William Faulkner’s “Barn Burning”: Motifs And Historical Issues

Written in 1983 and set in post-Civil War America, the short story “Barn Burning” reflects upon the United States’ history with issues such as class, race, sex, and economic turmoil that William Faulkner describes in a shocking way. Additionally, this story describes the Snopes family, who remain predominantly resistant to the social changes brought on by the Civil War as well as to the lifestyle of local southerners. Finally, the short story persists as the main focal point of those beginning to study Faulkner, considering that the Faulknerian style consisting of long-winding sentences; meticulous attention to detail, specifically of the senses; and the complex, widely unlikable characters and their psychology can effortlessly be found in this story.

Moreover, Faulkner wrote “Barn Burning” in a way that it feels similar to a nontraditional coming of age story, starring ten-year-old Colonel Sartoris Snopes, or Sarty for short. Although the plot seems relatively simple, the characters complex psychology and an overall thoughtful description of the phenomena that occurs in the story makes this story thought-provoking and crucial to the evolution of American literature. In “Barn Burning,” Sarty faces the inner turmoil that comes with choosing between his family and their beliefs or his own moral conscious. His family’s lifestyle includes violence, fire, and an all-powerful tyrant of a father. Despite the pressures placed onto him by his family throughout his life, Sarty still finds a way to connect with society and understand as well as value society’s views on justice. In the end, he chooses to do the morally right thing and go against his family’s beliefs.

“Barn Burning” persists as one of Faulkner’s best representations of his own internal conflict concerning the South. Most notably, Sarty’s conflict with his blood represents Faulkner’s struggle with loving the South. For example, the lure of family, familiarity, and the loyalty to these things. Moreover, the reader can see the overpowering beliefs often carried by citizens in the Bible Belt of America illustrated in Abner’s relationship with his family. In this way, Abner essentially becomes a tyrant and demands respect and loyalty from his family. For instance, puritan families often held the belief that women and children had to submit to their patriarch, in this case, Abner. This concept pulls attention towards the oppressive behavior that many citizens of the Old South subscribed to in the 1800s and still continue to in some regions.

Although wrote in 1939 and set in post-Civil War times, “Barn Burning” persists as a primary representation of the racial problems that remain prevalent today. Abner Snopes illustrates this by thinking of himself as superior to African Americans and shouting racial slurs at one despite working as a poor tenant farmer himself. Abner’s reaction shows that although America has progressed, there remains an abundant capacity to grow morally as a country. Additionally, Abner’s violent beliefs and actions represent how many people felt during the Great Depression: neglected by the government and the higher classes who continued to thrive in spite of the collapse of the stock market that affected everyone nationwide. Nonetheless, Faulkner carefully wrote the story so that the Snopes would not be confused as the heroes in this story. Instead, the family acts more like Vikings, pillaging and taking as they please with no concern to the damage that their crimes cause.

Throughout the entirety of the story, Faulkner places an immense importance and dread in

association with blood. In fact, the story starts with describing the “fear and despair and the old grief of blood” (Faulkner, 772) that Sarty feels towards his family. Similarly, the line refers to the internal conflict he has constantly felt concerning his moral sense of law and justice and the pull of family that he cannot escape and does not want to disappoint. Furthermore, Sarty does not truly feel like a part of the family since he does not just blindly go along with and accept what their father says like the rest of his family does. Surprisingly, Sarty describes Abner as “bloodless” (Faulkner, 774) even though Sarty feels guilty for not siding with his family. This shows just how detached and callous Abner is towards humanity. Still, after Abner states that Sarty is becoming a man and must learn to “stick to [his] own blood or [he] ain’t going to have any blood stick to [him]” (Faulkner, 774), which shows that although Abner does not care for humanity, he nevertheless cares for Sarty, even if in an unconventional way.

