

## Social Alienation and Displacement in Faulkner's "Barn Burning", Henry's "The Social Triangle" and Mansfield's "The Doll's House"

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### ABSTRACT

The present study questions the role of the state in reproducing class relations and interpellating lower class people. The state employs repressive and ideological apparatuses to maintain the ruling class hegemony. The apparatuses the study examines in the context of the selected stories include school, family, court and materiality. Teachers and parents in Mansfield's "The Doll's House", justices in Faulkner's "Barn Burning" and materiality in Henry's "The Social Triangle" are the state agents of repression which lower class characters in the stories could not protest or rebel against. Their assimilation of the upper class culture, the narrators assert, gets them nowhere but to eventually become alienated. This accounts for their failure to attain social mobility.

**Key words:** Class Relations, Hierarchies, Apparatus, Assimilation, Alienation

### INTRODUCTION

Class is a key Marxist concept that entails stratifying people into the hierarchical social categories of the upper, middle and lower classes depending on their common relation to the means of production. The production relations which people of different classes enter into are employer/employee in a capitalist context, landlord/sharecropper in a feudal context and master/slave in a slavery context. Laborers, sharecroppers and slaves are collectively viewed as a productive force owned and controlled by virtues of the food and shelter provided, labor offered and wages paid to them. The hierarchies dominating production relations are reproduced by what the French philosopher Louis Althusser (1970) referred to as "state apparatus" which "contains two bodies: the body of institutions which represents the Repressive State Apparatus on the one hand, and the body of institutions which represents the body of Ideological State Apparatuses on the other (148)". He adds that "the role of the repressive State apparatus ... consists essentially in securing by force (physical or otherwise) the political conditions of the reproduction of relations of production ... and the political conditions for the action of the Ideological State Apparatuses (149)". This paper explores how the state apparatuses of school and family in Katherine Mansfield's "The Doll's House", court in William Faulkner's "Barn Burning" and materiality in O' Henry's "The Social Triangle" perpetually reproduce productive forces and relations of production to ensure the hegemony of the ruling class and the subordination of lower classes. It also argues that

the fantasies the protagonists pursue reveal their extreme dissatisfaction of their social status and repressive desire to attain social mobility. The apparatuses repressively and ideologically interpellating the protagonists, the paper contends, account for their emergence as both appropriators and reproducers of the hegemonic ideology.

### Research Problem

The study explores interclass and intra-class relations in the context of three selected short stories set in the United States and New Zealand during the early twentieth century. It further correlates the proletarian assimilation of the high culture and depreciation of the low culture with socioeconomic motives. The study as well investigates the problematic sense of alienation and displacement low class assimilationists experience.

### Research Objectives

The paper seeks to question interclass and intra-class relations from the perspective of the selected short stories. It relates the cultivation and perpetuation of class hierarchies to repressive and ideological state apparatuses. The major questions the study raises are: how do state apparatuses contribute to the impoverishment and miseries of the low class people? What policies are used to maintain the ruling class hegemony? What motivates lower class people to assimilate the upper class culture? Does that yield them acceptance or displacement and alienation? Why are their endeavors to attain social mobility doomed to failure?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Hooti and Partovy (2012) investigate the nature of justice and judgment in O. Henry's *After Twenty Years*, and question the legal system upon which the merits, existence and identity of individuals are determined. They critiqued the binary opposition ruling authorities create among people of different strata based on their susceptibility and vulnerability to offence and crime. While the common people are viewed as possible wrong doers, the high class people are legally assumed to be immune from wrong doings. They believe that because the common people "are constantly reminded of not being mentally and socio-politically mature enough to enter the territory of giving their judgments on justice;"(2) justice accordingly becomes the private property of the privileged strata of society which is more qualified to give sound interpretations of laws, justice and injustice. O'Henry's *After Twenty Years* relates the story of childhood friends, Jimmy and Bob, who meet twenty years later not as friends but as a criminal and a police inspector. Jimmy seems to have forgotten the rules of friendship to which he does injustice in favor of his job to which he does justice when treating Bob as a criminal rather than a friend. O'Henry is assumed to criticize the enforcement of laws and justice without examining the atmosphere which might drive people to delinquency and crime. Hooti and Partovy indicate that O'Henry was victimized by the socio-legal system he satired in his writing. He was a popular short story writer and a bank teller, but he had to embezzle money entrusted to him as a teller to provide for the treatment of his wife who was diagnosed with tuberculosis. His real motif for the theft and psychological state following the death of his wife were not taken into account when he was sentenced to five-year imprisonment.

