

Original Paper

From an Ordinary Snopes to a Social Being—An Interpretation of “Barn Burning” from the Perspective of Ethical Literary

Criticism

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Abstract

“Barn Burning” is one of the most well-known short stories written by William Faulkner. The story tells about the struggle and final choice of a boy, Sarty, when he faced his father’s tyrannous way to vent his anger and cope with conflicts. This paper uses ethical literary criticism to interpret the growth of Sarty from an ordinary Snopes to a social being from four aspects — ethical environment, ethical identity, ethical choice, and ethical consciousness, hoping that readers can read the text historically and critically, understand the dilemma Sarty faced, discover his greatness in choosing reason instead of being engulfed by animal nature, as well as gain some ethical enlightenments.

Keywords

William Faulkner, “Barn Burning”, Ethical Literary Criticism, ethical situation, ethical identity, ethical choice, ethical consciousness

1. Introduction

William Faulkner, one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century, was born in New Albany, Mississippi, on September 25, 1897. His great-grandfather was definitely a local legend: a Colonel in the Civil War, a lawyer, a writer, a politician, and a railroad builder. And his father was the business manager of the University of Mississippi. As the oldest son, Faulkner later became the head of the family. Due to blood relations or moral commitment, he took family responsibility seriously, endeavoring to take care of his family members. His personal life was difficult. Suffering from an unhappy marriage, he was addicted to alcohol. Meanwhile, he traveled a lot throughout his whole life to receive an education, deal with publishers, and work in Hollywood. In combining the use of symbolism with the stream-of-consciousness technique, he created a new approach to fiction writing.

In 1949, William Faulkner won the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Faulkner completed his first volume of verse *The Marble Faun*, which was published in 1924, at the University of Mississippi. He wrote novels set in his imaginative world—Yoknapatawpha County. The works include *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932), and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). *Collected Stories* was published in 1950. This collection of short stories consists of six sections, each followed by several stories. And “Barn Burning” (1938) is the first story in the first section, The Country.

“Barn Burning” told the story of a poor white family who lived in the south of America after the civil war. Sarty Snopes was forced to commit perjury and deeply tortured for hiding the truth that his father Abner, a white sharecropper, burned the neighbor’s barn, still expecting Abner to learn from his mistakes. However, Abner refused to do that and contrived to burn another barn. After going through fierce psychological conflicts, Sarty chose to disclose his father’s scheme, becoming more mature. Sarty Snopes grew from a boy who could only passively accept his father’s immoral deed to a brave adolescent who was able to question its justification and have his own insight into justice, morality, and order. He had been struggling between family and social ethics in the entire process. Eventually, he broke the conventions of the kinship bond, embraced “truths of the heart”, and successfully transformed from an immature boy into a sensible social being.

As a research method to read and analyze literary works from the perspective of ethics, ethical literary criticism provides people with profound instructional significance, which is “the essential attribute and first function of literature” (Nie, “Fundamentals and Terms” 17). It does not make judgments on literary works at today’s moral stance, instead, it emphasizes the magnitude of interpreting them in the historically moral context as well as illuminating people’s motives and social phenomenon by taking political, economic, and cultural background into account. This paper will use this method to interpret the text “Barn Burning” from four major aspects: ethical environment, ethical identity, ethical choice, and ethical consciousness.

2. Ethical Literary Analysis

2.1 Ethical Environment

Ethical environment refers to “the historical space of literary works” (Nie, *Introduction* 256), or “the surrounding climate of ideas about how to live” (Blackburn 1). Exploring the ethical environment of “Barn Burning” is significant in that readers can “go back to the specific ethical context” and avoid “abstract or subjective moral judgments” (Nie, *Introduction* 256). This short story takes place in the south of America after the Civil War; it is a truthful portrait of sharecroppers’ life in the plantation economy, and the prevailing patriarchal traditions under the influence of Puritanism.

