

Barn Burning by William Faulkner

Context

Born in New Albany, Mississippi, in 1897, William Faulkner became famous for a series of novels that explore the South's historical legacy, its fraught and often tensely violent present, and its uncertain future. This grouping of major works includes *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1931), and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), all firmly rooted in the fictional Mississippi county of Yoknapatawpha. By creating an imaginary setting, Faulkner allows his characters to inhabit a fully realized world that serves as a mirror to and microcosm of the South that the novelist knew so well and explored so deeply. Faulkner's legendary milieu serves as a safe and distant—albeit magnifying—lens through which he could examine the practices, folkways, and attitudes that have united and divided the people of the South.

Faulkner was particularly interested in the moral implications of history. As the South emerged from the Civil War and Reconstruction and attempted to shake off the stigma of slavery, its residents were often portrayed as being caught in competing and evolving modes, torn between a new and an older, more tenaciously rooted world order. Religion and politics frequently fell short of their implied goals of providing order and guidance and served only to complicate and divide. Society, with its gossip, judgment, and harsh pronouncements, conspired to thwart the desires and ambitions of individuals struggling to unearth and embrace their identities. Across Faulkner's fictive landscapes, individual characters often stage epic struggles, prevented from realizing their potential or establishing and asserting a firm sense of their place in the world.

"Barn Burning," in its examination of a boy's struggle with family loyalty and a higher sense of justice, fits firmly in Faulkner's familiar fictional mode. Poverty and irrational, criminal behavior divide a family and, in the end, leave them more indigent and dependent than ever. The story first appeared in the June 1939 issue of Harper's magazine and received the O. Henry Award for the year's best work of short fiction. The story, a critical and popular favorite, was included in Faulkner's *Collected Stories* (1950) and later reprinted in the *Selected Short Stories of William Faulkner* (1961). In his portrayal of the Snopes clan, an underprivileged family with few economic prospects, Faulkner examines the deep-rooted classism and systems that rigidly divided southern society along racial, economic, and familial lines. The Snopeses and their struggle, in particular, symbolize the falling away of an old order, as the agrarian South slowly shifted to embrace a new era of industrialization and modernization. Although Faulkner's merciless portrayal of Abner Snopes precludes any sympathy for his peculiar brand of vigilante justice, the harsh reality the family faced was little more than institutionalized slavery and a life sentence of poverty and subsistence living.

Abner Snopes represents a common trope in Faulkner's fiction—the dispossessed male, shorn of power and lashing out at a world that he perceives as habitually wronging him and thwarting his felonious desires. Faulkner examines the sway that such menacing figures have over family and community by portraying the individuals caught up in the shadows of these savage personalities, individuals who are powerless and often culpable. Freedom comes only for Sartoris, the youngest Snopes boy, but, as is frequently the case in Faulkner's works, emancipation comes at a price. Sartoris has defended his sense of honor and attempted to restore the family name, but he ultimately faces an uncertain future alone.

Faulkner won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1949, and he donated half the prize money to a fund that supports new writers. His gift takes the form today of the PEN/Faulkner Award. He died in 1962.

Plot Overview

Young Colonel Sartoris Snopes crouches on a keg in the back of the store that doubles for the town court. He cannot see the table where his father and his father's opponent, Mr. Harris, are seated. The justice of the peace asks Mr. Harris for proof that Mr. Snopes burned his barn. Mr. Harris describes the numerous times Snopes's hog broke through the fence and got into his cornfields. The final time, when Mr. Harris demanded a dollar for the animal's return, the black man who was sent to fetch the hog gave Mr. Harris an ominous warning that wood and hay are combustible. Later that night, fire claimed Mr. Harris's barn. While the judge claims that that by itself isn't proof, Mr. Harris has Sartoris called to testify before the court. The boy knows his father is expecting him to lie on his behalf. After doing so, the judge asks Mr. Harris whether he wants the child cross-examined, but Mr. Harris snarls to have the boy removed.

The judge dismisses the charges against Snopes but warns him to leave the county for good, and Snopes agrees to comply. Snopes and his two sons then leave the store and head to their wagon. A child in the crowd accuses them of being barn burners and strikes Sartoris, knocking him down. Snopes orders Sartoris into the wagon, which is laden with their possessions and where his two sisters, mother, and aunt are waiting. Snopes prevents his crying wife from cleaning Sartoris's bloodied face. That night, the family camps around the father's typically small fire. Snopes wakes Sartoris and takes him onto the dark road, where he accuses him of planning to inform the judge of his guilt in the arson case. Snopes strikes Sartoris on the head and tells him he must always remain loyal to his family.

