons and caricatures. Hence, I argue, its threatening nature as well. Animals repeat humans with an uncanny difference, creating a reflection that shatters the treasured wholeness of the personal and species image. The humanness of beasts unsettles, rather than reinforces, the integrity of humans.

In *Understudies*, these relations at times resemble the colonialist structure of imitation that Homi Bhabha calls mimicry, the "primitive" subject's near-perfect imitation of the more civilized colonial master: the laughable pretension of a Babu's pronouncements or, in a different register, the horror of a savage vampire passing as an English gentleman. Intended as a self-replication that confirms authority, mimicry instead introduces difference and hybridity.[6] Our inferiors ape us, but in doing so they reveal us, not themselves. In *Understudies*, the most complex animal/human mirrorings come in narratives that repeatedly hint at an orientalist narrative: "The Monkey" and "The Parrot" are tales of exotic animals brought back from wild, primitive lands, encaged and partially domesticated. Monkey and parrot are also, and not coincidentally, the two species that humans have traditionally seen as and trained to be "natural" mimics. By exploring how humans re-present themselves in animals, Freeman engages the difficulties of reading interiority when faced only with its signs.

The primary character in "The Monkey," the Bird-Fancier, is puzzled by a beast and the boy who resembles him: "He was a saturnine boy, with a face not unlike the Monkey's own, with a curiously narrow height of forehead, and long upper lip, and bright brown eyes," a backward child who "lagged behind" in school (25). The Bird-Fancier develops a theory to explain the resemblance between the two. Combining his own ideas of evolution and religion, he argues, "All those little things in the shop are men and women run out. They ain't the beginning, as I have heard some say they believed, but they are the end" (22). Links to the past (the Bird-Fancier suggests that the Monkey is the reincarnation of "one of the Bible Pharaohs run out"), animals also embody a future extinction: "all the animal races" "die out" (23). Evolutionary and devolutionary fears are figured as biological: the monkey or ape is origin and end of the human race.

But Freeman also hints how tenuous the Anglo-American claim to cultural superiority is by designating the animal a pharaoh turned monkey, an ancient, inscrutable other who "might have been half asleep, and he might have been sunken in a reverie. He looked like an epitome of an Eastern sage" (20–21). The Monkey is "the key to Genesis and Revelation . . . if anybody knew how to use it" (24).[7] What the exotic knows is inaccessible, except perhaps to the Boy. Facing each other across the bars of a cage, "[t]he two mouthed at each other silently with perfect understanding" (33;

