

Bonnie Parker: And the Enslavement of a Modern Woman

Recent books on the infamous American outlaw duo, Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, confirm their stature as the premiere American couple. Nine major books on the two have appeared since 2000 including the acclaimed John Neal Phillips' 2002 reprint of his 1996 book, *Running Together*, Jim Knight's *Bonnie and Clyde: A Twenty-first Century Update* in 2005, books by Paul Schneider and E.R. Milner, an edited, eyewitness account by Blanche Barrow, and even more recently, Jeff Guinn's scholarly reassessment of the duo's hard life choices. This outpouring dwarfs all other "couple" accounts, including the literature on John and Abigail Adams that has sprung up around a recent PBS series, and other celebrity couples--Luci and Desi, Joe DiMaggio and Marilyn Monroe, George and Laura Bush, and Michelle and Barack Obama. It seems that part of the reason for this outpouring is linked to an American fantasy in hard times to resist discredited authorities, and at the same time to solve the problems of our fractious domestic lifestyles with a dazzling romance that holds through thick and thin. With all the detail and excitement these dramatic narratives have created, however, there has been a lack of character analysis. The recent literature goes back and forth about Robin Hood paradigms, and theories of poverty, but the main accounts assume that Bonnie and Clyde

were a loving, back-against-the-wall, couple. Authors have depicted the duo as a great team who loved and supported each other until their deaths. What they do not show is that Bonnie was quite different from Clyde, to the extent that she was as much a victim of Barrow's anger as the shop-owners and lawmen that Clyde murdered.¹

Historians have focused to a great extent on actual slavery and human trafficking globally, but they have missed the kind of psychological slavery that often connects brutal men with victimized women. In this perspective of Bonnie and Clyde, I will argue that Bonnie Parker became a "de-facto slave"² of Clyde, by the means of her psychological vulnerability, and the blackmailing and manipulation practiced by Clyde. I will argue that much of the recent literature is misleading, because instead of the apparent team they assume, there was in fact, a striking, asymmetrical relation between the famous outlaw duo.

In order to understand the psychological servitude that tied Bonnie to Clyde, we must first look at the growth of factors in the modern female mindset that make such asymmetry possible. Women and others born to subservience can slip into a psychological slavery that is just as intense, and harmful as actual slavery. This psychological slavery is based on strongly inbred myths, or illusions, and one of the first

¹ Jeff Guinn, *Go Down Together: The True, Untold Story of Bonnie and Clyde* (New York, 2009); Blanche Caldwell Barrow *My Life With Bonnie And Clyde* (Norman, Oklahoma, 2005); James R. Knight, *Bonnie and Clyde: A Twenty-First-Century Update* (2003); John Neal Phillips, *Running With Bonnie and Clyde: The Ten Fast Years of Ralph Fults* (2002). Robin Cole Jett, *Traveling History with Bonnie and Clyde: A Road Tripper's Guide to Gangster Sites in Middle America* (2008); E. R. Milner, *The Lives and Times of Bonnie & Clyde* (Carbondale 2003); Phillip Steele, *The Family Life of Bonnie and Clyde*, (New York, 2000).

² Denoting someone or something that is such in fact.

of these deep-seated beliefs that is socialized into many girls at a young age is the Myth of the All-Providing Father. The Parker family lived in Rowena, Texas, where Bonnie's father, Henry, was a bricklayer. They lived quite comfortably off of his plentiful salary during the booming 1920s when small towns like Rowena were being transformed by automobiles, and the emergence of sizable middle class subdivisions. In the very impressionable, conscious and memorable period in Parker's life from age four to eight, the Parkers ate balanced meals and lived in an ample middle class wage. In this "Dawn of Consciousness Era," Bonnie was raised to be a southern lady; taught how to pour tea, and charm all-powerful men like her father, and uncles. The implicit and all-encompassing lesson: "if the lead man in your life adores you, you will live comfortably."

