



Burning Barns And Broken Dreams: A Marxist Exploration Of Faulkner's Selected Short Stories

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Abstract

William Faulkner's short stories offer a profound exploration of the American South, a region shaped by its unique historical and socio-economic realities. Through works like "A Rose for Emily" and "Barn Burning," Faulkner delves into the complexities of the Southern myth—a constructed narrative idealizing the South's antebellum past. A Marxist approach to these stories unveils how the Southern myth serves as an ideological tool to perpetuate class hierarchies, maintain economic exploitation, and mask the contradictions inherent in the social structure of the postbellum South. Faulkner's stories highlight the contradictions within the Southern myth, exposing its reliance on exploitation and its failure to address the realities of economic and racial inequality. The myth glorifies aristocratic values while neglecting the labour and suffering of enslaved and working-class people who supported the Southern economy. Faulkner's portrayal of these dynamics underscores the role of ideology in maintaining social hierarchies and suppressing revolutionary potential.

Keywords: Faulkner, Southern Myth, Marxist criticism, Class-conflict, Racial inequality.

Introduction

The Southern Myth, also referred to as the Myth of the Old South, is a romanticized narrative that idealizes the pre-Civil War American South. It portrays the antebellum South as a region of genteel aristocracy, harmonious social hierarchies, and cultural refinement, masking the systematic oppression, economic exploitation, and racial violence that underpinned its social order. This myth has evolved and persisted in various forms, influencing literature, popular culture, and collective memory. The Southern Myth elevates plantation owners as benevolent patriarchs who embody honour, generosity, and leadership. These figures are depicted as guardians of a refined way of life and moral authority. Southern men are often portrayed as adhering to a code of chivalry, which emphasizes honour, bravery, and the protection of women. This idealized masculinity conceals the economic exploitation and violence inherent in the plantation system.

Plantations are mythologized as idyllic, self-sufficient estates that represent harmony between humans and the land. The economic exploitation of enslaved labour is downplayed or ignored entirely. It portrays the historical South as a pastoral paradise, contrasting it with the industrial North. This idealization ignores the brutality of slavery and environmental degradation caused by plantation agriculture. Southern women are depicted as delicate, virtuous, and submissive figures, embodying grace and moral purity. The archetype of the Southern Belle reinforces patriarchal values and strict gender roles. Women are often tasked with preserving Southern culture, family honour, and social

hierarchies, even as these ideals limit their autonomy. This myth suggests a harmonious relationship between plantation owners and enslaved people, portraying slavery as a benign institution. Enslaved individuals are often depicted as loyal, content, and dependent on their masters. The exploitation and oppression of both enslaved people and poor white labourers are obscured, replaced with a narrative of mutual dependence and affection. The Southern Myth incorporates the Lost Cause, framing the Civil War as a fight for states' rights, honour, and Southern independence, rather than a defence of slavery. Confederate soldiers are idealized as heroic defenders of a noble way of life. This myth mourns the destruction of the pre-war South as the loss of a noble and idyllic civilization, framing Reconstruction and modernization as unjust impositions.

The Southern Myth sustains itself through memorials, literature, and reenactments that glorify the Old South. This cultural preservation often seeks to mask or downplay the realities of slavery and racial injustice. The period after the Civil War is often depicted as a time of suffering for the South, emphasizing the plight of the white population while ignoring the opportunities and struggles of freed African Americans. The myth justifies and naturalizes racial hierarchies, portraying white dominance as the foundation of Southern culture and stability. Enslaved people and their descendants are often reduced to caricatures, such as the loyal servant or the "happy slave," reinforcing the narrative of white paternalism. This Myth often contrasts the simplicity and purity of agrarian life with the corruption and alienation of industrial society. This romanticized rural ideal ignores the economic inequality and reliance on enslaved labour in the plantation economy. Landownership and farming are linked to moral virtue, reinforcing the notion of the South as a region of moral and cultural superiority. It frames the South as distinct from and superior to the rest of the United States in its values, traditions, and way of life. This concept celebrates the South's resistance to social, economic, and cultural transformations, such as industrialization, urbanization, and civil rights movements, often framing these changes as threats to Southern heritage. The Myth persists in works like *Gone with the Wind* and *The Sound and the Fury*, as well as in films and television that romanticize the Old South. Writers like William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Toni Morrison critique and deconstruct the Southern Myth, exposing its contradictions, hypocrisies, and foundations in systemic violence and exploitation.

