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Reconstructing Woman's Place in Freeman's "The Revolt of 'Mother'"

by JOSEPH CHURCH

ITS SETTING a late-nineteenth-century rural New England farm, Mary Wilkins Freeman's "The Revolt of 'Mother'" (1890) centers on Sarah Penn and her husband, Adoniram, married some forty years and now in serious conflict because the prosperous Adoniram plans to erect a lavish barn on the very ground set aside for the new house promised Sarah at the time of her marriage. Through the years Sarah and their children have had to be content with a dilapidated, half-finished little "box of a house" (452) while watching Adoniram's farm buildings increase in size and number. When Sarah learns of her husband's latest plan, she tries to get him to understand the injustice of his ways, but the obtuse man won't listen. Just when the majestic barn reaches completion, however, Adoniram must be absent for several days, and Sarah takes advantage of this opportunity to initiate a "revolt": stunning her children and the community, she moves all her family's belongings into the new structure, transforming it into her dwelling. Adoniram returns to a confusing scene, the old house a barn, the new barn a house; disoriented, the dazed man capitulates, and Sarah achieves a victory for herself and her children.

Usually considered primarily an entertaining and finely crafted "local color" magazine story, Freeman's "Revolt of 'Mother'" actually advances a serious analysis of the difficulties a woman confronts when attempting to realize her interests.¹ That Sarah's struggle for self-determination involves obtaining a proper home locates her story within a central strain of American literature in which aspiring protagonists establish new dwellings. In *A World Elsewhere* Richard Poirier speaks of "an obsession in American literature with plans and efforts to build houses, to appropriate space to one's desire, perhaps to inaugurate therein a dynasty that shapes time to the dimensions of personal and familial history" (17). Of course what Poirier has in mind is that such structures serve as metaphors for the developing self. Clearly in "The Revolt of 'Mother'" Sarah Penn's daring move from the little house to the larger new structure expresses a metaphorical expansion of her selfhood. However, in a crucial way developments in Freeman's narrative differ from Poirier's thesis. Whereas Poirier

1. McElrath details stylistic devices Freeman deployed in making "The Revolt of 'Mother'" a successful magazine story. He briefly acknowledges a "Howellsian realism" in the narrative but concludes, "'The Revolt' is also, to speak more plainly, literary gimmickry at its best. It is so well executed that . . . [we] can enjoy the notion that love can sometimes conquer all, in 1890 and even in the 1980s" (261). Westbrook characterizes Freeman's narrative as a "good-natured story" (47), contending that "its main intention was probably comic" (46). Perceptive exceptions to such views are De Eulis' analysis of Sarah's house as metaphor for psychological restriction; and, although brief, Aarons' remarks about Sarah and Adoniram's "linguistic power struggle" (6).

emphasizes the creation of original structures, Freeman describes the appropriation of a structure already in place. Poirier's stress on originality derives from his ultimately understanding canonical American literature as essentially a modernist enterprise in which our authors have refused historical and social constraints in order freely to create more imaginative, that is, more aesthetic dwellings.² He contends that the building of these metaphorical houses is "an extension and an expansion of the self, an act . . . possible only if the imagination and space are freed from the possessive power of all that is not nature: from systems of any kind that derive from society and history" (18).

From the standpoint of contemporary critical theory, with its insistence on the way historical and ideological forces produce subjects (or selves), Poirier's conception of original creations appears a formalist mystification.³ Freeman's approach, on the other hand, indicates that we exist inescapably and only in structures but that such structures can be appropriated and properly transformed, particularly by those people strongly motivated because inadequately represented in such formations—for example, by a woman such as Sarah Penn. Of the majestic barn Freeman's narrator remarks, "Every builder builds somewhat for unknown purposes, and is in a measure a prophet. The architect of Adoniram Penn's barn, while he designed it for the comfort of four-footed animals, had planned better than he knew for the comfort of humans. Sarah Penn saw at a glance its possibilities" (463). Sarah's perspicacity and her appropriation of a structure designed for others result from the distress of her historical and social position as a comparatively powerless woman. By contrast, Poirier's strong protagonists supposedly refuse history and create original dwellings, but such autonomy derives, I believe, not so much from their imaginative work as from their already occupying hegemonic positions; predictably, his protagonists tend to be white men. After establishing Thoreau's *Walden* as exemplary in American literature's obsession with the building of the self's metaphorical houses, Poirier continues, "Most of the houses in Cooper answer these ambitions, as does the Grangerford house in *Huckleberry Finn*, the House of the Seven Gables, Fawns in James's *Golden Bowl*, Sutpen's Hundred in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, Silas Lapham's house, Gatsby's estate, and even the remade country house of Bellow's Herzog" (17). Such dwellings seem not so much originals as extensions of hegemony.

