

Literary Criticism (II)

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A Decent House as a Decent Status for Women in Mary E.

Wilkins' "The Revolt of 'Mother'"

In "Shakespeare's Sister," Virginia Woolf writes, "for they [Shakespeare's parents] were substantial people who knew the conditions of life for a woman and loved their daughter." In the past, being a dutiful wife and mother was regarded as the primary aspiration of a woman. She had to obey her parents and husband. If she failed to fulfill the traditional role, she would bring shame on herself and her family. By presenting the unfair situation a gifted woman encounters, Woolf points out the importance of following one's own will for women. In "The Revolt of 'Mother,'" Mary E. Wilkins further illustrates this idea by presenting how a mother attains a decent status in a patriarchal society by striving for a decent house to live in.

Mr. and Mrs. Penn have been married for forty years. Mr. Penn promised Mrs. Penn to build a new house when they got married; nevertheless, Mr. Penn breaks his promise and plans to build a new barn. His wife does not know his decision until the day the construction takes place. Inspired by her daughter's approaching wedding, Mrs. Penn determines to dissuade her husband from building the new barn. Although her husband neglects her request, Mrs. Penn does not yield. At last, she takes opportunity of her husband's short leave to move into the new barn.

At first, Wilkins shows the influence of a wife's role on women. Mrs. Penn does not know the construction of the new barn until she asks her son. Being part of the family, she is neglected by her husband –she is not informed of the important decision. Actually, she is aware of her discontent with her husband; in other words, she consciously resists patriarchy. Nevertheless, the invisible chain of wife's duty still binds her. "However deep a resentment she might be forced to hold against her husband, she would never fail in sedulous attention to his wants" (Wilkins, 555). As a result, when her daughter shows disagreement with the idea of having a new barn, Mrs. Penn still tries to defend her husband from being complained about. "We're women-folks...[W]e 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" (554). Mrs. Penn uses *weather* to refer to men, which alludes to women's powerless status. We can do nothing to weather. This indicates that the notion of "obeying one's husband" is deeply ingrained in her life.

Furthermore, she also tries to persuade her daughter into being satisfied with their living conditions, that is, their lesser status in the family and in society. "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"

(554). She wants her daughter to be grateful, although Mrs. Penn herself longs for a decent house as well.

While doing the house chores faithfully, Mrs. Penn experiences an inner struggle seeing “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” (555). She thinks that she would accept her husband’s decision meekly. However, a dream that she has expected for forty years is broken by her husband, the one who made the promise. Besides, due to the new barn, their daughter’s wedding cannot be held in an adequate place. She feels indignant. Mrs. Penn’s desire to follow her own will is thus strengthened.

A conversation conducted by Mrs. Penn with her husband demonstrates her determination to strive for a new house. “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” (556). While Mrs. Penn expresses her opinions, all Mr. Penn says is “I ain’t got nothin’ to say” (556). During the conversation, Mr. Penn is active, whereas, Mrs. Penn remains passive. Although her husband’s indifference discourages her, her daughter’s suggestion inspires Mrs. Penn to consider the possibility of having the new barn as their new house. “‘We might have the wedding in the new barn,’ said Nanny, with gentle pettishness. ‘Why, mother,

what makes you look so?" (557) Mrs. Penn stares at her daughter with "a curious expression." She knows that she has to take actions.

Without her husband's permission, the mother decides to follow her own will by moving into the new barn. "'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" (558). Undoubtedly, Mrs. Penn's revolutionary movement, which represents a challenge to the patriarchal society, causes a great sensation in the little village. "There was a difference of opinion with regard to her. Some held her to be insane; some, of a lawless and rebellious spirit" (559). Obviously, the entrenched conception of a patriarchal society dominates the way people think about the mother's manner. Both male and female reproach her. Wilkin's use of such specific words as *insane, lawless, and rebellious spirit* correspond to Woolf's of *half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at* in "Shakespeare's Sister." This is the prevalent patriarchal bias against women. People refuse to view the incidence on a deeper level; they tend to neglect women's efforts. Nevertheless, Mrs. Penn is not disturbed for she believes what she did is right.

When the minister visits Mrs. Penn, she tells him, "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" (559). The one

that created human beings is the Lord, not men. By referring to the Lord, Mrs. Penn implies that men are not superior to women; therefore, men do not have the right to dominate women. The traditional role imposed upon women is thus just a means invented by men to manipulate women. Mrs. Penn feels resolute and confident because her dream is fulfilled by herself.

The father's concessions at the end of the story acknowledge the mother's endeavors for a decent status. "Adoniram [Mr. Penn] 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'" (560). After the conversation with his wife, he tells his son Sammy one day, "'It's a strange thing how your mother feels about the new barn" (557). He was convinced that the new barn would give his family a better life; however, after knowing his wife's determination, he comes to realize that his self-pride blinded him from knowing the real need of his family.

Unlike Woolf, adopting a tragic ending in "Shakespeare's Sister," Wilkins puts forward a positive prospect for women. By presenting the mother's striving for a new house, Wilkins shows that women need a decent status in their families and society. She exposes the defects of patriarchy first. Men can break their promises at will and women are not supposed to utter their objections. No matter how much women devote

to their families, they are neglected. Women are not treated equal. Therefore, women should not be afraid of speaking their mind and taking actions. The mother's victory over the father at the end of the story confronts the misconception that a woman who follows her will is "insane, lawless, and rebellious." Mrs. Penn's decision proves to be right. She feels resolute and confident. Both Woolf and Wilkins point out that women deserve the right to pursue what they long for. And by presenting the mother's triumph, Wilkins reinforces the meaning of a decent status for women and the importance for them to follow their will.

Works Cited

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