William Faulkner is a towering figure in American literature who is best known for his complex narratives that delve into the themes of identity, history, race, and the social fabric of the American South. His literary achievements, including novels, short stories, and screenplays, earned him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1949. His works are deeply rooted in the Southern Gothic tradition, reflecting the decline and decay of the postbellum South while grappling with universal questions of human existence. His short stories, in particular, showcase his mastery of language and form, offering profound insights into the human condition. Faulkner's family history and the broader historical context of the South deeply shaped his worldview. His great-grandfather, Colonel William C. Falkner, was a Civil War veteran and a local legend whose life inspired much of his exploration of Southern history and mythology. His early exposure to writers such as Charles Dickens, James Joyce, and T.S. Eliot influenced his experimental approach to narrative structure and style. He served in the Royal Air Force during World War I, though he did not see combat, and this brief military experience also informed aspects of his writing.

Faulkner's literary career can be divided into phases, beginning with his early poetry and culminating in his prolific period of novel-writing and short story

composition. His major novels, including *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932), and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), established him as a leading modernist writer. These works explore the complexities of time, memory, and identity, employing stream-of-consciousness techniques and fragmented narratives. In addition to his novels, his short stories played a crucial role in cementing his literary reputation. He often used the short story form as a testing ground for themes, characters, and settings that would later appear in his novels. Many of his short stories are set in Yoknapatawpha County, creating a cohesive literary universe that reflects the cultural and historical complexities of the South.

Faulkner's short stories are marked by his innovative narrative techniques, rich character development, and unflinching examination of social and moral dilemma. His short stories often exhibit the hallmarks of Southern Gothic literature, including decayed settings, grotesque characters, and themes of violence, isolation, and moral corruption.

The racial tensions of the South are a recurring theme in his short stories. He portrays the deep scars left by slavery and the enduring legacy of racism. His stories also explore the fears and vulnerabilities of African Americans, who faces threats of violence in a racially charged Southern community. Through the perspective of a white child, Faulkner reveals the entrenched racial inequalities and the indifference of white society to the suffering of Black individuals. He frequently experiments with non-linear narratives and explores the subjective nature of memory. For example, in "The Bear" (part of *Go Down, Moses*) he employs a fragmented narrative to explore themes of tradition, environmental exploitation, and the loss of innocence. The story intertwines personal memory with broader historical forces, illustrating his fascination with time and its effects on individuals and communities. Faulkner's characters often grapple with the weight of their family legacies and the historical trauma of the South. In "Dry September", the collective hysteria and moral decay of a Southern town that erupts in violence following a false accusation of assault against an African American man. The story critiques the culture of honour and vengeance that perpetuates cycles of injustice and brutality.

His short stories stand as significant contributions to modernist literature. His use of fragmented narrative structures, multiple perspectives, and complex characters revolutionized the short story form. His stories provide a microcosm of the broader themes explored in his novels, making them essential for understanding his literary vision. His portrayal of the South is both critical and compassionate. While he exposes its flaws—racism, economic exploitation, and rigid social hierarchies—he also captures its beauty, complexity, and humanity. His creation of Yoknapatawpha County as a fictional setting allowed him to construct a richly detailed world that serves as a mirror to the real South, blending historical accuracy with imaginative depth.

Faulkner's short stories have studied from various perspectives be it Feminism, Eco- criticism, Psychoanalysis etc. But they can also be explored through the lens of Marxist theory. Georg Lukács was an important Marxist critic who emphasized the relationship between literature and historical materialism, particularly how literature reflects the material conditions and class struggles of its time. His focus on realism as a literary form and its ability to represent social totality is central to his theories. Lukács's concept of social totality provides a powerful framework for interpreting literature as a reflection of the interconnectedness of individual experience and broader social structures. In his seminal work, *The Historical Novel*, Lukács argued that great literature

offers a comprehensive view of the historical and social forces shaping human lives. Through its portrayal of characters, settings, and conflicts, literature reveals the underlying material and ideological dynamics of society. This concept is vividly depicted in William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" and "Barn Burning" as the socio-economic, historical, and cultural contradictions of the postbellum American South.

For Lukács, social totality refers to the interconnected web of historical, social, and economic conditions that define human existence. Literature achieves greatness, according to Lukács, when it transcends individual subjectivity to reveal the broader forces at work in society. Realist literature, in particular, excels in portraying the dialectical relationship between individuals and their social environments, illuminating the contradictions and struggles inherent in historical moments. He writes, "The individual can only be understood in the context of the broader social forces which determine their existence." (11) His stories align with this vision by situating personal narratives within the larger framework of Southern history and its post-Civil War decline. His characters are deeply embedded in the socio-economic structures of the South, and their conflicts reflect the region's racial, class, and cultural tensions.