The next day, the family arrives at its new home and begins unloading the wagon. Snopes takes Sartoris to the house of Major de Spain, the owner on whose land the family will work. Despite the servant's protests, Snopes tracks horse manure into the opulent house, leaving only when Miss Lula asks him to. He resentfully remarks that the home was built by slave labor. Two hours later, the servant drops off the rug that Snopes had soiled and instructs him to clean and return it. Snopes supervises as the two sisters reluctantly clean the carpet with lye, and he uses a jagged stone to work the surface of the expensive rug. After dinner, the family retires to their sleeping areas. Snopes forces Sartoris to fetch the mule and ride along with him to return the cleaned rug. At the house, Snopes flings the rug onto the floor after loudly kicking at the door several times.

The next morning, as Sartoris and Snopes prepare the mules for plowing, de Spain arrives on horseback to inform them that the rug was ruined from improper cleaning. In lieu of the hundred-dollar replacement fee, the major says Snopes will be charged twenty additional bushels of corn. Sartoris defends Snopes's actions, telling him that he did the best he could with the soiled carpet and that they will refuse to supply the extra crops. Snopes puts Sartoris back to work, and the following days are consumed with the constant labor of working their acreage. Sartoris hopes that Snopes will turn once and for all from his destructive impulses.

The next weekend, Snopes and his two sons head once again to a court appearance at the country store, where the well-dressed de Spain is in attendance. Sartoris attempts to defend Snopes, saying that he never burned the barn, but Snopes orders him back to the wagon. The judge mistakenly thinks the rug was burned in addition to being soiled and destroyed. He rules

that Snopes must pay ten extra bushels of corn when the crop comes due, and court is adjourned. After a trip to the blacksmith's shop for wagon repairs, a light meal in front of the general store, and a trip to a corral where horses are displayed and sold, Snopes and his sons return home after sundown.

Despite his wife's protests, Snopes empties the kerosene from the lamp back into its five-gallon container and secures a lit candle stub in the neck of a bottle. Snopes orders Sartoris to fetch the oil. He obeys but fantasizes about running away. He tries to dissuade Snopes, but Snopes grabs Sartoris by the collar and orders his wife to restrain him. Sartoris escapes his mother's clutches and runs to the de Spain house, bursting in on the startled servant. Breathlessly, he blurts out the word Barn! Sartoris runs desperately down the road, moving aside as the major's horse comes thundering by him. Three shots ring out and Snopes is killed, his plan to burn de Spain's barn thwarted. At midnight, Sartoris sits on a hill. Stiff and cold, he hears the whippoorwills and heads down the hill to the dark woods, not pausing to look back.

Character List

Colonel Sartoris Snopes (Sarty) - A ten-year-old boy and the story's protagonist. Small and wiry, with wild, gray eyes and uncombed brown hair, Sartoris wears patched and faded jeans that are too small for him. He has inherited his innocence and morality from his mother, but his father's influence has made Sartoris old beyond his years. He is forced to confront an ethical quandary that pits his loyalty to his family against the higher concepts of justice and morality.

Abner Snopes - Sartoris's father and a serial arsonist. Cold and violent, Snopes has a harsh, emotionless voice, shaggy gray eyebrows, and pebble-colored eyes. Stiff-bodied, he walks with a limp he acquired from being shot by a Confederate's provost thirty years earlier while stealing a horse during the Civil War. Known for his wolflike independence and anger, he is convinced of his right to unleash his destructive revenge on anyone whom he believes has wronged him.

Lennie Snopes - Sartoris's mother. Sad, emotional, and caring, Lennie futilely attempts to stem her husband's destructive impulses. She is beaten down by the family's endless cycle of flight and resettlement and the pall of criminality that has stained her clan. Nervous in the presence of her irascible, unpredictable husband, she is a slim source of comfort for Sartoris in the violence-tinged world of the Snopes family.

Major de Spain - A well-dressed and affluent landowner. De Spain brings the soiled rug to the Snopeses' cabin and insists that they clean it and return it. Snopes's unpredictable nature unsettles de Spain, and he uneasily answers Snopes's charges in court.

Mr. Harris - A landowner for whom the Snopeses were short-term tenants. The plaintiff in the first court case, Harris had attempted to resolve the conflict over the Snopeses' hog. In the end, he is left with a burned barn and no legal recourse, as his case is dismissed for lack of evidence.

Colonel John Snopes - Sartoris's older brother. Although his name is not given in the story, Faulkner's other works of fiction feature the same character and identify him. A silent, brooding version of his father, John is slightly thicker, with muddy eyes and a habit of chewing tobacco.