In Freeman's handling Sarah's usurping the man's structure hypostatizes the complicated task of obtaining authority within the discursive structures that produce subjectivity. From the first, Freeman emphasizes the role of discourse in the maintenance of unjust social relations, asserting that Sarah's subjugation derives in large part from her husband's refusal to engage in any meaningful dialogue with her. It's pertinent that for forty years he's kept her in a house

2. Poirier states, "The books which in my view constitute a distinctive American tradition within English literature are early, very often clumsy examples of a modernist impulse in fiction: they resist within their pages the forces of environment that otherwise dominate the world. . . . American books are often written as if historical forces cannot possibly provide such an environment, as if history can give no life to 'freedom,' as if only language can create the liberated space" (5).

3. Belsey and Silverman provide useful commentaries on theories of the production of subjectivity.

without a parlor.⁴ Of course Adoniram is not the villain of melodrama; rather, he's a comparatively simple, more or less obtuse man who presumes prerogatives and generally protects them by refusing to account for their source or value. In some ways he's like the vacant barn, a structure that Sarah must convert: indeed, after the successful revolt, he's described as being "like a fortress whose walls had no active resistance, and went down the instant the right besieging tools were used" (468). During their conflict Sarah discovers the "right besieging tools," but until then she suffers his authority.

Generally Adoniram's method of control is simple: he tries to prevent dialogue by restricting her to her space (the house) or by remaining obscure or silent. For example, when he finds Sarah demanding information about the new building, he advises her, "'go into the house, mother, an' 'tend to your own affairs'" (448). He also exercises control by means of his careless, garbled, and somewhat intimidating expression: "He ran his words together," comments the narrator, "and his speech was almost as inarticulate as a growl. But the woman understood; it was her most native tongue" (448). Furthermore, although no doubt unconsciously, Adoniram communicates more menacing symbolic messages to her; while the inquiring Sarah looks on, he sets about "harnessing the great . . . mare": "He hustled the collar on to her neck with a jerk . . . slapped the saddle upon the mare's back . . . tightened the last buckles . . . slapped the reins over the horse, and started forth" (448, 449). Obviously, and especially given the French homonym, the mare stands in for "mother." We should note, however, that Sarah also expresses an aggressive symbolism: at one point, thinking about Adoniram, she tries to scrub a dish into oblivion; later, after meeting another of his rebuffs, she picks up steel scissors and starts to cut some cloth for his shirts as if cutting his likeness to pieces.⁵

However, Sarah clearly seeks to elevate the meaning of their discourse. With the advent of the barn's construction, she insists for the first time that he sit and listen to her "talk plain" (457) about the injustice of the box of a house and life she occupies. The "unlettered" (461) woman makes her case skillfully, but to no avail, for as the narrator puts it, "She had pleaded her little cause like a Webster; she had ranged from severity to pathos; but her opponent employed that obstinate silence which makes eloquence futile with mocking echoes" (457). Mocked by the "echoes" of her rational discourse, Sarah discovers that although an Adoniram would justify his authority as reasonable he himself needn't listen to reason when it threatens his interests. To achieve her aims she must alter his position within the discursive formation; to do that demands that she somehow displace him to a marginal position such that he's forced to engage the formation under new terms. In a literal way, she does this by usurping his structure and leaving him outside wanting in.

4. Significantly, Freeman's narrative stresses that Sarah's mother's house contained an exceptional parlor (455). The narrator indicates that as soon as Sarah usurps the new structure, she sees that its "great middle space would make a parlor, by-and-by, fit for a palace" (463).

5. Even the "mince-pies" (453) she prepares for him have menacing associations since "to mince" is "to cut." When later the minister calls, he finds her not only unreceptive but pointedly shelling her peas before him "as if they were bullets" (464).

But Sarah Penn's usurpation has its more subtle, discursive character as well. Specifically, she assumes control of a certain theological position normally in the service of men. When she occupies the new barn, she appears to others as "crazy" (467), a "lawless and rebellious spirit" (464). Yet, those terms—the eccentric spirit—associate her with Providence, for earlier Sarah had advised her fiancéed daughter, " '[We're] women folks. . . . 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 we do of the weather' " (452). This equation joins the weather, men, and Providence as being unpredictable, inscrutable—the very character of Sarah's usurpation. Reverencing Sarah's act without losing sight of the danger of mock-heroic hyperbole, the urbane narrator associates the lowly farm woman with the gods, insisting that "There is a certain uncanny and superhuman quality about all such purely original undertakings" (463). In the crucial scene in which Sarah decides on her revolt, she consciously associates herself with Providence. Adoniram has received a letter from Sarah's brother Hiram (another "ram"), inducing him to go to Vermont for an exceptional horse. After he's gone, Sarah's thoughts take a strange turn; she muses, "'Supposin' I *had* wrote to Hiram . . . s'posin' I had wrote, an' asked him if he knew of any horse? But I didn't, an' father's goin' wa'n't none of my doin'. It looks like a providence' " (461). Her sense that she could have written the letter that motivates subsequent events indicates that she's becoming more conscious of her power to produce discursive positions for him and her, in other words, to be "like a providence."

