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Rethinking the Revolution:  
Duty, Domesticity, and Defiance in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "The Revolt  
of 'Mother'"

Emily Toler '08

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Sarah Penn, the protagonist of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's short story "The Revolt of 'Mother,'" is a complicated character. The multidimensional nature of her personality—from her devotion to her domestic duties to her apparent revolt against her restricted role—makes her a fascinating subject for critical analysis, so it comes as no surprise that "[recent] criticism of Freeman's writing has focused on her portrayal of women characters whose choices of autonomy and self-definition can be interpreted using feminist paradigms" (Cutter 280). This temptation to read Freeman's work through that contemporary lens is certainly a strong one, as many of this story's components—from its title to its conclusion—seem ideologically similar to a modern feminism in which the female character rebels against the patriarchal structures that confine her, ultimately seeking a total redefinition of traditional gender roles and social codes. Although Sarah Penn's "revolt" certainly has its unconventional aspects, it should not be interpreted as a call for a revolution in that contemporary sense. Her exceptional behavior is not an allegorical rejection of the national patriarchy, and it is not revolutionary in the unqualified sense that the term, in modern feminist discourse, often implies. Instead of advocating an *abandonment* of traditional roles prescribed for women, Sarah's actions represent Freeman's call for a *redefinition* of those roles within the household and the family—a change in the domestic politics of late nineteenth-century New England.

It is clear from the beginning of the text that Sarah Penn is hardly an unconventional woman. She and her husband Adoniram live in an unremarkable New England town, where he makes an unremarkable living as a farmer and she leads an equally unremarkable life as a housewife. If Sarah is somehow exceptional, it is not because she is a revolutionary—it is because she is extraordinarily *womanly*. Her "mild and benevolent [forehead], smooth curves of gray hair, [and] meek downward lines about her nose and mouth" are common physical traits of the ideal wife. More importantly, these characteristics are not coincidental; Sarah has apparently chosen to exhibit them: "her eyes, fixed upon the old man, looked as if the meekness had been the result of her own will, never of the will of another" (733). That Sarah has elected to adopt a visage of meekness—that is, the countenance of the humble wife—certainly suggests that she is an unlikely vehicle through which Freeman might espouse a feminist revolution.

This adherence to traditional roles is evident in more than Sarah's physical appearance. Her conversations with her daughter demonstrate that she is keenly aware of the position she occupies: "we're womenfolks, Nanny Penn [...] we know only what men-folks think we do, so far as any use of it goes, an' we'd ought to reckon men-folks in with Providence, an' not complain of what they do" (735). But this observation, even if it is slightly sarcastic, does not represent all of Sarah's opinions. Although she resents her dilapidated home—and her husband Adoniram's failure (or unwillingness) to replace it—she remains at least marginally grateful for what he *has* provided: "we've been pretty comfortable here, after all. The roof don't leak—ain't never but once—that's one thing. Father's kept it shingled right up. [...] A good many girls don't have as good a place as this. Nobody's ever heard me complain" (735). Clearly, Sarah understands the realities of her status as a woman and wife, and she fulfills the duties that those roles prescribe with admirable efficiency: "she [is] a masterly keeper of her box of a house. Her one living-room never seemed to have in it any dust [...] or] dirt to go before the broom. She [is] like an artist so perfect that he has apparently no art" (735). As Freeman's title implies, however, Sarah eventually revolts, ostensibly rejecting these traditional roles. Even so, this revolt is a complicated one; while, at least superficially, it might seem to represent a dramatic shift in the hierarchy of the home, her rebellion actually takes place firmly within the social and domestic structures in which she lives.

When Sarah Penn discovers that her husband has plans to build another barn instead of repairing their home, she is understandably angry, but her apparent powerlessness renders her incapable of changing Adoniram's mind. Because the only outlet she has to express her emotions is, appropriately enough, a traditionally domestic one—cooking—she immediately begins baking the "mince-pies [that] Adoniram [likes] better than any other kind" (736). That she is devoted to this wifely role, even in spite of her obvious frustrations, is made apparent in her willingness to serve her husband while wearing "that expression of meek vigor which might have characterized one of the New Testament saints" and in her admission that "however deep a resentment she might be forced to hold against her husband, she would never fail in sedulous attention to his wants" (736). Clearly, any bitterness that Sarah feels toward Adoniram remains hidden; her ability to act on her own feelings is subjugated to her female duties.

