

## **The Revolt of Mother – Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman**

[The Revolt of Mother](#) is a famous short story by the American author [Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman](#). Mary was a famous and well known American author of short stories back in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The Revolt of “Mother” which she wrote and published in the year 1896 is considered one of his best short stories.

Considered by many to be a pre-feminist literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, The Revolt of ‘Mother’ addresses many themes such as the repression of women and a patriarchal society.

This story is included into the high school curriculum of the USA and is read by hundreds of thousands of children across the world. You can download a free PDF copy of The Revolt of Mother story right below and also download a worksheet with many questions and answers.

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### **Why are they digging?**

"What are them men diggin' over there in the field for?"

There was a sudden dropping and enlarging of the lower part of the old man's face, as if some heavy weight had settled therein; he shut his mouth tight, and went on harnessing the great bay mare. He hustled the collar on to her neck with a jerk.

"Father!"

The old man slapped the saddle upon the mare's back.

"Look here, father, I want to know what them men are diggin' over in the field for, an' I'm goin' to know."

"I wish you'd go into the house, mother, an' 'tend to your own affairs," the old man said then. He ran his words together, and his speech was almost as inarticulate as a growl.

But the woman understood; it was her most native tongue. "I ain't goin' into the house till you tell me what them men are doin' over there in the field," said she.

Then she stood waiting. She was a small woman, short and straight-waisted like a child in her brown cotton gown. Her forehead was mild and benevolent between the smooth curves of gray hair; there were meek downward lines about her nose and mouth; but 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.

They were in the barn, standing before the wide open doors. The spring air, full of the smell of growing grass and unseen blossoms, came in their faces. The deep yard in front was littered with farm wagons and piles of wood; on the edges, close to the fence and the house, the grass was a vivid green, and there were some dandelions.

The old man glanced doggedly at his wife as he tightened the last buckles on the harness. She looked as immovable to him as one of the rocks in his pastureland, bound to the earth with generations of blackberry vines. He slapped the reins over the horse, and started forth from the barn.

"Father! said she.

The old man pulled up. "What is it?"

"I want to know what them men are diggin' over there in that field for."

"They're diggin' a cellar, I s'pose, if you've got to know."

"A cellar for what?"

"A barn."

"A barn? You ain't goin' to build a barn over there where we was goin' to have a house, father?"

The old man said not another word. He hurried the horse into the farm wagon, and clattered out of the yard, jouncing as sturdily on his seat as a boy.

The woman stood a moment looking after him, then she went out of the barn across a corner of the yard to the house. The house, standing at right angles with the great barn and a long reach of sheds

and out-buildings, was infinitesimal compared with them. It was scarcely as commodious for people as the little boxes under the barn eaves were for doves.

A pretty girl's face, pink and delicate as a flower, was looking out of one of the house windows. She was watching three men who were digging over in the field which bounded the yard near the road line. She turned quietly when the woman entered.

"What are they diggin' for, mother?" said she. "Did he tell you?"

"They're diggin' for -- a cellar for a new barn."

"Oh, mother, he ain't goin' to build another barn?"

"That's what he says."

### **A new barn**

A boy stood before the kitchen glass combing his hair. He combed slowly and painstakingly, arranging his brown hair in a smooth hillock over his forehead. He did not seem to pay any attention to the conversation.

"Sammy, did you know father was goin' to build a new barn?" asked the girl.

The boy combed assiduously.

"Sammy!"

He turned, and showed a face like his father's under his smooth crest of hair. "Yes, I s'pose I did," he said, reluctantly.

"How long have you known it?" asked his mother.

"'Bout three months, I guess."

"Why didn't you tell of it?"

"Didn't think 'twould do no good."

"I don't see what father wants another barn for," said the girl, in her sweet slow voice. She turned again to the window, and stared out at the digging men in the field. Her tender sweet face was full of a gentle distress. Her forehead was as bald and innocent as a baby's, with the light hair strained back from it in a row of curl-papers. She was quite large, but her soft curves did not look as if they covered muscles.

Her mother looked sternly at the boy. "Is he goin' to buy more cows?" said she.

The boy did not reply; he was tying his shoes.

"Sammy, I want you to tell me if he's goin' to buy more cows."

"I s'pose he is."

"How many?"

"Four, I guess."

His mother said nothing more. She went into the pantry, and there was a clatter of dishes. The boy got his cap from a nail behind the door, took an old arithmetic from the shelf, and started for school. He was lightly built, but clumsy. He went out of the yard with a curious spring in the hips, that made his loose homemade jacket tilt up in the rear.

The girl went to the sink, and began to wash the dishes that were piled up there. Her mother came promptly out of the pantry, and shoved her aside. "You wipe 'em," said she; "I'll wash. There's a good many this mornin'."

The mother plunged her hands vigorously into the water, the girl wiped the plates slowly and dreamily. "Mother," said she, "don't you think it's too bad father's goin' to build that new barn, much as we need a decent house to live in?"

