

Interplay between Overt and Covert Progressions: A Rereading of Father and Son Imagery in “Barn Burning”

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Abstract

There is a key consensus among scholars both domestically and internationally that “barn burning” is a story of growing up with the protagonist Sarty breaking away from his father’s control and turning towards order and law, while his father is depicted as a violent and unstable person using barn burning to resolve conflicts, which is seen as extreme and radical. This is indeed the direction of plot development. However, behind the public plot lies another hidden and parallel narrative process. In this apparent progress, Sarty was proven to be cowardly, vain, and selfish, and her father’s act of burning the barn was actually the only twisted means for a humiliated and oppressed civilian to maintain his distorted sense of dignity. The images of both father and son were overturned, and upon realizing this dual narrative process, the characters transformed from mundane and singular to rounded and multifaceted. The work itself has become rich from being direct. Only by examining the significance of this dual layer can we fully understand the complexity and richness of the story’s meaning.

Keywords: Barn Burning, dual narrative progression, covert progression, father-son imagery

1. Introduction

As one of the world-renowned modernist novelists, William Faulkner (1897-1962) is renowned for his empirical narrative style, vividly revealing the unique history and cultural traditions of the American South. Most of the characters in his works reside in the famous “Yoknapatawpha County” where he created the mythological world of the “Snopes” and “Sartoris” families. “The Burning Barn” (1939) is one of Faulkner’s most representative short stories, depicting the intense conflict between the Snopes and Sartoris families. The story revolves around the life of Southern white tenant farmer Abner Snopes and his family after the Civil War. Abner has a hot temper and often resolves conflicts with neighbors or employers by burning barns. After a dispute with neighbor Harris, Abner hired someone to burn down Harris' barn and was sued. His youngest son, Sarty Snopes, was forced to testify on behalf of his father to protect the family, respite Sarty realizing that his father's actions were illegal and unethical. As a ten-year-old child, Sati felt an instinctive conflict between his loyalty to his family and his growing sense of justice. He struggled painfully between being loyal to his bloodline and upholding fairness and morality. Sarty hoped his father could change the situation, but when Abner clashed with their new employer, the Spanish lieutenant, and stubbornly planned to burn down his barn despite Sarty and his mother's requests, it became the last straw. Unable to suppress his inner turmoil any longer, Sarty ran to warn the Spanish lieutenant and foiled his father’s plan. As a result, Sarty couldn’t go home to face his father, leaving him to search for a new life on his own.

It is easy to be captivated by the father-son relationship depicted in the story, and much of the existing research has also focused on this dynamic and the individual portrayals of the father and son. For example, scholar Wang Xiaoxia (Wang Xiaoxia, 2012) analyzed three types of father-son relationships in her paper “A Brief Discussion on the Father-Son Relationship in Faulkner’s Short Story Barn Burning”: conflict and contradiction, love and awe, struggle and rebirth. Scholar Zhang Qiong Yun (Zhang Qiongyun, 2012), in her paper “An Interpretation of “Father” and “Son” Images in Barn Burning from Structuralism Perspective”, analyzed the conflict and contradictions between the main character Abner and his son Sarty, particularly regarding their bloodline and moral views. Scholars often emphasize the use of multiple narrative perspectives in the novel, which structurally showcases Sarty’s coming-of-age journey and presents time in a non-chronological order. Similarly, scholar Pi Aihong (Pi Aihong, 2010) used Freud’s psychoanalytic theory to interpret the psychological growth journey of

the ten-year-old Sarty, the main character of “Barn Burning”, and his moral conflict with his father Abner. Scholar Jiang Man (Jiang Man, 2011), in her paper “Conflicts between Loyalty and Freedom – Sarty’s Search for Identity in Barn Burning”, explored Sarty’s psychological and physical journey from absolute loyalty to his father to gradually seeking his own identity and freedom, eventually breaking free from the control of paternal and social “superego”. Researchers generally agree that the novel portrays the father as a violent and erratic figure, whose habit of resolving conflicts by burning barns is seen as extreme and aggressive. Like scholar Long Yue (Long Yue, 2006), in his paper “Loyalty and Rebellion – Viewing the Father Figure in Faulkner’s Novels from A Rose for Emily and Barn Burning,” analyzed the cold-hearted, selfish, and tyrannical father figure, revealing the cruel and inhumane behavior of these tyrannical father. Sarty’s growth is interpreted as a transition from being afraid to testify against his father to ultimately reporting his father’s barn-burning intentions to Major de Spain, symbolizing his escape from paternal control and his turn towards order and justice. For this reason, many scholars consider the work as a coming-of-age story centered on Sarty.