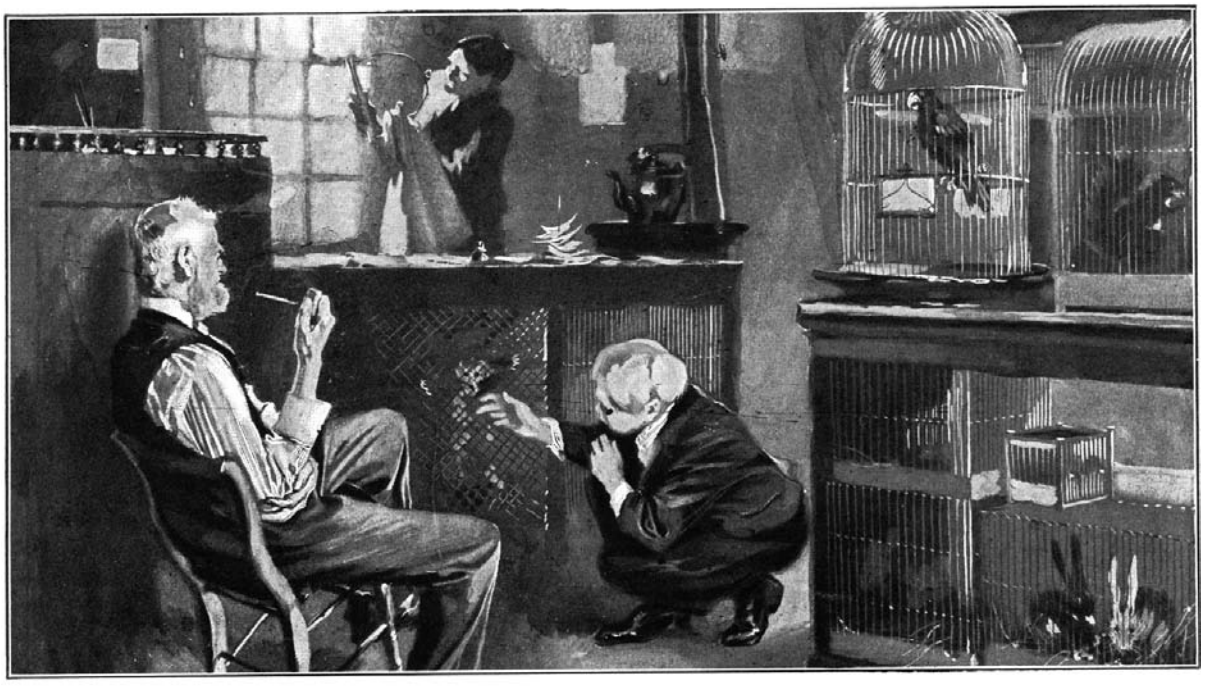
https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.2.511 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fig. 2). But what do they understand? Their exchanges are silent imitations of speech—or perhaps of each other. Indeed, Freeman seems to suggest that in this mirroring, it is the monkey, not the human, who is aped: the Boy doubles over to the Monkey's level. At one point the Boy actually stands behind a looking glass that he holds up to the Monkey, and they embrace across it. "Doubled, he looked like a little man; undoubled, there was a sudden revelation of a beast": the description refers to the Monkey's posture but works to further unsettle the distinctions between original and imitation (28).

We find the Monkey's expressive isolation, his effectual silence, replicated in that of the Bird-Fancier. Living with two virtually dumb women who "were on a higher range of stupidity than the animals" (24), he voices his theories only to find that his companions have not "the least understanding of anything which he said," are "no more audience than if he had been himself an inhabitant of some distant jungle, and removed by force to a cage of civilization" (21–22). Finally, the overburdened Boy struggles to cart the Monkey away in a parrot cage. The Monkey, located as a parrot, seems locked into a life of aping. But the Boy, bent over by the monkey's weight, face pressed against the bars so he can mouth to—back at?—the beast, also shapes himself to and as his other. "There goes one monkey carrying another," the Bird-Fancier concludes, a remark that hints that all we can see is imitation (35).

The narrative of "The Parrot," like that of "The Monkey," unsettles the human/animal hierarchy. Depicting a deep sympathy between a woman and a bird, Freeman also describes difference: the parrot retains a kind of integrity (or "symmetry," as Freeman calls it [65]), whereas the woman is revealed as violently self-divided. Initially, the story seems to depict a conventional human/animal relationship. The parrot cage functions as designed: as what nineteenth-century humans saw as an appropriate habitat for a pet, an animal domesticated and trained to echo human speech. Unconventionally, however, Freeman's parrot does not

FIG. 2
From *Understudies* (facing 26).



"The Boy and the Monkey looked ridiculously alike"

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.2.511 Published online by Cambridge University Press

