

The Revolt of “Mother”



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARY ELEANOR WILKINS FREEMAN

Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman was an American writer. After moving with her family to Vermont in 1867, Mary Wilkins attended high school, followed by brief stints at Mount Holyoke Seminary and Mrs. Hosford’s Glenwood Seminary. Afterwards, she returned home and began writing children’s short stories and religious poetry. Following the deaths of her parents, Mary Wilkins moved back home to Randolph, Massachusetts in 1883. She lived with friends while writing her first stories for adults in a Boston newspaper. Freeman wrote over a dozen short stories and novels during her lifetime. In 1902, she married Charles M. Freeman and lived with him in Metuchen, New Jersey until her death. Freeman’s stories, written in an objective yet humorous narrative voice, deal with individuals, mostly women, who struggle against oppressive situations. Mary is chiefly remembered for her collections *A Humble Romance and Other Stories* (1887), *A New England Nun and Other Stories* (1891), and her novel *Pembroke* (1894).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The late-19th century upheld traditional gender roles, with women expected to serve domestic roles as housewives, mothers, and caregivers in their communities. In addition, women were instructed to embody moral purity, fidelity, and chastity in their respective households, leaving the world of business and politics to their husbands. However, the rise of suffragism and industrialization during this era led to women’s increased involvement in politics and in economic life. More women sought the right to vote and be counted as equal citizens in the United States. What’s more, many women also sought employment, if not in factories, then as governesses, teachers, secretaries, and nurses. In “The Revolt of ‘Mother,’” Sarah Penn’s search for agency in her marriage aligns with the kind of agency and opportunity that women were beginning to seek out in the United States at the turn of the century.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

A couple of Freeman’s contemporaries included Mark Twain and Kate Chopin, who, like Freeman, were known for their “local color” style (that is, their depictions of regional customs and dialects) and their depiction of characters in restrictive environments. Mark Twain’s popular novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) details the exploits of an illiterate, poor, backwoods southern boy, while Kate Chopin’s novel *The*

Awakening (1899) chronicles the emotional journey of a married New Orleans socialite who embarks on an extramarital affair. Although these novels depict different regions and circumstances, they, like Freeman’s “The Revolt of ‘Mother,’” all involve characters who struggle with restrictions placed upon their gender and societal status. Additionally, the narratives in each of these texts convey humorous depictions and commentaries of the traditional—and sometimes antiquated—community values upheld in these regions, suggesting that the writers viewed them as outdated and out of touch.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Revolt of “Mother”
- **When Written:** 1891
- **Where Written:** Massachusetts
- **When Published:** 1891
- **Literary Period:** American Naturalism, American Realism
- **Genre:** Realism
- **Setting:** 19th-century rural New England
- **Climax:** While Adoniram is away, Sarah moves the family’s household goods to the new barn.
- **Antagonist:** Adoniram Penn, sexist gender norms
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Award. In the 1920s, the American Academy of Arts and Letters awarded Mary E. Wilkins Freeman the William Dean Howells Medal for her fictional writing.



PLOT SUMMARY

Sarah Penn has been a dutiful wife to her husband, Adoniram Penn, for 40 years. However, she questions his decision in building a new **barn** in the same location where he originally promised her a new house. Although she tries to confront him about the matter, he refuses to engage in a discussion with her and continues with his plans to build the new barn. Her son, Sammy, has also known about his father’s plans, but he is reluctant to discuss it with Sarah. Meanwhile, her daughter, Nanny, admits that she’s self-conscious about the family home’s inadequate state because she’s getting married in it and fears judgment from her fiancé and his family. Although Sarah tries to defend her husband to her daughter, she feels compelled to address her daughter’s concerns with Adoniram, who continues to disregard her feelings.

Sarah remains meek and dutiful to her husband despite resenting his lack of consideration for the family's needs. One day, Adoniram receives a letter from her brother, Hiram, inviting him to visit to buy a horse. This development leads Sarah to believe that Divine Providence has intervened on her behalf. She takes advantage of her husband's absence to claim the recently finished barn as their new house, dissuading the hired hands from placing hay and livestock in it and instructing her children to help transport their belongings into the barn.

Despite concern from the community and a visit from the church minister, Mr. Hersey, Sarah maintains a firm resolve that she has done the right thing, and no one can interfere with her decision. When her husband returns, he asks in shock and confusion what the family is doing in the barn. Nanny and Sammy defend their mother, explaining that they live there now. Sarah then tends to his bath and meal as if nothing has changed. Adoniram begins to cry, confesses that he didn't know how strongly Sarah felt about wanting a new house, and agrees to comply with whatever she asks of him. In Sarah's moment of triumph, she hides her glee.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Sarah Penn – Sarah Penn is the wife, mother, and protagonist in “The Revolt of ‘Mother.’” Although she has been a dutiful wife to her husband, Adoniram Penn, for 40 years, she questions his decision to build a new **barn** in the place where he promised her a new house. She confronts him about this, but he refuses to talk about the matter and continues to build the new barn. Throughout most of the story, Sarah is meek and defers to her husband, continuing her household duties and baking his favorite foods—that is, generally following the common expectations of a housewife during this era. However, she quietly resents his lack of consideration for the family's needs, and she resents that she cannot—as a woman living in a patriarchal society—question his decisions. One day, he receives a letter from her brother, Hiram, inviting him to visit to buy a horse. This development leads Sarah to believe that Divine Providence has intervened on her behalf. She takes advantage of her husband's absence to claim the recently constructed barn as their new house, instructing their two children to help her in transporting their belongings into the barn. Despite concern from the community and a visit from the church minister, Sarah maintains a firm resolve that she has done the right thing, and no one can interfere with her decision. When her husband returns, she now has the upper hand; his shock and confusion lead him to agree with whatever she asks of him.