Net and an Unnamed Sister - Sartoris's twin sisters. In his brief description of the two women, Faulkner focuses on their physicality and corpulence. They are described as large, bovine, and lethargic, with flat loud voices. They are cheaply dressed in calico and ribbons.

Lizzie - Lennie's sister and Sartoris's aunt. Lizzie supplies a voice of justice and morality when she boldly asserts, at the end of the story, that if Sartoris does not warn the de Spains that their barn is about to be burned, then she will.

Lula de Spain - Major de Spain's wife. Lula wears a smooth, gray gown with lace at the throat, with rolled-up sleeves and an apron tied around her. Assertive but intimidated by the imposing presence of Snopes, she resents having her home violated.

The Servant - A man in livery who works in the de Spain mansion. When Snopes bursts in and damages the rug, he calls the servant a racist epithet, viewing his presence as a mere extension of the slavery that dominated the South until the Civil War.

Themes, Motifs, and Symbols
Themes

LOYALTY TO FAMILY VERSUS LOYALTY TO THE LAW

In "Barn Burning," Sartoris must decide whether loyalty to family or loyalty to the law is the moral imperative. For the Snopes family, particularly for Sartoris's father, family loyalty is valued above all else. The family seems to exist outside of society and even outside the law, and their moral code is based on family loyalty rather than traditional notions of right or wrong. Snopes tells Sartoris that he should remain loyal to his "blood," or family, or he will find himself alone. This threat suggests how isolated the family really is and how fully they rely on one another for protection, even when their faith in this protection is unfounded.

Blood in a literal sense appears as well, underscoring the intensity of the ties among family. For example, when the Snopeses are leaving the makeshift courthouse at the beginning of the story, a local boy accuses Snopes of being a barn burner, and, when Sartoris whirls around to confront him, the boy hits Sartoris and bloodies his face. The blood, dried and caked on his face during the ride out of town, is, in a way, a mark of pride: Sartoris had defended the family name. However, after Snopes once again plans to burn a barn, Sartoris understands that family loyalty comes at too great a cost and is too heavy a burden. He rejects family loyalty and instead betrays his father, warning de Spain that his barn is about to be burned. Only when Snopes is killed—presumably shot to death by de Spain at the end of the story—is the family free. They were loyal, but they still wind up alone.

THE SEARCH FOR PEACE

Surrounded by violence and conflict, Sartoris is constantly overwhelmed by fear, grief, and despair, and he knows that he must search for peace if he ever wants to be free from these tumultuous emotions. Sartoris specifically refers to fear, grief, and despair throughout the story, revealing the depth of his struggle to find his place among the demands of his family and his own developing ideas of morality. To Sartoris, peace, joy, and dignity are the alluring promises of a different kind of life, one that seems very far away from life in the Snopes household. His

sense that a different kind of life exists grows particularly acute when he and Snopes approach de Spain's house. Sartoris is enamored with the grounds and the imposing house, and the domestic bliss that seems to emanate from the estate gives Sartoris a temporary comfort. The "spell of the house" seems to change everything, and Sartoris foolishly hopes that it has the power to turn his father from his criminal ways. For the first time, Sartoris has glimpsed a peaceful future.

Although Sartoris eventually frees himself from his father and his oppressive family life, he does not immediately find the peace and dignity that he expected would await him. Perhaps the happiness he seeks does exist for him in the future, as he leaves his family and old life behind without looking back. However, Sartoris has found a quieter, more subtle form of happiness. Life under his father was lived in a heightened state of extreme fear, grief, and despair. Now, the extreme emotions that loomed over Sartoris's young life have eased. His life may not have undergone a radical transformation, but "grief and despair [were] now no longer terror and fear but just grief and despair." Sartoris can't escape entirely, but he has already achieved a kind of peace.

Motifs

DARKNESS

The pervasive darkness in "Barn Burning" gestures to the lack of clarity that prevails in Snopes's thoughts and actions as well as the bleakness into which Snopes drags his family. Several significant episodes in the family's life occur under cover of darkness. For example, when the family camps by the roadside on their way to their new sharecroppers' cabin on the de Spain property, Snopes beats Sartoris and scolds him for planning to reveal his guilt at the courthouse. Sartoris can't see his father in the darkness, which reveals the alienation that is at the heart of their relationship. In the final portion of the story, darkness changes from being suffocating to suggesting freedom and escape. Snopes's plan to burn yet another barn is hatched in the darkness, and the night seems to promise nothing but more crime and despair. However, Sartoris rallies his own sense of morality during this night as well, finally standing up for what he believes in. Sartoris embarks on his new life just as the darkness ends and dawn approaches.