Firstly, the phenomenon and influence of the plantation economy were ubiquitous. Generally speaking, after the Civil War, the social structure of the Old South was quite fluid, the old and the new interwoven. One thing unchanged was that the great plantation owners enjoyed a high status, while

many slaves and the landless poor white were stuck in economic and cultural plight. Although the planter family of the Old South and the black play a crucial role in Faulkner's works, the characters who dominate his fiction are white people, the majority of whom suffered from poverty and lived on farms, neither the descendants of the old ruling class nor the slaves (Brooks 10). The same with "Barn Burning". Sarty's family was just one of them, who led a needy and unsteady life. After the case got dismissed, Sarty walked to their family members with his father. Faulkner enumerated all the residue of dozens of moving — "the battered stove, the broken beds and chairs, the clock inlaid with mother-of-pearl, which would not run, stopped at some fourteen minutes past the two o'clock of a dead and forgotten day and time, which had been his mother's dowry" (Faulkner 6). All of the fine things froze in the past together with the delicate clock with a frozen time: maybe their ancestors lived a relatively affluent life, yet, they were now underprivileged. Beyond that, all the vehicles that the Snopes family had was a wagon, indicating their daily life was shaky and unstable.

Cleanth Brooks once introduced the living conditions of sharecroppers in "The Plain People: Yeoman Farmers, Sharecroppers, and White Trash": sharecroppers were extremely poor so that they had to labor on the farms for landowners (10). After the repeal of slavery, they were not superior to the black any longer, instead, they were at the bottom of the social ladder to some extent. This can also be proved in the text — when the black old man told Abner to wipe his feet, he felt a huge gap in his inner psyche and got enraged. The plantation economy can illuminate the Snopes family quandary, and partly explains the motives of Abner burning barns.

Secondly, with the popularity of Calvinism, patriarchy is quite prevalent in the Old South. Religion was a formative sway for those living in the south of America. As Allen Tate famously put it, southern writers and novelists were men saddled with an acute awareness of "the past in the present" (292). William Faulkner also said, "It's just there," when elaborating on why religion appeared so frequently in his novels and short stories (Glynn and Blotner 41). As the geographical setting and cultural archetype of Yoknapatawpha County, Lafayette County was saturated with Puritan traditions. The Old South is more like a cultural and spiritual being because of its special history and pervasive Puritan elements than a geographical or physical being (Fan 62).

In the 20th century, America was governed by Puritanism. *The Bible* was the holy regulation that dictated people's lives in almost every aspect. And it aggravated patriarchal manipulation as well. As one of the teachings of Puritanism, patriarchy believed that children should listen to their parents' words unconditionally. Father, the head of the family, had the absolute authority. In the south, the God that people had faith in was almighty and he would give physical and severe penalty to all the guilty cities or people (Cash, WJ 135), like raining down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah in the Book of Genesis (New International Version Bible, 2011, Gen. 19.24). And the father was exactly the Lord of the entire family, who could punish whoever disobeyed his rules. In addition, the misfortune of women seemed to be predestined. A woman was just "made by the man's rib taken out of man" (Bible Genesis 2 Line 21). Thus, starting from creation, women were submissive to men. In "Barn Burning", Abner

intended to control his son's thoughts and behaviors through preaching and violence all the time, and he was possessive of other family members including his wife and daughters as well. Thus, the religious environment partly justifies the distorted characters of Abner — violent, cruel, dehumanizing, and tyrannous.

2.2 Ethical Identity

From the perspective of ethical literary criticism, the occurrence of all ethical problems is linked with an ethical identity which has numerous categories: identities based on blood relationships, ethical relationships, moral norms, community and social relationships as well as work ethics, etc. (Nie, *Introduction* 263).

In the text, Sarty mainly had two ethical identities, the son in the family and a new member of society, and the dilemma he faced was caused by his two ethical identities.

