In Something for Nothing, the faerie keeps telling McMullen, “You can’t get something for nothing.” McMullen thinks that the faerie is talking about himself. How does the faerie manage to teach McMullen the lesson from the story’s title?

The faerie manages to teach McMullen the lesson from the story’s title “Something for Nothing.” At the beginning of the story, McMullen was “a lazy lout.” He didn’t work hard and lounged around all day. He decides to go the easy way to fortune and riches: pleasing the faerie folk by giving them tarts.

However, he falls to eating the tarts himself. When the faeries grants him a wish for eating the tart, he says that he can’t get “something for nothing.” This means that because McMullen didn’t work hard to make the tarts, or did “nothing,” he can’t get “something” out of it. This is repeated all the time, throughout the story.

For example, when McMullen asks for a wife by stealing some tarts from the miller and giving them to the faerie, he again wants something for nothing. He didn’t put any work into making the tarts, so why should he get a wife? The faerie twists the meanings of the words to teach McMullen a lesson.

Finally, McMullen realizes that, as he can’t find any more tarts, he will have to work hard in Farmer Duffy’s field to earn the tarts. Here, he is actually doing something, and can get something out of it.

With the money, he didn’t even have to buy any tarts, as he realizes that he doesn’t need the helping hand of an external force to build his own future. The helping hand (the faerie) may be needed to guide him on the right path, but it can’t do everything for him. He has to work hard to do “something,” not doing “nothing,” to get “something” out of it.

By the end of the story, McMullen has turned into a hard worker, and realizes that the field of barley is actually the field of gold he wants, as he needs to work hard on his farm to succeed. The faerie didn’t do anything except make him realize that you can’t get “something for nothing.”