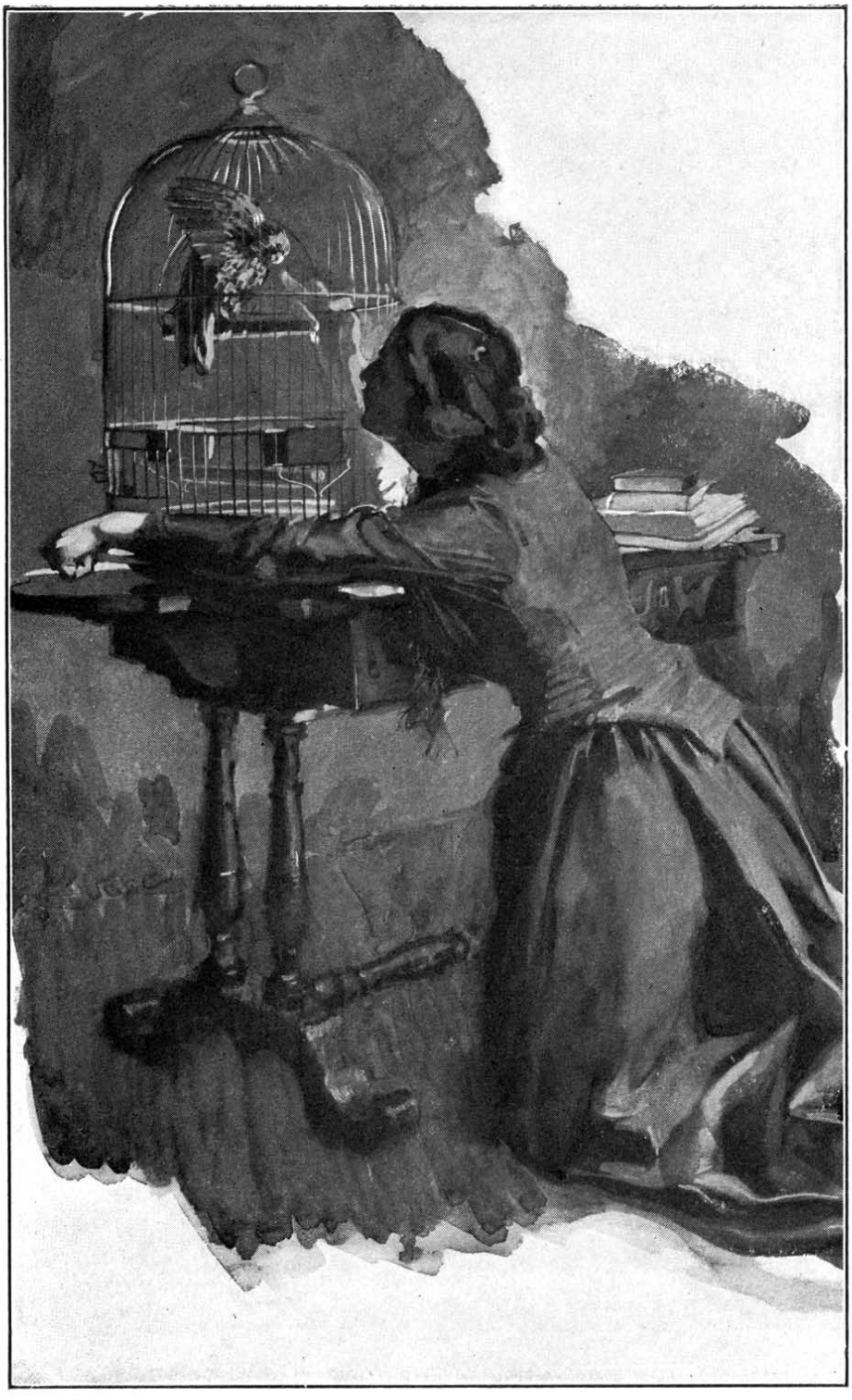
speak in imitation of his present owner. The animal gives the impression that his speech is, somehow, spontaneous: "Polly don't want a cracker; Polly will be damned if she eats a cracker" (71). The bird, nameless and male throughout the story,[8] ironizes the human production of parrot ("Polly") and parroting ("Polly don't want a cracker"). Freeman goes further and suggests that humans' behavior and speech may be shaped by "their" animals: "Martha, want a cracker?" asks the parrot.[9]

