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SEEKING JUSTICE FOR POOR SOUTHERN WHITES: THE ETHICAL WRITING IN “BARN BURNING”

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Abstract: *As the classic work of William Faulkner, “Barn Burning” focuses on the ethical crisis and choice of poor Southern American whites after the slave emancipation in the late 1890s. Taking the poor whites’ ethical crisis as the perspective, this thesis delves into the ethical dilemma, quest, and ethical choice represented by the Snopes family in the shift of power dynamic after the Civil War. Through Snopes’ path for seeking justice for the poor whites, Faulkner appeals for self-reliance and self-reflection within human beings, illustrating the potential for individuals to break free from the constraints of external dilemmas and secure justice and ethical value for all.*

Key words: *“Barn Burning”, ethical writing, justice, poor Southern American whites, William Faulkner.*

1. Introduction

As one of the most important writers in America, William Faulkner is a representative of Southern American literature in the 20th century and was the Nobel Prize laureate in 1949. Known for his intricate narratives and penetrating examinations of the human condition, Faulkner presents a searing critique of the social structures perpetuating inequality and marginalisation in the post-Civil War South. “Barn Burning” (1939) is a famous work of him, which unveils the consequences of living in a society rife with prejudice and injustice through the Snopes family’s experience. While the story takes place in the late 1890s, Faulkner’s portrayal of the aftermath of the Civil War and the Reconstruction Era reflects the sombre reality that followed the initial euphoria of slave liberation. At that time, Southern elites seek to maintain a system that keeps black people in a position just slightly above slavery through practices such as sharecropping, extra-legal violence like lynchings, and the enactment of discriminatory laws. Meanwhile, poor white individuals also face ongoing struggles to compete with former slaves, losing their white superiority as well as their belief in social justice. The faded superiority paradoxically elicited anxiety among poor whites about “whiteness’s fragility order to build a supremacist coalition” (Greene 2022:415-416). Faulkner’s portrayal highlights the complexities of social dynamics and the deep-rooted prejudices that permeate society, inviting readers to critically examine the nuanced experiences and perspectives of the poor Southern whites’ ethical adversities.

“Barn Burning” has garnered significant research attention from Chinese and international scholars, who have explored the narrative from diverse analytical perspectives such as reader-oriented analysis, economics and psychoanalysis. Scholars abroad have

primarily focused on reader-oriented and theme perspectives. Joseph Comprone (1982:1-21) analyses the story through reader-response theory, highlighting how the short story enables readers to question and revise their hypotheses while actively engaged in the act of reading. Charles Mitchell (1965:185-189), for instance, examines Sarty's inner conflict of blood and justice, emphasising the challenges faced by a ten-year-old in choosing between family loyalty and personal morality. Among the Chinese scholars, studies have predominantly concentrated on identity construction and psychoanalysis. Feng Bin and Qiu Yunlong (2006:75-77) explore the readjustment of postbellum productive relations in the American South, revealing how Abner's acts of arson serve as a release for his dissatisfaction with changing productive relations. Pi Aihong (2010:103-105) employs Freudian psychoanalysis to interpret Sarty's psychological journey of growth, asserting that the conflict between Sarty and Snopes represents a broader conflict between humanism and naturalism. Despite the extensive research domestically and internationally, no systematic analysis exists to explore the ethical writing of seeking justice for the poor Southern whites. This article examines William Faulkner's "Barn Burning" through ethical writing, and states that the Snopes family's path for justice serves as a powerful portrayal of the postbellum American South's ethical dilemma, ethical quest and ethical choice in the shift of power dynamic after the Civil War.

2. Ethical Writing in "Barn Burning"

2.1 Ethical Dilemma: Losing Righteousness in Alienation and Marginalisation

In "Barn Burning", William Faulkner transports the reader to a setting that predates the time of 1890s, in which he himself witnessed the poor Southern whites' ethical crisis of losing righteousness, and their endurance of stereotypes, prejudice, and systemic injustices that have plagued the alienated and marginalised group throughout history and perpetuated their exclusion from the fabric of society. Through the Snopes family, Faulkner provides a poignant representation of the ethical crisis and disillusionment faced by impoverished whites.

