“Barn Burning”: A Definition of Evil

by

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“Barn Burning,” published in 1939, is one of Faulkner’s finest short stories and one of his most profound. In a sensitive exploration of the troubled psyche of a child, Faulkner defines the nature of evil. The story is deceptive in its apparent simplicity. It is easy to misunderstand the moral significance of the boy’s emotional conflict if we fail to recognize metaphor as metaphor, ignore the subtlety of Faulkner’s narrative technique and miss the implications of the imagery. On the surface, the young boy’s emotional struggle seems to be equated with a conflict between an aristocracy representing ethical order and a sharecropper, Ab Snopes, representing moral entropy.

The protagonist is the youngest son of Ab Snopes. The child’s given name is Colonel Sartoris. In the opening scene, in which the boy’s emotional conflict is identified, the justice declares: “‘I reckon any boy named for Colonel Sartoris in this country can’t help but tell the truth, can they?’” (4)* As Faulkner’s narrator defines the boy’s anxiety, he is trapped between the “old fierce pull of blood” and a thrust towards justice and truth. The external correlatives of the moral forces tearing the boy in two would therefore seem to be his father, the sharecropper, and De Spain, the aristocrat. Ab Snopes is a barn burner, a violent, destructive man. De Spain’s plantation house, on the other hand, provides the child an objective image for the moral thrust generating his rebellion against his father. His immediate reaction to the sight of the house is to compare it to a symbol of justice, the courthouse. The white, ante-bellum manor evokes in the boy a surging sense of dignity and peace, and he feels certain, for a moment, that it must be safe from the malevolent touch of his father.

The opposition of sharecropper and aristocrat suggests social as well as moral implications. And, in fact, certain elements in the story support the possibility. Ab makes the valid point that De Spain’s house is built with “nigger sweat” as well as the white sweat of the sharecropper. Ab views himself, the narrator seems to suggest, as a continually violated victim of an unjust socio-economic system. He “burns with a ravening and jealous rage.” (11) The “element of fire,” the narrator authoritatively informs us, speaks to “some deep mainspring” of Ab’s being “as the element of steel or powder spoke to other men, as the one weapon for the preservation of integrity, else breath were not worth the breathing, and hence to be regarded with respect and used with discretion.” (7-8)

“Barn Burning” however is not really concerned with class conflict. The story is centered upon Sarty’s emotional dilemma. His conflict would not have been altered in any way if the person whose barn Ab burns had been a simple poor farmer, rather than an aristocratic plantation owner. The child’s tension, in fact, begins to surface during the hearing in which a simple farmer accuses Ab of burning his barn. The moral antagonists mirrored in Sarty’s conflict are not sharecropper and aristocrat. They are the father, Ab Snopes, versus the rest of mankind. Major De Spain is not developed as a character; his house is important to Sarty because it represents a totally new and totally different social and moral entity. Within the context of the society Faulkner is dealing with, the gap between the rich aristocrat and the poor sharecropper provides a viable metaphor for dramatizing the crisis Sarty is undergoing. Ab Snopes is by no means a social crusader. The De Spain manor is Sarty’s first contact with a rich man’s house, though he can recall, in the short span of his life, at least a dozen times the family had to move because Ab burned barns. Ab does not discriminate between rich and poor. For him there are only two categories: blood kin and “they,” into which he lumps all the rest of mankind. Ab’s division relates to Sarty’s crisis and only by defining precisely the nature of the conflict the boy is undergoing can we determine the moral significance Faulkner sees in it. The clue to Sarty’s conflict rests in its resolution.

In the story’s climactic scene, Ab Snopes orders his wife to hold her son to prevent him from warning De Spain that Ab intends to burn his barn. Sarty fights free of his mother’s arms and rushes to the manor house. After De Spain passes him on the horse, he hears shots ring out and at once begins to think of his father as dead. The nature imagery which Faulkner introduces in the concluding paragraphs of the story does not suggest that Sarty’s rebellion has meant
a triumph for morality and justice. In the chill darkness, on the crest of the hill, the boy sits with his back towards home, facing the woods. His fear and terror of his father are gone. Only grief and despair remain. By aligning himself with De Spain, the boy destroys his father and gains his freedom. At the story’s end, he moves into the future without looking back, responding, independent and alone, to the call of the “rapid and urgent beating of the urgent and quiring heart of the late spring night.” (25) The imagery suggests a feeling of unity with the world of nature, a sense of wholeness as if the boy, at last, has found himself. The quiescent, enveloping nature imagery contrasts sharply with the threatening, rigid, metallic imagery which Faulkner uses to convey the child’s sense of his father as a living force. The contrast clearly indicates that Sarty’s struggle is against the repressive and divisive force his father represents. The boy’s anxiety is created by his awakening sense of his own individuality. Torn between strong emotional attachment to the parent and his growing need to assert his own identity, Sarty’s crisis is psychological and his battle is being waged far below the level of his intellectual and moral awareness.

