
ALCOHOLIC TENDENCIES IN FAULKNER'S "BARN BURNING"

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If the purpose of literature is to teach lessons in life, then Faulkner's "Barn Burning" serves an important purpose. "Barn Burning" serves to inspire hope in what would seem a hopeless situation. The reader, identifying with Sarty, will feel the isolation of a young person at a turning point. His parents provide no support or guidance and this aggravates his dilemma—he is torn by the intrinsic bond of blood loyalty and his own objective certainty of right and wrong. Yet he finds the courage to stand alone and make a life-changing decision.

"Barn Burning" has often been examined in the context of its language, its narrative technique, its Southern setting, its time period and its depiction of the patriarchal order in family relationships. Other criticism has focused on Biblical connections and the social order of the post-Civil War era. Faulkner has been recognized as a prolific writer specifically identified with this era and setting. Often a writer weaves threads of truth from his own life experience into the fiction he writes. Faulkner is no exception. His well-documented firsthand experiences with alcoholism apparently influenced his depiction of this family in crisis. While the somewhat masked alcoholic elements of "Barn Burning" have been virtually absent from criticism, the characteristics of alcoholism in this piece warrant an examination of this facet of the story.

"Barn Burning" is a perfect example of the dynamics

of an alcoholic family. The behaviors and scenarios all follow the distinct pattern of a dysfunctional family in distress. The actions of the family members center on the conspiracy of silence that protects the alcoholic. Abner Snopes, the central figure, controls those around him with his cycle of abuse. But Snopes never touches a drop of alcohol. Rather, his liquid of choice is oil—the oil he uses to burn the barns of men who have, in his point of view, wronged or challenged him.

It's as if the tension builds and, rather than going on a drinking binge, Snopes goes on a barn burning rampage. Snopes displays some of the typical traits of an alcoholic. He suffers from low self-esteem, lives in denial that he has a problem, refuses any offers of help, refuses to talk about his problem, and exerts total control over his family, all of whom are bound to him by financial dependence and blood loyalty. His wife and children, in turn, display the traits and habits of the codependents in an alcoholic family. The entire family enters into a conspiracy of silence, so often the norm in the alcoholic household. The dynamics of the family in this short story are too closely related to the dysfunctional alcoholic family for this to be a coincidence.

Snopes himself seems trapped by something he cannot change—his position in life. He resents his more well-to-do neighbors and sees himself as no more than a slave in his sharecropper position. He creates a false world in which he has power—power he derives from the powerlessness he visits upon the men whose barns he burns. His barn burning is like the alcoholic high that is short-lived, though glorious, and is followed by the devastating, desolate hangover. A vision of the bright, glorious flames portrays the high of the drunk, and the gloomy, charred remains of the barn are like the morning-after hangover. This short-lived sense of power is much like the power an alcoholic feels while under the influence—ten feet tall and bullet-proof—until the alcohol wears off and reality sets in. Snopes has to flee to prevent paying the price for his actions.

Snopes refuses to admit he has any problem—much like the typical alcoholic. The blame for everything, however misguided and preposterous, is always placed on someone

else. When Snopes refuses to take responsibility for his wandering pig, even though his neighbor provides him with the materials to build a fence to keep the pig in his own yard, he is denying that there is any problem—or if there is a problem, it is not his, but rather his unfortunate neighbor's. In exasperation, the neighbor finally holds the pig and demands a fine from Snopes. Snopes retaliates by burning the man's barn to the ground. He is taken to "court" at the local general store, but there is no clear evidence that he burned the barn.

Here the youngest son, Colonel Sartoris ("Sarty") Snopes, sits torn between family loyalty and the sense of justice—an innate sense of right and wrong—where he dreads what he must do. "He aims for me to lie, he [thinks], again with that frantic grief and despair. And I will have to do hit (sic)" (87). Young Sarty is the typical child of an alcoholic, torn between keeping the dreaded family secret and disclosing the truth. The burden is heavy for a ten-year-old child, who in this "courtroom" experiences "the smell and sense just a little of fear because mostly of despair and grief, the old fierce pull of blood" (86). Confronted by a group of men that Sarty views as enemies, both of his father and of himself, it is apparent that Sarty desires a kinship with his father, even a misguided one that pits him and his father against the accusing neighbor, who Sarty well knows is in the right. When Sarty is almost called upon to testify, his heart is in his throat, for he must now make a choice between loyalty to his father and telling what he knows to be the truth. The accuser balks at questioning of a ten-year-old boy, so Snopes is not charged with anything but is advised to leave the area at once, and never return.

Often the children of alcoholics are forced into situations where they must take responsibility for things that should not be expected of ones so young. They in fact must behave like the adult, not only in decision making, but in defending and covering for the alcoholic parent. Children maintain family loyalty but are torn inside—they know the truth, but must hide it from the world. This torment is suffered by Sarty, and Abner Snopes recognizes but exploits it. Snopes realizes that Sarty was about to testify against him. He strikes the boy and lectures him on blood loyalty.

This is typical of an alcoholic—placing blame on others around him, rather than taking responsibility for his own actions. Yet, the nature of the codependent is to look at his or her own behavior and modify it to accommodate the alcoholic. Therefore, Sarty chooses to take this particular beating as a positive sign—his father’s beatings have never before been accompanied by explanation. Hoping this signifies a turning point, Sarty lets himself believe that his father has been satisfied by the latest barn burning and will stop now. This is the overly optimistic viewpoint of a child in an alcoholic family—fanciful belief that after the crisis, order will be restored and the beast within will be permanently sated.