Contritely, Lennie Snopes, the matriarch of the family, is characterized as a compassionate and caring woman despite her controlling husband and brainwashed children. She, like her son, believes in society’s versions of right and wrong, yet she does not actually challenge Abner’s dominance in the family. Lennie, undoubtfully the reason that Sarty thinks differently from his father and siblings, represents Sarty’s compassion in the short story. For these reasons, Lennie could also represent Faulkner’s own mother. For instance, the The Norton Anthology of American Literature describes Faulkner’s mother as having one of the largest impacts on Faulkner as well as depicting her as an ” ambitious, sensitive, and literary” woman that unquestionably contributed to Faulkner's writing schooling, and literary style (666).

Even with Lennie’s profound influence on Sarty, her other children act brainwashed by their father. Faulkner goes as far as to depict them as if they were little more than livestock. Namely, the older brother mindlessly obeys their father and shares a similar belief system to him. In a more notable scene, Faulkner depicts Sarty's older brother as chewing on tobacco similar to how cows chew cud (Faulkner, 780). Likewise, Faulkner portrays the twin sisters as “little more than flesh that occupies space” (Davis, Maine, Wilson, & Mepham; Faulkner, 777).

Faulkner describes Abner Snopes best with the symbolism: “it stood in a grove of locusts and mulberries across the road” (Faulkner, 773). This refers to Sarty's father, yet he uses the pronoun “it” instead of “he” which implies that Sarty does not think of his father as human. Furthermore, the imagery of locust and mulberries alludes to how Sarty thinks of his father. Locusts are a type of grasshopper, widely known for their ability to consume landscapes and even animals before leaving to find something else to eat. Henceforth, this can allude to Abner’s habit of burning things to the ground, letting them be consumed by fire, and then leaving as if nothing had happened. Moreover, mulberries often symbolize death and sacrifice for loved ones in literature, most notably in the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe. In “Barn Burning,” the mulberries help symbolize the death and destruction that Abner causes, in addition to the sacrifices of things like morality and ethics that the Snopes family suffers from in order to respect their family.

Additionally, towards the beginning of the story, Faulkner describes some of the old, broken-down and battered objects that the Snopes keep with them. Such as Lennie’s old pearl clock that did not run yet was part of her dowry. This clock shows just how much importance the Snopes place on family, because why else would they keep a broken-down clock and not sell or simply trash it? It also illustrates Faulkner’s painstaking detail to familial importance that the Snopes keep it around just because it is a part of their history and therefore a part of them.

Prominently, the de Spain's house symbolizes the overall theme of 'Barn Burning.' The house is the largest house that Sarty has ever seen and for a minute he seems to hope that this house could overshadow his father and calm Abner down. Sarty even goes as far as to compare it to a courthouse, a place of justice and law, something to thwart his father (Faulkner, 775). Nevertheless, when his father stands in front of Sarty, he realizes that Abner still looms over the house; that Abner will not change his ways for anyone or anything.

Likewise, the rug shows Abner's true nature in the short story. For one thing, it represents Abner's "willful blindness" towards others (Murphy). As a matter of fact, he does not only rub manure into the rug and make racist comments afterwards, later he goes as far as to make his daughters rub homemade lye while he mutilates the rug even more before returning it to the de Spains (Faulkner, 775). Not only does this show Abner's intense hatred towards those of higher classes as him, it also shows that he does not respect anyone that he believes is below him, such as African Americans. This could indicate that the story does not actually revolve around class issues since many in lower classes recognize that the only way to take on the elite is to band together. Instead, Abner just seems to despise everyone outside of his family and think of everyone as beneath him, even his family, although to a less extreme extent.

William Faulkner's "Barn Burning" echoes many of the important issues in the United States from post-Civil War times, to the time the book was written, to today, decades later. These problems include the class, race, sex, and economic issues that have withstood time. Additionally, "Barn Burning" deals with numerous topics that countless people can relate to such as struggling whether to follow their own beliefs or keep their family's ideology due to the comfort of familiarity or the topic of oppression from higher classes to some extent. Finally, Faulkner's symbolism in this story is astoundingly thoughtful and meticulously placed to get these problems to be understood by the audience with each line that they read.