The "Post Paternal Era"³ came all too soon for young Parker. Her father died unexpectedly, which left the family without a means to support themselves. Parker's mother did not hold a job and the family was relying solely on Henry's salary as a bricklayer. So, in order to keep her family from becoming poor, Emma Parker decided to move the family to west Dallas, which was where her parents lived. She got a job as a seamstress and began to support her family. Here, Parker's life approximated that of many young girls in the modern age who live without fathers, and live in poverty. It was also, in Parker's case, the start of America's Great Depression. Emma Parker under these circumstances faced desperate options, but chose a course that would help tie Bonnie more firmly to the "providing male" of her later life. Emma Parker tried to preserve a kind of middle class decorum by having the family act as if they were not poor. She

³ The era after the death of Parker's father.

expected her children to sit with good posture, and for her girls to walk as ladies. She took her children to church every Sunday because she said, “That is what the best people did.” This parade quickly became a charade in the mind of the adolescent Parker. The young girl learned not only what a misfortune it was to not have a man around the house, but how a merely feminist pretense was a sham. In other words, a great refutation of modern feminism and all it represents occurs in the minds of many children of female-headed households. This is not to put the blame on Emma Parker, or on single women, but merely to note that their options are severely limited. As it happened, the future “sink to his feet” tendency of her daughter was enhanced by the fact that her mother lived a lie. The implicit message, that every good woman needs a man was intensified by yet another message: a woman can only trust a man.

Parker’s dependence, which later would intensify into obsessive-compulsive deference to Clyde’s wishes, also hinged on her physical features. Even as a young married woman, Parker was described as a “pixie,” only five-feet tall and 90 pounds. As for many young women today, the feminist scenario appears out of the question when a woman sees herself in the mirror as a “powder puff.” Studies have shown that modern Presidents, CEOs, and celebrities all tend to be substantially taller than the norm.⁴ In a world where “bigger is better,” Parker knew in her heart that some alliance with a male who was more of a presence than herself would be necessary to break the cycle of her poverty, and to curb her obsessions about being a “loser,” and “living the lie.”

In fact, Parker was a very capable young woman. She was always on the honor roll. She made top marks and excelled especially in writing and speaking. Bonnie

⁴ “Short Guys Finish Last,” *The Economist* (23 December 1995).

dreamed of becoming a writer or an actress and hoped to be famous. And yet as with addicts, long-term goals remained empty unless mixed with short-term fixes. Biographers have noted that Parker's inferiority syndrome led to many bouts of crying throughout her life.⁵ A quick cure for her biting anxieties and obsessions always seemed the first step toward obtaining the long-range scenario. The young woman, overtaken by an inferiority obsession, could not see that the quick cure would disable the long term goal. Rather, the quick cure was necessary to make the pursuit of the long range end feasible.

Parker was bred to believe that womanly achievement would matter little. Her grades and awards were easily swept aside. By the middle of her adolescent years, she began to see her salvation in marriage. Already at fourteen, she was intrigued by one classmate, Roy Thornton, and in a year she had practiced enough at being a young woman, a flirt, and a girl friend to make the affair serious. Almost a year after the two began dating, they decided to get married. Parker dove, head-first into the romance. She had her lower thigh tattooed with a heart expressing her love of Roy, a very daring, extraordinary step for the 1930s. The wedding ring she received from Roy quickly developed into a kind of amulet for her, and she wore it up until the day she died, through all her capers with Clyde.⁶ It was the love of being in love that represented her great fulfillment, and escape. It was the wonder of having that passport to sufficiency—the all-providing male—around that gave her the one ecstasy that would serve as her balm in life. For Roy, Parker dropped out of school. For Roy, she kept away from her somewhat

⁵ Jeff Guinn, *Go Down Together* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009), 44.

