Barn Burning Study Guide

Barn Burning by William Faulkner

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

William Faulkner's "Barn Burning" (1939) comes from the mid-point of its author's career and finds its creator in consummate control of the modernist devices that he, more than any other, had brought to American prose: stream-of-consciousness narration, decadent and even culturally degenerate settings, extended sentences—interrupted by qualifying clauses—that give the effect of continuously suspended or deferred resolution of the action, and images of extreme violence. These modernist gestures disturbed Faulkner's early readers, and critics reacted harshly to his works of the late 1920s and early 1930s, such as the novels *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Light in August* (1932). Faulkner stood accused of excessive mannerism and obscurity, and of a morbid interest in unhealthy types. Northerners found his depiction of the unassimilated South too regional and Southerners found it too harsh and scandalous to be acceptable.

Before he developed his signature style, however, Faulkner had proven himself a powerful writer of ordinary, perfectly accessible prose. A good example of this is the early story "Turnabout" (1925), in which an American aviator in World War I befriends a British torpedo-boat pilot and comes to see the conflict from a perspective less remote and abstract than that provided by aerial bombing. To some extent, "Barn Burning" represents a compromise between the brutal themes of Faulkner's high modernist style and the accessibility of his early prose. The result is still a powerful, more-straight-forward-than-usual, glimpse into the author's fictional world.

Author Biography

William Faulkner - store-clerk, carpenter, general construction-worker, coal shoveler, deck-hand, cadet-aviator, and ultimately a prime incarnation of the Great American Novelist - was a product of the Deep South. Born in New Albany, Mississippi, the son of a railroad worker, he joined Britain's Royal Air Force in 1918, attended the University of Mississippi, Oxford, and then seemed to lurch through life, changing jobs and traveling. With the appearance of *Soldiers' Pay* (1926), a novel published with the assistance of his friend Sherwood Anderson, he launched himself on the career for which he would become famous.

Many a paradox clings to Faulkner, a traditionalist and even a reactionary who struck out into the realms of extreme literary innovation. Focusing on simple, or sometimes even simpleminded, characters, he employed complex syntax, interior monologue, disrupted chronology, and multiple perspectives to create what might be called realistic allegories. Often, at the core of the most complicated narrative, one finds a Biblical or folkloric motif; and, despite his frequent defense of peculiarly Southern values, Faulkner was often a penetrating critic of America's perennial race conflict. Then again, this extraordinary artist turned out to be an ordinary man, afflict-ed by his own peccadillos (a taste for strong drink, for example); and at moments, though in complete control of his formidable literary powers, he allowed himself to be drawn into situations that compromised his gifts, as when he worked briefly as a studio writer in Hollywood.

Soldiers' Pay was followed, in rather rapid succession, by *Mosquitoes* (1927), *Sartoris* (1929), *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1929), *Sanctuary* (1931), *Light in August* (1932), and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), a sequence which established Faulkner's reputation as a major presence in American letters and a leading figure in experimental prose. Considering the density of these novels, the achievement which they represent can only be considered as one of the most remarkable in the twentieth century. Unlike James Joyce, who labored for forty years over two immense and experimental novels, Faulkner turned out one book after another, as if possessed. Much of Faulkner's work is unified through being integrated into the fictional - or rather mythical - Yoknapatawpha County in northern Mississippi, the imaginary setting of his best-known stories and novels, including "Barn-Burning" and "The Bear." Like Thomas Hardy's Wessex, Yoknapatawpha County represents an immense act of creative imagination. Faulkner's synthesis of place, history, character, and atmosphere easily leads the reader into believing that Yoknapatawpha is a real place. Of course, real elements go into its making, drawn from the actual South that Faulkner knew so well.

Because the novels that he wanted to write - the difficult ones - sold poorly, Faulkner sometimes produced potboilers (works deliberately and entirely designed to make money for the author), of which *Sanctuary,* a story of abduction, rape, and murder, is a good example. It was probably on the strength of *Sanctuary* that Faulkner found himself summoned to Hollywood. His best-known screen-writing effort is his film adaptation of the 1939 Raymond Chandler novel *The Big Sleep* (1939). After a short while, Faulkner returned to novel-writing, which he practiced until his death in 1962. He was awarded

the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1949 as well as two Pulitzer Prizes for his novels *A Fable* (in 1955) and *The Reivers* (posthumously, in 1963). Faulkner's later work (including, ironically, *A Fable*) sometimes seems to be a parody of the earlier writing, but there are enough exceptions to the trend to justify the claim that Faulkner was a great artist from the beginning of his career until the end.

Plot Summary

The opening scene of "Barn Burning" finds the story's protagonist, a ten-year-old named Colonel Sartoris or "Sarty," waiting with his father, Abner Snopes, in a Southern small-town general store being used as a courtroom; the time is ten or fifteen years after the Civil War. As we learn from the interior monologue through which Faulkner conveys all of the story's events, Ab Snopes has been called into court on a charge of arson by his landlord-employer. (Ab is a sharecropper, someone who "rents" farmland by promising to remit part of his harvest to the property owner). Sarty is acutely aware of the physical aspects of the place, the aroma of the goods, the appearance of cans and jars on the shelves. His overwhelming thought is of an enemy, "ourn! mine and hisn both!" The reference is to the plaintiff. Faulkner underscores Sarty's sense of family loyalty to his father.

Mr. Harris, who charges Ab with the crime of burning his barn, explains how Ab's hog ruined his corn, how he took the hog as payment for the damage, and how Ab sent a go-between to him with the message that "wood and hay kin burn," which he interpreted as a threat against his life and property. Sarty knows that Ab did set the fire (Ab is, in fact, in the habit of setting fires) and knows also that his father expects him to lie in court. Sarty never testifies. The justice of the peace finds insufficient evidence and dismisses the case, but he tells Ab to his face that he believes him guilty and orders him to leave town. As they step from the store into the street, a boy hisses "barn-burner" at Ab and his son. Sarty launches himself in a fury at the insulter, only to be struck down by a blow to the face from the larger boy. He feels nothing; it is all a blur. A mule-drawn wagon, with the Snopes's pathetic belongings, is meanwhile already loaded, and Ab apparently has another lodging already lined up, on the plantation of Major de Spain.

The Snopeses camp that night. Ab builds a fire, which Sarty finds curiously meager given that it burns on rails plundered from a nearby fence and might be as big as the plunderer wanted to make it. Abruptly, Ab accuses Sarty of having been on the verge of telling the truth to the judge, or, as Ab sees it, of betraying him, the father. Although he doesn't answer, Sarty senses this to be true, and in any case Ab is convinced that it is true and slaps Sarty across his face.

The next day, they arrive at the de Spain plantation. Ordering his wife and their two daughters to make their shack livable, Ab decides to visit the manor house and make himself known to his new employer. The visit involves a deliberate provocation, however, as Ab deliberately steps in horse manure, refuses to wipe his feet before entering, and soils the rug in the parlor. Major de Spain is not home, but his frightened wife finally gets the gloomy apparition to leave. Later in the day, de Spain brings the rug to the shack to be cleaned by the Snopes women, who, watched over by Ab, promptly ruin it with the crude lye soap that they use. Ab then returns it to the manor. De Spain soon arrives at the shack to complain that the rug—an expensive one—has been ruined; he also says that he is going to charge Ab an additional twenty bushels of corn as payment. Beknownst to no one, Ab sues Major de Spain in the local court, claiming that twenty bushels of corn represents too high a price for the damaged rug.

Surprisingly the judge agrees, though he is nevertheless adamant that Ab is responsible for the damage. Feeling insufficiently vindicated, Ab decides to burn down de Spain's barn.

Sarty rebels at this plan and determines to thwart his father. But Ab, suspecting as much, tells his wife and two daughters to keep Sarty in the shack. But Sarty escapes, thinking all the time about the long succession of burnt barns, the endless lies, and the ceaseless movement from one humiliating domicile to another that the cycle entails. He runs to the manor and shouts to de Spain. At that moment, de Spain sees someone entering his barn. Sarty runs.

