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Scared Sexless: Divergence from Faulkner's Archetypal Women in "Barn Burning"

William Faulkner's "Barn Burning" gives us the world of a post-reconstruction sharecropping family through the eyes of a young boy torn between his sense of justice and an inherited temper. One aspect of this short story that is often glossed over both by and in the critical conversation, is the role that women play in the short story. According to Joseph Blotner, Faulkner's portrayal of women follows certain and often sexualized archetypes, or archetypes that play into sexual politics, namely, the "admirable little girl, the slim and virginal young woman, the voluptuous young woman, the matron, and the venerable matriarch" (p.9). In this short story, however, the five women portrayed or mentioned are almost entirely sexless. Instead, they are described as chattel, and are characterized as useless or ineffectual. Faulkner portrays these women so differently than in his other stories (even in his later books in the Snopes trilogy), drawing attention to their role within the story. This representation is both regurgitating a different archetype of the poor white trash woman and reinforces the role of women within a traditional society, and by

First of all, there are Sarty's twin sisters, who deviate so drastically from either the voluptuous or virginal young woman of Faulkner's other writings. Voluptuous and virginal both have strong sexual denotations and connote a visual appeal, while Sarty's twin sisters are decidedly sexless, and are often described in animalistic terms: "bovine," "hog[ging] it,"

“lethargic,” and having “heavy thighs.” They are also unnamed throughout the piece, are almost entirely indifferentiable, and don’t perform any actions that drive the plot forward (while they do attempt to wash the rug, Abner comes in after and makes the truly offending attempts). For what purpose, then, does Faulkner include them in the chemistry of this family? Ulf Kirchdorfer claims that they serve as a source of classic wry Faulkner humor, and it is “a sad humor: the sisters’ ribbons and weight [are] impotent to attract much male attention.” This sterilization is certainly not subtle, especially when they are “sitting with spread heavy thighs in the two chairs” (Faulkner p.16). There is nothing titillating in this description, which could have (almost too) easily been sexualized. However, instead of freeing or separating the twins from sexuality, the lack thereof reinforces the voluptuous and virginal archetypes. By eliminating any hint of grace or shapeliness or attractiveness and then poking fun at the “impotent” twins, Faulkner is reinforcing and perpetuating that these girls *should* contain some sexuality.

If sexually charged archetypes are not in the cards for the women in “Barn Burning,” they fit into a different archetype: that of a “white trash” woman. Poor white women in this time fit into a very specific social role: that of the less powerful half of a class generally disliked by all. In other words, poor whites were often looked down upon by both affluent whites and non-whites, and as women--who have always been the less empowered of the genders in the standard binary--this group gets the short end of an already short stick. The Snopes women embody this, but in a more complicated way: like a figure on a stage lit by two spotlights, they are illuminated by two separate time periods within the one story. These two sources of light come from the different perspectives of Sarty and Faulkner.

This short story carries a duality in the text due to the different foci of Sarty and Faulkner that is important to note in a discussion of historical and social context. "Barn Burning" was written by a 42-year-old white man in 1939, while the story's narrator itself is limited to the mind of an adolescent white boy in 1895 or so. The two social frames, and especially the roles and perceptions of women for both of these time periods must be considered because they both had dramatic impact on the lives and social statuses of poor white women. Faulkner was living in a time of newfound freedoms for women, while Sarty was living in a time where women were still possessions

Faulkner published "Barn Burning" in 1939, the year that WWII began. Alicia Bones discusses the "southern grotesque tradition," from this period, or the trend found in the writings of Faulkner and his contemporaries who wrote characters as physically divergent in a variety of ways as a tool for driving plot and theme "by deliberately creating ambiguity or subverting hitherto unchallenged assumptions" (You vi). Within this tradition, Faulkner often wrote grotesquely fat and sexually powerful women next to small men who would, as Bones explains, "grappl[e] valiantly with these women and the characteristics they represent in order to regain [their] lost masculinity." However, the twins, in their subjection to Abner, do not seem to give him any power. They aren't particularly responsive, and their sloth-like qualities don't seem to grant any sort of victory for Abner or anyone.