⁶ CBSnews.com.

critical mother initially for long stretches. Parker's male illusion was at this point inscribed on her heart, and it would henceforth be partially hidden at times, but never effaced. Later in her poem *Street Girl*, Parker wrote of "Santa Claus Men," who would provide a woman with glamour, money, and opportunity. In her poem, *Suicide Sal*, Bonnie described how the young woman protagonist found "Jack" to be "like a god to me."⁷

That this myth could live independently of the reality was a testament to how strong a myth it was. In actuality, the marriage with Roy, like many teenage romances kindled by desperation, proved a disaster. Parker missed her family and was distraught at the idea of not seeing her one remaining parent for long periods of time. Soon enough, Roy began to beat her, and leave her. Parker began to keep a journal, and its first words expressed both what a male fixation she had as well as her lamentation about her marriage: "I have a roaming husband with a roaming eye."⁸ Roy was later put in jail on accounts of burglary and he eventually was killed in an attempt to escape.

After the split with Roy, Bonnie was crushed. She wore beautiful dresses when she could, usually in red, with purses and hats to match. She kept her hair chopped short, in the bobbed style of the 1920s. She dated some men but was marked now as an-already married girl from a bad part of town, always possibly pregnant to outsiders, but never pregnant to herself. In fact, she seemed unable to conceive children, another liability, in her own mind to attracting a stable mate. Without prospects or family, Parker got a job

⁷ "The Poems of Bonnie Parker" < <http://texashideout.tripod.com/poem.html> >

[Accessed 30 December 2009].

⁸ Guinn, *Together*, 50.

as a waitress in West Dallas, but with the economy on the decline, she didn't hold the job long. While looking for work, Parker agreed to stay at a friend's house who had recently broken her arm, to help around the house. Parker was coming apart inside with desperation. She was the wrong sex, the wrong height, a malfunctioning female; a father-deprived little fairy whose abilities were redundant to a society that lacked jobs. It was that night that Bonnie met Clyde.

To comprehend the idea of Bonnie becoming a hostage to a criminal, we must now speculate on the up-bringing of the subjugator. Clyde Barrow is a good poster child for the hyperactive young male child of modern dysfunctional families, full of unspent rage, needing in today's context to be drugged by Ritalin just to get him through the eighth grade. Clyde was the sixth out of eight children for Henry and Cummie Barrow. One symptom of modern times, the breakup of the family, also affected the Barrows, but in this case, Henry, the father, seemed ineffective, and it was the son who schemed for his independence. Henry Barrow could neither read nor write. The Barrows were tenant farmers in Telico, Texas who were not making enough money to even put food on the table. Seething with indignation, Clyde and his older siblings were often sent to live with and beg from other relatives. When Clyde was about 12 years old, the family moved to west Dallas. They began their urban life together living under the Oak Street viaduct. West Dallas was the poor side of town, which consisted mainly of families who were

trying to make ends meet and a numerous amount of miscreant children. Clyde was ambitious, angry, and ill-educated.⁹

Famous American slave-holders from before the Civil War era like Jefferson Davis, Robert Rhett, William Yancey, and James Hammond were explosive men, with vitriolic tempers. They were highly ambitious; generally lacking in liberal education and willing to cut slack with the means should they hinder the ends. Barrow grew up to be such a man. He was enticing, with thick brown hair parted on the left side, and a smile that could be turned on at will, and then shut off with an impulsiveness known to gamblers, and actors. The aspiring slave master, Clyde spent his time in front of mirror, modeling new clothes, and barking out orders, dreaming himself into the acquisition of a sort of “hypnotic magnetism.” As the young Hitler understood that charisma could enslave a nation, so the young Barrow instinctively developed a kind of inner light and flashiness that could make him the king of his world.