Adoniram Penn – Adoniram is Sarah Penn's husband and the father of Nanny and Sammy. A hardworking, successful farmer,

Adoniram spends more time, care, and money on the farm and livestock than he does on his family's material needs. Single-mindedly in pursuit of what he believes is best for his family, he ignores his wife's requests to reconsider his promise to her regarding a new house. Before he goes away on a trip to buy a new horse, he gives his wife orders regarding the placement of new hay and new cows into the newly finished **barn**. His wife, however, disregards his orders, planning to place herself and their children and belongings into the new barn instead. Upon returning home, Adoniram is so shocked over this turn of events that he starts crying. He claims he had no idea how strongly she felt about having a new house. While he grapples with the fact that his wife undermined his authority, he must also acknowledge that he disregarded her feelings for a long time.

Nanny Penn – Nanny Penn is the daughter of Sarah and Adoniram Penn. Engaged to be married, she spends a considerable amount of time in the story fretting over how her fiancé, George Eastman, and his family will perceive their cramped, inadequate house, and, moreover, how she possibly could have a wedding in it. Sarah's consideration of her daughter's impending nuptials is partly what prompts her to address Adoniram with her concerns over the house's inadequate state. Her mother's dialogue with her father also reveals that Nanny has been sheltered from the drudgery of domestic responsibilities: Sarah has done most of the housekeeping, enabling Nanny to keep her hands soft and her face “fine and clear as porcelain.” Additionally, Nanny's facetious suggestion that they hold the wedding in the new **barn** is what precipitates Sarah's decision to take advantage of Adoniram's absence and transform the barn into their new home. Because Sarah makes the most of the opportunity given her, she can ensure that Nanny will have the dream wedding she envisioned.

Sammy Penn – Sammy is Sarah and Adoniram Penn's son and Nanny's younger brother. Just like his father, he is somewhat reluctant to engage in communication with his mother and prefers to respond with monosyllabic grunts. However, Sammy assists with the farm responsibilities and listens to both parents. At first, he is awed by his mother's rebellion when she asks him to help her move the furniture into the new **barn**. However, by the time his father comes home, Sammy believes his mother will win the battle of wills, and he even steps in front of his mother as a protective measure. When his father asks them what they are doing in the barn, Sammy replies in a complete sentence that the barn is their new home. Despite fearing his father's disapproval, he becomes brave enough to stand up to him by the story's end, perhaps proving that he, unlike his father, has learned the value of communication before it is too late.

Mr. Hersey – Mr. Hersey is the community's church minister. Upon the discovery that Sarah Penn has flouted her husband's

authority by turning the new **barn** into a house for herself and her children, he goes to visit her. His tasks are to provide her with spiritual counsel and likely sway her from her “lawless and rebellious spirit,” or perhaps even to determine if she has gone “insane.” However, Sarah does not take kindly to his presence, or what she perceives to be interference from the church and community. She dissuades him from talking, claims she is doing what she believes is right, and argues that this matter is between her, God, and her husband. Mr. Hersey finds himself unable to respond to her firm demeanor and resolve; he is sickly and unable to deal with present, real issues outside of the Bible. His presence proves to be ineffective, suggesting that he, the church, and the townspeople, have allowed tradition to stagnate growth and progress in the community.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Hiram – Hiram is Sarah’s brother. He writes to tell Adoniram that he has found a good horse for him to buy, thus drawing Adoniram away from home for long enough to allow Sarah to move the family into the new **barn**.

George Eastman – George Eastman is Nanny Penn’s fiancé.

the story’s end. Despite her efforts to appear subdued, once her husband leaves town to purchase a horse recommended by his brother-in-law, Sarah encourages her children to help her move their belongings into the new barn. When Adoniram comes home, in shock at the discovery of their new residence, Sarah continues to tend to his needs as if nothing has changed, appearing to placate him into accepting the drastic change in residence. However, her treatment of her husband is also an assertion of dominance, subverting her husband’s authority by placing him in a more helpless and docile role. She emerges from the story as the triumphant winner, as her husband promises to do “everything” she wants, having been outsmarted by his resourceful wife. In this way, the story suggests that though sexist 19th-century gender dynamics were certainly difficult to overcome, it was possible for women to use what little domestic power they were afforded to assert agency and willpower.