2.1.1. Alienation: Discrimination against Poor Southern Whites' Socioeconomic Status

Prior to the Civil War, extreme poverty prevailed among non-slaveholding whites in the American South, and the poor whites bear the brunt of derogatory labels such as "squatters", "clay-eaters", and "white trash" (Isenberg 2016:4-20). During the 1850s, these labels gain widespread popularity, emphasising the perceived physical and moral deficiencies of this social group. As a result, poor Southern whites are alienated from mainstream society as being viewed as inbred, lumped together with albinos, and stigmatised as abnormal and subhuman. Thus, they are caught in an ethical crisis of social alienation and discrimination, which mute their requirement for justice and equality. The ethical plight of the poor whites contributed economically to the monopolisation of the soil by the slave economy, restricting opportunities for non-slaveholding white men. According to George Weston (1970:46-47), the South is destined to sink "deeper and more hopelessly into barbarism with every succeeding generation".

In the short story, the Snopes family serves as a representative of the Southern "white trash", whose image is "patched and faded overalls" (Faulkner 1939:88) and a family relocated several times as a social parasite. In the face of the discrimination and hostility of the society, the father, Abner Snopes, could only resort to unlawful means of survival, such as stealing

horses, for which he sustains a “musket ball” (Faulkner 1939:88) shot in his heel by a Confederate provost’s man. The poor whites’ socioeconomic inferiority was further exacerbated through social discrimination in the mid-nineteenth century, which portrayed them as lazy vagrants, a diseased breed, and the degenerate spawn of a “notorious race” featured with a degenerate class, prone to crime, immorality, and ignorance (Isenberg 2016:161-164). In the story, the Justice asks the Snopes family to “leave this country and don’t come back to it” (Faulkner 1939:87), which shows the social exclusion and ethical alienation of the poor whites. These discrimination and alienation resonate with the depiction of Abner in the story, characterised as “a shape black, flat, and bloodless as though cut from tin in the iron folds of the frockcoat” (Faulkner 1939:88), “wolf-like independence” (Faulkner 1939:89), “latent ravening ferocity” (Faulkner 1939:89) and “ferocious conviction in the rightness of his own actions” (Faulkner 1939:89), which not only indicates Abner’s stubbornness and his tenacious personality but further highlights the poor whites’ counterproductive attitude towards social injustice and their wildness to secure survival in a harsh and hostile society.

The social discrimination and hostile ideologies against poor Southern whites’ socioeconomic status reveal deep-rooted prejudices and enduring stereotypes, which alienate them from mainstream society and deprive them of ethical justice as human beings. The persistent legacy of class-based discrimination and the derogatory labelling of “white trash” continue to exacerbate the poor whites’ ethical dilemma, forming a vicious circle as they could only equip themselves with crime and rebellion to sustain survival.

2.1.2. Marginalisation: Exclusion of Poor Southern Whites in Shift of Racial Dynamics

After the abolition of slavery, the landscape of racial dynamics in the South began to shift. According to John Duvall (2006:106-209), the Great Migration (1915-1970) has a profound impact on the social dynamics of the region, particularly affecting poor whites who move to different places to undertake job vacancies. Duvall (2006:106-209) argues that the migration blurs the boundaries between African American slaves and poor whites, resulting in their shared experiences of social marginalisation. As a consequence, the poor whites become “the socially abject” (Duvall 2006:110).