Clyde, by this time, was working his way up as the leader of a criminal band. A group formed around his brother Buck, and petty criminal, Sidney Moore, began to find Clyde to be an authority on everything from cars to guns, girls, and holdups. In an earlier time, when a man’s dream was to inherit his father’s farm, the need to emerge at the head of a band was not as pronounced. But in the modern corporate order, the desirable man must also establish his charisma, his daring—and his ability to use force when necessary. As Clyde learned the skills necessary to put hardened men in line under him, he was

⁹ Rosenberg, Jennifer. “Bonnie and Clyde

<<http://history1900s.about.com/od/1930s/a/bonnieandclyde.htm>. 2006.> [Accessed

17 December 2009.

more than ready to shackle a desperate 90-pound woman, and take her outside the zone of the law, so that his dominance could be complete. Even fellow criminals at this point were awed by Barrow's "irascible, volcanic temper," this ability to turn quickly with wild abandon on another. This was the quality that Southern men like the Texas senator, Louis Wigfall, cultivated before the Civil War, to offer the satisfaction of a duel at a moment's notice, to let everyone know that retribution for any misdeed could come quick and decisively.

The scene was now set for the two to meet, and for Clyde to lasso Bonnie into a life as his "slave." This is a difficult thing to contemplate for those entranced by the Hollywood mystique of romance that surrounds Bonnie and Clyde. But the fact remains that she would be shackled not only to badboy Clyde, but to his bursts of anger, his anti-societal vengeance obsession, his violence, and his literally hopeless game plan of continual, do-it-yourself crime.¹⁰ Clyde came into the kitchen of Parker's friend and introduced himself. They talked for hours. Clyde established a circuit of feeling through his eyes. Bonnie quickly fell for him. Despite the fact he was already a hardened criminal, Clyde, like an aspiring fascist dictator told a Big Lie with grace. He was only a victim of overzealous law officers. In Parker's most famous poem, "The Trail's End," she espoused the theory that she knew Clyde "when he was clean." In her rendering, it was the lawmen who "fooled around" with this ambitious ticket to her own success. Parker, beset with illusions, now bought a huge lie, and went forth as Clyde's pawn, believing she was helping a righteous soul-mate. A few days later, Clyde told Bonnie that the cops were looking for him and he had to get away. Clyde was soon caught and

¹⁰ Bonnie is free from her dreary life and is now a psychological slave to Clyde

thrown in jail and he called on Parker to visit him. Living in a world of illusions and lies, Parker did the unthinkable, and followed the bidding of a dangerous criminal.

When Bonnie came to visit Clyde, he asked her to do him a favor. One of Clyde's cellmates lived nearby, and he asked Bonnie to break into his house, steal a pistol, and smuggle it into the cell for them. Clyde sweet-talked Bonnie, and in this zero hour of animal male charisma, and female fantasy, the deed was done. She would do anything for Clyde, for her whole life had come down to the need for male-rescue. So she went through with the plan and helped Clyde and his cellmates escape. A recent book has noted that Hitler killed the Jews rampantly near the end of World War II because it forced the German people into a corner—they would now have to fight to the end to avoid retribution on themselves. When Clyde got Bonnie to do a criminal act, she too was implicated, and she too would have to fight to the end to avoid retribution from the police.¹¹

Parker now was a slave not only to a man but to a fate she soon began to recognize, would be a youthful, sudden death. She herself would never shoot or kill a person. Even the authorities who gunned down the twenty-three-year-old in 1932 conceded that she was no bloodthirsty killer and that when in custody the policemen according to a young law officer, treated her like a daughter. She seemed to them to be something fantastic, a Shirley Temple who was hard pressed, a high school valedictorian

¹¹ Ballinger, Frank M. "Bonnie & Clyde's Hideout."

<http://texashideout.tripod.com/bc.htm> 8 April 2005. [Accessed 28 October 2009].

who had been framed. One officer even gave her a shirt of his to wear instead of the prison garment, as the latter seemed so completely absurd on the body of the dejected girl. How had she, they wondered, become the accomplice of rage-filled Clyde Barrow? She did not plan robberies. She had never used a gun, and would only pose with one when asked by Clyde, which is another illustration of the life of slavery Bonnie was living. She was in so many respects just one very unfortunate, impoverished woman. But now she was chained to a violent man with a violent temper whose mode of sustenance involved—not running off to Alaska for their sake, but robbing small stores, gas stations, and banks while killing 13 people.

