A Submissive Revolt: Exploring the Paradox in “The Revolt of ‘Mother’”

Salsgiver, Jennifer

When one considers women’s role in society, what concepts are prominent? What role is appropriate and becoming for women to play in society? This question is not a new one. It pertains to the fundamental role of women. Women, in both the past and present, have challenged the widely accepted view. In addition to the role deemed appropriate by the masses, particular conduct or behavioral norms has historically been expected of women. In the nineteenth century, women were to be the angel of the house, nurturing, silent, and submissive; however, Mary Wilkins Freeman’s main character in “The Revolt of ‘Mother’” faces an interesting dilemma. “Mother” was not capable of fulfilling her primary role as a mother without imposing on the behavioral norms listed above. Thus, “Mother” faces various paradoxes throughout the tale. What happens when one must sacrifice adhering to behavioral expectations in order to successfully fulfill ones glorified role? Facing the good housewife paradox, the main character must momentary forgo being the angel of the house, nurturing, silent, and submissive in order to secure her overall performance as “Mother.”

During the nineteenth century, men were responsible for the public sphere and the women were in charge of the private sphere; however, while the public sphere intruded upon the private sphere, women had no ground to infringe upon the man’s public sphere. In theory, men were solely in charge of the business while woman were prominently responsible for the home. A woman was confided to a “status that stem[ed] from her position in a patriarchal society that through its focus on conquest and colonization often exclude[ed] feminine values” such as domestic life (Cutter 279). Business was inevitably more important than the home. Although the private sphere was meant to give women a sense of ownership in society, men could not help but cross these drawn lines; men controlled the finances earned from the business, which was needed for women to run the home. While the women were confided to one sphere, the men had access to both. Men experienced dominance in both worlds.

“Mother,” introduced to readers eventually as Sarah Penn, is concerned with the wellbeing of her family and takes matters into her own hands. Not the typical nineteen century woman would move her family from their old house into the new barn without approval from the man of the house. This clearly crosses the lines of her domain since the new barn indefinitely belongs to the public sphere, which her husband is responsible for. Adoniram remarked to his wife, “I wish you’d go into the house, mother, an’ ‘tend to your own affairs,” (723) when Sarah inquired concerning the men digging “in the place where Adoniram forty years ago had promised her their new house should stand” (Freeman 726). Adoniram was not attempting to surprise her with a new home he had promised forty years ago. Sarah’s inquiry was not based off of an anticipated delightful surprise; her attention to the matter proves that Adoniram has neglected his family’s wellbeing to a certain extent.

Despite the fact that their roof did not leak, Sarah pointed out, during her petition for a new home that their house was in dire need of renovation and unfit for their prosperous circumstances:

> You see this room here, father; you look at it well. You see there ain't not carpet on the floor, an' you see the paper is all dirty, an' droppin' off the walls. We ain't had no new paper on it for ten year, an' then I put it on myself, an' it didn't cost but ninepence a roll. You see this room, father; it's all the one I've had to work in an' eat in an' sit in sence we was marries. There ain't another woman in the whole town whose husband ain't got half the means you have but what's got better. (Freeman 726)

To correct the problem, Sarah claims the new barn, a public part of society, for her private sphere and home base since her husband will not acknowledge the legitimacy of her appeal. Since the private sector of the home, in theory, was the woman's domain, Sarah demonstrated authority, while protecting her dominion, by claiming new territory, which was located in her husband's public sphere. Prior to Sarah's coup on the new barn, only men crossed drawn lines. Interestingly, Adoniram promises territory, which he retracts forty years later by building a barn instead of a house. Sarah questions, "You ain't goin' to build over there where we was goin' to have a house, father" when she becomes aware that Adoniram reclaimed territory that he pledged to her years ago (Freeman 723). This event clearly required Sarah to play offensively in her opponent's reclaimed territory in order to gain new ground for her own, altering a public barn into a private home.

The home is visible expression of who Sarah is. Adoniram's success in business helps define him, which is why he is more concerned about the number of barns and cows he has over the wellbeing of his family. Their daughter Nanny exclaimed, "Oh, mother, he ain't going to build another barn," indicating there was not an immediate dire need for a barn as there was for a new home (Freeman 724). The woman was responsible for everyone's wellbeing and the man was responsible to support the family financially. The Penn's were well feed and sheltered, but the masculine dominance in their house reduced the home's potential. Apparently, in the nineteenth century and perhaps even now, it takes a woman's touch to make a home. Ironically, Sarah and Adoniram "were in the barn, standing before the wide open doors" when "The Revolt of 'Mother'" begins, a public sphere where Adoniram is dominate (Freeman 723); however, the story ends in the freshly claimed barn, a private sphere, where Sarah demonstrates her supremacy as "Adoniram sniff[s]" dinner while observing the relocated domestic items. Sarah created a home atmosphere out of a barn.