From a hilltop that night, Sarty looks at the sky and sees the stars and constellations wheeling overhead. He feels a strange peace which he is too young to understand. In the last line, he is walking—away—and he does not look back.

Characters

de Spain

Major de Spain hires Abner Snopes to tenant his land as a sharecropper. De Spain is a property owner of some stature and thus the social opposite of Ab, who owns nothing and has virtually no social standing. De Spain bears the title Major as an ex-officer of the Confederate Army; here again, he is Ab's social opposite, for Ab was a private soldier (and not a very good one). The Major presumably owned slaves before the war; he still keeps black servants, some of them in livery in the house, others no doubt bound for a pittance in the yards and fields. He is a member of the Southern aristocracy, but with a qualification: his name, which connects him with neither the Protestant upper class nor the Bourbons or other French-descended grandees of the Old South; the name de Spain suggests the nearly-submerged Spanish presence in Louisiana and Florida, or even the creole, or "light-skinned free blacks" of New Orleans. If de Spain were a creole, an individual with some African ancestors, then his lording his stature over Ab would presumably be even more stinging for Ab than usual in such confrontations. But this is speculative.

De Spain rides a sorrel horse; Ab drives mules. Again the contrast is emphatic. But it is important not to deprive Major de Spain of his humanity by characterizing him as a stereotypical oppressor. Ab Snopes, after all, is the real villain of the tale. In fact, compared to Ab, the Major strikes one as a reasonable man. His reaction to Ab's deliberate provocation of soiling the expensive rug is simply to order Ab, his employee, to clean the damaged item. When Ab deliberately does further damage to the rug, de Spain is technically within his rights to demand payment in kind (the twenty bushels of corn). To his great surprise, the tenant sues him and asks for a lower punitive remission, which the judge grants. De Spain is a man subjected to uninvited exasperation, and one could even say that he restrains himself. He is also within his customary rights when he shoots the arsonist (Ab) dead when he catches him in the act.

De Spain keeps a fine house, which impresses Sarty with its order. In the context of "Barn Burning" de Spain might be said to stand for social and aesthetic order, two things which Sarty has been deprived of all his life.

Mr. Harris

Mr. Harris is Abner Snopes's current landlord-employer when the story "Barn Burning" opens. Snopes has burnt down Harris's barn and Harris has brought Snopes up on charges; the case is being heard by the local justice of the peace in the general store. Mr. Harris is a man affronted. He tells the story of his grievance himself. In paraphrase: Ab's hog got loose in Harris's corn and trampled it; Harris instructed his tenant to tie up the pig and even gave him sufficient wire to mend the pigpen. Abner simply left the wire laying around, with the pigpen ramshackle and no restriction on the hog. When the hog

escaped again, Harris confined it to his own barn—keeping it in lieu of the damages it had caused. Abner then sent a man to Harris to deliver the message "wood and hay kin burn," which Harris properly took as a threat. Shortly thereafter, his barn took fire and burned.

During the course of the hearing, Harris points to Sarty and tells the judge to let the boy testify because "he knows," meaning that Sarty knows the truth—that his father is an incendiary. Harris thus functions as a catalyst in the awakening of Sarty's moral sense. Harris then declines to put Sarty to the test—to Sarty's relief—since the boy was in fact bursting with the truth and would have spoken it, to his father's chagrin. Sarty is thus morally in debt to Mr. Harris.

Mother

See Lennie Snopes

Sarty

Sarty—short for Colonel Sartoris Snopes—bears the name of a famous Rebel commander from the Civil War under whom, perhaps, his father, Abner Snopes, served; Ab appears to have bestowed the name on his son for its public-relations value in the post-Civil War South, where the story "Barn Burning" takes place. The ten-year-old male child (he has two older sisters) of an itinerant sharecropper, Sarty has the intellectual development that one would expect—he does not analyze events and brings no book-learning to bear on his experience of the world; however, he does display evidence of natural, if undeveloped, brightness, of which his intense consciousness of physical aspects of the world serves as one sign. (See, for example, his intense perception of the interior of the general store in the opening scene of the story.) Sarty's emerging sense of morality—a characteristic not shared by his father—is also a sign of his brightness.

Sarty's father has raised the boy to be fiercely devoted to his family. Thus, during the hearing in the general store, when Ab faces Mr. Harris's charge of arson, Sarty sees Harris as his father's and his own enemy. ("Enemy" is the term that Faulkner places in Sarty's mind in the interior monologue which constitutes much of the narrative.) When an older boy hisses "barn-burner" at Sarty and Ab as they leave the general store-cum-courthouse, Sarty springs at him like a wild animal—and is immediately beaten back and bloodied by the stronger contender. Later, Sarty allows Ab to slap him, and he acquiesces to the tyranny that Ab exercises over the family, until the end of the story.

Somewhere in Sarty a spark burns, however, that will not be extinguished by Ab's dark tyranny. In particular, Sarty rebels, at long last, over the wrongness of Ab's habitual acts of arson. The notion of an abstract right and wrong, separable from persons but applicable universally to any and every individual despite the context, takes hold of Sarty and compels him to warn Major de Spain of Ab's intended fire-setting, even though he knows that this act will separate him from his father forever. The forced lying

and the lack of love from his father have helped to turn Sarty in the direction of a new moral conception that transcends the demands of his father for family loyalty. At the story's end, Major de Spain catches Ab in the act of setting his barn afire and shoots him dead. Sarty's reaction is curious: He finds a strange serenity in his nighttime isolation on a hilltop as the constellations wheel eternally overhead.

Abner Snopes

Ab Snopes enlisted as a soldier in the Confederate Army during the Civil War, but his choice of sides signified convenience and nothing more, for, as the reader is told, Ab had gone to war as a "private" in the "fine old European sense"—for purely mercenary reasons, to get what booty he could. "It meant nothing and less than nothing to him if it were enemy booty or his own." Snopes took a musket-ball in his heel and limped afterwards because of it, but he does not deserve, as Faulkner makes plain, the usual respect due to wounded veterans (of either side). Snopes bears another, more important wound, of unknown origin, perhaps as old as original sin: He suffers from an inflamed ego and a thin skin, and he takes offense with the swiftness of a cobra striking. His life, indeed, seems to be a continuing hell comprised of offense, retribution, and flight. The barn-burning of the story's title refers to Snopes's habit of setting fire to the property of those who (in his eyes) slight him.

Like Captain Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* who tries to build his own world separate from the larger world, Ab has something like a God-complex, but he has none of Sutpen's creativity, and his madness expresses itself through dominance, destruction, and wrath. Ab's wife and daughters, for example, live entirely in his shadow, serving him in their apathetic way, showing little initiative or imagination as he bullies them and others. (Only Sarty, Ab's son, has a self equal to his father's.) But the God-complex is really only the surface manifestation of a complete lack of confidence. It is the insecurity of a man who sees himself as rejected by society and dejected under a sinister fate that makes him seethe with the sense of injury on every hand.

Although he never lays plans that might extract him from the cycle of itinerant land-tenancy—thus condemning himself to it—Ab nevertheless hates those who employ him. When he deliberately tracks dung into Major de Spain's manor house, for example, he is expressing his contempt for all those who, in his eyes and because of his own doing, hold some kind of sway over him; it is almost as if he invites conflict so as to find an excuse for his stealthy acts of retributive arson.

There is, finally, something paltry and brutal about Ab, whose thievery of fence-posts to make a fire merely results in a pathetic little blaze insufficient to warm his encamped family. He slaps Sarty and pushes his wife and daughter with a heavy hand; meanwhile, he harps on the sacredness of family bonds. Ab is a living failure and a living provocation, and the hell that he constructs for himself by maintaining a constant state of war with all other human beings becomes a hell for others—most significantly for Sarty and Sarty's mother and sisters, all of whom are fated to endure an endless amount of humiliation until Ab's death.

