

# The Interpretation of Barn Burning from the Feminist Perspective

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**Abstract.** In a well-known short story *Barn Burning* of William Faulkner, we can plainly see his attitude towards the female characters. The story, setting on the American civil war, mainly demonstrates class conflicts, racial conflicts, moral conflicts and the father's vengeance viewed through the third-person perspective of a young boy Sarty. In the story, William Faulkner laid less stress on the description of the female characters, like Sarty's mother Lennie and his sisters, which seems to be unimportant and redundant. Nevertheless, the arrangement of those female characters is elaborate and profound. Through analyzing those female characters' submissiveness from the feminist perspective, it will not only do us a favor to better understand the story, but also show us a vivid picture of women's living conditions in American South at that time. At the same time, with regard to William Faulkner's life and writing background, this paper will further investigate the traditional social values, life styles in that era, as well as the author's historical consciousness to these female images with suppressed humanity and distorted soul.

## 1. Introduction

As "the only American novelist who can be compared with James Joyce, Conrad, Adeline Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust and Thomas Mann" [1], Faulkner presents us with a lot of attractive stories with his unique narrative view and concern for the fate of women. In his short novel *Barn Burning*, it tells the life experience of Abner Snoops, a white sharecropper in the Southern United States after the Civil War, and how the boy Sarty's growth in the process of rebellion against his father Abner. Although the female characters in the novel are not the main characters with few descriptions, they can definitely reflect the feminist thoughts of that era in America and Faulkner's view and attitude towards women, which is worthy of analyzing. Therefore, this paper mainly analyzes these female images in *Bar Burning*, and women's status domestically and socially in the United States with further analysis to its triggers in three perspectives, naming the suppression of women in the patriarchal society, the social role of women as the Other, and the failure of women in constructing the Other. At the same time, according to William Faulkner's life and writing background, this paper will further investigate the traditional social values, life styles in that era, as well as the author's historical consciousness to these female images with suppressed humanity and distorted soul.

## 2. The suppression of women in the patriarchal society

In traditional patriarchal society, men were masters of society with rationality and power to impose "rational" on women. "Male represented social criteria and superior speech role, while female's images and voices are always masked and in the predicament of being narrated, peeped and dominated." [2] In Faulkner's *Bar Burning*, the society of American South is true of it, which is a plant-oriented society with strict puritanism in religion. Women were treated as the private property of the men, bounded with myriad of male-ordained rules. Therefore, they can just be submissive to male.

In the story, Lennie's submissiveness towards her husband Abner can be plainly seen through her behaviors and words. At the very beginning, Lennie Snoop's first impression left to us readers was in a carriage: "his mother and sister .....sitting on and among the sorry residue of the dozen and more moving..... the clock inlaid with mother-of-pearl, which would not run, stopped at some

fourteen minutes past two o'clock of a dead and forgotten day and time, which had been his mother's dowry." [3] In this description, broken furniture symbolized Lennie's imperfect and unhappy life; The stopping clock implies Lennie's incapability of controlling her own destiny, but to attach herself to Abner, like an object attach to its owner. In the story, her husband Abner had burned down their landowner's stables again, and they had to move to another place again. Lennie was at a loss what to do, but just crying in the wagon for her uncontrol over her fate, for her husband's cruelty and ruthlessness.

Moreover, after Sarty and Abner came back from the court, she wanted to get some water to wash Sarty's wound when she saw the wound was bleeding, but she wasn't allowed to. Even though she cared about her son, she had to obey Abner's order to stay in the wagon. When they arrived at their new residence, she worried Abner would condemn Sarty for his behaviors in the court, so she said "Abner". But what she got is her husband's "harsh level stare beneath the shaggy, graying, irascible brow". Later, she meant to help her daughter with the rug, and got another refusal by Abner. The author used both dialogues and descriptions to reveal Lennie's characters in the story. She is diligent, kind but also greatly submissive to her husband. In the later part of the story, after she failed to stop Abner ruining the rug and burning the barn, Lennie obeyed Abner's order "Lennie. Take hold of him. I want to see you do it".

In the story, although there were not so many descriptions of Lennie, the image of Lennie's submissiveness to her husband is clear and vivid. She had no idea of her own, but replaced by her husband, her children and the trifles in a meaningless and dead life. Lennie's tragedy just attributed to the impact of the deep-rooted patriarchal system in the patriarchal society.

### 3. The social role of women as the Other

"The Other" is the opposite concept to "Self", which refers to all individuals and things outside the Self. "The formation of the Other takes place in the dualistic opposition, in which a person uses force, language and ideology to practice hegemony over the other. While the other is often marginalized and subordinate due to various historical and realistic reasons, gradually losing their right to speak and indulging to a sense of inferiority." [4] In the traditional patriarchal society, they regarded women as men's vassal, constructed women as the other, marginalized them and deprived their speaking rights.

Foucault believes that discourse is the key to power relations. Language or discourse is not only a tool for people to communicate, but also an effective way of controlling people's thoughts. In the view of feminists, the mainstream discourse is patriarchal, while women have never been given the equal rights to fully use language and express themselves. They, women, are either forced to be silent or just express their ideas in euphemistic ways. Nevertheless, even if they were able to express their thoughts in words and languages, these words were saturated with patriarchal consciousness for the long-term identity as the Other. In *Bar Burning*, Lennie has few words and dialogues, but spends most of her time around her family for cooking, carrying luggage, and obeying his husband's orders to do whatever he wants. "'Abner!' his mother said. His father paused and looked back--the harsh level stare beneath the shaggy, graying, irascible brows." [3] It is clear that at that time, Lennie tried to stop Abner, but she only called him by name and did not continue under her husband's stern gaze. It can be seen from Lennie's "aphasia" that language has become one of the tools for male power to control women.