Faulkner makes this clear in the opening scene with imagery that might be described as synesthesia. The real smell of cheese is linked with the smell of the hermetic meat in the tin cans with the scarlet devils on the label that his “intestines believed he smelled coming in intermittent gusts momentary and brief between the other constant one, the smell and sense just a little of fear because mostly of despair and grief, the old fierce pull of blood.” (3) The smells below the level of the olfactory sense link the devil image and the blood image to identify the anxiety the father creates in the child’s psyche. Tension is created by the blood demanding identification with his father against “our enemy he thought in that despair; own! mine and his both! He’s my father!” (3) Sarty’s conflict is played out in terms of identification, not in moral terms. He does not think of his father as bad, his father’s enemies as good.

Faulkner develops his story on two levels of consciousness. He employs an adult narrator to translate the boy’s tensions and interpret the moral significance of his anxiety. But the dramatic scenes, the characters and situations are objectifications, as in a nightmare, of the boy’s psychological and emotional tensions. In the carpet-cleaning scene, for example, Sarty’s dread of his father and his fear of the consequences of Ab’s treatment of the rug give rise to a tableau as eerie as the opening scene of Macbeth. The child works at the
woodpile, covertly watching his two bovine, weird sisters minister over the bubbling lye-filled pot. Over them stands the rigid black-suited figure of the father. The child's sense of despair and helplessness against the implacable force of the father is projected in the figure of the mother, appearing momentarily in the doorway, her face and eyes filled with despair.

Sarty's anxiety cannot be viewed simply as an Oedipal identification with the mother against the father. On the wagon, he repulses his mother. His eyes are focused upon his father striking the mules. In all the scenes, the mother remains a peripheral figure in the boy's consciousness. Like the stopped hands of the inlaid clock which was her dowry, the mother is a figure without life or power. In contrast, the image of the father, always in rigid black, looms in his consciousness as a terrifying, threatening force. The physical descriptions Faulkner provides us of Ab are always presented through the eyes of the boy. Blackness, metallic imagery, cold violence dominate these descriptions.

In the second major scene, Ab leads Sarty up the slope away from the family at the campfire. The child looks up at the towering figure of his father "against the stars but without face or depth—a shape black, flat, and bloodless as though cut from tin in the iron folds of the frockcoat." (8) Ab strikes his son on the side of the head "hard without heat, exactly as he had struck the two mules at the store, exactly as he would strike either of them with any stick in order to kill a horsefly." (8) These images of cold violence and indifference to inflicted pain convey the child's sense of his father's emotional frigidity. Ab's cold violence is not an expression of hatred or anger. Violence is a tool, used upon his son as upon the mules—to make them do his bidding.

Ab unjustly accuses Sarty of intending to betray him at the hearing, but he correctly recognizes that his son is moving out of childhood, developing a mind and will of his own and is no longer blindly loyal. In instructing the boy that everyone is the enemy and his loyalty belongs to his blood, Ab's phrasing is revealing: "'Don't you know all they wanted was a chance to get at me because they knew I had them beat?'" (8) Ab does not use the plural "us." It is "I" and "they." Blood loyalty means total identification with Ab, and in the ensuing scenes, Snopes attempts to make his son an extension of himself by taking him to the De Spain house, rise up before dawn to be with him when he returns the rug, accompany him to the hearing against De Spain and finally make him an accomplice in the burning of De Spain's barn.
The moral import of Ab’s insistence on blood loyalty is fully developed by the satanic imagery Faulkner introduces in the scene at the mansion. As they go up the drive, Sarty follows his father, seeing the stiff black form against the white plantation house. Traditionally the devil casts no shadow, and Ab’s figure appears to the child as having “that impervious quality of something cut ruthlessly from tin, depthless, as though sidewise to the sun it would cast no shadow.” (10) The cloven hoof of the devil is suggested by Ab’s limp upon which the boy’s eyes are fixed as the foot unwaveringly comes down into the manure. Sarty’s increasing tension resounds in the magnified echo of the limping foot on the porch boards, “a sound out of all proportion to the displacement of the body it bore, as though it had attained to a sort of vicious and raving minimum not to be dwarfed by anything.” (11) At first Sarty thought the house was impervious to his father, but his burgeoning fear of the threat the father poses is reflected in his vision of Ab becoming magnified and monstrous as the black arm reaches up the white door and Sarty sees “the lifted hand like a curled claw.” (11)