However, when we move beyond the Aristotelian focus on plot development and pay closer attention to the details in the text, we can uncover the novel’s hidden, covert narrative progression. The author Faulkner’s image of father and son is not like the previous researcher’s research, which criticizes the father Abner and praises the son Sarty. Through the analysis of the covert progression, the image of father and son has been subverted.

2. Introduction to Dual Narrative Progression Theory

2.1 Background: Subversion of Traditional Narrative Criticism

Aristotle’s aesthetic work “Poetics” is widely regarded as the beginning of discussing the plot of novels. In 1984, American literary critic Peter Brooks (Brooks, Peter., 1984) published his influential book *Reading for the Plot*, which laid an important foundation for recent explorations into the narrative process within Western academia. In the late 1980s, American rhetorical narrative critic James Phelan (Phelan, James., 1989) published *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative*, which, similar to Brooks, viewed narrative as a process. He borrowed from narrative theory, distinguishing between story content and discourse, defining the foundation of the narrative process as the “unstable factors” in plot development and the “tension factors” in discourse. When researching the narrative movement of an entire text, their focus was on a single narrative process rooted in the unstable elements of the plot, continuing the narrative criticism tradition that dates back to Aristotle. And until today, academic attention to narrative processes still focuses on a single narrative process based on plot movements, continuing the tradition of narrative criticism that can be traced back to Aristotle’s focus on plot.

Professor Shen Dan (Shen Dan, 2013), a Changjiang Scholar majoring in English Language and Literature at Peking University, adopted a different approach and found that many narratives work actually contain a dual narrative process. This means that in a narrative work, there are two narrative processes simultaneously: one is the public plot movement, which has been the focus of narrative research so far; Another hidden plot development lies behind the public. Shen Dan (Shen Dan, 2013) defines this hidden narrative movement as the “covert progression” of narrative and emphasizes that this covert progression is not the deep meaning behind the story plot as usually understood, but rather a parallel narrative undercurrent that runs alongside the overt plot.

2.2 Core Concepts

Regarding the core concept of the “covert progression,” Shen Dan, gave an example from British author Katherine Mansfield’s short story “The Fly” (1922). Though the plot seems simple, it has attracted many scholars since its publication. Critics often analyse the plot around keywords like “war” and “death,” viewing the novel as a serious contemplation on the inevitability of death and the trauma of war. However, Shen Dan (Shen Dan, 2012) argues that if we break free from the shackles of long-standing criticism, we would discover an ironic narrative undercurrent hidden behind the development of the overt plot – this “covert progression” runs throughout the text. By examining seemingly unimportant details unrelated to the plot’s development, Shen Dan (Shen Dan, 2012) concludes that “The Fly” contains a covert progression themed around the irony of the boss’s vain and pompous character. In the story, the boss is not just the war victim and the torturer of the fly, as the overt plot suggests. He is also a self-important, vain little man, and the author’s target of irony.

Shen Dan (Shen Dan, 2013) also provides several explanations. The “covert progression” is a narrative movement that runs throughout the entire text and often functions as an ironic undercurrent from beginning to end. It does not affect the reader’s understanding of the overt plot development. Typically composed of seemingly trivial or off-topic text elements, the covert progression is characterized by its strong concealment and indirectness, making it easily overlooked. In terms of the relationship between the “covert progression” and the “overt plot,” Shen Dan (Shen Dan, 2013) notes that, on a narrative level, the covert progression acts as a hidden narrative current behind the overt plot, with the two developing independently and generally not intersecting. In a thematic sense, the covert progression either complements the overt plot or subverts it, contributing to the richness of the work’s thematic depth and character portrayal.

In this article, the author myself offers a subversive interpretation of the father-son imagery through the covert progression that subvert the overt plot.

3. The Imagery of Sarty in Covert Progression

If we focus solely on plot development, we might only see Faulkner’s praise for Sarty’s transformation and, like most scholars, interpret the novel as a coming-of-age story about Sarty. However, if we break free from traditional critical constraints, we find that the covert progression reveals Sarty’s timid, cowardly, and vainly selfish aspects, offering a subversive interpretation.

The story begins with the trial between Abner and Harris, where Sarty becomes a crucial witness. Previous analyses have often placed Sarty in a dilemma between his blood-relative father and the noble pursuit of justice. However, is it plausible that this ten-year-old boy had already developed mature rational thinking at that time? The author provides clues suggesting otherwise. At the start of this scene, there is a sensory description where Sarty smells cheese and canned meat before taking the stand. This is what we call the redundant component of the covert progression that seems to have nothing to do with the text. Why does the author specifically include this sensory detail in such a serious context? Sarty “smelled cheese” (William Faulkner, 2000) and saw shelves densely stocked with cans, yet he couldn’t read a word but “his stomach read labels” (William Faulkner, 2000). Additionally, it is mentioned later that his father bought a piece of dried cheese from the grocery store and “carefully divided it into three parts” (William Faulkner, 2000) for the family to share for lunch. This scene reflects that cheese and canned meat were rare and valuable for the impoverished Snopes family during the post-Civil War South, a time when white tenant farmers had fallen from their former status. The careful way the father handles the cheese indicates its significance. Sarty does not know how to read, so he recognizes the canned goods only by the pictures: “the scarlet devils and the sliver curve of fish” (William Faulkner, 2000). This indicates that Sarty’s education was limited, and his attention in such a serious situation is drawn to basic survival needs. Given his focus on immediate necessities, it is improbable that he possessed a sophisticated understanding of justice and noble values.