In "A Rose for Emily", Faulkner tells the story of Emily Grierson, a reclusive woman whose life mirrors the decay of the Old South. Emily, a product of Southern aristocracy, struggles to adapt to the social and economic changes brought by modernization and the decline of her family's status. The story's setting, Jefferson, Mississippi, represents a microcosm of the South grappling with the transition from a rigid, hierarchical society to a modern, industrialized world. Emily's resistance to change symbolizes the dying values of the antebellum South. Her refusal to pay taxes and her isolation from the community reflect her inability to reconcile her aristocratic heritage with the socio-economic realities of the postbellum era and is evident in, "Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town..." (23) Lukács's concept of social totality is evident in how he connects Emily's personal tragedy to the collective decline of Southern aristocracy, illustrating how historical forces shape individual fates. As Lukács' expounds in *The Historical Novel*, "The relationship between human beings and society is mediated by history, which creates a complex, interrelated totality." (17)

Emily's home, once a symbol of grandeur, becomes a decaying relic, mirroring the erosion of her family's social standing. "It was a big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies..." (57) This decline encapsulates the broader disintegration of the Southern gentry, whose wealth and power were built on slavery and exploitation. Faulkner critiques the Southern myth of honour and tradition through Emily's life. The community's complicity in preserving this myth is evident in their passive acceptance of her eccentricities and their voyeuristic fascination with her life. By intertwining Emily's personal struggles with the collective memory of the South, he exposes the ideological contradictions of a society clinging to a glorified past.

In "Barn Burning", Faulkner explores class struggle and the tensions between the landowning elite and the tenant farming class in the post-Reconstruction South. The story follows Abner Snopes, a poor tenant farmer with a penchant for arson, and his young son, Sarty, who grapples with loyalty to his father and his own moral awakening. "His father spoke for the first time in two hours, his voice cold and harsh, level, without emphasis: 'You were fixing to tell them. You would have told him.'" (13) Abner Snopes embodies the anger and frustration of the disenfranchised working class. His acts of barn burning are

symbolic rebellions against the landowning elite, who wield economic and social power over tenant farmers like him. He portrays Abner as a figure of alienation, whose defiance reflects the broader class struggles of the South. "Maybe he will feel it too. Maybe it will even change him now from what maybe he couldn't help but be." (54) Abner's destructive behaviour highlights the contradictions within the tenant farming system, where the labour of the poor sustains the wealth of the elite. His defiance is both a protest against his oppression and a futile attempt to assert agency within an exploitative system. Through Sarty's internal conflict, he examines the ethical dimensions of class struggle. Sarty's eventual rejection of his father's actions symbolizes a break from the cycle of violence and oppression perpetuated by class tensions. This moral awakening reflects the possibility of social change, even within a deeply unequal system.

In Lukácsian terms, "Barn Burning" reveals the totality of the tenant farming system, where the interactions between landowners, tenants, and their families reflect the broader economic and social structures of the South. Faulkner's depiction of Abner's defiance and Sarty's moral struggle offers a nuanced portrayal of the complexities of class conflict and individual agency within a stratified society. His short stories exemplify Lukács's ideal of literature that transcends individual experience to capture the broader social and historical forces shaping human lives. Both "A Rose for Emily" and "Barn Burning" provide richly detailed portraits of the South, illuminating its cultural, economic, and ideological contradictions. Faulkner situates his characters within the specific historical context of the postbellum South, using their struggles to explore the region's transition and the legacy of slavery and Reconstruction. Through his characters, he critiques the inequalities and injustices of Southern society, exposing the mechanisms of exploitation and resistance. His stories demonstrate how personal conflicts and moral dilemmas are inseparable from the broader social structures and historical forces.

Both these short stories also illustrate the concept of interpellation as positioned by Althusser. Louis Althusser is one of the major Marxist critics whose theory of interpellation, as outlined in his essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (1970), offers a framework for analysing how individuals are "hailed" or recruited into ideology. For Althusser, literature serves as one of the ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) through which dominant ideologies are perpetuated or critiqued. He explains, "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence." (2) In this context, William Faulkner's short stories, "A Rose for Emily" and "Barn Burning", reflect how individuals are shaped by and respond to ideological forces in the postbellum American South. Both stories reveal how characters are interpellated into the ideologies of their time—be it class, tradition, or power—and highlight the tensions between conformity and resistance within these systems.

Interpellation refers to the process by which ideology constitutes individuals as subjects. According to Althusser, individuals are "hailed" by ideological structures, such as family, religion, law, or education, which shape their identity and perceptions of the world. This process makes people unwitting participants in reproducing the dominant ideology, even when they appear to resist it. His stories, deeply rooted in the cultural and historical context of the South, vividly illustrate this process. His characters grapple with the forces of ideology that define their roles, behaviours, and relationships. He elucidates, "The individual in question behaves in every respect as a subject, and therefore subjugated, subjected to the Subject." (3) The interplay of ideology and individual agency becomes a central theme in "A Rose for Emily" and "Barn Burning."

