“A NEW ENGLAND NUN” 
BY MARY WILKINS FREEEMAN
Mary Wilkins Freeman, 1852-1930
Born in Randolph, MA
“The constraints of religious belief, and the effect of these constraints on character formation and behavior are among her chief subjects” (Baym 652).
Awarded the W.D. Howells medal for fiction and elected to the National Institute for Arts and Letters (653).
“At the same time as she provides a sense of place, local dialect, and personality type, Freeman also offers [...] insight into the individual psychology and interior life produced when confining, inherited codes of village life are subject to the pressure of a rapidly changing secular and urban world” (Baym 653).

“Treats the pervasive theme of the psychic oppression and rebellion of women” (653).
1891
- Women’s desire to be independent from men emerges strongly in literature, art, politics
- Cult of True Womanhood

If you look at today’s women’s magazine, what is valued? What is similar/different from the 19th century?

1920: Women given the right to vote

Literature is experiencing strong trends of regional writing and literary realism
“Although Freeman is best known for her stories, she also wrote plays and a number of successful novels on diverse topics from local history to labor unrest, but always with a focus on women” (Baym 653).
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe Louisa Ellis. Consider these also: Is she happy? What is she afraid of?

2. Describe Joe Dagget. Though the story illustrate the pressures placed on women in the 19th century, is Joe also under societal pressure?

3. “Should we interpret Louisa Ellis’ decision not to marry her estranged finance as a rejection of life or as a valid, self-affirming choice of autonomy?” (Cutter213)

4. What is the significance of the title? Louisa is not a real nun, so why name it that? How does the title affect Louisa’s likability? (Or maybe it doesn’t.)

5. Some critics say Freeman has an evident humor. What is funny in this story?

6. What is the setting of the story and how does it inform the characters?
1. How is the “New England Nun” an example of literary realism?

2. Defend or rebuke Louisa Ellis’ decision as being the right/wrong decision. Use reasons that can be supported by the story.

3. How does Louisa Ellis adhere to and/or deviate from the “Cult of True Womanhood” values?
THEMES

- Freedom and autonomy
- Women’s independence from men
- The consequences of choice
Symbols:
- Dog and canary: trapped like Louisa

Allusions
- Story of St. George pg. 658
- “Many facets of the story resonate in confusing directions, stimulating--and complicating--interpretation. One such dimension of the tale, only narrowly discussed by critics to date, is the allusion in the final paragraph of the story to Esau's selling of his birthright to Jacob for some pottage. Criticism has neglected, in particular, a most intriguing--and pervasive--ironic dissonance in the association of Louisa and Esau. Such incongruity complements--and builds on--patterns established earlier in the story, contributing to the humor of Louisa's portrayal. The allusion also serves to contrast, pointedly, inequitable conceptions of male and female birthright. Like the story itself, however, the allusion ultimately resists closure” (Tritt).