In the story, the Snopes’s marginalised social standing is depicted in the context of shifting racial dynamics in the postbellum South, where many poor whites felt little loyalty to either the Confederacy or the Union, instead “treating the war with indifference” (Forret 2006:226). Their indifference resulted from two factors: first, in the postbellum South, they have to survive in the margins of plantation society where poor whites, yeomen, and slaves often live in close proximity (Wetherington 2007:276-277). The sharing of physical space and labour tasks breaks their sense of white superiority. Second, they must compete with the previous slaves for resources and shows “no clear ideological commitment to the other’s plight as a class” (Forret 2006:226). The fierce resource struggle between them and the previous black slaves further confirms their social marginalisation and deepens their hatred towards their black competitors and the Confederacy or the Union. The Snopes family, as poor white sharecroppers, find themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy and constantly face inferiority and exclusion in the local community. Sarty and Abner encounter a black American steward at the Major’s mansion. In stark contrast to Abner’s ragged appearance, the black servant, described as an “old man with neat grizzled hair, stands as a barrier at the door” (Faulkner 1939:91),

asserting his authority and demanding respect in front of the Snopes. What's more, the black man's discourse manner of addressing Snopes as "Wipe yo foots [your feet], white man", and his image on a "fine sorrel mare" (Faulkner 1939:92), a higher and stronger dominate position, as well as his command of asking the family to wash the rug, all signify a change in the power dynamics and reflects the increasing assertiveness of African Americans in American social hierarchy, further accentuating the vulnerability and marginalisation experienced by poor whites.

However, Abner expresses his resentment by diminishing the black Americans: "Get out of my way, nigger" (Faulkner 1939:91), and "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" (Faulkner 1939:90). Abner's remark reflects his frustration and a perceived threat to his own protruding racial superiority. His words reveal a deep-seated fear and insecurity that arise from the diminishing boundaries chasm between these marginalised communities for the poor whites. In addition, the dialogue highlights the growing dissatisfaction towards the society of the poor whites and their long-existing sense of superiority over the blacks.

As a result, Abner's misunderstanding of power dynamics shifts blinds him to the righteous way of asserting justice and rights. Facing external hostility and being unable to challenge the oppressive systems that perpetuate inequality, Abner could only direct his anger towards society and other innocent public. In this sense, it has formed a vicious cycle in which the underprivileged group are mired in marginalisation and exclusion from mainstream society.

The double forces of alienation and marginalization have thrust the Snopes family into a vortex of social injustice, where their quest for righteousness is continually thwarted by the fabric of the society that surrounds them. Through the detailed depiction of Abner's ethical dilemma, the author also gives a cautionary voice, warning against the perpetuation of oppression and the dismantled systems that deny equal access to law and justice for the poor white citizens. Being overwhelmed by external hostility and inequality, the Snopes attempts to reset the ethical structure and regain a sense of social equality in their nomadic and defiant existence, which is not merely a response to their socioeconomic alienation, but a profound critique of a justice system that seems to exclude them at every turn.

2.2. Ethical Quest: Challenging Justice in Vagabond and Rebellious Lifestyle

After the long endurance of alienation and marginalisation, the Snopes family steps on a track of violent subversion of the established justice system. They live a nomadic life and refuse to be subject to any community, and conduct rebellious, even anti-social behaviors such as stealing, anti-rich, and arson to reset justice for themselves and regain superiority as whites. Through their unwavering ethical quest in the corrupted society, the huge economic divergence in American society and the astonishing wealth accumulation of the minority upper class are disclosed.

2.2.1. Rebellious: Denying the Undermined Social Standing and Subverting Justice

Following the Civil War, poor Southern whites continued to experience a profound alienation in terms of law and justice, a theme that is prominently depicted in the short story "Barn Burning" to disclose the social and ethical justice problem. For example, Abner Snopes's disillusionment toward social justice is amplified when the first court hearing unjustly sentences

his family to leave the region, despite the justice of the failure to procure sufficient evidence to prove his guilt. These experiences ultimately result from a socially exclusionary and alienating system of justice, and could only be challenged and subverted through violent rebellion and revolution, since their descending societal position is born out of brutal war plunder and compulsion, which attempts to restructure their thinking, beliefs, feelings about self-worth (Thompson 2019:25-59).