Thus, in the patriarchal society, women are forced by men to practice the role of "the Other", who are unable to form their own identity and express themselves as the Self. And in the story *Bar Burning*, female characters were just practiced as the Other in the society, not only submissive to man, but also to kinship. Lizzie is unmarried and lodges in her sister's home, and always submissive to Abner. When she sees her sister fighting with Abner, she doesn't dare to help her sister or even denounce Abner. When Abner commands "Hold him", she makes a startled movement, which plainly reveals that she is afraid of Abner. Considering her condition in the family, we can understand that she has no choice but to obey Abner since he is the breadwinner. More importantly, Lizzie's submissiveness

is not only to Abner, or rather to the kinship she depends on with Sarty's family, in which Abner is the center and pillar. In this family, Lizzie has represented as the other to have no right to speak and even protect her sister.

#### **4. The failure of women in constructing the Other**

The awakening of female consciousness is first reflected in their desire to get rid of the bondage and oppression of the moral norms of the patriarchal society, and to realize the existence of self-value instead of the unconscious obedience. In the story, Lennie finally resisted towards Abner. When Abner was asked to clean up the soiled carpet, Lennie realized something was erroneous and pleaded, "Abner. Abner, please don't. Please, Abner." [3] Though Abner still brushed it off, it was the first time Lennie spoke out against Abner. Meanwhile, after discovering Abner's attempt to burn the barn, "the mother tugged at his arm until he shifted the lamp to the other hand." [3] Lennie began against Abner through concrete actions. Ultimately, when Sarty wants to report Abner's burning to the landowner, Lennie let him go although she verbally promised Abner to stop Sarty. Apparently, in Lennie's mind, she refused to be blindly obedient to her husband, but eager to get independent rights. Despite her struggles, Lennie was still saturated with patriarchal ideas. She spoke out against Abner to wash the carpet out, and just kept silent when being ignored by him. Also, to prevent Abner from burning the bar, she did not fight still, but showed hopeless despair. Lennie and other female characters in *Bar Burning* are not the present of all women in American society. They are just representatives that are suppressed by the patriarchal society, representatives of being marginalized as the Other. Nevertheless, although women attempted to construct "Self" and get rid of "the Other", the impact of patriarchy had been deeply carved into their mind, making their actions bounded with being "the other" in patriarchal society.

In Faulkner's works, he also portrays many other female characters who are fighting against the patriarchal society. For example, in Faulkner's well-known novel *A Rose for Emily*, Emily cut off her long hair after her father dies. "Long hair" in the southern traditional social concept, is the carrier of "being elegant". When Emily cut off her long hair, she shows her rebellion against traditional moral concepts, against the labeling of women in patriarchal society, as well as against the imprisonment of patriarchy. Emily was determined to free herself from these restraints of being the Other and pursue her Self and her own happiness. However, her resistance is extreme, unsuccessful and ineffective, which is same as Lennie. Emily's life is ended in a tragedy. She neither own the love she always longed for, nor get the social status and power of discourse she longed for. But turned herself from a gentle and virtuous lady into a psychopathic demon. The ineffectiveness of resistance to Emily was precisely rooted in the ravaging and poisoning of the social environment at that time, which is similar to Lennie.

#### **5. William Faulkner's feminist perspective and its origins**

Faulkner's works have a strong complex of the American South, and those women characters in his novels are set under such social background of the Slavery in the South, the American Civil War and patriarchy, the iconic features of the American Southern society, have also become important factors influencing Faulkner's female characters.

First of all, the racial and class conflicts caused by slavery had a profound impact on Faulkner's feminist perspective. Influenced by chivalry and racism rooted in slavery, white women in the South were seen as sacred symbols and objects to be protected. Racists believe that white people are superior to black people in every way. For instance, in his work *Absalom! Absalom!* Thad abandoned his wife and his son after knowing that she is of black descent. Secondly, the American Civil War brought great social changes to the American southern society. Facing the ruins of the war, southerners began to cherish the memory for the glory of the past to relieve themselves. Women who represented the glory of the old South, like Emily in his work *A Rose for Emily*, were subjected to greater control and even have to endure with the mental torture by those southerners. At the same time, the patriarchy in

the American South also pays great spiritual oppression on women. Under the rule of patriarchy, women lost their independent status and discourse power, becoming the appendages of men. However, the concept of so-called *Southern lady* in southern culture, namely a series of moral and social norms that white women are required to follow, further restricts the development and independence of women. In addition, the south of the United States at that time, had strict hierarchical concepts on gender, race, class and other issues, which made women in that era in the imprisoned and oppressed position. In that era, women had no sense of Self, no independent identity and no voice of their own. Everything was described, interpreted and decided by others. That's the main reason for William Faulkner's feminist perspective and Lennie's obedience to his husband.

## 6. Conclusion

As a famous short story written by William Faulkner, *Barn Burning* shows not only the conflict between blood and morality but also women's submissiveness to the men, kinship and society. Some of them tried to struggle to win an applicable position, but mostly their struggles were infirm without defined aims. Psychologically, their submissiveness is determined by their women's feminine character vulnerabilities to a large degree. More importantly, they can't unfetter themselves from the social limitations of the times. Meanwhile, Faulkner's conception of women was rooted in the social background of the South Slavery, the American Civil War and patriarchy, which has greatly paid an impact on his feminist perspective. From Faulkner's point of view to women, we can clearly see his sympathy for the fate of women, which exudes the brilliance of humanitarianism. William Faulkner's novel world created by hierarchy, patriarchal thought and social background is mixed with unique aesthetic experience, revealing daily reflection and stunned struggle. Faulkner constructs such novel world to condense his unique inspiration, showing the spiritual secret, and coruscating the unique charm of himself.

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