Colonel Sartoris Snopes

See Sarty

Lennie Snopes

When we first meet Sarty's mother, Mrs. Snopes (who at one point her husband calls Lennie), she is wearing her Sunday dress, sitting in a wagon (loaded down with the Snopes's pathetic belongings), and crying. She has cause to cry: Her husband has been called to legal account on a charge of arson, the latest of such acts which have led, once again, to the uprooting of the Snopes family. Mrs. Snopes is sobbing because of the wretchedness of her life and the cruelty of her husband. On the wagon with the other household goods is a clock, described as her dowry, which has long been uselessly stopped at fourteen minutes past two o'clock. The broken piece of furniture serves as a metaphor for Mrs. Snopes's life, which came to a stop, spiritually, when she bound her fortune, for whatever reason, to Ab Snopes.

Mrs. Snopes has two daughters and a son, in addition to her ten-year-old son Sarty. On seeing Sarty and his father approaching, she moves to climb down from the wagon, but Ab orders her to stay where she is. This, too, is a figure of her life: Ab dominates her and their children totally and (on occasion) brutally; when Sarty appears with his father after the hearing, his nose is bloodied, courtesy of a blow from Ab. His bloody nose inspires her to maternal concern and affection; she wants to wipe Sarty's face clean, though he refuses her comfort.

When the family arrives at their shack on the de Spain plantation, it is Mrs. Snopes who unloads the wagon, like a beast of burden, and it is she, significantly, who utters a single word to her husband when he instructs Sarty to come with him to the de Spain manor. "Abner," she says, the implication being that her husband should control himself, which she probably knows that he will not do. Ab silences her with a grim look, but with this one word she demonstrates that she has a moral sense and a grasp, however crude, of her husband's psychology. If one asks where Sarty gains *his* moral insight, then—since it cannot be from Ab—it could perhaps have come from his mother. She also evidences love and a sense of tradition, in her own way, as Faulkner reveals that she somehow saved enough money to present Sarty with a Christmas present, a chopping ax.

Mrs. Snopes's moral test comes at the same time as Sarty's, when Ab orders her to keep hold of Sarty while Ab sneaks off to the de Spain barn to set it afire. The dialogue that follows suggests that Mrs. Snopes does not struggle very hard to keep Sarty from escaping to warn Major de Spain. Yet, as he escapes her, she cries, "I can't," meaning that she feels that she should not let him go—but she makes no great effort to stop him. Her limits of self-assertion are smaller than Sarty's, but they model and anticipate his.

Mrs. Snopes

See Lennie Snopes

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

In "Barn Burning," Faulkner depicts a child, on the verge of moral awareness, who finds himself cut off from the larger social world of which he is growing conscious; this sense of alienation takes root, moreover, in Sarty's relation with his father, who should be the moral model and means of entry of the child into the larger world. Because of his father's criminal recklessness, Sarty finds himself, in the first part of the story, the object of an insult, and he attacks a boy who, in more ordinary circumstances, might be a school-companion or a friend. His father has taught him to regard others as the "enemy." Mr. Harris, the bringer of the arson charge, is thus "our enemy . . . hisn and ourn." In fact, Mr. Harris is simply a man who has been mistreated by an egomaniacal provocateur. The story concludes with Sarty alone on a hilltop at night, watching the stars. This, too, reflects the boy's loneliness, and lack of social ties, but it also suggests his liberation from his family on the basis of a moral insight which just possibly signifies a bridge to link him with the greater social world.

Anger and Hatred

Abner Snopes is anger embodied, ready to take offense over any interaction with other people, but especially with those whom he sees as his social superiors (which means most of them, since he lives at the lowest rung of the socioeconomic ladder). Ab is locked into a hell of personal revenge, and his viciousness appears to have played a large part in the misery of his family. Readers witness the anger of others, too, but often this is anger with a cause, as in the case of the exasperated Mr. Harris, or even the haughty Major de Spain. Sarty also experiences anger—at his father—precisely on account of the father's maniacal anger at the world.

Loyalty and Betrayal

Abner's crude psychological stratagem for gaining the complicity of his family in his bizarre way of life is to press his claim of family ties, of loyalty. This surfaces in Sarty's interior monologue, in the first court scene, concerning enemies, "mine and hisn both." But this represents only a degraded view of loyalty, since there is no moral requirement to be loyal to particular persons without qualification, not even to parents. Abner's criminality absolves Sarty morally from maintaining loyalty, a view to which Sarty himself eventually comes. In a technical sense, Sarty betrays his father to Major de Spain, but in a larger moral sense, Sarty expresses his real loyalty to normative ethics, in which revenge is an aberration and aggressive violence a sin.

Morals and Morality

Morality has to do with reciprocity among individuals and is encapsulated in "The Golden Rule," that you should do unto others what you would have others do unto you. Ab Snopes persistently and willfully flouts morality so conceived. He beats his son, tyrannizes his wife, picks fights with people who have done him no harm, and is an arsonist. He was equally rabid and self-serving as a soldier, for he enlisted solely to make the best of the opportunity for looting. Morality is expressed ethically in the form of law, which requires an objective sorting-out of truth. "Barn Burning" traces Sarty's passage from immersion in the egocentric Hell of his father's life to his espousal of morality and law. This is also a passage from the natural state of animal solidarity to the cultural state of concession to institutions.

Order and Disorder

Abner Snopes's life, symbolized by his constant removal to new quarters on account of his quarrels with everyone and by the random wretchedness of the family's meager belongings, is a life of violent disorder. Ab cannot integrate himself into any aspect of the social matrix, and even as a soldier he was out for himself. Ab's tendency toward barn-burning sums up his warlike attitude toward social structure. Sarty trades this disorder for order, symbolized most powerfully during the first courtroom scene, when Mr. Harris points to him with the enunciation that this boy knows the truth. The objective truth, the account of what really happened between Abner and Mr. Harris, is the first revelation to Sarty of an order obtained by the individual's subordinating himself to abstract concepts of existence and proper behavior. In this sense, Sarty's denunciation of his father to Major de Spain is a cry for order, for the liberation of his family from the infernal disorder of Ab's criminal tyranny.

Style

Syntax

The most noticeable feature of Faulkner's style, in "Barn Burning" and elsewhere, is his syntax or sentence structure. Faulkner's sentences tend to be long, full of interruptions, but work basically by stringing out seemingly meandering sequences of clauses. The second sentence of "Barn Burning" offers a case in point: It is 116 words long and contains between twelve and sixteen clauses, depending on how one parses it out; its content is heterogeneous, moving from Sarty's awareness of the smell of cheese in the general store through the visual impression made by canned goods on the shelves to the boy's sense of blood loyalty with his accused father. It is the subjectivity of the content—sense impressions, random emotions and convictions—which reveals the purpose of the syntax, which is to convey experience in the form of an intense stream-of-consciousness as recorded by the protagonist. The reiterated "and . . . and . . . and . . ." of these sequences creates a type of organic flow, as of a raw, unanalyzed encounter with the world and its variety of people and things.

Point of View

Faulkner was a perspectivist: That is to say he liked to tell a story from some particular point of view—or sometimes, as in the novels, from many divergent points of view, each with its own insistent emphasis. "Barn Burning" offers a fairly controlled example of the application of perspectivism. Faulkner tells his story primarily from the point of view of young Sarty, a ten-year-old boy. This requires that Faulkner gives us the raw reportage of scene and event that an illiterate ten-year-old would give us, if he could. Thus, Sarty sees the pictures on the labels of the goods in the general store but cannot understand the lettering; adults loom over him, so that he feels dwarfed by them; and he struggles with moral and intellectual categories, as when he can only see Mr. Harris as an "enemy." There are few departures from this strict perspectivism, but they are telling, as when, in the penultimate paragraph of the tale, an omniscient narrator divulges the truth about Ab's behavior as a soldier during the Civil War. But even this is a calculated feature of Faulkner's style: the breaking-in of the omniscient narrator is another way of fracturing the continuity of the narrative, of reminding readers that there are many perspectives, including a transcendental one in which all facts are known to the author. One further note about the story's confined perspective: Sharing Sarty's immediate impressions and judgments forges a strong bond between the boy and the reader.