Her mother scrubbed a dish fiercely. "You 'ain't found out yet 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 we do of the weather."

"I don't care; I don't believe George is anything like that, anyhow," said Nanny. Her delicate face flushed pink, her lips pouted softly, as if she were going to cry.

"You wait an' see. I guess George Eastman ain't no better than other men. You hadn't ought to judge father, though. He can't help it, 'cause he don't look at things jest the way we do. An' we've been pretty comfortable here, after all. The roof don't leak -- 'ain't never but once -- that's one thing. Father kept it shingled right up."

"I do wish we had a parlor."

"I guess it won't hurt George Eastman any to come to see you in a nice clean kitchen. I guess a good many girls don't have as good a place as this. Nobody's ever heard me complain."

"I 'ain't complained either, mother."

"Well, I don't think you'd better, a good father an' a good home as you've got. S'pose your father made you go out an' work for your livin'? Lots of girls have to that ain't no stronger an' better able to than you be."

### **Sarah Penn, Adoniram and Sammy**

Sarah Penn washed the frying-pan with a conclusive air. She scrubbed the outside of it as faithfully as the inside. She was a masterly keeper of her box of a house.

Her one living room never seemed to have in it any of the dust which the friction of life with inanimate matter produces. She swept, and there seemed to be no dirt to go before the broom; she cleaned, and one could see no difference.

She was like an artist so perfect that he has apparently no art. To-day she got out a mixing bowl and a board, and rolled some pies, and there was no more flour upon her than upon her daughter who was doing finer work.

Nanny was to be married in the fall, and she was sewing on some white cambric and embroidery. She sewed industriously while her mother cooked, her soft milk-white hands and wrists showed whiter than her delicate work.

"We must have the stove moved out in the shed before long," said Mrs. Penn. "Talk about not havin' things, it's been a real blessin' to be able to put a stove up in that shed in hot weather. Father did one good thing when he fixed that stove-pipe out there."

Sarah Penn's face as she rolled her pies had that expression of meek vigor which might have characterized one of the New Testament saints. She was making mince-pies. Her husband, Adoniram Penn, liked them better than any other kind. She baked twice a week. Adoniram often liked a piece of pie between meals.

She hurried this morning. It had been later than usual when she began, and she wanted to have a pie baked for dinner. However deep a resentment she might be forced to hold against her husband, she would never fail in sedulous attention to his wants.

Nobility of character manifests itself at loop-holes when it is not provided with large doors. Sarah Penn's showed itself today in flaky dishes of pastry. So she made the pies faithfully, while across the table she could see, when she glanced up from her work, the sight that rankled in her patient and steadfast soul -- the digging of the cellar of the new barn in the place where Adoniram forty years ago had promised her their new house should stand.

The pies were done for dinner. Adoniram and Sammy were home a few minutes after twelve o'clock. The dinner was eaten with serious haste. There was never much conversation at the table in the Penn family. Adoniram asked a blessing, and they ate promptly, then rose up and went about their work.

Sammy went back to school, taking soft sly lopes out of the yard like a rabbit. He wanted a game of marbles before school, and feared his father would give him some chores to do. Adoniram hastened to the door and called after him, but he was out of sight.

"I don't see what you let him go for, mother," said he. "I wanted him to help me unload that wood."

Adoniram went to work out in the yard unloading wood from the wagon. Sarah put away the dinner dishes, while Nanny took down her curl-papers and changed her dress. She was going down to the store to buy some more embroidery and thread.

When Nanny was gone, Mrs. Penn went to the door. "Father!" she called.

"Well, what is it?"

"I want to see you jest a minute, father."

"I can't leave this wood nohow. I've got to git it unloaded an' go for a load of gravel afore two o'clock. Sammy had ought to helped me. You hadn't ought to let him go to school so early."

"I want to see you jest a minute."

"I tell ye I can't, nohow, mother."

"Father, you come here." Sarah Penn stood in the door like a queen; she held her head as if it bore a crown; there was that patience which makes authority royal in her voice. Adoniram went.

Mrs. Penn led the way into the kitchen, and pointed to a chair. "Sit down, father," said she; "I've got somethin' I want to say to you."

### **I 'ain't got nothin' to say**

He sat down heavily; his face was quite stolid, but he looked at her with restive eyes. "Well, what is it, mother?"

"I want to know what you're buildin' that new barn for, father?"

"I 'ain't got nothin' to say about it."

"It can't be you think you need another barn?"

"I tell ye I 'ain't got nothin' to say about it, mother; an' I ain't goin' to say nothin'."

"Be you goin' to buy more cows?"

Adoniram did not reply; he shut his mouth tight.