Thus, the poor whites, represented by the Snopes family, begin to assert their rights and strive for equality through social rebellion and violence, such as barn burning, stealing and violent revenge. For example, when Abner first comes to the Major De Spain's house, he deliberately steps in mud and then stamps on the Major's rug with self-confirmation and the reason of revenge, as the Major lives in extravagant life with "a hundred dollars worth of rug" (Faulkner 1939:94), and hires a black steward who is even higher in his working position. Later on, he refuses to wash the rug and ruins it with resentment and violence, which is highly symbolic that the anti-rich sentiment resulted from the substantial economic divergence in American society and the astonishing wealth accumulation of the minority upper class. The Snopes and the De Spain families live near each other and yet occupy entirely separate worlds, signifying the entrenched inequalities of Southern life following the Civil War. In this case, passivity and defiance are, in many ways, the only choices available to the poor. Abner's rebellious attitude also lies in his "burning" action, as he tries to burn both Mr. Harris's barn and Major De Spain's house. Resorting to fire, a destructive power, to ruin every existing system and reset the new, is precisely the wish of the poor whites to reallocate material wealth and reestablish their social status.

However, it is important to note that the paper does not encourage the anti-social behaviours of the Snopes family and their disastrous infringement towards others but provides a broader understanding based on the social background and their choice-less life struggle to use violence as a way to reject inferiority and inequality.

2.2.2. Wandering: Escaping the Hostile Community and Resetting Justice

In "Barn Burning", Snopes's ethical quest for poor whites' justice lies in their unwillingness of assimilating into the local justice system, accentuating their disconnection from mainstream society and their challenging attitude towards the judicial system. As a result, their rootlessness and lack of belonging highlight the profound vagabond experienced by poor whites who struggle to escape from the hostile community and relocate themselves to reset justice.

In the story, the family does not even know "where they are going" (Faulkner 1939:88), underscoring the struggling quest for justice for the poor whites to find a sense of belonging and community. The description of the Abner's work to "make a crop on another farm" (Faulkner 1939:88) further alludes to the aimless wandering of the poor whites to make a living, and the exploitative sharecropping system prevalent in the South during that time. The sentence "None of them ever did or ever asked" (Faulkner 1939:88) suggests a resigned acceptance of their transient lifestyle, indicating that their lack of belonging has become ingrained and normalised, and their rejection of being classified as white workers in any farm and village. The mention of "a house of sorts waiting for them" (Faulkner 1939:88) conveys the temporary nature of their settlements, reinforcing the notion that they never truly establish a permanent

home, underscoring the profound sense of dislocation and uprootedness experienced by the Snopes family. The following quotation is an excerpt from the text describing the frequent migratory experiences from the eyes of Sarty:

To-morrow they were there. In the early afternoon the wagon stopped before a paintless two-room house identical almost with the dozen others it had stopped before even in the boy's ten years, and again, as on the other dozen occasions. (Faulkner 1939:88).

The excerpt above depicts a scene after the judicial eviction sentence, where the Snopes family arrives at another destitute shed. The dilapidated "two-room house" serves as a poignant symbol of the Snopes family's extreme poverty, further emphasising their lack of social resources and inescapable destiny as "white trash" in their living community. In contrast to the act of painting or decorating one's house, which typically signifies the establishment of a personal touch and a sense of ownership, the Snopes family's "paintless" (Faulkner 1939:90) house signifies their inability to establish a lasting sense of belonging. What's more, the repetition of wandering and relocating underscores the family's recurring cycle of ethical quest and dissatisfaction with the social justice system, which underscores their ongoing struggle to find a shelter with justice for their own.

The Snopes' defiance of the established social order and their quest for a redefinition of justice is a testament to their struggle against the oppressive forces that have marginalised them. Their nomadic existence, fraught with violence and the constant challenge to the local justice system, is not merely a rejection of their social standing, but a profound subversion of the principles that have led to their alienation and marginalisation. Under the influence of Snopes' rebellious actions and attitudes, the new generation in Snopes family, represented by Sarty, must navigate the ethical landscape left in the wake of the family's tumultuous history. He faces with the challenge of either continuing the cycle of violence and defiance or seeking a new path that may lead to a more just and equitable society.