As the son of the Snopes family, Sarty valued his lineage a lot. The “family” was the basic unit of the society, and the concept of “family” was deeply rooted in the southern cultural traditions, of course, in the boy's mind as well. After fighting with the half-grown boys who made a mockery of him, Sarty refused to wipe away the dried blood, indicating his struggle to define himself in blood ties. Although his father, brother, and sisters didn't treat him well, he still bore it and shouldered his responsibility for the family before he couldn't tolerate his father committing mistakes again and left home. Besides, even if Abner was cruel and tyrannous, he also accepted Sarty's identity. When the Snopes camped at that night, Abner said, “You were fixing to tell them... You got to learn. You got to learn to stick to your own blood or you ain't going to have any blood to stick to you” (Faulkner 8). It was a verbal threat against Sarty indeed by reminding him of his blood. Apart from that, it could be inferred that Abner's concealed motive to master Sarty's affection was always lurking. Faulkner's portrayal of a vengeful and despotic father was vivid and lively. And the word “learn” signified that Abner also deemed the father-and-son relationship as a teacher-and-pupil relationship, in which he played the role of a teacher and made his son a puppet manipulated by him. Additionally, when Sarty enraged his father by saying “at least you sent a nigger before” (Faulkner 21), Abner didn't strike Sarty, and he refused to tie Sarty up to the bedpost, instead, Sarty was lifted up, “his toes just touching the floor (Faulkner 22)”. Furthermore, Abner asked Sarty's mother instead of his aunt to take hold of him. At this time, it seemed that Abner treated his boy as an infant who was unable to walk himself, simply cross with his father, and desperately needed his mother's comfort. Abner tried to confine his son to the mother's embrace at the risk of failure. This rare action revealed tender feelings inside Abner. So “the son of the Snopes family” is actually a two-way ethical identity, acknowledged by both the son and father, able to justify why Sarty chose to stay silent in front of the Justice.

The other ethical identity was a new member of society, which was given after Sarty eventually left his home and headed for the unknown future. He failed to persuade Abner to give up the scheme, so he made the decision to tell De Spain about it. However, to some extent, he contributed to the inadvertent slaughter of his father. Inflicted by the trauma, he did not go home. The end of the short story revealed

the future of the boy. “He was a little stiff, but walking would cure that too as it would the cold, and soon there would be the sun” (Faulkner 25). The night would pass and the light would come. The image of “the cold” and “the sun” corresponded to “the woeful past” and “promising future” respectively: the trauma and miserable past would fade away, and he would finally embrace a bright future; he was enormously certain and also optimistic about that. He walked toward the “dark woods”, the area of self-exploration, and he was on his way to a mature adult. He insisted on the virtues, made the right decision in his mind, and integrated into the orderly society, trying to get rid of the decayed traditions of the Old South. In this way, he withdrew from the limited frame of the family and became a social being who stuck to order and rules at the turn of the century.

2.3 Ethical Choice

“In modern society, human being is still a sphinx beast combined by rationality and animal nature” (Nie, “Ethical Choice” 20). There are two types of ethical choices — free choice and moral choice: the former is “the external manifestation of instinct and the result of animal factors”, and the latter is “the external manifestation of reason and the result of human factors” (Nie, “Ethical Choice” 20). Basically, Sarty made two ethical choices in the text and encountered an ethical dilemma in this process.

At the beginning of the text, Sarty committed perjury to hide the truth that his father was the culprit of burning the neighbor’s barn. Human instinct dominates the sentiment, which is expressed in free will or irrational will. Even adults with a mature mind cannot totally get rid of animal nature, that is to go after benefits and avoid harm, let alone a boy. The free choice he made was understandable.

One reason was that he treasured blood ties due to instinct. As a young boy, though he was maltreated, he still yearned for a complete family. Without any one of the family members, the family would become broken, doomed to be sorrowful and miserable, and Sarty definitely would not be willing to see that. He unconsciously tended to believe that his father was a brave soldier in the war and a noble man in daily life. As a result, it was human nature that made him tell lies to maintain a complete family. Another reason was that he was influenced by his father’s constant instillation of ideas and the lingering religious teaching that children had to obey their fathers’ rules committedly. In some way, he merely dared not to sign his father’s death warrant, since the price for telling the truth was very like to be severely beaten.

Nevertheless, he was aware of the injustice of telling lies and fell into an ethical dilemma. He began to think about preventing his father’s wrongdoings, sticking to virtues, and preserving virtues.