"I know you be, as well as I want to. Now, father, look here" -- Sarah Penn had not sat down; she stood before her husband in the humble fashion of a Scripture woman --

"I'm goin' to talk real plain to you: I never have sence I married you, but I'm goin' to now. I 'ain't never complained, an' I ain't goin' to complain now, but I'm goin' to talk plain. You see this room here, father; you look at it well. You see there ain't no 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 nine-pence 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 married. There ain't another woman in the whole town whose husband 'ain't got half the means you have but what's got better. 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, an' their fathers not so able as hers is. It's all the room she'll have to be married in. What would you have thought, father, if we had had our weddin' in a room no better than this? I was married in my mother's parlor, with a carpet on the floor, an' stuffed furniture, an' a mahogany card-table. An' this is all the room my daughter will have to be married in. Look here, father!"

Sarah Penn went across the room as though it were a tragic stage. She flung open a door and disclosed a tiny bedroom, only large enough for a bed and bureau, with a path between. "There, father," said she -- "there's all the room I've had to sleep in for forty year. All my children were born there -- the two that died, an' the two that's livin'. I was sick with a fever there."

She stepped to another door and opened it. It led into the small, ill-lighted pantry. "Here," said she, "is all the buttery I've got -- every place I've got for my dishes to set away my victuals in, an' to keep my milk-pans in. Father, I've been takin' care of the milk of six cows in this place, an' now you're goin' to build a new barn, an' keep more cows, an' give me more to do in it."

She threw open another door. A narrow crooked flight of stairs wound upward from it. "There, father!" said she; "I want you to look at the stairs that go up to them two unfinished chambers that are all the places our son an' daughter have had to sleep in all their lives. There ain't a prettier girl in town nor a more ladylike one than Nanny, an' that's the place she has to sleep in. It ain't so good as your horse's stall; it ain't so warm an' tight."

Sarah Penn went back and stood before her husband. "Now, father," said she, "I want to know if you think you're doin' right an' accordin' to what you profess. Here, when we was married, forty year ago, you promised me faithful that we should have a new house built in that lot over in the field before the year was out. "

"You said you had money enough, an' you wouldn't ask me to live in no such place as this. It is forty year now, an' you've been makin' more money, an' I've been savin' of it for you ever since, an' you 'ain't built no house yet."

"You've built sheds, an' cow-houses an' one new barn, an' now you're goin' to build another. Father, I want to know if you think it's right. You're lodgin' your dumb beasts better than you are your own flesh an' blood. I want to know if you think it's right."

"I 'ain't got nothin' to say."

"You can't say nothin' without ownin' it ain't right, father. An' there's another thing -- I ain't complained; I've got along forty year, an' I s'pose I should forty more, if it wa'n't for that -- if we don't have another house, Nanny she can't live with us after she's married. She'll have to go somewheres else to live away from us, an' it don't seem as if I could have it so, nowadays, father."

"She wa'n't ever strong. She's got considerable color, but there wa'n't never any backbone to her. I've always took the heft of everything off her, an' she ain't fit to keep house an' do everything herself. She'll be all worn out inside of a year. Think of her doin' all the washin' an' ironin' an' bakin' with them soft white hands an' arms, an' sweepin'! I can't have it so, nowadays, father."

Mrs. Penn's face was burning; her mild eyes gleamed. 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. Adoniram arose clumsily.

"Father, 'ain't you got nothin' to say?" said Mrs. Penn.

"I've got to go off after that load of gravel. I can't stan' here talkin' all day."

"Father, won't you think it over, an' have a house built there instead of a barn?"

"I 'ain't got nothin' to say."

### **Adoniram's Sunday suit**

Adoniram shuffled out. Mrs. Penn went into her bedroom. When she came out, her eyes were red. She had a roll of unbleached cotton cloth. She spread it out on the kitchen table, and began cutting out some shirts for her husband.

The men over in the field had a team to help them this afternoon; she could hear their halloos. She had a scanty pattern for the shirts; she had to plan and piece the sleeves.

Nanny came home with her embroidery, and sat down with her needle-work. She had taken down her curl-papers, and there was a soft roll of fair hair like an aureole over her forehead; her face was as delicately fine and clear as porcelain. Suddenly she looked up, and the tender red flamed all over her face and neck. "Mother," said she.

"What say?"

"I've been thinkin' -- I don't see how we're goin' to have any -- weddin' in this room. I'd be ashamed to have his folks come if we didn't have anybody else."

"Mebbe we can have some new paper before then; I can put it on. I guess you won't have no call to be ashamed of your belongin's."

"We might have the weddin' in the new barn," said Nanny, with gentle pettishness. "Why, mother, what makes you look so?"

Mrs. Penn had started, and was staring at her with a curious expression. She turned again to her work, and spread out a pattern carefully on the cloth. "Nothin'," said she.

Presently Adoniram clattered out of the yard in his two-wheeled dump cart, standing as proudly upright as a Roman charioteer. Mrs. Penn opened the door and stood there a minute looking out; the halloos of the men sounded louder.