2.3. Ethical Choice: Resuming Justice in the Spiritual Growth of the New Generation

After the continuous quest for justice in rebellious antisocial behaviours and the wandering lifestyle of the first generation, the new generation of poor Southern whites, represented by Sarty in the Snopes family, ultimately achieves spiritual growth and maturity in understanding the operation of social justice and establishes an unbiased perception of ethic value. In Sarty's choice of shelter in justice rather than enmity towards the external community, Faulkner proposes an outlet for the poor whites to achieve justice.

2.3.1. Awakening of Justice: The Aspiration for Peace and Order

In the story, the young protagonist, Sarty, grapples with a profound inner conflict surrounding the concepts of "blood" and justice (Zhang 2023:56-62), torn between his loyalty to his family and his own sense of right and wrong. Nevertheless, during the growth process with his father, he gradually questions his father's disastrous actions and waves his plan to carve out a new future for himself. In his father Abner's warning, Sarty should learn to "stick to [his] own blood or [he] ain't going to have any blood to stick to [him]" (Faulkner 1939:88), which suggests that the enduring legacy of blood creates a sense of obligation for Sarty, compelling

him to prioritise loyalty to his father over justice or truth, even if it means resorting to lies in the court. However, as a young boy who witnesses his father's continuous immorality to challenge the established social ethic, he is bewildered if their distressed dislocation and alienation is the only choice for resetting justice of their own.

As Sarty and his family arrive at De Spain's mansion, "he saw the house for the first time and at that instant he forgot his father and the terror and despair both, and even when he remembered his father again (who had not stopped) the terror and despair did not return" (Faulkner 1939:90). The sight of the mansion allows Sarty to momentarily forget his father's shadow and the associated dread, suggesting a psychological relief from the moral turmoil he endures. And even the image of his father comes back to his mind, the "terror and despair did not return" reveals that the mansion's representation of a just and peaceful life has left a lasting impact on Sarty, sparking a desire for a different existence and a moral awakening towards seeking justice and order in his own life. He begins to astonish that "it's big as a court-house he thought quietly, with a surge of peace and joy whose reason he could not have thought into words, being too young for that: They are safe from him. People whose lives are a part of this peace and dignity are beyond his touch." (Faulkner 1939:90). In his admiration towards the house, the aspiration for "peace and joy" (Faulkner 1939:90) first arises in the young heart and seeds the wakening of justice in the young mind. A stark contrast is presented between their previous life in a poor and harsh environment and the grandeur of the mansion before them. He is struck by its sheer size and elegance, and the magnitude of the house evokes a sense of awe and wonder within him. The mansion serves as a powerful symbol of peace and order, as well as an outlet of ethical choice—they could also live in a life characterised by stability, order, and a sense of moral integrity as long as the poor whites could erase their enmity and hostility. Sarty experiences a surge of peace and joy, although he may not fully comprehend the reasons behind these emotions. In the presence of De Spain's mansion, Sarty begins to understand that there is an alternative to the cycle of destruction and enmity that has defined his family's existence.

However, the inner admiration is blocked by harsh reality as he never owns such kind of peace and joy before, and "this peace and dignity are beyond his touch" (Faulkner 1939:90) as the family always show their hostility towards the external community, especially towards the rich. The mansion represents a concentration of wealth and power, and Sarty's perception is shaped by his desire to find a contrasting reality to the destructive environment he has grown up in. Caught between the conflicting feelings towards his inner desire for peace and morality and the unbearable reality of his family, Sarty could only form his ethical choice in painful psychological struggle and hopes "Maybe it will even change him [his father Abner] now from what maybe he [his father Abner] couldn't help but be" (Faulkner 1939:91), signifying a desire to change his father's destructive actions and embrace peaceful lifestyle. When his father ruined the rug and had to pay twenty bushels for it, Sarty thinks: "Maybe this is the end of it. Maybe even that twenty bushels that seems hard to have to pay for just a rug will be a cheap price for him to stop forever and always from being what he used to be" (Faulkner 1939:94). His hopes for his father lay somewhere between wish and terror. He desires to stop Abner's rascality and tries to reassure himself via fantasy about peace and order in front of the mansion, but at the same time he fears about his impotency in front of father's authority and the rigidly prejudiced societal system for the poor white community. It is compelling that his understanding of justice and ethical choice is divergent from Abner's actions and hopes they could live in a more

peaceful and harmonious way.