Setting

The setting of "Barn Burning" is extremely important to the story: It is the post-Civil War South, the South of Reconstruction, in which a defeated and in many ways humiliated society is trying to hold its own against the Northern victor. This South has retreated into

plantation life and small-town existence, and it maintains in private the social hierarchy that characterized the region in its pre-war phase. Slavery has been abolished, but a vast distance still separates the land-owning Southern aristocracy from the tenant-farmers and bonded workers who do the trench-labor required by the plantation economy, itself in a state of disruption and decadence. The Snopeses belong to the lowest echelon of white postwar Southern society. They are itinerant sharecroppers, who move from one locale to another, paying for their habitation in this or that shack by remitting part of the crop to the landlord. This is a setting of intense vulnerability and therefore of intense resentment. But "setting" is a word which needs to be qualified in reference to "Barn Burning" because, as Sarty notes, he has lived in at least a dozen ramshackle buildings on at least a dozen plantations in his ten short years. In a way, then, the story's "setting" is the road, or rather the Snopes' constant removal from one place to another due to Ab's quarreling and violence. The wagon, heaped with miserable chattel, is the setting, as is Abner's egomaniacal personality and Sarty's miserable yet rebellious heart.

Historical Context

Any discussion of William Faulkner in a historical context necessarily involves a discussion of modernism, the philosophical and artistic movement to which Faulkner, perhaps reluctantly, belonged. Modernism is generally considered *the* peculiarly twentieth-century school of artistic expression, and it is associated in literature with, for example, the poetry of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, the painting of Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso, the music of Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg, and the prose fiction of James Joyce, Marcel Proust, John Dos Passos, and Faulkner. In each of these cases, one observes a conscious breaking with traditional ideas about style, content, and purpose. In the poetry of Pound, as for example in his *Cantos,* experience is broken in pieces, and the reader is faced with a collage of fragments, allusions, declarations, and epiphanies; so, too, in the poems of Eliot, who also typifies the moral atmosphere of modernism, which could be summed up as despair over the condition of humanity in the aftermath of the soul-wrenching and materially devastating First World War (1914-18). Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) offers the paradigm of the modernist consciousness. It is often said that modernism expresses the alienation of the twentieth-century soul, its dislocation, its detachment from traditional sources of moral and intellectual authority, its search for new values to replace those rendered obsolete (as the modernists typically saw it) by massive human violence in the trenches. Artist Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) rejected unitary perspective, rejected the naturalistic or representational style, and concocted his "cubism," with its fractured planes and combinations of broken perspectives; Georges Braque (1882-1963) went even further, into the abstraction of shapes and colors, so that the painting no longer depicted recognizable objects of the real world. Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) introduced new and violent rhythms, intense dissonances, and dry, unsentimental melodies into shocking orchestral works like his *Rite of Spring* (1914); and Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951) did away entirely with traditional harmony, substituting his "twelve-tone" method, with the result of constant unresolved dissonance.

Modernism is complex, and while some of these formal experimenters rejected received values (Pound), others wanted to uphold old values by new means (Eliot). Thus Pound's work includes a sustained attack on Judeo-Christian values and embraces the radical relativism of philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), a German precursor of twentieth-century modernism who called for a "revaluation of all values," while Eliot uses his experimentations to plead for the continued validity of traditional morals in a morally degenerate world. Faulkner is closer to Eliot than to Pound, which means that he is formally a modernist while being morally and philosophically a type of traditionalist. Faulkner could even be called a reactionary—and in truth he was reacting, negatively, to much of the transformation taking place in the world of his time.

In the aftermath of World War I the Western nations, including the United States, saw an unprecedented abandonment of small towns for the economic benefits, some real and some illusory, of big cities; the war had also stimulated the growth of industry and had provoked massive technical innovation. With Europe in debt, and with America in possession of thousands of new factories, the United States enjoyed an economic

boom. This coincided with a new, devil-may-care moral attitude best summed up in the ideas of the "Jazz Age" or "the Roaring Twenties." The winked-at consumption of illegal alcoholic beverages outlawed by Prohibition, relaxed sexual attitudes, the unprecedented freedom of the private automobile, mass entertainments in the cinema and radio, gangster wars—all of these things suggested that the sedate world of pre-World War I agricultural and small-town America had yielded to something else. Smokestack America was burgeoning, and this entailed vast changes not only in the habits and interests of the average American, but in the very landscape.

Faulkner, a son of the traditional South, with its agricultural values and intense devotion to Protestant Christianity, understood all of this with an artist's acuity. He had prepared to fight in the war as an aviator with the British and though he did not see combat, he was close enough to it to understand it. His response to modernity in all of its social and technical manifestations was conditioned by his closeness to the war and to its dehumanizing effects. The new age seemed to represent a breakdown of the human spirit itself, seduced by the gewgaws of technology and the ease of undisciplined living. Faulkner would also have been aware, in the 1930s, of the tide of dictatorship rising in Europe, for this decade was the decade of fascism and militarism in Germany, Italy, the Soviet Union, Romania, and Japan.

Faulkner's reaction to the twentieth century runs in parallel with Oswald Spengler's and Jose Ortega y Gassett's. In *The Decline of the West* (1919) Spengler expressed in vast detail his contention that Western Civilization had entered a decadent phase in which the mass of people and their leaders lived off the stored-up cultural and economic capital of previous ages while contributing nothing by themselves. Ortega y Gassett wrote about

The Revolt of the Masses (1932). The modern age, he claimed, was the age in which mass man replaced aristocratic man and in which the moral laxity of the masses had become the social norm. Ortega y Gassett's thesis was very close to Spengler's, and both of them together suggest in an explicitly philosophical way much of what Faulkner thought, though Faulkner chose to express himself primarily in fiction.

Critical Overview

In one sense, criticism of "Barn Burning" has displayed a remarkable unanimity, for this story throws into sharp relief a young boy's existential choice involving the two notions of "blood relation" and "morality." Whatever conclusion individual critics draw about the tale, their arguments necessarily center on the meaning of that choice. In preparing to read the story and again in considering it afterwards, readers must ask themselves a key question: If family ties constitute a moral obligation on the individual, is there any higher morality which might require the individual to act against a family member? This is the question that ten-year-old Sarty confronts—and answers.

Early reactions to Faulkner's modernistic work in general reflected the uneasiness that modernism itself inspired in the older generation of traditional critics. As late as 1941, Warren Beck could write that Faulkner had been "severely criticized for his style" but was nevertheless a "versatile stylist." Even so, Beck judged that Faulkner "remained guilty of carelessness, especially in sentence construction" and had "persisted in mannerisms." Beck commented on a "profuseness of language . . . elaborate lyrical descriptions [and] persistent lyrical embroidery." The whole aim in Faulkner's writing, Beck wrote, was "perspective." Around the same time, Alfred Kazin referred negatively to Faulkner's "mountainous rhetoric" and his "discursive fog." In 1954, reviewing *The Hamlet,* in which "Barn Burning" appears, Peter Lisca noted "the complex symbolism and character evaluation" inherent in Faulkner's style. But Lisca assumes the validity of Faulkner's style and does not express the reservations still present in Beck's assessment of a decade or so earlier.

Percy H. Boynton, writing at the same time as Beck, directed his attention not to style but to content, and called attention to *The Hamlet* as an instance of Faulkner's representation "of a defeated and outdated gentry, victims of the northern enemy, of their own natures." Boynton noted that, in the stories of the Snopeses in particular, "degeneracy in itself" has become Faulkner's theme, so that he "has come to fill several other volumes with pimps, prostitutes, and perverts in ultimate forms of decadence."