COMMUNITY, SCANDAL, AND CONFORMITY

“The Revolt of ‘Mother’” pits Sarah Penn against not just her own husband but also the surrounding community. By boldly undermining Adoniram’s plan to build a **barn** instead of a new house, Sarah ends up challenging the broader community, ultimately scandalizing her neighbors and their ideas about what’s considered proper and reasonable in their society—especially for women. When gossip circulates about her decision to move the family’s belongings into the barn, it becomes quite clear that the town strictly adheres to certain domestic conventions. In fact, the narrative explicitly notes that any “deviation from the ordinary course of life in this quiet town was enough to stop all progress in it.” Everyone keeps close tabs on Sarah, illustrating the extent to which any departure from convention attracts quite a bit of attention in this community. And it’s not just that the townspeople are disconcerted by an unfamiliar turn of events—they’re also scandalized by Sarah herself, whom many think has gone “insane.” This strong reaction to her independence is a clear illustration of how straying from convention is seen as shocking and even disgraceful for a woman living in the conformist, male-dominated environment of late-19th-century New England.

When the town minister, Mr. Hersey, visits Sarah, he mainly does so to convince her to stop undermining Adoniram in his absence. In other words, he tries to persuade Sarah to once again adhere to the status quo, perhaps because her independence poses a threat to the unquestioned conformism of the rest of the town. The fact that Mr. Hersey comes to visit her in the first place suggests that the people in Sarah’s community think they can somehow save her from herself. But when Sarah puts Mr. Hersey in his place, the story implies that sometimes it’s necessary for individuals to go their own way without heeding the people around them—after all, if Sarah



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



GENDER ROLES AND POWER DYNAMICS

Adoniram and Sarah Penn live in an era that promoted traditional gender roles and established men as the head of the household. As the husband and father, Adoniram makes the household decisions in the best interests of the farm, which is the family’s source of income. Meanwhile, Sarah, as the wife and mother, is expected to cater to her husband’s wishes—even when they go against her *own* wishes. Despite her resentment following a confrontation with her husband over the building of a new **barn**, Sarah feels that she would “never fail in sedulous attention to his wants,” stifling her private misgivings in order to uphold the duties of a domestic and dutiful spouse by baking Adoniram pies and sewing him new shirts. She also tells her daughter, Nanny, not to complain about getting married in their shabby house, saying that it’s futile to bemoan what men do, since men “don’t look at things jest the way we do.” By saying this, she attempts to prepare Nanny for the unequal marital dynamics that exist between men and women.

However, Sarah’s adamant refusal to wait any longer for her husband to build a new house culminates in a role reversal by

relented as a result of her conversation with Mr. Hersey, nothing would change about her life, and she would remain miserable and resentful. Thankfully, though, she recognizes the importance of living life on her own terms, regardless of what her fellow community members think.



COMMUNICATION

In many ways, “The Revolt of ‘Mother’” is a story about the importance of effective communication. For the past 40 years, Adoniram has failed to fulfill

his promise to build Sarah a new house, but Sarah has never voiced her discontent about this. Each time he builds a new shed or some other farm-related structure, she can’t help but feel that he cares more about his livestock than he does about his family. Finally though, when he reveals that he’s building a second **barn** on the exact site he originally intended to build a new house, Sarah speaks up—only to be met with Adoniram’s terse response, which is “as inarticulate as a growl.” This disengaged style of communication is so ingrained in Adoniram that Sarah has become well-versed in interpreting what he means, as if his grunts are her “native tongue.” In fact, even his son, Sammy, has developed his own version of this uncommunicative style, ultimately suggesting that a lack of clear and effective communication can spread throughout a household, keeping its members (and, it seems, especially men) from opening up and connecting with each other.

None of this, however, deters Sarah, who sits Adoniram down, admonishes him, and boldly makes a case for why he should build a new house instead of another barn. This is obviously a courageous thing to do, considering that Sarah has spent so many years withholding her feelings on the matter. Still, Adoniram dismisses her concerns, claiming he “ain’t got nothin’ to say.” His lack of communication, however, doesn’t deter Sarah from taking the initiative to thwart his plans—in fact, it possibly *encourages* her to do so. She has already tried to communicate openly with him, but he’s unwilling to genuinely talk about the issue, so she takes matters into her own hands and decides to move the family into the new barn while Adoniram is away. The fact that Adoniram says, upon returning, “I hadn’t no idee you was so set on’t as all this comes to” is a good illustration of just how tragically inept he is when it comes to communicating with his wife—after all, she very plainly told him how she felt. The problem, though, is that he refused to engage in a dialogue about the matter, thus allowing himself to ignore her feelings. By outlining this dynamic, the story champions honest and unencumbered communication as a tool people can use to ignore outright conflict.



OPPORTUNITY, RELIGION, AND CONVICTION

“The Revolt of ‘Mother’” highlights the importance

of seizing opportunity when it comes along, even if that means taking advantage of unforeseen circumstances. Sarah first conceives of the idea to use her husband’s new **barn** for a domestic space during a conversation with her engaged daughter, Nanny. After Nanny facetiously suggests that she and her fiancé should have the wedding in the new barn instead of their shabby old house, Sarah stares at her daughter “with a curious expression” before returning to her housework. Using the barn for an unintended purpose intrigues Sarah, and she presumably contemplates this course of action for months. This is indicated later in the story, when Sarah asserts to the church minister, Mr. Hersey, that she did what was right, as she “thought it all over an’ over” and “made it the subject of prayer.” All she needed, it seems, was an unexpected opportunity to take control of the situation, and that’s exactly what she has done.