Therefore, Sarty's wakening of ethical choice is to seek justice free from the first generation's hostility and violent destruction towards the society, and is derived from his inner admiration towards peaceful life characterised by stability, order, and a sense of moral integrity.

2.3.2. Evoking for Justice: The Outlet in Self-improvement and Self-reliance

Ultimately, Sarty's spiritual growth and understanding of ethical justice culminate in a decisive moment of choice. When faced with the opportunity to warn Major De Spain about his father's intention to burn the barn, Sarty musters the courage to take a stand against his own family. This act of defiance signifies his moral integrity, his willingness to break free from the destructive patterns of his past, and his commitment to seeking a higher truth. Through this pivotal moment, Sarty embraces his own agency and embarks on a path of self-discovery, paving the way for his spiritual growth and the possibility of a more meaningful and fulfilling life. In the story's closing lines, "He did not look back" (Faulkner 1939:99), Faulkner hints at Sarty's departure from his father and makes his ethical choice of relying upon the social and moral values of kindness, integrity and credibility.

After warning Major De Spain and hearing the gunshot, his determination to seek a new direction and embrace personal growth is symbolised by his journey into the dark woods to achieve self-improvement and self-reliance. By venturing into darkness, which always symbolise the social evil and uncertain future, Sarty demonstrates his courage and willingness to confront all the uncertainties and corruptions of poor whites' life. The mention of the "liquid silver voices of the birds" (Faulkner 1939:99) and the "urgent and quiring heart of the late spring night" (Faulkner 1939:99) suggests the presence of nature and its vibrant vitality, which may serve as a source of inspiration and guidance for Sarty's spiritual maturity. The pursuit of the sun, the Apollonian symbol of reason and justice, metaphorically signifies Sarty's quest for a better understanding of the social ethical value and the outlet for poor whites' justice: they should live in a life that is not defined by injustice and violent refute, but by personal growth, empathy, and a deeper sense of social justice value. Through his spiritual growth and evoking for justice, he moves toward a future characterized by self-improvement, self-discovery, and self-reliance, rather than the deep-rooted resentment and hostility held by his father.

In "Barn Burning", the second generation of poor Southern whites represented by Sarty has stepped on a journey from confusion and inner conflict to moral awakening and spiritual growth, ultimately making his ethical choice of morality and setting an example for the poor Southern whites to achieve justice and ethical value. Through the depiction of Sarty's self-reflection and the pursuit of personal integrity, Faulkner appeals for hope and resilience in the process of questing for justice among the poor white group, illustrating the potential for individuals to break free from the constraints of external dilemmas such as economic divergence, social alienation and marginalisation, as well as a long-existing feud and violence threats.

3. Conclusions

Through the Snopes family, Faulkner provides a microcosm of the broad struggles faced by impoverished Southern whites, whose ethical dilemmas arise from the alienation and marginalization of their community, highlighting the discrimination and exclusion that strip

them of their righteousness. In order to subvert the societal norms and accuse the undermining of their social standing, they resort to a rebellious and nomadic lifestyle, which is revealed as an attempt to escape hostility and reset their moral compass to regain a sense of superiority. After the continuous pursuit of justice in the insubordinate lifestyle of the first generation, the new generation of poor Southern whites, represented by Sarty, ultimately achieved spiritual growth in understanding the operation of social justice and establishing an unbiased perception of ethical value. His yearning for peace and order is rooted in a desire to break free from the cycles of violence that have defined his family's past, and his choice of seeking justice through self-improvement and self-reliance suggests that the path to ethical justice may lie in the individual's commitment to personal growth. Overall, the Snopes' journey from alienation to an aspiration for justice, and finally to the moral achievement of the new generation, is a testament not only to the suffering of poor Southern whites, but also to the enduring human spirit and its quest for ethical justice.

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