In respect to "Barn Burning" particularly, critics have recognized it as an especially clear statement of Faulkner's central, existential issue: The interior struggle of the individual to discern right from wrong and to act on the discernment. As James B. Carruthers has written, in *William Faulkner's Short Stories* (1985), Sarty becomes "aware of alternatives to his own and his father's choice of action." Carruthers's essay also points up a trend in criticism of this particular tale from *The Hamlet,* that of seeking to justify Abner's violence. Carruthers characterizes Ab as stern but not violent towards his family, as the victim, in some sense, of his social caste.

M. E. Bradford states that "Barn Burning" is "a very important story" in the Faulknerian oeuvre; but Bradford, unlike Carruthers, upholds the intuitive notion that Ab Snopes is a very bad man indeed: "The very real justice of Harris and the rural magistrate in the first trial scene, when taken in conjunction with the moderation of de Spain and the Peace Justice of his county . . . marks how little is required of Ab" and by contrast how truly

monstrous is Ab's sense of absolute self-justification. In other words, one could say that the division among critics of this story lies between those who wish, for whatever reason, to excuse Abner and those who side with Sarty in his decision to embrace an external measure of morality rather than sustain blind (or blood) loyalty.

Karl Zender's essay, "Character and Symbol in 'Barn Burning'" (1989), shows some elements of the apology for Abner. Understanding the story, this critic argues, requires our "overcoming our distaste for Ab to the point where we understand anew the 'mainspring' of his character." Zender readily admits that Ab is "vengeful" and "tyrannous," but claims that he is nevertheless motivated by "a desire for his son's affection." Zender believes that there is "partial justification" for Ab's fiery rage. By contrast, Susan Yunis (1991) complains that Faulkner himself is "intent on explaining and justifying Abner's barn-burning." Yunis represents a typical development in contemporary criticism: the putative discovery that canonical works of literature embody "oppressive" values and legitimate so-called patriarchal oppression. Yunis refers to "the silencing of personal pain" effected by Faulkner's supposed refusal to give voice to Sarty's mother and sisters.

Yunis thus operates within a variant of the class-conflict school of socially oriented criticism. Edmund Volpe (1980) says, however, that "Barn Burning" "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."

John E. Bassett's "Faulkner in the Eighties: Crosscurrents in Criticism," examines recent trends in Faulknerian scholarship. Bassett summarizes the many contemporary techniques that have been applied to Faulkner, including semiotics, deconstruction, Marxist and Feminist hermeneutics, and reader-response criticism. Among critics, Faulkner remains one of the most-discussed American writers of the twentieth century.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Bertonneau is a Temporary Assistant Professor of English and the humanities at Central Michigan University, and Senior Policy Analyst at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy. In the following essay, he examines the tormented character of Abner Snopes and the high price for self-knowledge that Sarty must pay.

Abner Snopes, in William Faulkner's "Barn Burning," is everyone's double, and that is the source of the misery in which he immerses his family and all of those with whom he comes into contact. Snopes feels challenged, it seems, by the pure existence of others and succumbs on each occasion to the demon of incendiary rivalry. At the conclusion of the first courtroom scene, for example, when the justice of the peace, failing to find Snopes guilty of arson against Mr. Harris, nevertheless orders him to "leave this county," Faulkner reports the following as Snopes' reply:

[Abner] spoke for the first time, his voice cold and harsh, level, without emphasis: "I aim to. I don't figure to stay in a country among people who . . . " he said something unprintable and vile, addressed to no one.

The utterance performs two rhetorical tricks revelatory of Abner's essential character. First, it wrests an order, directed at him by an authority figure, from the authority figure, and presents it as Abner's own prior determination, as if to say, "You can't order me to leave since I've already decided to leave of my own volition." Second, it attempts to reverse the moral judgment that the justice of the peace has ascribed to Abner by vilifying ("he said something unprintable and vile") those who would condemn him; if you call me a barn-burner, Abner implicitly says, then I'll call you something even worse. A third observation might be added. Abner's vilification is addressed, Faulkner writes, "to no one." Abner does not look his accusers in the eye when he insults them, he simply mutters the insult as if to himself. His rivalry is also, then, a cowardly rivalry.

The phenomena of doubles and rivals is extremely important to "Barn Burning," as to Faulkner's work in general. Faulkner appears to have understood what philosophical anthropologists like Rene Girard and Eric Gans have understood: That human beings are mimetic (or imitative) creatures and that the problem of violence is directly related to mimesis (or imitation). Perhaps the most common type of problematic imitation in which people engage is acquisitive imitation. When Smith possesses something and makes a show of it, then Jones wants it, too, and to the extent that there is only one object of ownership, it is easy for Smith and Jones to come to blows in a struggle over possession (Smith defensively, Jones aggressively). But there are subtler forms of acquisitive imitation, as when Smith thinks that Jones enjoys a richer life, gets more attention, commands more prerogatives, or wields more authority than he. In such a case, what Smith ends up desiring is Jones's very existence; Smith becomes an unwitting double of Jones and challenges Jones for his very existence. If Smith then fails to become Jones by appropriating Jones's richer life, and so on, then Smith might instead seek a kind of revenge against Jones for being - as Smith sees it - unjustly and unbearably superior, a model whose greater amplitude seems to mock Smith's

perpetually wounded dignity. Social order, with its roots in religion, is based on channeling the imitative impulse in human nature; the net gain when people follow the laws that inhibit uncontrolled imitation is a lessening of conflict and a corresponding increase in peace and happiness.

Abner Snopes is not only at odds with other people, in this sense, but he is also at odds with the very notion of social order. Abner's son Sarty thinks, as they leave town for the de Spain plantation (their next domicile), that "maybe he's done satisfied now; now that he has. . . ." But Abner, wounded by the perceived superiority of everyone to himself, cannot be satisfied; he remains trapped in a cycle of rivalry of which his fire-setting is the perfect symbol. Abner's injunction to Sarty "to stick to your own blood" is really a demand, by Abner to his family, that they actively endorse his "ferocious conviction in this rightness of his own actions." Faulkner's diction is important. The word "ferocious" is related to the word "feral," or "wild." Abner is literally a wild-man, someone unassimilated and perhaps inassimilable to society, which requires a suppression of ego and individual appetite for the net good of the community. Morality is reciprocity, and Abner's only notion of reciprocity is revenge for imagined or grossly magnified slights.

Take Abner's behavior on arriving at the de Spain plantation. "I reckon I'll have a word with the man that aims to begin to-morrow owning me body and soul for the next eight months." Approaching the impressive manor, Sarty sees Abner bring his stiff left foot "squarely down in a pile of fresh droppings where a horse had stood in the drive and which his father could have avoided by a simple change of his stride." Abner now barges into the de Spain house, tracking manure on the rug; he frightens Mrs. de Spain and humiliates the servant. Everything in this chain of actions suggests deliberate provocation by Abner spurred by his own prior assumption that the de Spains have insulted him. But in Abner's "ferocious" psychology, the mere existence of the de Spains, with their fine house in contrast with the Snopeses' "battered stove" and "broken bed and chairs," constitutes an insult; it strikes at Abner's haunting sense of his own diminution before others. Abner has thus immediately picked a fight with Major de Spain, a conflict which he exacerbates by ruining the rug further when de Spain bids him (reasonably) to clean it up. Abner's resentment, pumped up by his own provocative misbehavior, now incites him to the usual climax, setting fire to his rival's barn.

Another kind of imitation is at work in "Barn Burning," however. This is the type of constructive imitation by which the child becomes assimilated to society. Sarty, from whose viewpoint Faulkner largely tells the story, has up until now had only his father as a primary model. In the first trial scene, however, something happens which undoubtedly affects Sarty. Mr. Harris, who has brought the charge of incendiarism against Abner, designates Sarty as one who "knows," that is to say, knows the truth about his father's guilt. Harris wants the boy to testify. Sarty knows that his father *"aims for me to lie."* In the end, Harris will not make the boy choose between lying for his father and betraying the paternal bond by telling the truth. Sarty feels reprieved from the "abyss" that such a choice would have constituted for him. Harris has thus provided a model of concession and decency not available to Sarty in Abner. Again, at the de Spain plantation, Sarty sees the manor as an image of order, *"as big as a courthouse"* exuding a *"spell of peace."* The metaphor of the courthouse links the manor to Harris; the notion

of "peace" contrasts with Abner's imposition of eternal dislocation and terror on his family. Sarty then witnesses his father's willful disruption of the manorial serenity.