Sharifa Akter (2014) argues that O. Henry deconstructed the harsh social realities of class and racial conflicts characterizing the American society in the wake of the Civil War with the use of humor and irony in his short stories. His characters, she thinks, are fantasized "to unmask the unimaginable reality by interpreting and experiencing the meaning of those fantasies" (286). He perceives fantasies as unsatisfied wishes repressed into unconsciousness to escape from harsh material realities. Thus, Akter contends that each character fantasizes a world of its own to recreate and romanticize reality. This accounts for the surprising ends of O. Henry's short fiction whose characters pursue the fulfillment of certain fantasies.

Mauricio D. A. Linde (2008) reveals that O. Henry's characters manifest the ideological shift from an older American culture committed to the Puritan virtues of self-denial and temperance, conservative traditions of the family and church, and supremacy of men over women to an emerging progressive consumer culture with its emphasis on pleasure, self-fulfillment and overspending. Linde further contends that O. Henry's short fiction disputes and poses important questions about previously incontestable concepts, immutable principles and indelible shibboleths of gender roles and Darwinist postulates on human types and evolution. The world in O. Henry's stories subsequently becomes "a place where nothing is reliable. Cause-and-effect sequences are

reverted, logic proves to be blind, sham appearances count more than disguised truths, uncertainties substitute for deeply rooted beliefs, and dysgenic replaces eugenic in the age of progress" (11). The "universe of masks and symptoms" (24), where Mauricio believes O. Henry's characters live, gives little or no value to gender identities and social roles and sets no boundaries between what is true and what is not. Proceeding from the suspension of truth and dismantling of established structures, be it gender, class or genre, Mauricio indicates that destiny, which governs the flow of events, has been replaced by casualty, accident or hap in the contemporary world. This accounts for the formal structure of O. Henry's narratives, invariably ruled by surprise endings, ambiguities and half-statements.

LIU Ke-dong and LIN Shi-rong, (2013) investigate class conflict in the nineteenth-century American society as it is portrayed in Faulkner's "Barn Burning" (1939). The sense of injustice the working class people have ignites their conflict with the high class over equal rights, opportunities and social status. Ke-dong and Shi-rong argues that Abner, the barn burner, holds the legal and social system engendered by the ruling class accountable for abusing tenant farmers through immoral means. He as well blames them for the pain and suffering the stress of injustice causes to the working class people. Abner's suppressed fury towards the rich, Ke-dong and Shi-rong emphasize, takes the form of violent threats to violate the legal rights and properties of the others. His resolutions to burn the barns of Mr. Harris and Mr. de Spain reveal his resentment of the class system and revenge of the working class oppressors. The violent rebellion Abner wages against the upper class brings him into conflict with his son Colonel Sartoris, who meets the burning of barns with condemnation and guilt rather than with commendation and consent.

Elizabeth S. Hope (2006) contends that the different classes and social ideologies Faulkner's characters belong to and identify with give rise to class conflict, violence and lack of communication. However, effective communication is more probable among people of the same class, regardless of the difference in their values. In this sense, she finds that "the interaction between Popeye and Ruby at the Frenchman Place, though antagonistic, exemplifies how persons possessing similar knowledge and occupying similar social positions are able to communicate" (24).

Grossmann Liane (2001) addresses the problem of class consciousness in Mansfield's "The Doll's House". The study examines the social circles formed in a classed society and shows how people in one circle could not integrate with others outside that circle due to the demarcation line drawn between the privileged upper class and the impoverished low class. Because students of different social classes are enrolled in a school represented as the melting pot and receive different treatment from teachers and mates, they become conscious of class distinction and the social ideologies in force at a very early stage of their lives according to Liane.

Rebecca J. Richardson (2005) examines "how Kathrine Mansfield creates characters of different socio-economic classes" (14). She adds that Mansfield condemns neither

class to ensure that readers show sympathy to characters of either class. In her reading of "The Garden-Party", Richardson believes that the story sheds light on the internal psychological conflict within the character of Laura Sheridan, the youngest member of rich Sheridan family. She commends the sympathy and care Laura shows to lower class people. Shaken violently by the death of their poor neighbor, Schot, who leaves a widowed wife and five orphaned children behind him, Laura wishes to cancel the garden party in order to help the newly widowed woman. Richardson concludes that most characters in Mansfield's stories are entrapped by the class system; and "are either poor or female" (74).

## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

### Social Triangle

In O Henry's "Social Triangle (1912)", materiality is the apparatus used to maintain class hierarchies and reproduce production relations. Seeking material pleasures and romanticizing the pretentious extravagant manners and customs of the upper class community evince the materialistic ideology protagonists assimilate and reproduce in a capitalist society. Such pursuit and assimilation tendencies are meant to repress the agitation and rebellion of lower class people against their exploiters and oppressors. Socially classed communities in this story are envisaged as a triangle with three unequal sides emblemizing hierarchies among low, middle and upper class people. Ikey Snigglefritz, a tailor's apprentice, Billy McMahan, a district leader, and Cortlandt Van Duyckink, an aristocrat, are fictionally characterized to be the triangle intersection points where class distinctions become blurred but not erased. Snigglefritz, for instance, is a low class person but acts like an aristocrat. The twelve dollars he weekly earns by working for a tailor-shop are not wisely invested to meet his personal and family needs. He could have selflessly spent them on his mother and three sisters who were living in squalor and infelicity. He could have saved them to start a tailor-shop of his own where others are apprenticed to him. Instead, he determinedly spends them in pursuit of publicity and pleasure at a pretentious public house known as Café Maginnis. Because the pub does not reverberate with acclamations of joy, gratitude and welcome for his arrival as it does when McMahan comes, he futilely believes that befriending and shaking hand with McMahan whom he idolizes as "the greatest man, the most wonderful man that the world had ever produced (122)" may arouse his senses of pride, glory and joy, and attract more public interest and notice to him. Thus, he treats his idol along with comrades to champagne for which he "threw his week's wages in a crumpled roll upon the bar (124)" and endured the insults of his mother and sisters.

In like manner, McMahan is an upper middle class person with the education and lifestyle of an aristocrat. He has become a mogul of politics, business and media; his own people dreaded, loved and obeyed him; papers had men to "chronicle his every word of wisdom (125)"; and honorary caricatures were drawn of him. Realizing that there is "a race of men from which he stood apart but that he viewed

with the eye of Moses looking over to the promised land (125)" accounts for his idolization of people with more power, authority and influence than those attained to him. The allusion made to Moses likens McMahan's pursuit of social rise to that of the Promised Land, Jerusalem. McMahan is as discontent of his social status as Snigglefritz, so he vainly imitates aristocracy by means of displaying extravagance in food, fashion and accessories. His wife ostentatiously has visiting cards; she puts on conspicuous diamonds and evening dresses; they have dinner at "noted hostelrys (124)" and drink the "costliest brands (124)" of wine.

McMahan as well seeks publicity by making acquaintances with people of a higher social class. Having a conversation or shaking hand with an aristocratic man like Cortlandt Van Duyckink constitutes an opportunity or "a startling and audacious act (124)" McMahan never dreamt would happen or come across his way for the accolade and royalty it bestows him with. Despite the brevity of the conversation McMahan luckily has with Van Duyckink over the latter's philanthropic endeavors and projects to alleviate poverty and wretchedness in low class communities, people in the hostelry stared at him with "envy and new admiration ... He saw smiles and bows about him. He became enveloped in the aura of dizzy greatness". His wife subsequently "trembled with ecstasy (127)"; and people suddenly became proud of their acquaintance with McMahan. In frivolous display of artificial generosity to celebrate the laudatory notice and publicity yielded to him through his extravagant manners and elitist acquaintances, he commands the waiter to serve wine to everyone in the hostelry. Yet, the waiter apologizes for not carrying out the order considering the "dignity of the house and its custom (127)".

Contrary to the expectations of McMahan, the romanticization and assimilation of the materialistic values and traditions of the elite capitalist class contribute to their alienation from but not reconciliation with or acceptance by their upper class idols. Van Duyckink, for instance, depreciates the fame and popularity his lower class romanticists and idolizers like McMahan have rewarded and crowned him with. He realizes that his idolizers are hungry to catch his eyes; and that his nod may bestow them with prestige and knighthood. He, nonetheless, avoids speaking to or looking at them. Inter-class dialogue accordingly turns out to be too futile to yield acceptance or appreciation to the assimilationists of the elite culture and value system. Rather, it socially alienates them from either social classes like what happens to Snigglefritz who maintains the gratitude and appreciation of neither his family nor his upper class idols.

### The Doll's House

Mansfield's "The Doll's House" elucidates the classist nature of the educational system in New Zealand society during the early 1920s. The school whose policies and rules are supposed to be class-blind and applicable to all students is delineated as an institution nurturing classism. The story is set at a time when upper and lower class students attended different schools. The five child characters, the Burnell daughters and the Kelvey daughters, belong to different social classes but are enrolled in

the same school because the closest school for the upper class children is miles away from the neighborhood. The parents of Isabel, Lottie and Kezia Burnell would not have sent their daughters to that school neither would the judge, doctor, storekeeper or the milkman if they had had another choice. The misfits and outcasts in this school community are Else Kelvey and Lil Kelvey due to their low social status.