This “unsolicited” opportunity comes about when Sarah’s husband, Adoniram, receives a letter in the mail inviting him to come buy a horse. Hearing this news, Sarah turns “very pale” and “her heart beat[s] loudly,” as she realizes that Adoniram’s absence will give her a chance to take things into her own hands. Because she had nothing to do with drawing Adoniram away from their property, she believes it is an act of Divine Providence—that is, a fated turn of events determined by God. Because of this belief, Sarah is steadfast about her plan to use this unforeseen opportunity to improve her life; she sees it, in a way, as God’s plan, which allows her to embody a righteous sense of conviction. This, in turn, helps her assert herself even when Mr. Hersey tries to convince her not to go through with the plan. Ultimately, then, Sarah’s belief in Divine Providence leads her confidently take advantage of an opportunity to improve her family’s circumstances. The story therefore illustrates both the importance of capitalizing on unexpected opportunities and the power of religious faith to embolden people to advocate for themselves.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE BARN



The new barn represents a clash of values within the Penn household. For the industrious Adoniram Penn—as well as for the 19th-century rural New England community in which he and his wife live—the barn symbolizes agricultural growth and progress: a core value for a community oriented around advancement and productivity. For Sarah Penn, however, the barn represents a broken promise and Adoniram’s disregard for their family and its needs. She feels that he has prioritized his crops and livestock over the people in


his life who should matter most. Eventually, Sarah manages to subvert the barn's purpose so that it becomes a new home for her and her family. With her strong assertion that the family has "as good a right here as new horses an' cows," she overturns traditional community values in favor of genuine progress for her as an individual, as well as for her family's benefit. In turn, the barn comes to represent a sense of familial harmony—a harmony brought about by her unwillingness to acquiesce to her husband's domineering ways.

she herself inwardly resents this dynamic.

“I ain't got nothin' to say.”

Related Characters: Adoniram Penn (speaker), Sarah Penn

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 


Page Number: 70


Explanation and Analysis

When Sarah Penn confronts Adoniram about the fact that he's building a new barn instead of constructing a better house for the family to live in, he avoids the topic altogether. No matter what Sarah says, he remains unwilling to discuss the issue, saying, "I ain't got nothin' to say." This terse statement outlines the clashing communication styles between him and his wife. Sarah Penn calls out Adoniram for his broken promise, relays the fact that their daughter is embarrassed to get married in their home, and asks if Adoniram thinks it's right to prioritize livestock over his family. All the while, Adoniram Penn resists engaging in the conversation, repeating that he has nothing to say several times before finally leaving the room. In doing so, he stubbornly refuses to connect to his wife in any meaningful way, not seeming to care that she's trying hard to have an open and honest conversation about something that affects their entire family. By essentially ignoring Sarah, Adoniram demonstrates his adherence to sexist societal conventions that prioritize men as figures of authority—figures that don't need to justify their decisions. Little does he know, though, that his failure to listen to his wife will end up working against him.

“We might have the wedding in the new barn,” said Nanny with gentle pettishness. “Why mother, what makes you look so?”

Related Characters: Nanny Penn (speaker), Sarah Penn, Adoniram Penn

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 




QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *A New England Nun and Other Stories* published in 2000.

The Revolt of “Mother” Quotes

“You ain't found out we're women-folks, Nanny Penn,” said she. “You ain't seen enough of men-folks yet to. One of these days you'll find it out, an' then you'll know that we know only what men-folks think we do, so far as any use of it goes, an how we'd ought to reckon men-folks in with Providence, an' not complain of what they do any more than they do of the weather.”

Related Characters: Sarah Penn (speaker), Nanny Penn

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

Sarah Penn explains to Nanny Penn, who has just expressed her disappointment that her father is building a new barn when they need a new house, that she's too young to understand the power and gender dynamics at play. Men make decisions in the household, she says, and women must accept their husband's wishes without complaint. While Sarah Penn's intention in conveying this information is to prepare her daughter for her impending marriage, her harsh tone suggests that she inwardly feels resentment towards this unbalanced power dynamic and recognizes—on a certain level—that it's unfair. Nonetheless, Sarah Penn still cleans and cooks for her husband despite resenting his broken promise to build her a home, thus adhering to the societal expectation that a woman shouldn't question her husband's authority. By outlining the expectations surrounding gender roles to Nanny, then, Sarah tries to realistically prepare her daughter for what it's like to married in a male-dominated, sexist society—even if



Page Number: 71


Explanation and Analysis

After Nanny expresses her embarrassment over having her in-laws and fiancé visit her family's inadequate home for her upcoming wedding, she offhandedly suggests that the wedding should be held in the new barn instead. Sarah Penn's startled expression in response indicates that her daughter's suggestion has more significance to her than one might expect. Nanny is unaware of it for now, but her flippant comment prompts Sarah Penn to realize that the barn has the potential to be used for unintended purposes—that is, she realizes that, though the barn has been built for livestock, it's still a perfectly good building. After all, it's newer and grander than the family's house, and it is just as good for humans as it is for livestock. Nanny Penn's quote also serves as the impetus for Sarah Penn's ultimate decision to move their belongings into the barn while Adoniram is away. This ensures that Nanny can hold her wedding in a new house, which is, ironically, the same location that she jokingly suggests in this moment.