The hopeless hope that is experienced by the young Colonel Sartoris is the same as that of any young child of an alcoholic parent—the desperate hope that someday, somehow, the parent will stop drinking. This belief is what leads the codependents in an alcoholic relationship to alter their own behavior to accommodate the alcoholic, with the hope that this will alter the behavior of the alcoholic. The problem is that the alcoholic remains in control—the actions and behaviors of the alcoholic determine the actions and behaviors of the codependents. Nevertheless, the codependents hold firmly to the desire for a new future, and focus on the silent hope that this time will be the last time. When the Snopes family moves once again, the family members have a renewed hope that they are leaving the past behind and starting anew. However, they come to realize, as all families of alcoholics must at some point, that the behavior and the patterns of living follow a family from new home to new home. Behaviors and habits are not left behind in the physical home, but journey with the family to create new horrors in a new home.

Upon arrival at their new sharecropper’s house, Snopes and Sarty walk to the mansion of the new boss, Major de Spain. The private hopes that Sarty holds are heightened when he sees the grandeur of the new boss’s magnificent home. Surely his father will not dare to defile this man’s property. Surely he will be changed “from what maybe he couldn’t help but be” (94). But Sarty sees trouble immediately when his father deliberately steps in fresh horse droppings on the property, rather than

simply sidestepping the mess. He walks on and steps into the luxurious home, leaving footprints of fresh horse droppings on an expensive rug in the entryway. He does this despite the warning from the butler, despite the outcries from Mrs. de Spain. Snopes simply turns on his heel, grinding the horse manure into the rug and smearing it across an even larger area. Snopes is demonstrating his contempt for the owner of the home and the rug. He sees himself as no more than a slave to the de Spains, but flaunts his supposed power over them by ruining their rug.

Sarty has now seen a deliberate act by his father — Snopes is obviously inventing a situation that will justify (at least in his mind) burning de Spain's barn. De Spain brings the rug to Snopes, demanding that he clean the rug and return it. True to form, Snopes orders the women to clean the rug, failing to take responsibility for his deliberate defiling of it. The women, clearly out of their element, have no idea how to clean a fine rug, and manage only to ruin it further with their attempts at removing the horse manure stains. Nevertheless, Snopes returns the rug, noisily dumping it on the porch of de Spain's home in the middle of the night.

De Spain is outraged, not only at the blatant disregard Snopes shows for his property, but at the audacity of Snopes' attempt to sue de Spain! De Spain had insisted that Snopes repay him for the \$100 rug. He acknowledged, "It cost a hundred dollars. But you never had a hundred dollars. You never will. So I'm going to charge you twenty bushels of corn against your crop" (99). De Spain goes on to lay out the terms of the repayment, but is shocked to find that Snopes brings de Spain to court, claiming that the price he is exacting for the rug is too high. The court finds against Snopes, but reduces the amount he must repay. Of course, Snopes is not satisfied with this, and immediately makes plans to burn de Spain's barn.

Snopes orders Sarty to fetch a barrel of oil. Sarty runs off to do his father's bidding, but his heart is racing and he engages in a verbal battle within himself, torn still by blood loyalty and the dread of what is to come next. Sarty's older brother is clearly ready to follow in his father's footsteps without question, and willingly prepares the oil to start the barn on fire, but

Sarty has reached a decision point, and can not be restrained. He will not stand by and watch his father burn another barn and his father knows it, so Snopes orders his wife to hold Sarty back so he can't run off to warn the de Spains. Despite her pleas for him to stop, Snopes is off to set fire to the barn. Sarty soon breaks free from his mother's grasp and rushes to warn de Spain, but he is too late. The barn is already in flames.

That young Sarty found the courage to confront the demons is remarkable. There is often one person in an alcoholic family who will stand up and dare to say what no one else will say—the truth. That one who breaks free becomes the alien—for he no longer belongs with the codependents and the enablers. While the others may admire him, they lack his bravery, and simply return to the comfort of the familiar, yet desolate, existence with the alcoholic. As for the brave young ones who break away, as Sarty does, they must do as he did, and never look back.

This critical examination of “Barn Burning” lends itself to discussion along several avenues. It is certainly a “coming of age” story where students can identify with the awakening of their own ideals, which may be in conflict with the ideals of their parents. It also serves to assure students that if their own family lives are less than perfect, they are not alone. The secrecy and conspiracy of silence that is often the norm in an alcoholic family can be broached and when the truth is revealed, there can be a sense of relief rather than shame. Sarty separates himself from the secret, vows to no longer take part in the conspiracy and denial, and becomes his own person as a result.

The example of this young boy, still far from manhood, can give other young students the courage to make decisions to save themselves from similar lives of certain misery. Yet this example is not reserved for the young—many adult children of alcoholics face the same demons. They, too, need to find the courage to break free from the pattern of helplessness and hopelessness. Sarty's courage serves as an inspiration to children (of any age) that they are not destined to follow in the paths of their parents when those paths lead to destruction, but that they can forge new paths for themselves that lead to hope and fulfillment rather than ruin and despair.

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