Life on the road for Bonnie was filled with disappointments, crushed dreams, and a gunshot away from death. The law was always on their tails, and a few times it was a miracle they escaped. If she seemed to be in love with Clyde, that point was moot. Clyde who gave his guns female names, may well have loved them, perhaps even sexually more than Parker. According to a gas station attendant who was kidnapped by the pair, Barrow and Parker did not have intimate, loving relations. It was also rumored that Clyde was gay, which would have crushed Bonnie's need for a man's touch. It was just that Clyde was her only source of sustenance and life. Grunts, misleading innuendo, long rides to nowhere, and nights where a naked woman might just as well encounter her friend's loaded pistol under a pillow rather than his hand ensued. Roy's ring remained on her hand, the lone holdout of a more auspicious time. Parker's mother Emma, for one, would never recognize that a love affair between her daughter and Clyde ever existed. And she would have known because Bonnie visited her mother while an outlaw. Later Emma, refused to have the two buried together.

While on the road with Clyde, Bonnie wanted a way to escape. Yet, she was too afraid to what would happen if she were to leave Clyde. Would he find and gun her down for escaping his “chains” that kept her bound? In her poem, *Suicide Sal*, confiscated by police after a raid, Bonnie wrote that “rods were rulers.” “Rod” can be slang for “pistol”, which would summarize the gun-enchanted Clyde in any case, but it can also be an off-color allusion to males. She also wrote: “You’ve heard of a woman’s glory being spent on a downright cur.” What was she, in a sense, but a young woman bound to a violent, senseless, man who acted the part of an enraged, ill-bred dog? Could she now go back home to her loving mother; start a new life, one of which she could live her dreams instead of someone else’s? Obviously not. The “rod,” the “cur,” had the authority. Clyde was an intimidating factor that kept her by his side. With a violent temper and trigger-happy finger, there is no doubt that she could have endured verbal and perhaps physical abuse. He kept her chained up by promises that would come up empty, the idea of a man to love.

On May 23, 1934, Bonnie and Clyde were heading to an accomplice’s house when they were caught in a trap set up by law enforcement. They were ambushed and given no chance of surrender. More than 130 rounds were shot into their car, and it was the end for Bonnie and Clyde. Each body was hit around 50 times, but Bonnie did not die instantly. Reports from the lawmen that gunned them down reported that you could hear her long horrified screams as the bullets tore into the car. And why such screaming? Why not a stoic death, or a Warren Beatty-Faye Dunaway pouring out of tender, last-minute eye-to-eye affinity? Were such screams for the police’s sake? Or were such

screams meant in the end for that one man who had failed, and had failed her, that one man who had given her not riches, but terror?¹²

Bonnie became a victim like so many other women have before. She fell for a con man, who used every aspect of her life to entrap her, making it impossible for her to escape. Clyde became sort of a drug to Bonnie; He gave her the presents and access to fine clothes of her father, Henry. He gave her a male image that was so necessary for her sense of wellbeing. But as she was caught in his trap, she too was soon in trouble with the law, and she had no way out. It is no surprise that Parker's gangster poems, "Trail's End," "Suicide Sal," and the "Street Girl," are all filled with fatalism. The women are chained in each of these poems to a dreadful fate. Just so, Clyde led his slave to her death. He lacked a game plan, and brought her into a meaningless downward spiral, of "goin-nowhere" crimes, and get-aways. Her accomplice lacked any end-plan, and any true love for the otherwise, law-abiding, smart young woman he had in his possession. If Clyde had loved Parker, he would have tried to save her. But instead he lived out the myth of his own invulnerability and need for revenge.¹³

¹² Geringer, Joseph. "Bonnie & Clyde: Romeo and Juliet in a Getaway Car."

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¹³ Other sources that informed my story about the enslavement of Bonnie to Clyde at many points are: Allen, Elizabeth Jean. "Bonnie and Clyde." ≤<http://www.squidoo.com/bonnieandclyde>> 5 February 2006. Web. [Accessed 3 November 2009].

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