“It's a strange thing how your mother feels about the new barn.”

Related Characters: Adoniram Penn (speaker), Sammy Penn

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 71


Explanation and Analysis

As the builders construct the new barn, Sarah Penn stops trying to talk to Adoniram about the matter. Eventually Adoniram, notices her quiet resentment and notes, while talking to Sammy, that it's “strange” how strongly she feels about the issue. To be fair, Adoniram himself originally refused to engage in a conversation about the barn, but now he's surprised to see that Sarah avoids talking about it—a sign that he perhaps intuits, on some level, the fact that she is particularly upset. Indeed, this passing comment to his son implies that he recognizes his wife's concerns but has chosen not to change his mind. Although this moment shows that Adoniram might be a bit more relationally perceptive that it seemed at first, then, this development actually makes him look even worse: he can see that his wife

is upset, but he doesn't care enough to actually do anything about, and he doesn't even try to reopen the conversation. In turn, his selfishness and failure to communicate are on full display.

“Unsolicited opportunities are the guide-posts of the Lord to the new roads of life.”

Related Characters: Sarah Penn (speaker), Adoniram Penn, Hiram

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 73


Explanation and Analysis

Sarah Penn makes up her mind to take action following a letter from her brother Hiram to her husband—a letter in which Hiram invites Adoniram to visit so he can buy a horse. Sarah didn't initiate this development, but she instantly recognizes that Adoniram's departure will provide her with an opportunity to take matters into her own hands by moving the family's belongings from the house into the barn. Recognizing the serendipity of her brother's letter and how it coincides with the completion of the new barn, Sarah creates a “maxim” that she frequently repeats, insisting to herself that “unsolicited opportunities” are charged with spiritual significance. Indeed, she sees her good fortune as a sign from God that she should capitalize on the opportunity to change her life for the better. This, in turn, makes it easier for her to conceive of undermining her husband. Because she lives in a male-dominated, sexist society, the prospect of going against her husband's wishes is surely quite daunting. However, her belief in Divine Providence—or the notion that God has a hand in predetermining her path in life—helps her overcome any hesitancy, ultimately inspiring her to make the most of this opportunity because she believes it's heaven-sent.

“There ain't no use talkin', Mr. Hersey,” said she. “I've thought it all over an' over, an' I believe I'm doin' what's right. I've made it the subject of prayer, an' it's betwixt me an' the Lord an' Adoniram. There ain't no call for nobody else to worry about it.”

Related Characters: Sarah Penn (speaker), Mr. Hersey

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 75


Explanation and Analysis

Sarah Penn has moved her family's belongings into the barn and claimed it as the family's new house. Now, she won't tolerate any opposition from the community—not even Mr. Hersey, the minister, who has come to pay her a visit. Mr. Hersey finds that he cannot provide spiritual counsel because of Sarah Penn's assertion that neither he nor the villagers have any say in the matter. Sarah persists in her independent convictions, undeterred in her belief that Divine Providence led her to make the choices she did, and she claims nobody except God can tell her how to think or what to do. Meanwhile, the church and the surrounding community—with their reservations about Sarah Penn's unconventional behavior and how her husband will respond—remain more preoccupied with superficial concerns such as appearances, social conformity, and tradition. In this way, it becomes clear that sometimes otherwise tightknit communities harshly criticize people who do anything that doesn't align with convention.

☞ At last, she looked up, and her eyes showed the spirit that her meek front had covered for a lifetime.

Related Characters: Sarah Penn (speaker), Mr. Hersey

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis



When Mr. Hersey stands to leave after trying—and failing—to convince Sarah Penn not to undermine her husband, the narrative describes her as looking at him with spirited eyes that undermine the “meek front” she normally presents to others. The implication here is that Sarah has learned to subvert various gendered expectations by presenting a “meek front” that isn't necessarily indicative of her true nature. She might seem “meek,” but she's ready and willing to take matters into her own hands when opportunity strikes, as evidenced by her quick decision to

move the family's belongings into the barn when Adoniram goes away. She is not meek at all, as it turns out. She is strong-willed, determined, and righteous.

However, most women during this era are expected to honor, serve, and obey their husbands just as the community honors, serves, and obeys the law and the church. Because of her transgression against male authority, then, the other townspeople question her sanity. But Sarah persists in her independent mindset, emphasizing to Mr. Hersey, the minister who comes to visit, that she is unwilling to submit to any authority except the Lord's. Her strong resolve is in keeping with the story's introduction of her as much stronger than appearances would suggest.

☞ “We've come here to live, father.”

Related Characters: Sammy Penn (speaker), Sarah Penn, Adoniram Penn, Nanny Penn

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 77


Explanation and Analysis

When Adoniram Penn returns from his trip to buy a new horse, he finds his family in the new barn and asks what they are doing there. Sammy is the first to speak up. He does so while standing in front of his mother, as if shielding her from anything that could go wrong. This action reflects a transformation in his character arc. At the story's beginning, Sammy showed signs of his father's influence with his disengaged communication style, initially responding to his mother's questions with grunts that resembled the noncommunicative sounds his father tends to make. However, upon his mother's orders that he and his sister Nanny help her move their belongings into the barn, Sammy changes. He now supports his mother over his father, believing she will win the battle of wills. By bravely communicating with his father, Sammy shows that he is capable of learning from the mistakes Adoniram Penn has made regarding the importance of connection and family, and he likely will not make them in the future.