It seemed to her all through the spring months that she heard nothing but the halloos and the noises of saws and hammers. The new barn grew fast. It was a fine edifice for this little village.

Men came on pleasant Sundays, in their meeting suits and clean shirt bosoms, and stood around it admiringly. Mrs. Penn did not speak of it, and Adoniram did not mention it to her, although sometimes, upon a return from inspecting it, he bore himself with injured dignity.

"It's a strange thing how your mother feels about the new barn," he said, confidentially, to Sammy one day.

Sammy only grunted after an odd fashion for a boy: he had learned it from his father.

The barn was all completed ready for use by the third week in July. Adoniram had planned to move his stock in on Wednesday; on Tuesday he received a letter which changed his plans. He came in with it early in the morning. "Sammy's been to the post-office," said he, "an' I've got a letter from Hiram." Hiram was Mrs. Penn's brother, who lived in Vermont.

"Well," said Mrs. Penn, "what does he say about the folks?"

"I guess they're all right. He says he thinks if I come up country right off there's a chance to buy jest the kind of a horse I want." He stared reflectively out of the window at the new barn.

Mrs. Penn was making pies. She went on clapping the rolling-pin into the crust, although she was very pale, and her heart beat loudly.

"I dunno' but what I'd better go," said Adoniram. "I hate to go off jest now, right in the midst of hayin', but the ten-acre lot's cut, an' I guess Rufus an' the others can git along without me three or four days. I can't get a horse round here to suit me, nohow, an' I've got to have another for all that wood-haulin' in the fall. I told Hiram to watch out, an' if he got wind of a good horse to let me know. I guess I'd better go."

"I'll get out your clean shirt an' collar," said Mrs. Penn, calmly.

She laid out Adoniram's Sunday suit and his clean clothes on the bed in the little bedroom. She got his shaving water and razor ready. At last she buttoned on his collar and fastened his black cravat.

Adoniram never wore his collar and cravat except on extra occasions. He held his head high, with a rasped dignity. When he was all ready, with his coat and hat brushed, and a lunch of pie and cheese in a paper bag, he hesitated on the threshold of the door.

He looked at his wife, and his manner was defiantly apologetic. "If them cows come to-day, Sammy can drive 'em into the new barn," said he; "an' when they bring the hay up, they can pitch it in there."

"Well," replied Mrs. Penn.

Adoniram set his shaven face ahead and started. When he had cleared the door-step, he turned and looked back with a kind of nervous solemnity. "I shall be back by Saturday if nothin' happens," said he.

"Do be careful, father," returned his wife.

### **Hay in the new barn**

She stood in the door with Nanny at her elbow and watched him out of sight. Her eyes had a strange, doubtful expression in them; her peaceful forehead was contracted. She went in, and about her baking again.

Nanny sat sewing. Her wedding day was drawing nearer, and she was getting pale and thin with her steady sewing. Her mother kept glancing at her.

"Have you got that pain in your side this mornin'?" she asked.

"A little."

Mrs. Penn's face, as she worked, changed, her perplexed forehead smoothed, her eyes were steady, her lips firmly set. She formed a maxim for herself, although incoherently with her unlettered thoughts.

"Unsolicited opportunities are the guideposts of the Lord to the new roads of life," she repeated in effect, and she made up her mind to her course of action.

"S'posin' I had wrote to Hiram," she muttered once, when she was in the pantry -- "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." Her voice rang out quite loud at the last.

"What you talkin' about, mother?" called Nanny.

"Nothin'."

Mrs. Penn hurried her baking; at eleven o'clock it was all done. The load of hay from the west field came slowly down the cart track, and drew up at the new barn. Mrs. Penn ran out. "Stop!" she screamed -- "stop!"

The men stopped and looked; Sammy appeared from the top of the load, and stared at his mother.

"Stop!" she cried out again. "Don't you put the hay in that barn; put it in the old one."

"Why, he said to put it in here," returned one of the haymakers, wonderingly. He was a young man, a neighbour's son, whom Adoniram hired by the year to help on the farm.

"Don't you put the hay in the new barn; there's room enough in the old one, ain't there?" said Mrs. Penn.

"Room enough," returned the hired man, in his thick, rustic tones. "Didn't need the new barn, nohow, far as room's concerned. Well, I s'pose he changed his mind." He took hold of the horses' bridles.

Mrs. Penn went back to the house. Soon the kitchen windows were darkened, and a fragrance like warm honey came into the room.

Nanny laid down her work. "I thought father wanted them to put the hay into the new barn?" she said, wonderingly.

"It's all right," replied her mother.

Sammy slid down from the load of hay and came in to see if dinner was ready.

"I ain't goin' to get a regular dinner to-day, as long as father's gone," said his mother. "I've let the fire go out. You can have some bread an' milk an' pie. I thought we could get along." She set out some bowls of milk, some bread, and a pie on the kitchen table.

"You'd better eat your dinner now," said she. "You might jest as well get through with it. I want you to help me afterward."