When Major de Spain appears with the rug, he assumes an image which can only arouse Abner to further rancor. Sarty sees "a linen-clad man on a fine sorrel mare" with a "suffused, angry face." Considering the provocation, de Spain maintains remarkable control; but Abner, despite his wife's pleas, insists on amplifying the insult by burning the rug with lye in a sham attempt to acquiesce in the employer's direction. When de Spain lays an indemnity of twenty bushels of corn against Abner, Abner surprisingly sues de Spain to get the indemnity dismissed. The justice of the peace upholds the charge, but he does reduce the indemnity, to ten bushels. This fails to mollify Abner, of course, who now determines to execute his usual retribution. He will burn down de Spain's barn.

Sarty is acutely aware of the probable course of events and for the first time articulates his own dilemma: "corn, rug, fire; the terror and the grief, the being pulled two ways like between two teams of horses." On the one hand, there is the blood-bond between father and son. "You got to learn to stick to your own blood or you ain't going to have any blood to stick to," Abner has told Sarty. On the other hand, there is an abstract morality, the foundation of community, modeled by Harris and by the life of the de Spain plantation. But Sarty now understands that the blood-bond entails his acquiescence in his father's violence and his own submission to an authority whose demonic character he begins to recognize. The nature of that authority is suggested by his mother's pathetic cries when she divines that Abner is about to go incendiary again: "Abner! No! No! Oh, God, Oh, God. Abner!" By invoking God, Mrs. Snopes invokes the morality, the transcendental model of ideal human relations, which Abner's egomaniacal rivalry with all and sundry repeatedly and terrifically violates. Mrs. Snopes's cries also implicitly ask for deliverance from the cycle of violence.

Sarty's actions - escaping from his mother, whom Abner has charged to keep him confined to the house, running to the de Spain manor to warn the Major about his father's likely plans - do not form a perfectly calculated or transparent whole; Sarty, a ten-year-old illiterate, responds to partly assimilated intuitions about right and wrong. It seems to be the case that he has no clear intention except to thwart an act of violence, and to thwart thereby the continuous dislocation and meaninglessness of his family's wretched life. De Spain, of course, takes heed quickly and decisively, shooting Abner dead in the very moment when he sneaks into the barn with his pail of oil. This occurs "offstage." Sarty is running away from the manor, in aimless flight, and is aware only of two gunshots, at the sound of which, recognizing (one guesses) what they mean, he yells "Pap! Pap!" and then again "Father! Father!"

Exhausted on a hilltop as morning approaches, Sarty thinks with pity that his father, who had been a soldier during the Civil War, "was brave!" Faulkner obtrudes as narrator to contradict the lad: "His father had [in fact] gone to that war a private in the fine old European sense, wearing no uniform, admitting the authority of and giving fidelity to no man or army or flag, going to war as Malbrouck himself did: for booty - it meant nothing and less than nothing to him if it were enemy booty or his own." The phrase "that war" might casually be read as, simply, the Civil War, but it must be treated carefully and

credited with the ambiguity that it deserves, for "that war" was only chronologically the Civil War. Faulkner's comments make it clear that Abner fought his own war, against everyone, for his own purposes; his entire life was "war," and war, as they say, is Hell. Is it coincidence that Abner's war-wound is a minie ball lodged in his left foot? The Devil, in folklore, limps in his left (cleft) foot, and given his connection with fire there is something truly devilish about Abner Snopes.

Sarty's situation at the end of "Barn Burning" is still unenviable; but some progress has occurred which must be recognized as such. Sarty has, by an act of his own will, turned from a primitive bond (the supposed blood-bond) toward an abstract morality which, because it is not a person, tends to minimize the resentment of those who espouse it. The "slow constellations" which rotate in the sky as Sarty watches from his hilltop symbolize the raising (however meager) of the pitiable boy's consciousness. The price of wisdom is suffering, but the price of freedom, of whatever kind, is wisdom, and this, painfully, in some tiny measure, Sarty has gained.

Source: Thomas Bertonneau, "An Overview of 'Barn Burning'," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

Yunis is professor of Languages and Literature at The College of St. Scholastica. In the following essay, she discusses Faulkner's narrative technique in "Barn Burning."

Faulkner's short story "Barn Burning" poses a problem for me as a reader in that the narrator seems in several instances more intent upon explaining and justifying Abner's barn-burning than in registering the pain his family suffers in the context of these fires. The often quoted fire-building passage provides a good illustration:

The nights were still cool and they had a fire against it, of a rail lifted from a nearby fence and cut into lengths—a small fire, neat, niggard almost, a shrewd fire; such fires were his father's habit and custom always, even in freezing weather. Older, the boy might have remarked this and wondered why not a big one; why should not a man who had not only seen the waste and extravagance of war, but who had in his blood an inherent voracious prodigality with material not his own, have burned everything in sight? Then he might have gone a step farther and thought that that was the reason: that niggard blaze was the living fruit of nights passed during those four years in the woods hiding from all men, blue or gray, with his strings of horses (captured horses, he called them). And older still he might have divined the true reason: that the element of fire spoke to some deep mainspring of his father's being, as the element of steel or of 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.

Though this voice seems in part to articulate Sarty's viewpoint, it speaks with a peculiar degree of detachment from Sarty's sensations. That is, if I try to imagine Sarty in this scene, I see a boy whose family has been forced to leave their home, huddled by a small fire in the cool night, and who has huddled by such a small fire even on freezing nights to evade the retaliation of angry landlords. I see discomfort, anger, even despair at the repetition of this situation and at the powerlessness of the family to change it. And yet this discomfort is never spoken by the narrator. "Barn Burning" seems so clearly to be Sarty's story, that a narrator who focuses less on the child than on the motivation of his violent, even abusive parent seems incongruous.

Karl F. Zender explains [in *College Literature*] this incongruity as the author's effort to get us beyond Sarty's limited perspective: the narrator is modeling for the child how he should learn to regard his father. Zender writes that "the story invites us not . . . to limit ourselves [to Sarty's perspective on his father] for it provides . . . a model not only for Sarty's development but for our performance as readers of Faulkner's fiction . . . [The story] invites us to move by stages to a condition of active, intuitive, passionately engaged reading . . . [which] means overcoming our distaste for Ab to the point where we understand anew the 'mainspring' of his character." Similarly, Richard C. Moreland argues [in *Faulkner and Modernism*] that the narrator urges us to read Ab's own history and potential humor better than Sarty does, adding that what Ab himself is instructing Sarty to understand is what is excluded by the structures of Southern oppositions of

master, slave, white, black. Likewise, Zender reads Abner's coercion of Sarty, his insistence that Sarty participate in his vendettas against his landlords, as attempts to instruct Sarty on the "injustice of (the) family's subjection to the quasi-slavery of turn-of-the-century tenant farming." Though Abner's lesson may be lost on Sarty, Zender argues that it should not be lost on us: the "peace and dignity" of the plantation is purchased with the sweat of blacks and tenant farmers like Abner.

I would agree with both critics that the narrator is trying to model, even control our response to Abner—to mitigate our dislike of the man, just as Abner is trying to control Sarty's response to himself. But for me, reading the narrator's voice as the model for our response to the characters, exposes the narrator's failure to attend to many of the physical and emotional needs of the characters: the narrator is as defensive, as capable of neglect and abuse as the Snopes men are. If we examine closely the context of the voice—that the narrative arises in an abusive situation as a defense—a strategy for controlling abuse, we can appreciate the similarity of the narrative voice to the abuse it defends against. If we heed too carefully the narrator's instructions on how to read Abner, we fail to hear the voices that the narrator and the men he speaks for abruptly silence.