The parrot's mistress is a sternly repressed New England woman. The only character in these stories who is named, she is labeled typologically: Martha, the selfless domesticated female. In contrast, the parrot is "a vociferous symmetry of green and gold and ruby red, with eyes like jewels," "a tropical thing" (65, 67). Yet it is precisely through his otherness that her companion is able to represent the woman's unspeakable feelings, to others and herself: "The parrot was the one bright thing in the woman's life; he was the link with that which was outside her, and yet with that which was of her truest inwardness of self" (67). As in the hysterical narrative of *Jane Eyre*, a foreign, primitive creature represents the civilized gentlewoman's wildest emotions. The communion between bird and woman here seems based on their shared wildness: two passionate, natural selves who have been cruelly caged.[10] That this passion is at least in part sexual is indicated by the unconventional way that Freeman and her illustrator position the two (fig. 3), in striking contrast not only to other illustrations in the collection but also to nineteenth-century painterly depictions of woman and parrot (e.g., by Manet, Renoir, and Cézanne).[11] Although the two images are structured differently, the illustration in "The Parrot" perhaps resonates most closely with Courbet's 1866 *Woman with a Parrot* (fig. 4).[12] Like Courbet, Freeman delineates how in a parrot's presence woman becomes or is revealed as exotic: "down upon the floor in her sitting-room she flung herself, with all the floodgates of her New England nature open at last. She wept and wailed her grief and anger aloud *like a Southern woman*" (78; emphasis mine).

Freeman's description, captured vividly in this illustration, continues her interrogation of the identifications and authority that structure animal and human relations. The mistress passionately prostrates herself before the animal that she has fearfully associated with "idols of wood and stone . . . Baal . . . the golden calf" (69). Although Martha, a minister's daughter, is rigidly orthodox in her Christianity, her parrot's profane, rude speech, screeched "with a seemingly diabolical comprehension," has made her think that perhaps the bird has a soul (68). At the end of the story, when the bird acts out his mistress's hidden anger, violently attacking her rival, Martha claims to recognize his "comradeship and . . . equality" and decides that, in fact, "the parrot had a soul" (81). Flying creatures (birds or butterflies) have long been used to represent the invisible self that the human body hides.[13] Here Martha posits that words and wings signify the bird's independent interiority.

This proposition is not, as Freeman knows, as heterodox as her character fears. Mason describes how, "[a]s the century progressed, books and articles in the nation's most respected periodicals—including 'Have Animals Souls?' (1856), 'Are the Lower Animals Approaching Man?' (1887), and *Where is My Dog? Or, Is Man Alone Immortal?* (1892)—challenged assumptions about human uniqueness with increasing intensity" (19).[14] Although the relevant terms have shifted (e.g., to *mind* rather than *soul*), these questions figure centrally across the range of contemporary animal studies: in scientific and philosophical investigations of animal interiority, in ethical arguments about animal rights and human responsibilities, in scholarly and popular discussions of whether animals are capable of reasoning or emotion. What we find in Freeman's earlier example is not answers to these questions. Instead, *Understudies*, rehearsing

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.2.511 Published online by Cambridge University Press



"'Why, Martha! What is the matter?'"

FIG. 3
From *Understudies* (facing 74).

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.2.511 Published online by Cambridge University Press



FIG. 4
Gustave Courbet, *Woman with a Parrot*, 1866. Oil on canvas, 129.5 × 195.6 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, H. O. Havemeyer Collection, bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929 (29.100.57).

encounters between species, double-casts the roles of self and other. These relational performances of animal and human suggest that the problem, and process, of knowing otherness is a reflexive one.

NOTES

1. The word *understudies* first comes into usage in the 1870s. *Understudies* was published as the work of Mary E. Wilkins. I use Freeman, her better-known name, which she adopted after her marriage.

2. Freeman was well known in her time as a psychological writer. See, e.g., Moss; Thompson.

3. For other recent work on animals in nineteenth-century literature, see Mason; Morse and Danahay.

4. See Mason on the arguments of Stowe and others that animals were in fact superior to humans in loyalty.

5. Mason argues that "in the nineteenth century a combination of new methods for disciplining equines and new forms of recreational riding rendered the equine body discursively situated to communicate the internalized discipline and self-regulation that was necessary to make a human body middle class" (37).