☞ “You'd better take your coat off an' get washed—there's the wash-basin—an' then we'll have supper.”

Related Characters: Sarah Penn (speaker), Adoniram Penn

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 


Page Number: 77


Explanation and Analysis

When Sarah Penn welcomes her husband, Adoniram Penn, home from his trip, she tends to his needs as if nothing has changed. As she explains her reasons for moving their belongings to the barn, she appears to placate him into accepting the drastic change in residence. However, her treatment of her husband is also an assertion of dominance. By ordering her husband to wash and prepare for supper, Sarah Penn subverts her husband's authority by placing him in a more helpless and docile role. Sarah insists to her husband that she will not forsake her domestic responsibilities, as evidenced by the fact that she has his bath and supper ready for him upon his arrival. This also indicates that Adoniram Penn relies upon his wife's contributions to the household as much as she and their children rely upon his. In the end, Sarah's actions make it clear that she and her family deserve as much care and consideration as his livestock do.

“Why, mother,” he said, hoarsely, “I hadn’t no idee you was so set on’t as all this comes to.”

Related Characters: Adoniram Penn (speaker), Sarah Penn

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the story, Adoniram Penn has repeatedly disregarded his wife's feelings, shut down communication, and prioritized his building projects. Now that he comes home to find that his wife has flouted his authority by moving the family and household possessions into the barn, he feels overwhelmed and helpless. In this stunning role reversal, Adoniram Penn now must contend with the flood of emotions that come over him, realizing not only how strongly his wife felt about his 40-year promise to build a new house, but also how much his own pride and refusal to listen has hurt them both. Acknowledging that his resourceful wife has outsmarted him, Adoniram goes on to say that he'll do whatever she asks of him in the transformation of the barn to an official house. Sarah Penn thus emerges the clear winner of the battle of wills between husband and wife, her triumph reflecting a drastic upheaval of gender roles, though it's worth recognizing that this upheaval was borne out of the simple desire to provide for her family and seek out a better life.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE REVOLT OF “MOTHER”

Mother cries out to her husband, whom she calls “Father,” to ask why there are men digging in the field. Father doesn’t answer, but his wife persists, prompting him to contemplate that she looks “as immovable as one of the rocks in his pasture.” As he walks away with the horse, he finally says that the men are building a new **barn**. This news upsets Mother, who’s surprised to hear that Father has decided to build yet another barn when what their family really needs is a new house. Father doesn’t respond to her objections, though, instead leaving Mother alone with her questions.

When Mother enters the house, her daughter asks why the men are digging in the yard. Mother repeats what Father told her. The daughter is surprised to learn that Father intends to build another **barn**, but Sammy—her brother—reveals that he has known for three months, saying that he thought it would “do no good” to mention this beforehand. The daughter expresses uncertainty as to why their father would want to build another barn. The mother then asks Sammy if his father intends to purchase more livestock. Sammy doesn’t reply immediately, but he eventually says that his father intends to buy four more cows. The mother then goes to the pantry, and the boy gets ready for school.

While doing dishes, the daughter asks Mother if she thinks it’s unfortunate that Father is building a new **barn** when they need a nicer house. Mother says that her daughter, whose name is Nanny, is still young and doesn’t understand how gender differences play a role in daily life—men, she says, expect women not to “complain.” Nanny claims that her fiancé, George Eastman, isn’t like the men her mother describes. Mother claims that all men are the same, though she also says Nanny shouldn’t judge her own father because he “doesn’t look at things jest the way we do.” When Nanny muses on how nice it would be to have a more spacious house with a parlor, Mother reminds her how fortunate it is that the house is clean, that at least Father helps with repairs, and that she should be more grateful for the home she has.

From the very beginning, Mother and Father’s relationship is defined by their distinctive, clashing communication styles. Mother’s communication style is more sophisticated: she persists in initiating conversations, seeking answers to questions, and trying to understand her husband’s behavior and actions. Father, by contrast, shuts down all forms of effective communication with more primitive vocal utterances and by claiming he has nothing to say. However, Mother is not to be deterred; she not only is stronger than she looks, but she is not easily dismissed or disregarded. This early interaction, then, foreshadows the story’s resolution by establishing Mother’s strong will and resolve.



The children’s communication styles reflect their parents’ and align with certain gendered expectations. The daughter performs domestic responsibilities alongside her mother, and she is just as articulate as her mother. Sammy, on the other hand, assists his father with the farm labor and is equally non-responsive and reluctant to communicate. Sammy’s hesitancy to disclose his father’s plans to build a barn indicates that he, like his father, does not think his mother plays an equal role in the family.