Indeed, even as Adoniram remains deaf to her requests and as the compounded frustrations of years of unrealized desires weigh more heavily on her shoulders, Sarah does not abandon her role. When the day of her revolt arrives, her obvious anticipation does not deter her from fulfilling her domestic duties: she continues making pies, "clapping the rolling-pin into the crust, although she was very pale, and her heart beat loudly," and she prepares her husband for his trip, "[laying out his] Sunday suit and his clean clothes, [getting] his shaving-water and razor ready, [and buttoning] his

collar and [fastening] his black cravat" (739). Even after Adoniram's departure, Sarah does not immediately abandon her wifely responsibilities in favor of her rebellion; instead, she "[hurries] her baking [so that] at eleven o'clock, it was all done" (740), enabling herself to secure her family's position in the new barn. It is only after her tasks have been completed that Sarah allows herself to set her plan in motion, and even then, she clearly indicates that it is only "as long as father's gone [that she] ain't goin' to get a regular dinner" (740). Clearly, for Sarah, the relative importance of this rebellion is far from surpassing that of her wifely and motherly duties; it is barely even an interruption.

After Sarah moves her family into the barn, it becomes even more apparent that she has not designed this revolt to replace or redefine her role as wife. Instead, she is motivated by concern for her standing in society and for her family's welfare. Early in the story, she expresses anxieties about how her daughter's marriage will be perceived if it takes place in the dingy old house, concerned that "it's all the room Nanny's got to have her company in; an' there ain't one of her mates but what's got better. [...] It's all the room she'll have to be married in" (737). She is similarly frustrated with the low social status that her dilapidated home affords her, lamenting cosmetic problems such as "no carpet on the floor, an' the paper all dirty, an' droppin' off the walls" (737). It is no surprise, then, that Sarah is receptive to Nanny's playful suggestion that "[they] might have the wedding in the new barn" (738). Indeed, it is precisely this comment that ignites the rebellious spark in her.

While this social status is important to Sarah, it is primarily her concern for her family that motivates her. This domestic devotion is made plain when she explains her actions to Adoniram: "I ain't crazy. There ain't nothin' to be upset over. But we've come here to live, an' we're goin' to live here. [...] The house wa'n't fit for us any longer" (743). Similarly, the new barn better equips Sarah to fulfill her role as wife and mother. Immediately after the move, it looks "almost as homelike as the abandoned house across the yard had ever done" (741), and it allows Sarah to have "brown-bread and baked beans and a custard pie, [...] the supper that Adoniram loved on a Saturday night" (742) ready for his return. Even her extraordinarily dense—and likely unpleasantly surprised—husband can't ignore the improvement in his family's situation; instead of demanding an explanation from his wife, he simply asks, "What is it smells like cookin'?" (743).

Thus, we see that Sarah Penn's rebellion, despite the implications that Freeman's title might carry in a contemporary context, is not a microcosmic representation of the author's call for widespread social change. The location may have changed, but the story remains largely the same: Sarah still cooks, cleans, looks after the family, and fulfills the traditional role of the wife—she simply does so in a new barn instead of an old house. The fact that her revolt is not necessarily meant to advance a



radical feminist agenda does not, however, mean that it is not revolutionary in other ways. Sarah's rebellion, in fact, is still a call for change, but it is a call for change at the domestic—not at the regional, national, or global—level.

It may initially seem that Sarah Penn's revolt changes nothing about her home's conjugal hierarchy; after all, upon Adoniram's return, she helps him bathe and prepares dinner for him and her family. But, importantly, she performs these same domestic duties in a very different context than before. Adoniram now "[seems] to lack the power" to take care of himself or the family, and can only "[look] dazedly at his plate" instead of offering the blessing—until, of course, Sarah intervenes, prompting (and implicitly allowing) him to speak: "Ain't you goin' to ask a blessin', father?" (743). Clearly, this represents an important shift in the power structure of the Penn household: instead of being relegated to "[a] powerless status that stems from her position in a patriarchal, frontier society [that] excludes feminine values" (Cutter 279), Sarah has renegotiated her place within that society. Her rebellion does more than simply modify the relationship between the wife and husband, however; it also changes the power dynamics between the father and the son. Young Sammy Penn, whose early contributions to the domestic conversation are only "[grunts] he had learned from his father," (739), finds the courage to stand up to Adoniram—"[stepping] suddenly forward [to stand] in front of Sarah [and speak,] his shrill voice [quavering] out bravely" (743)—only after his mother makes the first revolutionary move to the barn.

Clearly, "The Revolt of 'Mother'" is not a call for a revolution in modern feminist terms. The story does not advocate, either implicitly or explicitly, a total overhaul of society, and it does not disparage the traditional definitions of the roles of *wife* and *mother*. Freeman's work, however, *does* advocate a more subtle rebellion—one that works within the extant social hierarchy to provide the apparently powerless with some degree of power. The revolt that Freeman describes through Sarah Penn is ultimately a call for redefinition rather than for revolution—for manipulating the established social structures instead of destroying them. If Sarah's actions enable her to tear down the "fortress" of this microcosmic domestic patriarchy, it is only because "the right besieging tools were used" (744)—that is, because she works within the framework available to her. Sarah's revolt may not quite be a revolution, but it certainly represents the first step away from the dilapidated house of traditional familial power and toward the new barn of a more balanced domestic hierarchy—even if, at the end of the day, "brown-bread and baked beans" are still on the dinner table.

## Works Cited

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