Nineteenth century woman were expected to be nurturers, not conquers. According to this mainstream belief, the realm society bestowed upon women was to be upheld meekly and new ground was not to be fought for. Nonetheless, many women in the nineteenth century "shared Sarah Penn's spirit of revolt," desiring more in life than what they were given (Fienberg 500). Instead of portraying the nurturing mother, Sarah inflicted emotional pain on her husband by conquering the new territory. A typical nineteen century man would not respond in remorse for his wife's blatant

rebellion, but Freeman goes beyond depicting a "weeping" Adoniram and describes his violent sobs explaining that "the old man's shoulders heaved" (Freeman 733). Instead of feeling safe and secure or even angry in the new home, Adoniram's "old bristling face was pale and frightened" (Freeman 733). He was not comfortable with her private interests dominating over his public sphere. Sarah's ability to nurture in a comforting environment required her to impose momentary discomfort on her husband. "Adoniram was like a fortress whose walls had no active resistance" after calculating the degree of his wife's revolt (Freeman 733). She stepped out of her role as nurturer and he felt the effects. To maintain her role as nurturer, she was required to conquer. Momentary conflict was necessary for long-term tranquility.

Sarah did not complain to her husband or society about her situation, even though it was unjust. Sarah explained to Adoniram, "I ain't never complained, an' I ain't goin' to complain now, but I'm going to talk plain" but Adoniram refused to discuss the matter (Freeman 726). Since Adoniram could afford another new barn, one may assume finances were available to build a new house, but he chose to allocate finances for his own interests. Instead of caring for his family, he was absorbed in his work. Though it was the mother who petitioned Adoniram for a new home, other family members, such as the daughter, acknowledged they were in "need [of] a decent house to live in," but Sarah warned her daughter not to complain (Freeman 725). It is conceivable that a husband would not like to listen to complaining, but he also did not want to converse in plain talk with the wife either. If Sarah continually nagged about her living situation, one may understand way Adoniram would avoid talking the matter over; however, one gains the impression that Sarah did not nag. In order to respect her husband, Sarah waits until Nanny departs for the store to buy more thread before addressing her husband regarding the barn. "When Nanny was gone" Sarah took that window of opportunity to speak plainly to Adoniram regarding the new barn (Freeman 726). After he disregarded her pleas, she also discontinued the discussion throughout the new barn's construction. Her voice had no presence in the marriage. Her opinion on public affairs such as the stewardship of property and finances, from society's point of view, should be the mirror image of her husband. As a result of these expectations, Adoniram never saw her as an individual who should be consulted. Sarah recognized that plain talking produces no results; as a result, she communicated with actions after her words ceased to be acknowledged.

Woman in the nineteenth century often felt the need to have their voices heard. When the man of the house asserted, "I ain't got nothin' to say about it," in regards to an important decision that should be discussed between the married couple, one may grasp the woman's state of mind concerning a decision to move into the barn (Freeman 726). Sarah has no opportunity to persuade or be victorious in conversation. Her only option is to act independently when her husband is away on business while she has free rein. Lorne Fienberg argues "Freeman's women toil for their daily bread, of their dignity and self-esteem, and also for their autonomy as human beings" which explains Sarah's desperate act. The window of opportunity is only open when her husband is absent from the scene (Freeman 483).

Although "Father" Adoniram did not listen to her plea, God the Father did. Sarah thought "unsolicited opportunities are the guideposts of the Lord to the new roads of life" and uses this theory to justify her idea to move into the new barn (Freeman 729). She did not manipulate the situation to make this opportunity since "father's goin' wa'n't none of [Sarah's] doin'" (Freeman 729). Sarah confidently proclaimed "it looks like a providence" and she acted reassured that she was under God the Father's authority to move (Freeman 729). Weather it was providence or not, Freeman offers a woman's perspective on what a character may do when desperate to be included in decisions which involve her family. Since "Father" will not discuss his decisions, she takes actions into her own hands.

Sarah does not complain; instead, she implements Adoniram's philosophy when facing opposition to one's preferred course of action. Since her voice is not recognized, she acts without voicing her request. She recites to Mr. Hersey, the minister, "There ain't no use talking" (Freeman 731) which is a modified statement her husband told her repeatedly, "I ain't go nothin' to say" (Freeman 727). Clearly in both instances, the speaker's mind is settled and no method of persuasion could modify their conclusions. One may observe through her actions and demeanor that Sarah possessed a strong will. During her inquiry regarding the men digging in field, "her eyes, fixed upon the old man, looked as if the meekness had been the result of her own will, never to the will of another" (Freeman 723). Though she faithfully fulfills her role as "Mother," she does not easily surrender ideologies.