When Abner was determined to burn De Spain’s barn, Sarty made up his mind to stop his father and tell De Spain his father’s intention. This was his moral choice, through fierce psychological conflicts, after weighing the rational elements and animal factors. The choice he made this time was also justifiable. At the time when the old traditions and new moral codes are alternating, he became wiser and found something much more essential and meaningful — honesty, justice, and social order — compared with the calling of the blood. Hans Skei commented that “the development of Sarty takes him from being an ordinary Snopes, submissive to ‘the old fierce pull of blood’...into a society whose laws and

regulations the boy intuitively seems to have not only accepted but come to trust". (60) As society was moving forward, people would place more trust in social institutions and lead a steady life. At the same time, people would become more sensible because of fairness and equality, and people would be supervised and strained by institutions and discipline as well. Sarty lived at the turn of the century, he believed that he would see a better future of the south, and he was willing to make efforts for that — persist in virtues and receive discipline. Consequently, he gained the freedom of will and got the power to control his own fate.

2.4 Ethical Consciousness

When making ethical choices, ethical consciousness as well as the distinction between the good and the evil come into being; due to the emergence of ethical consciousness, human beings fancy getting out of chaos and crave ethical order. (Nie, *Introduction* 2 &13) In "Barn Burning", Sarty also experienced the process — from ethical chaos to the awakening of ethical consciousness.

When choosing to hide the truth in front of the Justice, Sarty was in ethical chaos. At that time, he was at the stage of passive acceptance, and his animal nature outweighed his rationality. He passively accepted the idea that he had to stick to his blood by any means, even if his father's immoral deeds violated the law. Sarty believed that his father had "wolflike independence and courage" (Faulkner 7), and could convince people that his actions were righteous. Although Faulkner only wrote about two barn burnings, readers could infer that Abner did this far more than twice. In the eyes of Sarty, fires were "his father's habit and custom always" (Faulkner 7). Fire gave Abner the power and strength to deconstruct whatever he thought to be improper or unfair, and Abner used it as a simple and brutal way to solve all troubles and conflicts.

Sarty knew that his father was a "recidivist", and he also wished to stop his father from making mistakes again and again, so he began to question his father and rejected to follow his father's instructions. He was in the dilemma between blood ties and the moral code. Sarty's hesitation in the process could be seen when he silently disobeyed Abner's twice-spoken command, "Go back in the wagon" (Faulkner 6). He became soberer and soberer, and watched his father "pivot on the good leg" and saw "the stiff foot drag round the arc of the turning", "leaving a final long and fading smear" (Faulkner 12). He observed his father's ugly temperament — resentment and jealousy, and gradually realized that he was tempted to flee. The story didn't reach a climatic confrontation until Sarty cried to his father, "Ain't you going to even send a nigger?", which could be seen as an open act of rebellion. Then, he ran away from home to tell De Spain about his father's scheme. "The ability to distinguish the good from the evil" is the most vital feature of ethical consciousness. He gained insight into the social order and justice and made up his mind to prioritize them over kinship. Rationality overcame the "Sphinx factor"; his ethical consciousness was fully awakened. Finally, he went on his life journey on his own.

As a matter of fact, the outcome was not untraceable. In other words, Sarty's final decision was foreseeable. He was always looking forward to a steady life. Sitting at the back of the crowded store, he

saw “the solid, squat, dynamic shapes of tin cans” (Faulkner 3), and the smell of cheese and meat was lingering. He felt a sense of despair and grief in that he didn’t have the chance to taste the food with a good smell. In addition, when he saw De Spain’s house, he felt it was a courthouse beyond his father’s reach, full of peace and dignity. In front of the white house, he temporarily forgot the fear of his father. He didn’t want to see the deconstruction of beautiful things by Abner. Sarty was tired of a turbulent life and he intended to seek his new life, which required him to leave his home in the first place.

3. Conclusion

In “Barn Burning”, William Faulkner vividly depicted the growth of Sarty’s mind: he shifted from an ordinary member of the Snopes to a reasonable citizen of society. The greatness of Sarty was that he surmounted the weakness of animal nature and made efforts to construct society in pursuit of justice and order. Ethical literary criticism provides readers with a scientific and critical approach to analyzing social phenomena and characters from ethics, thus digging out instructional value. The transformation of Sarty can be explored mainly based on four aspects, and Faulkner manifested the sparkling rationality that contributed to a better society and a kind of self-realization only possible in a well-organized community, which was universally meaningful and thought-provoking. His work contains deep concerns about harmony between men and men as well as men and society, and it resonates with people, instructional for the exploration and construction of contemporary ethics.

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