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The significance of Animals in the “Barn Burning”

In William Faulkner’s famous short story “Barn Burning”, the third-person narrator uses the “bovine” or “cow” frequently. All the cow-like creatures or cow-like behaviors mentioned in the story refer to the people who do everything they are told without thinking. However, horses symbolize the courage and wisdom as well as the graceful beautiful lifestyle of the upper-class. In contrast to the horses, the mules are considered the symbol of the lack of change and a hopeless lifestyle doing the uninteresting routine work. The narrator also mentions “wolf-like” particularly. Wolves stand for independence, courage, and leadership.

For the bovines and cows, they are considered as the symbol of slow, unintelligent followers. Take a careful look at the story, it’s not hard to find that the words “bovine” and “cow” are mostly used to describe the sisters and the brother. When the whole family get to the new house the two sisters and the bother don’t move at all until their father told them “get out of chairs up and help your Ma unload”, then “The two sisters got down, big, bovine, in a flutter of cheap ribbons; one of them drew from the jumbled wagon bed a battered lantern, the other a worn broom.” (4). The narrator uses “bovine” to describe the two sisters. They need their father to tell them what they are supposed to do next. They can’t react with their own thoughts. In fact, they don’t even have their own minds. Besides, when Abner attempts to burn the barn again, the brother still “chewing with that steady, curious, sidewise motion of cows” (9). Abner is against a powerful landlord, which would probably get the family into trouble, but the brother just like an outsider without doing anything. He neither knows what was happening nor knows how it would affect his life. Moreover, when the boy was struggling out of his mother “the sister not yet having begun to rise from the chair her head, face, alone merely turned” only leaving “an expression of bovine interest.” (10). They don’t care about whether their father burns the barn. Neither they understand why they should care. If we interpret these descriptions of the sisters and the brother, it becomes clear that the bovines stand for the sluggish, unintelligent people who have no thoughts of their own and do only what they are told.

Unlike “bovine”, “horse” stands for courage, gracefulness, and an exciting upper-class lifestyle that Abner likes. The first time Abner and Sarty meet Colonel De Spain, he was on a beautiful horse: “when he heard the hooves and saw the linen-clad man on a fine sorrel mare, whom he recognized even before he saw the rolled rug in front of the Negro youth following on a fat bay carriage horse” (5). Besides, when Abner in the courtroom again, the narrator describes Colonel De Spain; “he had seen but twice before in his life, and that on a galloping horse” (8). Colonel De Spain is the owner of the magnificent house, he comes from the upper class, and he lives a graceful delightful life with great wealth. The horses symbolize the way he lives, a Southern upper-class lifestyle. Also, Abner used to be a horse trader, “heard his father tell a long and unhurried story out of the time before the birth of the older brother even when he had been a professional horse trader.” (9). The horses also stand for the life Abner had before. Although he was a “horse trader”, he never really owned a horse. He used to have almost a pleasing life and was respected as a man, but now he doesn’t have any properties, and he is treated unfairly. Also, there was a poster with scarlet horses on it: “And then his father came up beside him where he stood before a tattered last year's circus poster on the other side of the store, gazing rapt and quiet at the scarlet horses,” (9). The color “scarlet” stands for enthusiasm and hope. Scarlet horses mean a lifestyle full of hope and passion, which is also the lifestyle Abner desires. Furthermore, Abner also enjoys watching horses, “And still they did not go home. It was a horse lot this time … the father commenting now and then on certain of the animals, to no one in particular.” (9). Abner loves watching and commenting horses since he loves the pleasing life he had. He desires to live a comfortable, graceful, highly respected life. So, we can say horses stand for upper-class lifestyle, highly respected life and the beautiful life Abner has been chasing but never really had.

In contrast to the horses, Abner doesn’t like mules. Mules are the symbol of the lack of change, lack of creativity and routine. Mules are a symbol of barrenness, their life was fixed when they were born, they can’t change their life on their own. They can’t produce, which means that they can’t expect their life can be changed by the next generation either. Mules stand for the lack of change. Abner doesn’t like mules. He “struck the gaunt mules” a lot (2). When Abner washed the rug and returned the rug. Abner made his son sitting on the mule, while he didn’t want to sit on the mule himself, “‘Don't you want to ride now?’ he whispered. ‘We kin both ride now,’” (7). He doesn’t like mules just like he doesn’t like his hopeless, unchangeable life he lives. Also, the narrator describes the mules, “presently his father was up behind him and he doubled the reins over and slashed the mule across the neck, but before the animal could begin to trot the hard, thin arm came round him, the hard, knotted hand jerking the mule back to a walk.” (7). The mules are big and strong, but they can be easily controlled by people. They don’t have the ability to take an adventure or make a change. In addition, the mules always do the uninteresting work like plowing or other kinds of routine works, while Sarty can do something he interests, “During the rest of that week he worked steadily … he had this from his mother, with the difference that some at least of what he did he liked to do, such as splitting wood with the half-size axe which his mother and aunt had earned.” (7). Different from the mules, the boy is creative and can do some interesting works, but the mules can only be made to do the boring routine work without even thinking.

Distinct from the mules, Abner considers himself as an intelligent wolf. Wolf stands for the independence, natural leader, and adventure takers. Abner is presented as a wolf-like man: “There was something about his wolflike independence and even courage when the advantage was at least neutral which impressed strangers” (3). Abner wants an independent respected life. He is the leader of the family. He is very confident about himself, and he considers people against him as his enemies. Wolves are considered as top predators. They hunt other unintelligent animals like mules or cows. They love taking adventures, they always wait for the right time to capture their prey. They can feed themselves, and they only rely on themselves. They are the leader of their own. They are a symbol of independence, the adventure takers, and the natural leaders.

The third-person narrator uses the bovines, horses, mules and wolves to symbolize four different kinds of lifestyles. Bovines are the symbol of instinctive submission, they are more followers rather than the leaders, they count on others rather than themselves. They do what they are told without any thoughts, just like the sisters and the brother. Horses stand for strength, power, a graceful fancy lifestyle of the upper class and beautiful respected life Abner used to have. Mules stand for barrenness, lack of change, lack of creativity and boring routine work. They can be controlled easily, and they can never change their life by putting their hope on the next generation. Wolves stand for an image of unfettered, independent, confident, adventure takers. They themselves are the only people they depend on. The horses are just like the American Dream. They are beautiful, powerful, and everyone wants to get them, however, is there any other way to be a horse except born to be one? Who should be blamed when so many people become “bovines” and “mules”?

Faulkner, William. “Barn Burning” (1939). Engl 103 A08, Spring 2018, eClass