

An analysis of Binary Oppositions in Barn Burning

Yuyun Chang

Fujian Normal University, Fuzhou 350007, Fujian, China

Abstract: This paper focuses on the comprehension and analysis of the masterpiece Barn Burning of William Faulkner. Based on close reading of the text, it explores the binary oppositions demonstrated in this work from three diverse aspects: family affection and morality, poor white and rich white, father and son. The purpose of this paper is to elaborate on the antagonistic relationship between various oppositions, so that readers can have a deeper understanding of the historical environment.

Keywords: Barn Burning; Family affection; Morality; Binary opposition

1. Introduction

William Faulkner was an American novelist. He wrote 19 novels and more than 100 short stories, being regarded by western literary circles as “a modern classic writer”. In 1949, Faulkner won the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Barn Burning is an American short story written by William Faulkner in 1938. The story happened in a white sharecropper family in the Southern United States. The father Abner used to settle conflicts with others by burning their barn. His youngest son, Sartoris, was forced to give false evidence to his father for the sake of family affection. However, the boy feels the immorality of his father's actions, and he is torn between being faithful to the family line and upholding justice. Sartoris left home to seek a new life.

2. Literature review

According to my research, Barn Burning by far has been studied mainly from three perspectives:

2.1 Perspectives on the tone and behavior of the characters

Plenty of the researches related to this work are about words and deeds of the characters, which describe how these reflect the protagonist's psychology and personality, such as An analysis of the ironic tone of Faulkner's Barn Burning by textual close reading (Qin Jiangli, 2013) and An analysis of the speech and act patterns of father and son in Barn Burning (Zhao Congyi, 2019).

2.2 Perspectives on the relationship between father and son

Part of the studies focus on the parent-child relationship, such as Multi-dimensional Interpretation of the relationship between father and son in Yoknapatawfa's Hereditary novel Barn Burning (Liu bo, 2012) and On the Relationship between Father and Son in Barn Burning (Xu rui, 2015).

2.3 Perspectives on the characterization of heroes

The rest of the studies are primarily about the analysis of protagonists' image, such as Revenge originates from social Reality -- Analysis of the father image in Barn Burning by Faulkner (Zhang Fangling, 2012) and The interpretation of the father image in Barn burning (Li yan, 2013).

So far there are some studies that provide reference for us. However, there is little comprehensive reflection on the main contradictions in it. This paper will summarize previous studies and further analyze the binary oppositions of this novel, which can help readers quickly grasp the main idea of the text, so as to reveal the influence of the historical background.

3. Contradictions of the novel

3.1 Contradiction between family affection and morality

Sartoris' inner struggle between family affection and morality has always been a key point in this novel. After the defeat of the Civil War, the traditional moral norms in the Southern United States had gradually disintegrated. Sartoris is the representative of the

new value system of the South. He was infused with the traditional family concept by his father, but still stood for justice and fairness. From the perspective of blood relationship, the innate ethical identity of Sartoris requires him to be loyal to the family affection; from the perspective of social relations, membership in society requires him to abide by social norms. Sartoris's need to confront both identities simultaneously is the root cause of his dilemma.

At the beginning of the article, his father Abner was accused. With frantic grief and despair, Sartoris didn't tell the truth. It is his loyalty to his family that led him to lie.

However, loyalty and filial piety are hard to achieve both. Sartoris's lie exempted his father from prosecution, but he was badly tortured by doing this. Hence, when his father attempted to take revenge on the Major, he exposed his father's crime. This led to his father being shot. Although this met his expectation for justice, it also ruined his chances of having a sound family. At last, Sartoris left his home, running away from both the guilt that had been plaguing him and the yoke of family affection.

3.2 Contradiction between poor white and rich white

The gap between rich and poor has long been a source of social conflict. Snopes' family was a classic example of post-war poor white. After the land was seized by the rich white, the brutal nature of Abner was fully exposed, and gradually formed a hatred of the rich. The following examples are some of the conflicts depicted in this novel.

For starters, in the presence of rich white, Abner was even more resentful and didn't mind if his shoes stain his master's blankets. When he was asked to leave the Major's house, he wiped his shoes on the doorstep. This behavior shows his provocation and disdain for the luxurious life of rich white people. He looked back at the house, "Pretty and white, ain't it?" he said. "That's sweat. Nigger sweat. Maybe it ain't white enough yet to suit him. Maybe he wants to mix some white sweat with it." These words showed the father's dissatisfaction with the rich people's exploitation, paving the way for his later vindictive action.

Moreover, compensation. From Abner's perspective, society was just so unfair. Most of his harvest was taken away by the landlord. Moreover, just stepping on the Major's rug would cause him to compensate for 20 bushels of corn, which was too expensive for a poor white like him. The poverty of the poor is beyond the imagination of the rich, while the rich indeed don't need to pay for the misdeeds of the poor. Abner used extreme behavior to resist the oppression of the rich whites to the poor whites. The darkness of his heart also reflected the irreconcilable social contradictions in the old South.

3.3 Contradiction between father and son

In this novel, the relationship between Abner and Sartoris is not based on love and care, but full of estrangement and exclusion.

If Abner is the author's critique of the old Southern system, then Sartoris is a profound and rational discussion of the new system. Abner is a traditional southern father, who is tyrannical, violent, selfish and willing to violate morality for profits. He turned all conflicts into violence, requiring Sartoris to be absolutely loyal to his bloodline. Sartoris, however, was more in favor of justice. Though he did not directly oppose his father at first, he already had the idea of rebellion in his subconscious.

When Abner arrived to work at his new employer--Major De Spain's house, Sartoris felt a sense of joy in the face of the beautiful mansion. He truly envied the stable and decent life of the rich white, and did not want to be his father's accomplice in violating social norms. The rift between father and son grew. So when his father had another dispute with his employer and decided to commit arson again, Sartoris reported his father's crime to his employer. At that time, father-son conflict reached its peak.

The Snopes family's experience also reflects the fact that family relations were strained by traditional values, while the rebellion of Sartoris against his family was a necessary stage of social development at that time.

4. Conclusion

This paper makes a comprehensive analysis of *Barn Burning*, clarifies the historical environment of the novel and argues the different binary oppositions lying in it to deepen reader's understanding of the novel. Through a series of oppositions, Faulkner reveals the evil of the representatives of the old South like his father Abner, and expresses his confidence in the future of the South through Sartoris' pursuit of justice.

References:

- [1] Li Xinbai. "Consanguinity" or "Morality"? -- On the Growth of Sartoris Snopes in *Barn Burning* [J]. English Square, 2019, (6): 7-8.
- [2] On the Naturalism in William Faulkner's Novels: 1929-1936[D]. Tang Liwei. Wuhan University 2005.