The satanic images are projected out of the son’s nightmarish vision of his father, but they are reinforced by the comments of the adult narrator. Sarty believes Snopes fought bravely in the Civil War, but Ab, we are told, wore no uniform, gave his fealty to no cause, admitted the authority of no man. He went to war for booty. Ab’s ego is so great it creates a centripetal force into which everything must flow or be destroyed. The will-less, abject creature who is his wife symbolizes the power of his will. What Ab had done to his wife, he sets out to do to the emerging will of his son. Ab cannot tolerate any entity that challenges the dominance of his will. By allowing his hog to forage in the farmer’s corn and by dirtying and ruining DeSpain’s rug, he deliberately creates a conflict that requires the assertion of primacy. Fire, the element of the devil, is the weapon for the preservation of his dominance. Ab’s rage is not fired by social injustice. It is fired by a pride, like Lucifer’s, so absolute it can accept no order beyond its own. In the satanic myth, Lucifer asserts his will against the divine order and is cast out of heaven. The angels who fall with Lucifer become extensions of his will. In the same way, Ab is an outcast and pariah among men. He accepts no order that is not of his blood.

All centripetal will, Snopes can have no feeling for any other being. He is incapable of recognizing what Faulkner in *Absalom, Absalom!* describes as each person’s sense of self, the “I Am” of his being. In the crucial scene on the slope, the narrator interprets
Sarty’s resistance to his father’s description of “they” as the enemy: “Later, twenty years later, he was to tell himself, ‘If I had said they wanted only truth, justice, he would have hit me again.’” (8) Sarty’s resistance constitutes a recognition of an entity beyond his father, a correlative of his own emerging sense of individuality. The truth and justice “they” the enemy want is nothing more than acknowledgment of their rights as individual entities. Ab would have hit Sarty again because such a statement would have been a challenge to Ab’s will, identical with the challenge of the enemy. The “they” referred to in this passage are simple farmers, not aristocrats. Sarty is struggling to be himself. He responds with such intensity to the sight of De Spain’s house not because it corresponds to some innate moral sense but because he sees it as an entity, powerful and completely isolated from his father’s will. The mansion makes him forget “his father and the terror and despair both.” (10) The surge of joy has the effect of diminishing the terrifying image of Ab to little more than a “buzzing wasp.” The “they” who belong to the house he feels certain, must be safe from his father, their barns “impervious to the puny flames he might contrive.” (10)

In the ensuing scenes, Ab moves inexorably to a collision with De Spain that must terminate in barn burning. Sarty’s increasing anxiety as he watches Ab respond to the challenge De Spain represents corresponds to the escalating threat to his own identity that Ab poses as he forces the boy to submit to the pull of blood by making him his accomplice. When De Spain fines Snopes an extra twenty bushels, Sarty tries to stave off the barn burning by insisting to Ab that they will not pay. He will hide the bushels. Sarty’s daydreams express a hope that somehow his father will change. In the field plowing, his bare feet in the rich soil, he dreams that Ab has accepted the fine. Acceptance would mean that Ab has acknowledged the integrity of an order beyond his own and is willing to live with it rather than striking out with his destructive violence. If that were true, if his father were indeed changed, then the boy’s own terror and grief would be at an end, the “being pulled two ways like between two teams of horses” (17) would cease.