Nanny and Sammy stared at each other. There was something strange in their mother's manner. Mrs. Penn did not eat anything herself. She went into the pantry, and they heard her moving dishes while they ate.

Presently she came out with a pile of plates. She got the clothes-basket out of the shed, and packed them in it. Nanny and Sammy watched. She brought out cups and saucers, and put them in with the plates.

### **The Revolt of the Mother**

"What you goin' to do, mother?" inquired Nanny, in a timid voice. A sense of something unusual made her tremble, as if it were a ghost. Sammy rolled his eyes over his pie.

"You'll see what I'm goin' to do," replied Mrs. Penn. "If you're through, Nanny, I want you to go up stairs an' pack up your things; an' I want you, Sammy, to help me take down the bed in the bedroom."

"Oh, mother, what for?" gasped Nanny.

"You'll see."

During the next few hours a feat was performed by this simple, pious New England mother which was equal in its way to Wolfe's storming of the Heights of Abraham.

It took no more genius and audacity of bravery for Wolfe to cheer his wondering soldiers up those steep precipices, under the sleeping eyes of the enemy, than for Sarah Penn, at the head of her children, to move all her little household goods into the new barn while her husband was away.

Nanny and Sammy followed their mother's instructions without a murmur; indeed, they were overawed. There is a certain uncanny and superhuman quality about all such purely original undertakings as their mother's was to them. Nanny went back and forth with her light loads, and Sammy tugged with sober energy.

At five o'clock in the afternoon the little house in which the Penns had lived for forty years had emptied itself into the new barn.

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.

Those great box-stalls, with quilts hung before them, would make better bedrooms than the one she had occupied for forty years, and there was a tight carriage-room. The harness-room, with its chimney and shelves, would make a kitchen of her dreams.

The great middle space would make a parlor, by-and-by, fit for a palace. Up stairs there was as much room as down. With partitions and windows, what a house would there be! Sarah looked at the row of stanchions before the allotted space for cows, and reflected that she would have her front entry there.

At six o'clock the stove was up in the harness-room, the kettle was boiling, and the table set for tea. It looked almost as home-like as the abandoned house across the yard had ever done. The young hired man milked, and Sarah directed him calmly to bring the milk to the new barn.

### **Adoniram's and the mother**

He came gaping, dropping little blots of foam from the brimming pails on the grass. Before the next morning he had spread the story of Adoniram Penn's wife moving into the new barn all over the little village. Men assembled in the store and talked it over, women with shawls over their heads scuttled into each other's houses before their work was done.

Any deviation from the ordinary course of life in this quiet town was enough to stop all progress in it. Everybody paused to look at the staid, independent figure on the side track. There was a difference of opinion with regard to her. Some held her to be insane; some, of a lawless and rebellious spirit.

Friday the minister went to see her. It was in the forenoon, and she was at the barn door shelling peas for dinner. She looked up and returned his salutation with dignity, then she went on with her work. She did not invite him in. The saintly expression of her face remained fixed, but there was an angry flush over it.

The minister stood awkwardly before her and talked. She handled the peas as if they were bullets. At last she looked up, and her eyes showed the spirit that her meek front had covered for a lifetime.

"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."

"Well, of course if you have brought it to the Lord in prayer, and feel satisfied that you are doing right, Mrs. Penn," said the minister, helplessly. His thin gray-bearded face was pathetic. He was a sickly man; his youthful confidence had cooled; he 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.

"I think it's right jest as much as I think it was right for our forefathers to come over from the old country 'cause they didn't have what belonged to 'em," said Mrs. Penn. She arose. The barn threshold might have been Plymouth Rock from her bearing.

"I don't doubt you mean well, Mr. Hersey," said she, "but there are things people hadn't ought to interfere with. I've been a member of the church for over forty year. I've got my own mind an' my

own feet, an' I'm goin' to think my own thoughts an' go my own ways, an' nobody but the Lord is goin' to dictate to me unless I've a mind to have him. Won't you come in an' set down? How is Mis' Hersey?"

"She is well, I thank you," replied the minister. He added some more perplexed apologetic remarks; then he retreated.

He 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.

But, after all, although it was aside from his province, he wondered more how Adoniram Penn would deal with his wife than how the Lord would. Everybody shared the wonder.

When Adoniram's four new cows arrived, Sarah ordered three to be put in the old barn, the other in the house shed where the cooking-stove had stood. That added to the excitement. It was whispered that all four cows were domiciled in the house.

Toward sunset on Saturday, when Adoniram was expected home, there was a knot of men in the road near the new barn. The hired man had milked, but he still hung around the premises. Sarah Penn had supper all ready. There were brown-bread and baked beans and a custard pie; it was the supper that Adoniram loved on a Saturday night.