THE WORD RAVENING

The word ravening, which means devouring greedily, destroying, or preying on, appears several times in the story, and every time it highlights Snopes's malicious character. In its first sense, "devouring greedily," the word resembles "ravenous," which gestures to the poverty the family must endure. When the family does eat, the meal is makeshift and cold. For example, when Snopes and his sons are in town to pursue their case against de Spain, Snopes buys a small portion of cheese, which he divides into three even smaller pieces. Faulkner also uses the word to link Snopes and fire. Snopes's "latent ravening ferocity" and his "ravening and jealous rage" are expressed in the fire, which hungrily destroys the beams and dry hay bales of his employers' barns. Finally, Faulkner's use of the word also suggests the overpowering destructive impulse that defines Snopes. He is a parasite, preying on others to his own advantage, gleefully seeking the destruction of others' livelihood and property in his own hunger for revenge.

Symbols

FIRE

Fire is a constant threat in “Barn Burning,” and it represents both Snopes’s inherent powerlessness and his quest for power and self-expression. After the family has been run out of town because Snopes burned a barn, Snopes steals a split rail from a fence and builds a small fire by the roadside, barely functional and hardly suited to the large family’s needs on a cold evening. He’d committed his fiery crime in a desperate grasp at power, but now he reveals how utterly powerless he is to adequately care for his family. When Snopes turns the fire on others’ property, however, his power increases, albeit criminally. Snopes has grown adept at committing crimes and escaping undetected, and his entire family is drawn in to this pattern of lying and evasion. Unlike the small, inadequate fire Snopes built for his family, the criminal fire that Snopes set in Mr. Harris’s barn sent Confederate patrols out for many nights of searching for the rogue and horse thief. For Snopes, fire is a means of preserving his integrity and avenging the slights he believes have been ceaselessly meted out to him throughout his life. Powerless and poor, Snopes turns to fire to tilt the balance in his favor, even if it is only for one brief, blazing moment.

THE SOILED RUG

The rug that Snopes soils with horse manure in the de Spain home indicates a critical shift in his typical method of operating, because this is the first time that Snopes has intruded into and violated a home. Snopes’s destruction is a swipe at the financial security that de Spain has and that Snopes lacks, as well as a clear statement of his unhappiness at being subservient to de Spain for his livelihood. Without even knowing the de Spains, Snopes resents them simply for being prosperous landowners and in a superior position. A barn holds a farmer’s livelihood, including crops, livestock, and machinery, and this is Snopes’s usual target. Extending his criminal reach to the rug signals that Snopes’s resentment now encompasses the domestic sphere as well. The shocking act of smearing the rug with excrement eventually leads to the rug’s complete destruction, which then leads to another court hearing, another act of revenge, and ultimately Snopes’s death. The expensive rug represents for Snopes every comfort, opportunity, and privilege he feels he has been unfairly denied, and in destroying it, he renounces all regard for his life and family’s future.

Structure and Style

Faulkner is known for his distinctive style, especially his use of long sentences that are frequently interrupted by clauses. For example, the lengthy second sentence of “Barn Burning” would be considered typical Faulkner. This unique style lends Faulkner’s work a sense of scope and continuity. Faulkner seems to suggest that human understanding and perception are unstable and always changing, subject to the environment and other people. This style also suggests a lack of clear resolution to the action. For example, at the end of “Barn Burning,” Sartoris has finally escaped his father’s clutches, but we are left with an unresolved sense of the impact that Sartoris’s escape will ultimately have on him and his family. Faulkner’s syntax (the way a sentence is put together) helps contribute to this lack of a definitive conclusion, because many of his sentences meander and digress before ending—sometimes to the extent that we forget how the sentence began. This technique adds complexity to Faulkner’s fiction, which he intended to reflect the struggles faced in everyday world—struggles that usually don’t have clear resolutions.

Faulkner's long, looping sentences form a stream-of-consciousness style in which a character's roving thoughts and associations are reproduced on the page. The opening paragraph is a key example of this style. The second sentence spills out, each subsequent clause modifying the observations and thoughts that have come before it, ultimately forming a chain of loosely connected impressions and ideas. In real life, thoughts are not linear, and Faulkner represents the chaotic quality of private thought by interrupting the flow of the sentence with clauses. The sentence thus gives us a peek into Sartoris's swirling sensory impressions, revealing much more than simply his observations of what's around him. Sartoris's impressions reflect the hunger, fear, and guilt he feels, an impoverished child watching his father's hearing from the back of a general store. The sight and smell of the foods surrounding Sartoris remind him of his empty stomach, which then leads him to consider more abstract concerns, such as his sadness and struggle to sustain his family loyalty.