Teachers as well as parents contribute to the socialization of the school children from the perspective of the narrator in Mansfield's story. As for the school teachers, they are blamed for their prejudice and injustice toward lower class students. The third person narrator shows that even the teacher has a special voice and a special smile for them. The unequal treatment upper and lower class students receive manifests the class ideology of the school which recognizes the social demarcation line "drawn at the Kelveys" (29). Teachers attempt neither to integrate their marginalized disadvantaged students into the mainstream nor to relieve them from harassment and poverty.

As for the parents, Burnell's mother forbids her daughters to befriend or communicate with the Kelveys and so do the mothers of the other children. They instruct them that Lil and Else are socially inferior; and are going to be servants or maids like their mother when they grow up. Parents' social prejudices are extended to their children who humiliate and insult Lil and Else and raise questions about their family background. They learn that they are the daughters of a washerwoman and a prisoner. They realize that Mrs. Kelvey makes her daughters conspicuous by dressing them in a strange manner. They are dressed in "bits" (30) given to her by the people for whom she is working. Everybody laughs at them though they are trying to look decent on their way.

Poor Kelveys are "shunned by everybody (29)" considering their inferior social status. When the Burnell's children receive their doll's house from Mrs. Hay, they invite all the schoolmates to see it but Else and Lil. The fame of the doll's house has spread and become the hot topic of the school for days. The children were fascinated by the rooms, kitchen, chimneys, bedclothes and doll family of the house. The social prejudices of the parents are counteracted by the impartiality and innocence of little Kezia Burnell, who entreats her mother to let the Kelveys see the doll's house just once. Yet, the mother rebukingly reminds her of their class difference and demands her not to do so. Kezia appears as being too innocent to understand why the Kelveys are to be kept away; and why they are "going to be a servant" (34). She, nonetheless, allows them to come and see the beautiful doll's house despite Lil's remarks that "Your ma told our ma you wasn't to speak to us (36)". This unsullied innocent act angers Aunt Berly who responds to the existence of the little Kelveys in the courtyard by shoeing "them out as if they were chickens (37)". She further instructs Kezia that she should never attempt to cross the demarcation line drawn for lower class people.

### Barn Burner

Peace Court is another state apparatus capitalists employ to dominate and subordinate people of lower classes. Faulkner's "Barn Burning", which is set during the American civil war,

portrays a community comprising three hierarchical classes of land owners, sharecroppers and slaves. The laws regulating tenancy labor in the story are manipulated to maintain the ruling class hegemony and ensure the compliance and submission of sharecroppers. Characters in the story counteract the authority of the court by acts of defiance and vandalism. The third person narrator in the story negatively represents Abner Snopes as a vandal in his confrontation with his employers Mr. Harris and Major de Spain. Though the Justice of the Peace Courts does not condemn Abner for burning the barn of Mr. Harris, he is referred to as a barn burner and advised to leave the country and never come back to it. The damage Abner causes to the one-hundred-dollar rug with the smeared prints of his boots irritates Major de Spain who demands him to wash it and pay "twenty bushels of corn (18)" against his crops. Having felt injustice, Abner pursues a remedy by bringing a case in the Peace Courts to which he explains that he "washed the tracks out and took the rug back to him (18)". The justice, nonetheless, resolves that the rug was not returned in the same condition it was before making the tracks on it. He accordingly holds Abner liable for the damage but reduces the reimbursement value to the amount of "ten bushels of corn over and above (his) contract (19)" with Major de Spain. The unfair sentences Abner receives in both cases heighten his feelings of injustice and alienation which account for his resolution to enact revenge by burning the barn of Major de Spain. They as well breach the relationship of trust with his son Colonel Sartoris, whom he suspects was "fixing to tell (21)" the judges about his involvement in the burning of the barns. The one to be blamed for the transformation of Abner into a vandal is the court through its empathetic coalition with landowners against sharecroppers.

### CONCLUSION

The narrators in Faulkner's "Barn Burning", Henry's "The Social Triangle" and Mansfield's "The Doll's House" relate the reproduction of class relations and hierarchies to either of the state apparatuses of school, court, family and materiality. Such apparatuses according to Louis Althusser control the aspects of social life and engender the hegemony of the upper class ideology. The selected stories effectively show how class hegemony operates; how it ensures the submission and subordination of lower class people; and how it socializes people. The study finds that most protagonists such as Ikey Snigglefritz, McMahan, Else, Lil and Colonel Sartoris not only idolize but they also assimilate the ruling class culture which never recognizes or appreciates their assimilationist tendencies. This results in their alienation and displacement from their native class culture and the upper class culture as well.

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