Emily Grierson's identity in "A Rose for Emily" is shaped by the patriarchal and aristocratic ideologies of the Old South. From an early age, Emily is interpellated as a symbol of Southern tradition and respectability. Her father's authoritarian control reinforces her role as a passive vessel of aristocratic values. Even after his death, the town continues to regard Emily as a relic of the past, preserving her as a monument to a fading social order. The townspeople interpellated Emily as a representative of their collective memory and nostalgia for the antebellum South. This is evident in their treatment of her as a "fallen monument." "When the next generation, with its more modern ideas, became mayors and aldermen, this arrangement created some little dissatisfaction." (21) Their voyeuristic fascination with her life reflects their desire to uphold the ideology of Southern gentility, even as it decays. While Emily resists modernization (e.g., refusing to pay taxes or acknowledge her father's death for three days), these acts of defiance are shaped by the same ideological structures she ostensibly resists. Her resistance is not revolutionary but an affirmation of the aristocratic identity imposed upon her. Her house serves as a physical embodiment of ideological interpellation. Once a symbol of grandeur, the house becomes a decaying relic, mirroring the ideological stagnation of the South. The space confines Emily, both physically and ideologically, ensuring her continued subjugation to patriarchal and aristocratic norms. "The men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house." (77)

Abner Snopes, the central figure of "Barn Burning", is interpellated by the ideology of class hierarchy and exploitation in the post-Reconstruction South. As a tenant farmer, Abner is subjected to the economic and social power of the landowning elite. His acts of barn burning are symbolic responses to this interpellation, simultaneously resisting and reproducing the ideology of class oppression. Abner's subservience to landowners like Major de Spain demonstrates how the class structure interpellated him into a position of inferiority. Even his acts of rebellion—burning barns—are framed by this ideology, as they target symbols of wealth and power rather than the system itself. Abner's deliberate soiling of de Spain's rug symbolizes his awareness of class oppression and his refusal to fully internalize the landowners' authority. Yet, his destructive actions fail to transcend the ideology of class struggle, as they ultimately reinforce his role as a resentful, powerless subject.

Sarty, Abner's young son, represents the internal conflict between loyalty to his father and adherence to a moral code shaped by dominant ideology. The story dramatizes Sarty's gradual interpellation into the ideology of justice and individual agency, as opposed to his father's ideology of resistance and survival. Sarty is repeatedly "hailed" by the ideology of law and order, represented by the courtroom scenes and his internal struggle to differentiate right from wrong. "He could not see the table where the Justice sat and before which his father and his father's enemy stood..." (38) His eventual decision to betray his father reflects his acceptance of this moral ideology, even at the cost of family loyalty. Sarty's journey highlights the tensions within interpellation, as he navigates competing ideologies—his father's cynicism and the promise of fairness upheld by society. This conflict underscores the dynamic and contested nature of subject formation.

Both stories illustrate the role of ISAs, such as family, tradition, and class systems, in perpetuating ideology. In "A Rose for Emily," the town and its collective memory act as ISAs, ensuring Emily's compliance with the myth of Southern gentility. In "Barn Burning," the legal system and economic hierarchy function as ISAs, maintaining the oppression of

tenant farmers like Abner. While Faulkner's characters often resist their ideological "hailing," this resistance is limited by the structures that define their existence. Emily's defiance of social norms and Abner's acts of arson are shaped by the same ideological forces they aim to reject, highlighting the paradoxical nature of resistance within interpellation. His exploration of agency within ideological constraints aligns with Althusser's view of subjects as neither wholly free nor entirely determined. Emily's isolation and Sarty's moral awakening exemplify the possibilities and limitations of agency within ideological systems.

Therefore, we can conclude that the Southern Myth is a complex cultural construct that idealizes the antebellum South while masking its systemic inequalities and violence. By perpetuating romanticized notions of class harmony, racial paternalism, and cultural superiority, the myth has had lasting implications for how Southern history is understood and represented. At the same time, it has been critically challenged and deconstructed by literature, scholarship, and social movements that expose its ideological underpinnings and complicity in justifying oppression. His masterful depiction of class struggle, historical decline, and ideological contradictions aligns with Lukács's vision of realist literature as a medium for exploring the dialectical relationship between individuals and society. Both stories demonstrate how characters are "hailed" into roles defined by class, tradition, and morality, while also highlighting the tensions and contradictions inherent in this process. His portrayal of the interplay between resistance and conformity provides a rich site for exploring the dynamics of ideology and subjectivity, making his works enduring examples of the complexities of human existence within ideological frameworks. William Faulkner's life and works reflect a profound engagement with the cultural, historical, and moral complexities of the American South. His short stories, marked by innovative techniques and deep psychological insight, are a vital part of his literary oeuvre. Through stories like "A Rose for Emily," "Barn Burning," and "Dry September," he critiques the myths and realities of the South, offering a timeless exploration of human frailty and resilience. His legacy as a master storyteller endures, influencing generations of writers and readers who continue to grapple with the themes he so powerfully articulated.

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