Mother attempts to prepare Nanny for her impending marriage by explaining the gendered expectations she will surely encounter in her life. Men, mother outlines, make the decisions, and women are expected to accept this dynamic. She even takes her husband’s side over Nanny’s in this conversation, refusing to acknowledge that their house isn’t nice enough for the wedding. All of this is done for show, however, as Mother clearly does not entirely agree with what she tells her daughter. She resents that her husband broke his promise to build a house and instead is building a barn; she resents that she cannot have any say in the matter; and she resents that her daughter cannot have the wedding she wants and will be embarrassed in front of her fiancé and her in-laws.



After finishing some housecleaning, Mother bakes pies while Nanny works on embroidery for her autumn wedding. Although Mother is angry about her husband's building plans, she still accommodates his wishes by baking his favorite pie. Every time she looks up from her work, she sees the men digging the cellar in the same location that her husband promised to build a new house—a promise he made 40 years ago. The family congregates for dinner, eats, then continues with their responsibilities.

After Sammy leaves for school and Nanny runs a store errand, Mother tells her husband, Adoniram, that she would like to have a word with him. At first, he is resistant, claiming he has chores to do, but she insists that he sit in the kitchen. Standing over him, she continues with her earlier questions about why he is building another **barn** and if he intends to buy more livestock. He does not answer her questions.

Mother—whose name is Sarah Penn—finally speaks candidly with her husband about the state of the house. She notes that she has never complained and isn't now, but she stresses just how old and insufficient their current house is. It doesn't suit their needs, and they can afford a nicer one. She also emphasizes how important it is for their daughter to be married in a nice house. She reminds Adoniram of his 40-year-old promise to buy her a new house. They have long been able to afford this, but instead of building a new house, Adoniram has built new sheds and barns and lodging for the livestock. Mother now asks if her husband thinks it's right to treat his "dumb beasts better than" his own family.

Sarah Penn points out that she has gotten older, making it harder for her to maintain the house. While Adoniram remains silent, she sustains a clear, articulate voice. He finally stands to leave and claims he can't spend the entire day conversing with her. When Sarah pleads with him to reconsider his decision to build a new **barn**, he replies that he "ain't got nothin' to say." He leaves, and Sarah continues the housework while Nanny comes home and works on her embroidery again. After admitting to her mother that she feels ashamed to have her wedding in the house because of how small and faded it is, she suggests that they have it in the new barn. She then comments on her mother's odd expression. Sarah, for her part, simply focuses on making a shirt pattern for her husband.

Baking her husband his favorite pie despite her misgivings about the new barn reflects how much Mother prioritizes her husband's feelings and needs above her own. However, the fact that she keeps glancing out the window to survey the workers as they build the new barn suggests that she's not happy about the sacrifice she has made to adhere to the sexist expectation that women should unquestioningly listen to their husbands.



That Mother waits until Nanny is out of the house before confronting Adoniram indicates that she doesn't want her daughter to hear her when she challenges the status quo by standing up to her husband. This, in turn, suggests that she's still hesitant to challenge her husband's authority—though not hesitant enough, it seems, to stop her from speaking her mind in private.



Sarah Penn's name is finally introduced in the story, indicating that this is where she finally asserts herself as an individual who is distinct from her role as a mother and wife. Everything she has said previously to her daughter is now contradicted: she reminds Adoniram of his promise to her, wanting him to start prioritizing her and their family's needs over the farm's. Her misgivings about the new barn are fully expressed when she asks her husband why the animals are given more care and consideration than his own family, making him seem especially heartless for breaking his promise after all these years.



The conflict remains unresolved, as the issues addressed at the story's beginning continue to plague Sarah Penn. Sarah's continued attempts to connect with her husband and communicate her feelings are once again shut down. When Nanny says that she feels embarrassed to have her wedding in the family home, she accentuates just how unfair it is that Adoniram has decided to build a new structure for his animals instead of his family—and, of course, how unfair it is that he remains unwilling to even discuss this decision with his wife.



Spring passes. Sarah and Adoniram do not speak to each other about the **barn**. At one point, Adoniram tells Sammy that he thinks it's "a strange thing how your mother feels about the barn." The barn is completed near the end of July. Just when Adoniram is about to transport his livestock into it, a letter arrives from Sarah's brother, Hiram, who says he might have a horse for Adoniram to buy if he visits. Sarah pretends to listen nonchalantly to this news, but she is secretly excited at the possibility of her husband leaving on a trip. Adoniram admits he wouldn't leave the farm if it wasn't for the chance to get a horse in time for the fall. Before he leaves, he says that if the new cows arrive, Sammy should lead them into the new barn. The hay can also be pitched into the new barn.¹⁰¹¹

Sarah reflects on the current situation. She believes it is divine providence that led her brother to write her husband. She repeats the following maxim to herself: "Unsolicited opportunities are the guide-posts of the Lord to the new roads of life." When the cart of hay arrives for the new **barn**, she orders the men to place it in the old barn instead. The workers do not question her orders, assuming they came from her husband. She then tells her children to eat dinner before helping her. She starts packing their belongings while they eat. When Nanny asks what she's doing, Sarah orders her to start packing her belongings as well while Sammy helps with the furniture. Together, they move all their belongings into the new barn. Although the barn was built for the comfort of animals, Sarah thinks it will suit humans very nicely.