For instance, consider the scene in which Abner deposits Sarty in his mother's grip for fear Sarty will warn de Spain of Abner's intention to burn the barn. Zender reads this action as the desperate attempt "at personal risk, to confine his son inside an infancy in which doubts about his father's courage and fairness could not occur," as "enclosing Sarty inside the embrace [as a] last urgent expression of a fatherly need, even a love, never spoken in its own form." Clearly Zender is following what he sees as the narrator's lead in understanding the mainspring of Abner's behavior. And the narrator, if he's not quite so sympathetic to Abner in his telling of the incident, at least allows such a reading by detaching from the pain and humiliation Sarty must feel as he is dragged by the collar across the floor of two rooms:

Then the boy was moving, his bunched shirt and the hard, bony hand between his shoulder-blades, his toes just touching the floor, across the room and into the other one, past the sisters sitting with spread heavy thighs in the two chairs over the cold hearth, and to where his mother and aunt sat side by side on the bed....

"Hold him," the father said.

In this instance, the narrator's silencing of Sarty's pain would correspond to a strategy frequently used by victims of abuse: a refusal to feel pain or anger or the impulse to resist, or any other response which might incur further abuse. And furthermore, Zender's reading of the incident from Abner's viewpoint corresponds to a strategy used by victims to help them predict and control abuse. For instance, if Sarty were to try to understand and control his father's behavior, he might well rationalize Abner's behavior as love (as Zender does) and figure that the one way to keep Abner's love, to control his anger, is to stay small and dependent: to do what Abner expects before he demands it. It is a strategy we see throughout the earlier parts of the story, used by Sarty and voiced by

the narrator. But what is lost in the narrator's and Zender's readings of Abner, in Sarty's early attempts to read Abner, and in all of their refusals to feel Sarty's pain is the violence done to Sarty.

Most readers, I think, feel Sarty's abuse anyway, resisting the narrator's efforts to control their response to Abner. And Moreland himself acknowledges Abner's brutality in a footnote, admitting that "Ab's violence toward blacks, toward women, and toward his son Sarty is obvious throughout the story. It is not in defense of this violence but in an effort *to understand it*— the 'savage blows . . . but without heat' that I might add that Ab seems here to be passing on, in a more explicitly despotic, violent form, the naturalized, axiomatic social and economic violence he feels directed against himself" (emphasis added). But the very footnoting of their emotional experience reveals the marginalization of Abner's family's pain which the narrator's focus upon Abner entails.

This silencing of personal pain and the intentional focusing upon the experience and motivation of another are for me what the narrator speaks. It is a strategy used by all of the Snopes men in their dealings with abusive, powerful others. Looked at in this way, the narrator's voice is not discordant but articulates the strategies, if not the pain and anger, of the powerless in their attempts to control abuse.

The narrative begins in a "courtroom," as Sarty agonizes over his inability to please both groups of men who demand compliance: the Snopes men, who demand loyalty; and the Justice and his likes, who demand honesty. As he sits hungry among cheeses and tinned cans of meat whose labels he cannot read, Sarty seems sealed in his body and its fierce pull, unable to label his experience, his conflict, unable to understand its dynamics or to begin to resolve it.

Sarty feels potential relief from the weight of his body when he is asked to testify about his father: "it was as if he had swung outward at the end of a grape vine . . . and at the top of the swing had been caught in a prolonged instant of mesmerized gravity, weightless in time." Telling about his father, he senses, would give him relief. But he lacks the literary and rhetorical skills to be able to satisfy both of the audiences in the courtroom. He cannot tell "the truth" and exonerate his father at the same time. Yet the need to control the anger of both audiences is crucial to Sarty. For a judgment against Abner means the family must move again, which provokes Abner's retaliation and his abusive treatment of his family. In addition, Sarty must control his own anger against his abusive father which, though it is not explored, we feel must exist, and probably impels him at some level to testify against this man who sacrifices the needs of his family to satisfy his own vendettas. The enormous job of using words to understand and control two sets of powerful and angry men and their demand for justice is overwhelming to the small, illiterate child. This job of using language to control anger is left to the narrator.

The narrator can do for Sarty what the young Sarty cannot: he can understand Abner's anti-social behavior, his anger, in a way Sarty as yet cannot; he can read, and therefore he can tell the truth about Abner's fires while placing him in the context of heroes respected by his audience. The narrator uses language and literature to speak in a way that appeases powerful men—but still at the expense of the abused body and its

hungers. For Sarty's experience is eclipsed by narrative attention to Abner not only in the fire-building passage, but in the story as a whole. "Barn Burning" is told twenty years after the events described, and though we can infer from a brief reference to Sarty's thoughts as a thirty-year-old man that the narrator apparently knows what has happened to Sarty in this intervening period ("Later, twenty years later, he was to tell himself, 'If I had said they wanted only truth, justice, he would have hit me again'."), we get no glimpse into Sarty's life story. The mature Sarty has no present, only a past the narrative voice circles endlessly around—Sarty's telling the truth about his father.

The narrator's voice of literate understanding, this voice without a body or a life, this penetration into the feelings, motives, behaviors of powerful others, is a total erasure of self, the weightless liberation which Sarty dreams of in anticipation of telling about his father. "Barn Burning" lays bare that stories about powerful others may be an attempt both to placate the powerful and to escape personal pain. Here, both reading and writing—the construction of the meaning of an event—take place in a context of power relationships so threatening that the meaning constructed inevitably reflects the image of the powerful abusive audience. And the price of these strategies for identifying with the powerful in order to control them is emotional death—a numbing of the self to personal injuries which is symbolized in Abner's frozen leg. The narrator's storytelling is so focused upon intuiting its audience and controlling its response that the self and its injuries are momentarily forgotten.

The narrator expresses Sarty's defensive rhetorical impulse: he is able to placate both powerful audiences, remaining loyal to Abner and still telling "the truth" about Abner's fires. For he needn't answer right away—he has the space of the text to use as he chooses; he can withhold revealing Abner's guilt until an opportune moment. He can choose the time and method for telling about Abner's fires. When the narrator finally does admit to Abner's habitual fire building, in the fire building passage quoted above, he couches the admission in abstract language which resonates with heroic adjectives, with implicit reference to the most famous and heroic builder of fires, Prometheus. Storytelling, based as it is upon the carefully timed disclosure of events in order to manipulate audience response, is a strategy well suited to characters who feel the need to control the emotions of those around them. And Prometheus is an apt image here since, in his stealing the secrets of the control of fire, he is an archetypal symbol for the control of libidinal impulse.

We can see Abner using similar strategies to control anger, his own and that of his most powerful audience, his landlords. Abner is generally able to tolerate his landlords' insults and injuries without obvious anger because, we assume, he holds out to himself the promise of a burning barn, the promise of retribution at the time and place of his choosing, after he has secured another tenancy for himself. Not only does the promise of the fire enable Abner to control his own anger, the fires themselves enable him to control his landlord's angry response to him. The fires, set as Abner flees to a new location, control the landlord's behavior in a way other acts of vandalism might not: because of the value he places on his property, the landlord will extinguish the fire rather than pursue Abner. Abner understands his oppressors well enough to know that they won't fly off half-cocked and shoot him; they will safeguard their property first. The

careful timing of Abner's fires to control his audience is voiced in the narrator's careful timing of the disclosure of those fires.

Abner's fires are both a mechanism for and a numinous symbol of his control over rage—his own and his landlords': the "niggardly" fires he builds for his fleeing family remind Abner to control his rage. The well controlled fire is symbolic of the passion, the energy, he must control and use to his best advantage in his war with his landlords: it is "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." As he understands the careful use of fire, the conservation of it, the insulation of it so that it does not spread, so his fires remind him to understand and predict anger, his own and his landlords', to keep it contained, to insulate against its spread, and to indulge it only occasionally, and at a safe distance, when he has secured another tenancy.