### **Adoniram shock and Sarah Penn's stand**

She had on a clean calico, and she bore herself imperturbably. Nanny and Sammy kept close at her heels. Their eyes were large, and Nanny was full of nervous tremors. Still there was to them more pleasant excitement than anything else. An inborn confidence in their mother over their father asserted itself.

Sammy looked out of the harness-room window. "There he is," he announced, in an awed whisper. He and Nanny peeped around the casing. Mrs. Penn kept on about her work. The children watched Adoniram leave the new horse standing in the drive while he went to the house door. It was fastened.

Then he went around to the shed. That door was seldom locked, even when the family was away. The thought how her father would be confronted by the cow flashed upon Nanny. There was a hysterical sob in her throat.

Adoniram emerged from the shed and stood looking about in a dazed fashion. His lips moved; he was saying something, but they could not hear what it was. The hired man was peeping around a corner of the old barn, but nobody saw him.

Adoniram took the new horse by the bridle and led him across the yard to the new barn. Nanny and Sammy slunk close to their mother. The barn doors rolled back, and there stood Adoniram, with the long mild face of the great Canadian farm horse looking over his shoulder.

Nanny kept behind her mother, but Sammy stepped suddenly forward, and stood in front of her.

Adoniram stared at the group. "What on airth you all down here for?" said he. "What's the matter over to the house?"

"We've come here to live, father," said Sammy. His shrill voice quavered out bravely.

"What" -- Adoniram sniffed -- "what is it smells like cookin'?" said he. He stepped forward and looked in the open door of the harness-room. Then he turned to his wife. His old bristling face was pale and frightened. "What on airth does this mean, mother?" he gasped.

### **Adoniram understands the mother's revolt**

"You come in here, father," said Sarah. She led the way into the harness-room and shut the door. "Now, father," said she, "you needn't be scared. 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. We've got jest as good a right here as new horses an' cows. The house wa'n't fit for us to live in any longer, an' I made up my mind I wa'n't goin' to stay there. I've done my duty by you forty year, an' I'm goin' to do it now; but I'm goin' to live here. You've got to put in some windows and partitions; an' you'll have to buy some furniture."

"Why, mother!" the old man gasped.

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

"Why, mother!"

Sammy went past the window, leading the new horse to the old barn. The old man saw him, and shook his head speechlessly. He tried to take off his coat, but his arms seemed to lack the power. His wife helped him.

She poured some water into the tin basin, and put in a piece of soap. She got the comb and brush, and smoothed his thin gray hair after he had washed. Then she put the beans, hot bread, and tea on the table. Sammy came in, and the family drew up. Adoniram sat looking dazedly at his plate, and they waited.

"Ain't you goin' to ask a blessin', father?" said Sarah.

And the old man bent his head and mumbled.

All through the meal he stopped eating at intervals, and stared furtively at his wife; but he ate well. The home food tasted good to him, and his old frame was too sturdily healthy to be affected by his mind.

But after supper he went out and sat down on the step of the smaller door at the right of the barn, through which he had meant his Jerseys to pass in stately file, but which Sarah designed for her front house door, and he leaned his head on his hands.

After the supper dishes were cleared away and the milk-pans washed, Sarah came out to him. The twilight was deepening. There was a clear green glow in the sky. Before them stretched the smooth level of field; in the distance was a cluster of hay-stacks like the huts of a village; the air was very cool and calm and sweet. The landscape might have been an ideal one of peace.

Sarah bent over and touched her husband on one of his thin, sinewy shoulders. "Father!"

The old man's shoulders heaved: he was weeping.

"Why, don't do so, father," said Sarah.

"I'll -- put up the -- partitions, an' -- everything you -- want, mother."

Sarah put her apron up to her face; she was overcome by her own triumph.

Adoniram was like a fortress whose walls had no active resistance, and went down the instant the right besieging tools were used. "Why, mother," he said, hoarsely, "I hadn't no idee you was so set on't as all this comes to."

### **Moral of the story**

The moral of "The Revolt of 'Mother'" is that opportunity must be seized when it comes along, even if that means taking advantage of unforeseen circumstances. A wasted opportunity missed due to indecision might never be available again.

### **Summary of the Revolt of "Mother"**

Sarah Penn, also known as "Mother," is the protagonist of the story. Her husband, Adoniram Penn, is called "Father" throughout the story. Adoniram had promised Sarah that he would build them a new house almost 40 years ago and he had never gotten to it.

On that day, men were digging in the farm to erect a structure and Mother wants to know what they are digging for. Her husband is very reluctant to answer the question until he says that they are making a new barn. When Sarah asks why, he simply says that he has nothing to say.

Sarah asks Sammy, her son, if he knew that Father was going to build a new barn, and Sammy says he has known for around three months. When she asks the young boy, a man in making, he replies that he has nothing to say.

Mother is not happy at the idea of a new barn since she has always wanted a house to be built and Father has never delivered. Their house is decrepit and was very old. The wallpapers had peeled off, the walls were crumbling, the rooms were small and the house was unlovable and not liveable.