Sarah had been a submissive and successful helpmate all throughout their marriage. Since submission was not accommodating for her to successfully fulfill her role as mother, she took matters into her own hands. "Mother" is the entire identify that this woman clings to. Her husband refers to her as "Mother." Thus, nurturing her family by keeping a comfortable home is one of her only defining elements. The home is her territory and she will venture outside of socially acceptable means to protect that domain. Her husband does not include her in decisions that affects her domain; he was building the new barn on the exact spot he promised to build her new house on. Sarah's inability to correct her son when he disrespects her at home indicates that she is powerless even in her own dominion. Martha Cutter argues, "Sarah Penn is forced repeatedly to understand her powerless status," but she eventually breaks (Freeman 279). To continue in her submissive state would constitute no change. Only when Sarah discards the box of socially acceptable behavior, which she had been confided to, is she able to fulfill her role as "Mother" as she desired.

Sarah did not act recklessly; instead, she conducted herself with the highest level of dignity. Society opposed her action, but she was convinced that though she was acting contrary to social conventions, her momentary "revolt" would enable her to better fulfill the role society expected from her to begin with. As a hard worker and faithful helpmate "She was a masterly keeper of her box of a house" (Freeman 725). Though Sarah harbored "deep resentment" against her husband for building the new barn, "she would never fail in sedulous attention to his wants," which indicates

her faithfulness (Freeman 725). Alice Brand agrees, "Mother's anger is supremely ordered by self-control, never keeping her from her duty" (91). She channeled her negative energy out on the dishes and housework. After discovering a cellar was being dug for the new barn on the spot her new house was promised to eventually be, "mother plunged her hands vigorously into the water" (Freeman 725). When the minister challenged her move during her husband's absence, "the saintly expression of her face remained fixed, but there was an angry flush over it" (Freeman 731). As a hard-working wife and caring mother, she never diverges from her sweet feminine nature. Barbette Levy argues, Sarah "possess[ed] an innate dignity of soul that compels admiration" (355). Far from the subversive stereotype, Sarah revolts in an acceptable manner by maintaining her dignity as a woman.

Sarah regained the respect of her children, especially her son, by asserting authority in her domain. Prior to Sarah's revolt, her son Sammy was disrespectful by blatantly ignoring her question, "Is he goin' to buy more cows," before reluctantly answering after her second inquiry (Freeman 724). The boy mutters "I s'poses he is" instead of giving a plain answer, knowing Adoniram plans to purchase four cows (Freeman 724). It is evident that information must be drug out of him since he does not offer it freely. One may question why the son has the right to be informed of family affairs of which the mother is ignorant. Sammy's treatment of woman reflects Adoniram's treatment of Sarah. Consider how the sibling conversation reflects their parent's dialogue: "'Sammy, did you know father was going to build a new barn?' asked the girl. The boy combed assiduously. 'Sammy!' He turned and showed a face like his father under his smooth crest of hair. 'Yes, I s'pose I did,' he said, reluctantly" (Freeman 724). This excerpt indicates that Sammy is adapting his father's mannerisms, expressions and conduct towards women. When Sarah exerted her right to dominate in the private sphere, on the location promised to her for this use forty years ago, she not only gained a new home, but the loyalty of her son. When Adoniram returned and entered the new house where he would face Sarah, "Sammy stepped suddenly forward and stood in front of her" to protect his mother from his father (Freeman 732). Her role as mother is more complete since she acquired Sammy's allegiance in addition to the new home.

Sarah is faced with various paradoxes which require her to choose between actions which conflict with society's behavioral standards for women or a failure to fulfill the female role society demands. In short, her behavior momentarily changed to protect her role. Though a good wife is to remain in her private sphere to maintain in good standing with society, Sarah must momentarily operate outside of the private sphere while transforming her husband's new barn in the public sphere, into a home in the private sphere, in order to successfully fulfill her role. Her nurturing persona can only continue if she momentarily inflects discomfort while she conquers her new domain. Though she desires to converse plainly with her husband without complaining regarding her concerns, her request to discuss the matter is not heeded. When her voice is not acknowledged, she uses actions which cannot be ignored. Her plea for justice is heard by her Heavenly Father since her appeals fall on "Father's" deaf ears on earth; thus, her actions are under the authority of her Heavenly Father.

Sarah remains fully feminine while she operates in a meticulously subversive manner. Theodore Roosevelt praised "The Revolt of 'Mother'" as an effective voice on women's rights while others "downplayed the feminism of Freeman's work" (Gardner 464). Nevertheless, Freeman's "Mother" sheds light on the paradox women face while attempting to perform and fulfill expected roles.

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