At the hearing of Ab’s suit against De Spain, the boy momentarily feels defiant and even exultant. He believes his father is charged with barn burning, and Sarty knows Ab is innocent. His cry, protesting his father’s innocence, expresses the desperate hope that Ab’s innocence is proof that he has changed. The fear and terror immediately return. Ab’s suit, Sarty recognizes, is an assertion of will that
must end in barn burning. After the hearing, the child again insists to his father that they do not have to pay even the ten bushels. Ab’s statement that they will wait until October to see what happens lulls the child’s anxiety and the following scene has the quality of an idyll. For the first time, Ab appears human. The terrifying images of rigidity and blackness are gone. The boy listens to his father telling a story at the blacksmith’s. At lunch, Ab divides the food with his two sons. During the slow afternoon they loiter along a fence watching the horse trading.

This peaceful interlude ends abruptly that evening with the mother’s anguished cry. Again, Sarty sees the figure of his father stiff in the black suit “as though dressed carefully for some shabby and ceremonial violence.” (20) When Ab orders him to get the oil from the barn, Sarty responds to the pull of blood, at the same time dreaming of running away and never returning. But he does return. When he dares, for the first time, to express opposition to his father, he is made a prisoner. The scene is right out of a child’s nightmare. Ab grabs Sarty by the back of the shirt and holds him helpless with just his toes touching the floor, thrusting him into the bedroom and ordering the boy’s mother to hold him. Ab will not allow the aunt to hold the struggling child. Sarty must fight free of the grasp of Ab’s surrogate, the terrified creature whose will has become an extension of Ab’s. By warning De Spain, Sarty identifies himself with an entity other than his father, and only by violating his blood does he gain his freedom. Whether Ab is actually killed we do not know. The detail is unimportant. For Sarty, Ab is dead. Significantly, the boy feels grief but no guilt. He has destroyed the crushing force that threatened his awakening identity and, at last, the fear and terror are gone. His nightmare ended, Sarty, appropriately, falls into a dreamless sleep, from which he awakens whole and at peace, ready for the future.

Throughout Faulkner’s fiction, the crimes people inflict upon their fellow men derive from gradations of the inhumane ego-blindness that achieves its apotheosis in the satanic Ab Snopes of “Barn Burning.” One of Faulkner’s primary interests is in exploring the complex combinations of social and psychological forces that produce blindness to the individuality and rights of others. One of his major preoccupations, for instance, is the psychological and moral impact of such social concepts as white supremacy. The insensitivity to the equal humanity of others that such an abstraction produces is explored with great dramatic power in Absalom, Absalom! The central figure in that novel is Thomas Sutpen, whose imperious will is almost as destructive and powerful as that of Ab Snopes. Sutpen’s
will is harnessed to his grand design which is a synthesis of the myths, codes, and aspirations of Southern society. In contrast to Ab, whose will is absolute, a given, operating for and of itself, Sutpen's is exercised for a purpose and has its roots in humanly identifiable psychological and social forces. The effects, however, are the same. Sutpen leaves in his wake numbers of violated, mutilated egos, the way Snopes leaves the ashes of burned barns. In Sutpen's history of insensitivity is reflected the crime of the South—the blindness of white Southerners to the humanity of the blacks.

The many grotesques who populate Yoknapatawpha county are frequently victims of the kind of psychological tyranny that threatens Sarty or they are victims of rigid religious and social concepts that warp their personalities and turn them into obsessed creatures, incapable of acknowledging the individuality of their fellow human beings. The victim becomes the violator; the sins of the father are visited upon the children, and evil remains a constant in the history of mankind. The antithesis to the implacable satanic will that finds its avatar in Ab Snopes is Faulkner's code of the heart—a sensitivity to others that amounts to empathy. The young hero who articulates that code and attempts to practice it is Ike McCaslin in "The Bear" of Go Down, Moses, which was published a few years after "Barn Burning." Ike's conflict with his heritage has strong affinities with Sarty's battle to free himself from the crushing force of his father's will. Ike also battled the fierce pull of blood, blood which taints him with the sins of his fathers. In the woods, Ike discovers his natural self, his individual being, and at twenty-one, he attempts to cut himself off from his social heritage by renouncing his patrimony. In effect, Ike duplicates Sarty's act in killing his father to gain his moral freedom. Ike sees himself as the new Adam, but Faulkner recognizes him as only human. The old fierce pull of blood is too strong. Ultimately, Ike fails. He re-enacts the sin of his fathers by rejecting a girl with black blood. The new Adam is not born in Faulkner's fiction.