The Mother calls Adoniram to talk to her. He says he is busy, but she insists that he come into the kitchen. Sarah tells her husband that the bedroom, pantry, and almost all the chambers are unfinished or damaged. Adoniram replies that he has nothing to say.

Nanny, the younger daughter is engaged to be married, has always been a weak girl and cannot live with them if they do not have another house. She requests Adoniram to reconsider, but he says that he needs to go back to work.

The new barn is almost complete during the spring and is a magnificent structure, admired by all the fellow farmers. The construction is finally completed in July and Adoniram is going to move his hay inside. He receives a letter from Sarah's brother in Vermont asking him to come immediately.

Father has to leave and so he instructs Mother to put the new cows in the barn and pitching hay there. He says he plans to return by Saturday.

Sarah decides to take advantage of her husband's sudden absence; she believes it is a sign from God. Sarah goes outside and stops the hay cart before it goes to the new barn. She tells the labourers to put the load in the old barn.

When Sammy comes home for dinner, Sarah begins packing. Over the next few hours, the family moves their possessions to the new barn. They are finished by five o'clock, and the table is set for tea.

The news spreads throughout town the news that Mrs. Penn and her family has moved into the new barn. People in town gossip, thinking she is either insane or has a "lawless and rebellious spirit".

The minister, Mr. Hersey, goes to see Mother to advise her against her revolt. She is very angry and tells him that she believes what she is doing is right. She also says that she prayed about it, so no one else should worry. Mr. Hersey is helpless and soon leaves.

Of the four new cows, three are moved into the old barn and the fourth cow is moved into the house-shed. On Saturday, Adoniram is expected back, and the whole village is waiting with bated breath wondering what he would do to the revolting mother.

He arrives and goes to the locked house and shed. He is confused and then heads to the new barn. Father asks why the family is in the barn and the Mother tells him that they live there.

Mother says that they will live in the barn, and that Father must put up windows and partitions and buy furniture for it so that it would become a house. Adoniram is dazed and is unable to speak a word. He sits on the step of their new front door and looks defeated and is crying. Father promises to make the house exactly as she wants.

### **Analysis of the Revolt of "Mother"**

The Revolt of "Mother" is considered by Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman as one of the earliest proponents of feminism and of her finest pieces of literature. This short story by American author Mary E. Wilkins Freeman was first published in 1890. The story is considered by many to be the earliest writings of a feminist in action; it showcases domestic rebellion by a female against a male, and also the repression of women in a patriarchal society.

### **Analysis: Relationship between Sarah and Adoniram**

- The Mother Sarah Penn and the Father Adoniram differ strongly in their personalities and also in the way that they present their replies.
- The Mother is strong and persists in conversations to arrive at a conclusion. She seeks answers to her questions and wants to be part of the decision making process.
- The Father shuts down all discussion with women as was more prevalent in the past. He does not feel the need to say anything to her as she is a woman and not a man. He always ends the conversation by saying that he has nothing to say.
- The analysis indicates the relationship between a man and a strong woman in the 1800s.

### **Analysis of the Children**

- The children's behaviour and the way they are raised also conform to the gender expectations of the 1800s in a male dominated society.
- The daughter Nanny, as was expected from daughters and women in the 1800s, should involve in and help in domestic work alongside the women of the house. The daughter Sarah is like her mother, very articulate in her thoughts and actions.
- The son, Sammy assists his father with the farm work and like his father is reluctant to communicate.
- Early on in the story, Sammy does not reveal to the mother for 3 months about the Father's plan to build a barn. This is again in line with patriarchal behaviour of the era where the son like the father, thinks his mother (a woman) is inferior and has no role in the decision making process of the family.

### **Analysis of the Mother: Women demanding rights**

- The mother is very assertive and strong for a woman in the 1800s. Women were expected to be slaves and subservient to the men of the house.
- By contrast, the Mother is strong willed and is not afraid of her husband, not because of lack of respect but because of her belief that she has rights and wants to be part of the decision making process.
- When the mother makes the decision to move into the house, she is aware of the risk that she is taking and still believes that what she is doing is right and that she must do it regardless of the risk.
- When the minister, Mr. Hersey, goes to advise the Mother against her revolt, she gets very angry and tells him that she believes what she is doing is right. She also says that she prayed about it, so no one else should worry which renders Mr. Hersey helpless.
- When the Father arrives and asks why the family is in the barn, the Mother resolutely tells him that they live there and that Father must put up windows and partitions and buy furniture for it so that it would become a house. In the end she gets what she wants.