That Sarah Penn has assumed a certain providential authority becomes more evident with the arrival of the community's official minister, Mr. Hersey. He's come to put down her rebellion, but she easily defeats this "pathetic" (465) fellow, whose "youthful confidence had cooled [and who now] had to scourge himself up to some of his pastoral duties as relentlessly as a Catholic ascetic, and then he was prostrated by the smart" (465). Like Adoniram and the barn, he and his theology appear somewhat vacant structures over which Sarah will assume a certain command. Freeman hints at this usurpation in her choice of name for the minister: Hersey, that is, "her-say." Significantly, Sarah dispatches him by claiming historical precedent for her act, namely that of her country's revolutionary "forefathers . . . who didn't have what belonged to 'em" (465). Again she assumes certain supposedly male codifications, but the obtuse minister can't follow her analogy. The narrator comments that Mr. Hersey "could expound the intricacies of every character study in the Scriptures, he was competent to grasp the Pilgrim Fathers and all historical innovators, but Sarah Penn was beyond him. He could deal with primal cases, but parallel ones worsted him" (465). Had this learned minister been more competent with analogues, with parallel cases, he might've been all the more nervous confronting Sarah, for the Biblical Adoniram was killed by rebels demanding freedom from forced labor for the king.⁶ Unlike

6. 1 Kings 12:18. Commenting on the use of names in "The Revolt of 'Mother,'" Gallagher notes that Adoniram

Mr. Hersey, Sarah, given her status as a woman, has necessarily learned to think in "parallel" ways, in other words, analogically, tropologically. Underrepresented by the "primal cases," by the hegemonic structures, she means to reconfigure them for her own ends. Indeed, at the moment the revolt occurs to her, not only does she have a "pattern" (458) in her hand but, hearing her daughter's sarcasm about marrying in the lavish barn, Sarah translates that small remark into her larger project.

In the spirit of analogy, we can see how Sarah's struggle to appropriate a proper dwelling might metafictionally reflect Freeman's own difficulties as author and woman, how "The Revolt of 'Mother'" might function as a commentary on the house of fiction. At one point the narrator characterizes Sarah Penn as a kind of "artist" (452), and it could be argued that, like Sarah, Freeman herself meant to take over a comparatively empty but potent structure, namely the so-called "local color" magazine story, and convert it into a meaningful form.⁷ All the emphasis in "The Revolt of 'Mother'" on establishing significant dialogue between man and woman suggests that Freeman had similar interests in mind for her own narrative. Perhaps, like Adoniram, the male readers of *Harper's Magazine* found themselves surprisingly on the outside looking in at Freeman's unexpected words and worlds. When the story opens, Sarah and Adoniram stand in his space (the original barn) looking through open doors, much as the reader looks through the doors of fiction; together they see only men digging in the field.⁸ But at the story's conclusion, Sarah stands alone in her usurped space, looking out through open doors at a man who wants in. This reversal may parallel that of readers who set out assuming certain prerogatives but end confronting the authority of Freeman. Since *Harper's* devoted most of its pages to disseminating hegemonic concerns, such readers, like Adoniram absent on business, may have returned to find certain important structures, namely the house of fiction, newly transformed and occupied. When Adoniram receives the fateful letter inducing his temporary absence, Freeman intimates that significant letters—writing—may seem a man's affair, the letter passing from Hiram to Adoniram, delivered by the latter's son. But Sarah's recognition that *she* could write the letter motivating all the events indicates that Freeman understands her own writing—her letters—as potentially transvaluative. She urges such a view by naming her artful protagonist Mrs. Penn, a woman displacing the confining (animal) pen with a liberating writing pen.⁹

To close, Freeman leads us to be wary of clinging, like Hersey, to "primal cases" or imagining, like Poirier, original structures, uninformed by historical

served as "overseer for King Solomon," but curiously he doesn't mention Adoniram's having been killed by people revolting.

7. Renza makes a somewhat similar claim for Jewett and her "White Heron," that story's being "written precisely *not* to become 'a very good magazine story,' i.e., for the marketplace pre-occupied by male editors, but rather to secure a 'room of her own' for [Jewett]" (89).

8. See Chambers' metafictional analysis of open doors and open windows (35–39).

9. In "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" (1898) Stephen Crane predictably reverses the metaphor, the pen becoming an animal: associated with the dog "Scratchy" shoots at, Crane's protagonist behaves "like an animal in a pen" (321). In my essay on Jewett's "Foreigner" I discuss the struggle of women to write significant "letters," that is, to appropriate discursive positions and power unto themselves in turn-of-the-century America.

and social forces. In contrast, she emphasizes the necessity of our inhabiting but transfiguring and transvaluing inherited structures to satisfy present demands. In this respect the narrator's assertion that "Every builder builds somewhat for unknown purposes" (463) no doubt carries an intention in Freeman's own construct, "The Revolt of 'Mother,'" reflecting her hope that we readers will make use of it to meet our present needs.

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