6. Interestingly, a critic in the *Literary News* claimed Eastern origins for Freeman's stories: "These stories belong in a measure to the fabulous narrations which, originating at an early period among the peoples of the far East, have reached us as the productions of Pilpay, Æsop, and others, but with such differences that they may now be said to be their distant, if not their poor relations. They do not impress us as representing the healthiest and best aspects of human beings—their impulsive actions, their good nature, as one may say, but their darker qualities, their meanness and their malignity, and the verisimilitude is not a pleasant one" ("Understudies").

7. Freeman may be obliquely alluding here to the deciphering of the Rosetta stone in 1822. The puzzle of the stone's inscriptions, of course, images the multiplicity of sign systems.

8. This parody and ironized rejection of typical parrot speech is the exception.

9. Of course, there is the possibility of training by previous owners, but such training would be unlikely to include the name Martha. In any case, Freeman chooses not to tell that story.

10. Freeman describes Martha's "undiminished fire of the spirit which dwelt within her, as securely caged by her

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.2.511 Published online by Cambridge University Press

training and narrowness of life as was the parrot by the strong wires of his house" (67).

11. See Manet's *Woman with a Parrot* (1866), Renoir's *Woman with a Parrot* (1871), and Cézanne's *Woman with a Parrot* (1862–64).

12. The association between parrots and sexuality, especially female sexuality, persists in any number of obscene jokes. See Carter.

13. On the tradition of imaging souls as flying creatures, see Warner.

14. Ritvo states that for Victorians "the default answer to the question 'Are people animals?' would have been 'No.'" However, she goes on to say, "[a]longside formal assertions of extreme difference—that animals' lack of souls or lack of intelligence constituted an insurmountable barrier separating them from people—existed many informal acknowledgments of similarity or even identity" (272).

Works Cited

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Carter, Paul. *Parrot*. London: Reaktion, 2006. Print.

Grier, Katherine C. *Pets in America: A History*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2006. Print.

Kendrick, Brent. *The Infant Sphinx: Collected Letters of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman*. Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1985. Print.

Lansbury, Coral. *The Old Brown Dog: Women, Workers, and Vivisection in Edwardian England*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1985. Print.

Lutts, Ralph H. *The Nature Fakers: Wildlife, Science, and Sentiment*. Golden: Fulcrum, 1990. Print.

Mason, Jennifer. *Civilized Creatures: Urban Animals, Sentimental Culture, and American Literature, 1850–1900*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005. Print.

Morse, Deborah Denenholz, and Martin A. Danahay. *Victorian Animal Dreams: Representation of Animals in Victorian Literature and Culture*. Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007. Print.

Moss, Mary. "Some Representative American Story Tellers: II—Mary E. Wilkins." *Bookman* 24 (1906): 20–29. Print.

Patterson, Virginia. *Dickey Downy: The Autobiography of a Bird*. Philadelphia: Rowland, 1899. Print.

Patteson, Susanna Louise. *Pussy Meow: The Autobiography of a Cat*. Philadelphia: Jacobs, 1901. Print.

Ritvo, Harriet. Afterword. Morse and Danahay 271–75.

Saunders, Marshall. *Beautiful Joe*. Philadelphia: Banes, 1893. Print.

Sewell, Anna. *Black Beauty: The Autobiography of a Horse*. London: Jarrold, 1877. Print.

Thompson, Charles Miner. "Miss Wilkins: An Idealist in Masquerade." *Atlantic Monthly* 83 (1899): 665–75. Print.

"Understudies." *Literary News* 22 (1901): 229. Print.

Warner, Marina. *Fantastic Metamorphoses: Ways of Telling the Self*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. Print.

Wilkins, Mary E. *Understudies*. New York: Harper, 1901. Print.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.2.511 Published online by Cambridge University Press