### **Analysis of the Father: Patriarchy**

- The Father is a patriarchal figure from the 1800s wherein it is felt that they do not need to involve or say anything to the woman of the house.
- He is dismissive and does not honour his wife with a reply or a conversation as he feels he is superior because he is a man. He shows this rapidly by always ending the conversation by saying that he has nothing to say.
- When the father hears any logical statement made by the Mother, he simply dismisses her words and ends the conversation as it would mean admitting that his decision is wrong.
- In the end, the Father asks why the family is in the barn, the Mother resolutely tells him that they live there which breaks his spirit completely as he is forced to listen to logic and reason.
- He also indicates that has no idea about what to do when in face with a strong woman who has made a decision on her own which goes against his.
- Another interesting point to note here is that he agrees to make all the changes which the mother has requested, a decision which is quite contrary to the era. It was not uncommon for men to hit their wives even for the smallest of faults. This is indicated in the writer's words where all the people of the village gather around expecting the Father to discipline her. It also indicates his love for her and that he would not hurt her to make his point.

### **Questions and Answers - The Revolt of "Mother" – Set 1**

1. Who are the main characters in The Revolt of "Mother"?
  - The main characters in the story are Sarah Penn (the Mother), Adoniram Penn (Father) and their children Nanny and Sammy.
2. Who is the protagonist of the story The Revolt of "Mother"?
  - The protagonist of the story is the strong and independent woman Mother Sarah Penn.
3. Who is the antagonist of the story The Revolt of "Mother"?
  - While throughout the story it is shown that Men are shown to be dismissive to the idea of women having a voice, t/here is no true antagonist in the story.
4. Is The Revolt of "Mother" a true story?
  - The Revolt of "Mother" is not a true story and is a work of fiction. The settings are written to draw inspiration from the patriarchal society of North America back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Incidentally, this was when the story was written.
5. What happens in the end of The Revolt of "Mother"?

- Father arrives from his travel and asks why the family is in the barn. The Mother resolutely tells him that they live there and that Father must put up windows and partitions and buy furniture for it so that it would become a house. In the end she gets what she wants.

### **Questions and Answers - The Revolt of "Mother" – Set 2**

6. What is the main idea or theme behind The Revolt of "Mother"?
  - This main theme is the defiance or the reversal of traditional gender roles.
7. What happened in the start of story The Revolt of "Mother"?
  - In the start of the story, men were digging in the farm to erect a structure and Mother wants to know what they are digging for. Her husband is very reluctant to answer the question until he says that they are making a new barn. When Sarah asks why, he simply says that he has nothing to say.
8. What does Sammy say to the Mother when she asks him what the men were building in the farm?
  - Sarah asks Sammy, her son, if he knew that Father was going to build a new barn, and Sammy says he has known for around three months. When she asks the young boy, a man in making, he replies that he has nothing to say.
9. What is the moral of The Revolt of "Mother"?
  - The moral of "The Revolt of 'Mother'" is that opportunity must be seized when it comes along, even if that means taking advantage of unforeseen circumstances. A wasted opportunity missed due to indecision might never be available again.

### **Questions and Answers - The Revolt of "Mother" – Set 3**

10. What does the barn symbolize according to the Father Adoniram Penn?
  - For the hardworking Father, a new barn symbolizes prosperity, growth and economical success.
11. What does the barn symbolize in the revolt of mother according to the mother?
  - For the mother, it indicates that the animals are getting a better and new house than themselves. Their house is run down and inadequate.
12. What is the climax in the revolt of mother?

- The Father comes home and sees that that the Mother has moved the kids and all their possessions into the new barn. Father finally accepts that the new barn is now their house.

13. What is the irony in the revolt of mother?

- It is ironic that the animals are getting a better living arrangement than the humans, whose home is rundown and inadequate.

14. What is the conflict in the Revolt of mother?

- The story revolves around the mother's conflict of being a submissive wife which is what the society wants her to be or to be a strong independent woman

15. What is Adoniram favorite pie?

- There were brown-bread and baked beans and a custard pie; it was the supper that Adoniram loved on a Saturday night.

#### **Questions and Answers - The Revolt of "Mother" – Set 4**

16. When did the Revolt of Mother take place?

- It takes place in the late 1890s (when the author write the short story). Women were brought up to be subservient to men, a common practice during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

17. Who is Adoniram in the Revolt of Mother?

- Adoniram Penn also known as "Father" is Sarah Penn's husband. He has two children, a daughter Nanny and a son Sammy. He is a honest and hardworking, successful farmer. Adoniram spends great amount of time and money on the farm and livestock than he does on his family.

18. Who is Sarah Penn The Revolt of mother?

- Sarah Penn also known as the "Mother" is the protagonist in "The Revolt of 'Mother". Sarah has been a dutiful wife to her husband, Adoniram Penn, for 40 years. In the story, she rises up to the occasion and questions her husband's decision to build a new barn.

19. What had Adoniram promised Mrs Penn forty years before?

- Forty years ago, her husband Adoniram had promised Sarah that their new house should be built within the next few months where the barn was now coming up.

20. When does the Mother get the idea to move into the barn?

- Sarah Penn gets the idea of moving into the barn when her daughter says that she would rather get married in the barn than the parlour.