Additionally, through various textual details that constitutes covert progression, I argue that Sarty does not truly waver between familial loyalty and justice. His anxiety and fear seem to stem from a primal dread of the trial and his role as a vital witness, rather than from a moral or ethical struggle.

From the beginning, Sarty’s description “crouched on his nail keg at the back of the crowded room” (William Faulkner, 2000)—immediately conveys his fear. Later, when he is testifying, the portrayal of him “he seemed to walk beneath the palpable weight if the grim turning faces” (William Faulkner, 2000) reflects a ten-year-old child’s innate fear and nervousness. The line, “our enemy he thought in that despair; ourn! mine and hisn both!” (William Faulkner, 2000), suggests that Sarty’s stance is initially clear; he views them as enemies and instinctively sides with his father. Given this stance, Sarty could have easily denied his father’s actions, but his fear renders him speechless, feeling “he felt no floor under his bare feet” (William Faulkner, 2000). It is only when Harris stops pressing him that Sarty “now time, the fluid world, rushed beneath him again, the voices coming to him again” (William Faulkner, 2000). Therefore, I believe his silence is not due to an inner conflict or reluctance to lie, but rather is a result of sheer terror and weakness in the face of the courtroom.

When the Snopes family moves to the new farm, Sarty accompanies his father to visit their employer, Mr. DeSpain. Upon seeing the opulent mansion, Sarty feels a sense of joy, which the text suggests is beyond his ability to articulate due to his young age. The narrator explains that Sarty’s sense of reassurance comes from the belief that his father will be deterred from committing any further transgressions due to the employer’s wealth. But is this truly the case? I argue that it is not. This scene seems to be deliberately crafted by the narrator to mislead the reader. In reality, the scene serves to confirm that Sarty believes in the power of material wealth. It is likely that his motive for preventing his father from burning the barn stems from a desire to protect and pursue material wealth, rather than from a genuine commitment to abstract ideals like justice and fairness.

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. Because, for all the twelve movings, they had sojourned until now in a poor country, a land of small farms and Fells and houses, and he had never seen a house like this before. (William Faulkner, 2000)

In public scenes, Spain's buildings symbolize peace and order, but they do not equate to social justice, and their tranquility and dignity can easily be disrupted. The text shows that Sarty was completely mesmerized by this building, expressing a desire for such grandeur: "though he could not have thought this into words either, walking on in the spell of the house, which he could ever want" (William Faulkner, 2000). This detail implies the vanity side of Sarty's personality. When we set aside all previous explanations of the novel and carefully read the text, doesn't it evoke a charm of luxury homes that masks family connections? The text also points out that Sati and his family used to live in rudimentary dwellings, and he had never served as an informant before. So, why did he suddenly make a different choice in front of this luxurious house? This is not only because Sarty's sense of justice triumphed over loyalty to her family; On the contrary, it is because he is completely captivated by this building.

In addition, Sarty also demonstrated the cruelty and selfishness of the Snopes family. When Sarty finally decided to report his father, he desperately broke free from his mother and threatened, "Lemme go! I don't want to have to hit you" (William Faulkner, 2000). Additionally, at the end of the novel, "he did not look back" (William Faulkner, 2000). Many scholars interpret this as Sarty's complete break from his father's control, a farewell to his past self, and an indication of his maturity. Scholar Jiang Man (Jiang Man, 2011), in her paper "Conflicts between Loyalty and Freedom—Sarty's Search for Identity in Barn Burning", argued that for Sarty to escape his father's fate, he must say goodbye to the past. Only by doing so can he completely free himself from the absolute control of the incompetent "superego" of that era, follow his own path, and become an independent and free individual. I believe this is not the case. This moment actually represents him coldly abandoning his family in pursuit of his own happiness. In addition, there is a noteworthy detail in the text where the author repeatedly uses the word "stiff" (William Faulkner, 2000) to describe Sarty's father, as well as other descriptions that are usually not suitable for people, such as "his voice cold and harsh" (William Faulkner, 2000), which depicts a picture of a cruel father. At the end of the story, the author also uses a "stiff" (William Faulkner, 2000) to describe Sarty. It can be seen that the author has more than just an admiring attitude towards Sarty.