In the new **barn**, Sarah keeps up her household rituals. She orders the man hired to milk the cows to deliver it to the new barn. Upon arriving, he's surprised to see its transformation, and he relays the news to the other villagers. Everyone in town wonders if she's crazy. The minister, Mr. Hersey, visits while Sarah is preparing dinner. When he expresses his concern about what she's doing, she asserts that she believes she has done the right thing and that "there ain't no call for nobody else to worry about it." She adds that she has attended church for over 40 years and that "nobody but the Lord is goin' to dictate to me." Old, sick, and unable to do anything but quote and analyze the Bible, the minister is unable to dissuade her.

Even Adoniram can sense his wife's silent resentment of the new barn. By remarking upon this to his son, he expresses an awareness of his wife's feelings, but he doesn't actually do anything to address the issue—instead, he simply notes that Sarah is clearly upset about the barn and then moves on with his original plans. His singular focus on the farm, however, proves to be his undoing, as his desire to acquire more livestock to fill his new barn gives his wife an opportunity to take advantage of his absence.

Sarah has been planning and praying for spiritual guidance over the barn dilemma. The letter provides confirmation to her that a higher power has granted her this opportunity to carry out her plans, without the need to manufacture one herself. Ironically, because of the socially ingrained gender roles of the community, the hired farmworkers do not question her orders, even though they contradict the original directions her husband gave. Sarah relies upon her children to help her with transporting their belongings into the barn and making it their new home. In turn, they become complicit in her rebellion against her husband and their father.



Despite the judgment she receives from the minister and the surrounding community for transgressing against her husband's authority, Sarah Penn does not care what anyone else thinks, expressing her confidence that she is doing the right thing. She validates her thoughts and actions by underlining her own independence, thus calling upon fundamentally American values surrounding the idea of freedom—values that her fellow townspeople would most likely be wary of undermining. She even overpowers the minister with her adamant claims that she reached this conscious decision through much prayer, thought, and spiritual faith, concluding with the assertion that only God can judge her for her actions. The minister, in contrast, is unable to match her strong resolve, as he finds he cannot apply scripture to real world circumstances. Her independent spirit and the community's response to it highlight a discrepancy in values: Sarah values individual and spiritual growth, while the community values appearances and tradition.



Sarah has one of the four new cows put in the old house's shed while the others are placed in the old barn. On Saturday, the hired milkman waits for Adoniram to come home. Sarah has supper prepared and wears a nice dress to greet her husband. The children watch from one of the windows as their father first arrives at the old house, which is locked. Adoniram then goes to the shed and is confused to find the cow. He takes his new horse to the new **barn**, and when he opens the barn doors, Nanny steps behind her mother while Sammy steps in front of her. After Adoniram asks what they're doing, Sammy announces that they live in the barn now. Adoniram, confused and scared, asks his wife what this means. She explains that they have "jest as good a right here as new horses an' cows."

After reminding her husband that she has fulfilled her duty as his wife for over 40 years, Sarah now indicates that it's Adoniram's turn to fulfill his duty to her by installing room partitions, putting in windows, and purchasing furniture. Her husband remains speechless as she orders him to clean up and dress for dinner. She helps him undress and clean himself before setting the table.

After eating his meal, Adoniram sits down on the smaller doorstep and places his head in his hands. Sarah approaches him after clearing the table and washing the dishes. The evening is tranquil, but her husband is agitated—she notices that he's crying, so she asks him to stop. He replies that he will do what she has asked of him, claiming that he "had no idea" she was so "set" on the idea of a new house. She covers her face with her apron to conceal her delight at winning this battle of will.

Sarah's preparation for her husband's return is calculated to suggest that nothing in their daily lives has changed. She will continue to play the role of housewife and mother by providing meals and serving her family. In so doing, she can appease her husband in the hopes that he will accept their drastic change in residence. Even the children support her in this endeavor; Sammy goes so far as to step in front of his mother to fortify her, and he courageously explains to his father that the barn is their new home. His shift in allegiance from his father to his mother further stresses that Sarah Penn's actions benefit and honor her family more than Adoniram's actions have. Sarah's personal conviction that they have the right to a comfortable dwelling, just as the livestock do, is both a retort and an indirect reminder to her husband of her earlier complaint that he treats the livestock better than his own family.



While appearing to placate her husband, Sarah also assumes an authoritative role in their marriage for the first time. Just as she ordered the hired men not to place cattle or hay in the new barn and flat-out told the minister not to meddle in her affairs, she now orders her husband to make amends by accepting the barn as their new residence and making all the necessary alterations to convert it into a home. This assertion of dominance places her husband in a more subservient role and subverts the gender roles and power dynamics upheld by their church and community.



The stunning gender-role reversal continues, as it is now Adoniram who communicates his feelings and attempts to connect with his wife through his dismay, likely stemming from his hurt pride as well as the realization that he never truly tried to understand his wife's perspective. Until this moment, Adoniram has clearly taken his family for granted and prioritized his own ambitions and goals for the farm. As he comes to terms with his wife's usurpation of his role, he agrees to do whatever she asks of him, finally validating her wishes. As Adoniram unveils his emotional vulnerability, Sarah basks in silent victory—a clear indication that her unwillingness to acquiesce to her husband's authority has paid off.





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