In fact, the women in Abner's life seem entirely under his control from the start: required

to follow along and pay the cost for any choices that the man of the house makes. When the story starts in the makeshift courtroom, the fate pronounced on Abner, to “leave this country and don’t come back to it” (p.2), is also the fate of those attached to him; the women are also required to uproot. Mrs. Snopes evidently has a sense for what will lead to social retribution, and wants to keep her husband, and by extension her family, out of trouble. Her only efforts to stop her husband in picking fights however, are unspoken, or expressed only in a timid “Abner?” (pp. 6, 9, 15). We see his almost pleasure in this control he has over her when he commands her to restrain Sarty, saying “I want to see you do it” (p.16). But this relationship is static--there is no change in the dynamic between husband and wife, much as there is no change in Abner’s relationship with his daughters. This does not mean that Faulkner is not engaging in any gender politics however. Once again he is reinforcing the role of women and defining their power to his own end.

Faulkner applies this contemporary tradition of the grotesque to map the culture of the post-reconstruction South. Bones goes on to say that “the Southern gothic tradition uses the body as a site of both self and culture—a place where culture is mapped onto subjectivity and the pain of this mapping becomes visible.” The twins are indeed grotesque (if not abnormally sized they are abnormally shaped), but not in the pattern that Faulkner typically uses, as outlined by Blotner. In writing about the past, Faulkner is not mapping out the perhaps more powerful women in the 1930s, who were experiencing newfound freedom after a decade of suffrage and post-war opportunities in the workforce, but instead something more oppressed and oppressive from the past.

The Snopes family are sharecroppers, who are owned body and soul by those who own the land they work for, a class often labeled as “white trash.” Kirstine Taylor explains white trash by first defining whiteness as “willfully innocent” (the adolescence of Scarlett O’Hara would be an excellent example of this), whereas white trash signifies a loss of that innocence. They are “marked as trash, as something that must be discarded, expelled, and disposed of in order for whiteness to achieve and maintain social dominance” (qtd in Hester). We see this in “Barn Burning” when Sarty, viewing the impressive deSpain plantation mansion, hears his father say ““Pretty and white, ain’t it? 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”” (p.8). This quote shows Abner’s (and by instruction, Sarty’s) disillusionment with whiteness and its innocence. While physically white-skinned themselves, they are not afforded the privileges or elevation of the class. This distinction between white supremacy and the excluded poor whites is fundamental and, as Hester points out, “many negative white trash stereotypes appeared in Depression-era popular culture” when economic and racial upheaval challenged them. Faulkner would have been aware of the plays that Taylor goes on to analyze from the 1920s and 30s, and the archetypal and stereotypical white trash woman who would become the Snopes women in this story.

The Snopeses have lost their “white innocence,” meaning that they are no longer blind to the harmful social structures that were once a black (or just non-white) people’s problem. To combat their claim to whiteness, claims of “racial transgressions” were often made towards white trash. In fact, the Georgia Medical Association called for the state to “take stock of this rubbish [and] sterilize all individuals who are not physically, mentally or emotionally capable of normal offspring”” (qtd. in Taylor). In metaphorically sterilizing the twins, Faulkner is reaffirming their

trash-ness. They are useless to the Snopes family, and not having any power (sexual or otherwise) to be conquered, they are useless to society and a threat to its structures.

This is the backdrop, with the women serving more as scenery and context, that Abner's struggle is cast against. Abner Snopes is a disadvantaged man with a chip on his shoulder, and while he does his best to stick it to the man, he projects those same oppressions he feels on the women in his life. In this way, Abner's "I want to see you do it." is no different than Major deSpain's command to Abner & Co. to wash the rug (p.9). The women serve to help the audience identify the time period, as many of Faulkner's contemporary readers were seeped in that dislike and distrust for white trash, and would have been familiar with the fixture that was the poor white woman.

Faulkner has established this will-less, sexless, and useless woman who is more like an animal than a human being, but in the same way that we see him taking all sexuality from the twins to emphasize that they should have sexual appeal, he is taking all power from these women to emphasize that they should have power. "Barn Burning" could easily have been a nostalgic tale of a romantic childhood of down-to-earth labour, but by telling a story that avoids nostalgia there is room to read these women as, through negation, a claim that the suffrage and rights and power that women were afforded in the 1930s was justified and should be valued.

This is important because if, as Faulkner seems to see it, women were granted these rights as a sort of reparation for the injustices of the past (as demonstrated by the lack of power for and steamrolling of the women in "Barn Burning") then he still is not seeing these women as people, deserving rights of their own due to their innate humanity, but as archetypes, gaining power via political victory. This empowered woman can now play the grotesque roles that

Faulkner is more used to writing, and that power can be exchanged in transactions, allowing his tiny men to use them as rungs in a ladder to masculinity.

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