These textual details contradict the overt plot and create a subversive covert progression, revealing Sarty's vanity and selfishness. It shows that Faulkner's portrayal of Sarty is not solely commendatory, but rather more complex and nuanced.

4. The Imagery of Abner Snopes in Covert Progression

In the novel, Snopes, the key character of the father, demonstrates different characteristics in the covert development process. Previous studies often criticized the father's personality, portraying Abner as a symbol of barbarism and violence. However, in the covert progression, we can see another side of Abner. As a father, he is depicted as the pillar and protector of the family, yearning for a stable life. In fact, his act of burning down the barn was the only way for him to fight for dignity as a poor white man in the southern United States. As a poor white man with limited rights and opportunities, considering the situation at the time, choosing to burn down the barn was a desperate measure.

At the beginning of the court trial, the father, Abner, is taken to court for burning the barn. There is a detail in the text: "His father, stiff in his black Sunday coat donned not for the trial but for the moving (William Faulkner, 2000)." This indicates that Abner had long been prepared for relocation. His statement, "I aim to. I don't figure to stay in a country among people who..." (William Faulkner, 2000) shows that for someone of Abner's lowly status as a poor white man, achieving a stable life was extremely difficult. Thus, before the trial began, he had already planned to move his family to a new place and was hopeful for a better future. After the trial, when the Abner family relocates, and the daughter complains that the new place is not as good as the pigpen, Abner reassures her, "Nevertheless, fit it will and you'll hog it and like it" (William Faulkner, 2000). He also agrees to his wife's suggestion of visiting the new employer, indicating that Abner had long-term plans to work for the new employer. Thus, Abner is shown to have a side beyond just violence.

Why did Abner ultimately burn down the barn again? Unlike previous employers, the elite class represented by desperate families is the last straw for people like Abner. After seeing the grandeur of the desert estate, Abner was filled with jealousy and resentment. When his son Sati showed admiration and reverence for this luxurious mansion, Abner was filled with strong jealousy. He thought that such a manor must be built on the sweat of oppressed people, and he thought, “That’s sweet. Nigger sweat. Maybe it ain’t white enough yet to suit him. Maybe he wants to mix some white sweat with it” (William Faulkner, 2000). The way the black servants in the estate treated him and Sati further intensified his anger, causing him to dirty the carpet.

From the narrative of the novel, we understand that Abner’s family made every effort to clean the footprints from the carpet, leaving only some watermarks. When they returned the carpet, they were further humiliated with the statement, “It cost a hundred dollars. But you never had a hundred dollars. You never will. So, I’m going to charge you twenty bushels of corn against your crop” (William Faulkner, 2000). Abner’s family, already struggling, faced no sympathy despite Abner’s injury from the war, which left him with a limp. They were subjected to relentless mistreatment and humiliation. Abner argued that he had cleaned the carpet thoroughly, and if the employer’s family was dissatisfied with their method and results, they should have specified their requirements from the beginning. This suggests that regardless of how well the carpet was cleaned, the employer might never have been satisfied. After the carpet incident, Abner worked tirelessly, taking on any job, whether feasible or not. This demonstrates his desire for a stable and peaceful life. However, the carpet issue led to him being taken to court again. Despite his explanations to the sheriff that he had cleaned the carpet properly, the sheriff was unresponsive and instead defended the employer’s family, resulting in a judgment against Abner. For impoverished white people like Abner, there was no justice or fair treatment, making the court ruling the last straw. Faced with no other option, Abner resorted to burning the barn. This act was, in fact, a distorted means of preserving his dignity through a means of protest against the insults and damage he had suffered.

In the covert progression of the story, despite Abner’s desire for a stable life, he faces harsh working conditions, long hours, and exploitative low wages due to systemic oppression. His relentless hard work did not receive corresponding rewards, and the continuous humiliation and oppression he endured prompted him to repeatedly burn down the barn. This behavior became his only means of maintaining his dignity as a marginalized and impoverished white person.

5. Conclusion

In Faulkner’s short story “Barn Burning”, there is a parallel narrative trajectory known as secret development as the covert progression. Through this covert progression, Faulkner achieved satirical commentary on overt plot, expressing satire on Sartoris and sympathy and admiration for Abner. Abner is depicted as both an aggressor and a victim, with arson becoming his only means of maintaining his dignity and self-worth. Faulkner's feelings towards Abner, the representative of the poor in the South, are complex: he criticizes Abner’s stubborn and violent way of solving problems, but he also acknowledges the pain and resilience of these people. Faulkner expressed deep sympathy for the poor lower classes in the South. The dual narrative process enriches the thematic significance, increases the complexity of character portrayal, and injects convincing contradictions into the work.

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