Sarty has strategies as well for controlling anger, his own and his father's. In fact, so skilled is Sarty at avoiding his own anger we seldom, if ever, see it; and we may suspect that he himself is unaware of it. Immediately before Abner stains the de Spains' rug, Sarty has been hoping that the peace and dignity of the house will change Abner. Abner's failure to clean his boot deflates Sarty's romantic notions about the ability of the house to change the direction of Abner's life, and yet Sarty never registers anger at Abner over the stained rug or over Abner's vengeful scraping it clean; Sarty evades his own response by worrying about Abner's anger—by trying to anticipate his father's response:

"Pap," he said. His father looked at him—the inscrutable face, the shaggy brows beneath which the gray eyes glinted coldly.... "You did the best you could!" . . . "If he wanted it done different why didn't he wait and tell you how? He won't git no twenty bushels!" . . . [Sarty] whisper[ed] up at the harsh, calm face beneath the weathered hat: "He wont git no ten bushels neither. He wont get one. We'll . . ." until his father glanced for an instant down on him, the face absolutely calm, the grizzled eyebrows tangled above the cold eyes, the voice almost pleasant, almost gentle:

"You think so? Well, we'll wait till October anyway."

Sarty's job of anticipating his father's anger is complicated by Abner's self-control. Sarty is often unable to predict his father's responses because Abner is so controlled that his rage seldom shows; his face is "absolutely calm," "inscrutable." But Sarty's survival depends upon his ability to see beneath his father's calm exterior, to intuit what his father wants him to do: to read him. In the opening scene, in the courtroom, Sarty's attention is focused on his father: "His father, stiff in his black Sunday coat donned not for the trial but for the moving, did not even look at him. He aims for me to lie, he thought, again with that frantic grief and despair. And I will have to do hit." When Sarty finally risks telling the truth about his father's fires he tells de Spain when Abner is out of earshot. The careful reading of one's audiences and the careful timing of disclosures are strategies that both Sarty and the narrator use to control angry responses.

Just as Sarty and Abner struggle to control their own emotional responses and those of their enemies, so they control any expression of feeling by the females. When Sarty is tackled by another boy outside the courtroom, his mother cries, "Does hit hurt?" yet Sarty silences her cry of pain just as he silences his own: "'Naw,' he said. 'Hit dont hurt. Lemme be'." Likewise the women express disgust with their living conditions, and for this instinctive anger they are humiliated by Abner: "'Likely hit [their house] ain't fitten for hawgs,' one of the sisters said. 'Nevertheless, fit it will and you'll hog it and like it,' his father said." Only the women express anger at having to clean the shit from de Spain's rug. And at least initially only the women express fear or guilt at Abner's fires: "the mother tugged at [Abner's] arm until he shifted the lamp to the other hand and flung her back, not savagely or viciously, just hard, into the wall, her hands flung out against the wall for balance, her mouth open and in her face the same quality of hopeless despair as had been in her voice."

In his wife and daughters and children, Abner and Sarty silence the anger, fear, despair and human sympathy which they fear would overwhelm them. The women's voices are reminders of vulnerability; the Snopes men deny these feelings in themselves, punish them in the females, and ritually display their understanding of and control over these dangerous impulses in their fires.

The narrative voice silences the emotional women just as Sarty and Abner do. Abner and Sarty let them cry, and then silence or humiliate them. So, too, the narrator describes the women as crying, their voices having the quality of "hopeless despair," but he splits off from their emotionality in a refusal to translate their grief into words ("the hysteric and indistinguishable woman-wail"). The narrator refuses to speak pain and labels that voice in others as hysterical and not worth attending to. The narrator, like Sarty, uses his telling to separate from despair, to silence it.

In the same way the narrator refuses to tell Sarty's pain: "he leaping in the red haze toward the face, feeling no blow, feeling no shock when his head struck the earth . . . feeling no blow this time either and tasting no blood." And when Abner hits Sarty, the narrator focuses upon Abner and the way he hits, not on the way it feels to Sarty:

His father struck him with the flat of his hand on the side of the head, hard but 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 horse fly, his voice still without heat or anger.

The narration is a deliberate focusing upon the abuser, not the feelings of the abused. The narrator is the voice of Sarty's evasion of pain through identification with the oppressor instead of the oppressed as a technique of survival, but also as a means of detaching from pain. The narrator is also the voice of Sarty's effort to control the response of his audiences to Abner, to soften their judgment of him: Abner's brutality is less liable to outrage an audience that is not focused upon the pain that his brutality inflicts.

There are moments when Abner loses control of his anger: around his family of course, he is less controlled, since they are powerless: they do not threaten him with retaliation. But the staining of the rug with horse shit is one moment when Abner spontaneously vents his rage at his landlord rather than at his family. Abner's momentary loss of control when he stains the rug and his vengeful scraping it clean, connect him with both the narrator and Faulkner as writer. Abner, "stiff," "black," "flat," like "something cut ruthlessly from tin" whose stiff foot "strike[s]" with "machinelike deliberation" the pale rug of the de Spains, leaving indelible "prints," suggests a typewriter whose stiff, tin-type leaves its print on a pale sheet of paper. He then "erases" the prints at the insistence of de Spain: he agrees to wash the shit from the rug. Though his act begins in angry protest against the conventions of aristocratic culture, a sort of written protest, Abner adapts, amends his message: he erases the heel mark, though he damages the rug in the process. Residual marks remain. The narrator has done the same thing. In the story itself he has erased Abner's passionate outburst against his landlord, "'I dont figure to stay in a country among people who . . .' he said something unprintable and vile." Similarly, in a letter dated July 8, 1939, six months before his completion of "Barn Burning," Faulkner, apparently at his publisher's suggestion (another type of landlord who skims a percentage from his tenant's labor?), agrees to what he calls the "whitewashing" of his just completed novel, *The Wild Palms*, by which he means the deletion of "objectionable words." One of those words is "shit." In his letter Faulkner agrees to the ellipses, but demurs that "there are a few people whom I hope will read the book, among whom the preservation of my integrity as a faithful . . . portrayer of living men and women is dear enough for me to wish not to betray it." Faulkner's demurrer about the "preservation of my integrity," which he will later use in reference to Abner's fires ("the one weapon for the preservation of his integrity"), and the possible similarity of the look of the ellipsis (. . .) in *The Wild Palms* which replaces the word "shit," to the abrasions in the rug left by Abner's rock as he scrapes off the actual shit may suggest Faulkner's identification with Abner, and the insistence of both men to leave the traces of their censored outrage. Perhaps at some level Faulkner sees himself and Abner as truth-tellers who betray their own integrity when they bend to the niceties of those upon whom they are economically dependent, when they erase the humiliating traces of their own instinctive humanity to placate their more powerful audiences. The personal cost of a voice which agrees to cauterize its feelings to control the anger of its audience is a betrayal of one's own integrity—of one's self.

Source: Susan S. Yunis, "The Narrator of Faulkner's 'Barn Burning'," in *The Faulkner Journal,* Vol. VI, No. 2, Spring, 1991, pp. 23-31.

Critical Essay #3

Zender is a professor of English at the University of California—Davis. In the following excerpt, he provides a thematic and stylistic analysis of "Barn Burning," relating the story to Faulkner's other works and to American literature in general.

Allowing us to inhabit Ab's point of view is an act of artistic courage on Faulkner's part. It is a striking example of how much of the human condition lies inside the pale of his imaginative sympathy. But allowing identification with Ab also places almost intolerable pressure on the conclusion of the story, by forcing a single signifier to serve incommensurate artistic purposes. Once we have attained to intimate knowledge of Ab's true motives, the father that Sarty "forgets" can never again be only an interior, imaginary, symbolic figure. He must also be Adam, flesh and blood, Ab as social and physical reality. An uneasy sense of the explosiveness of this combination of symbolism and realism, and of the need to defuse it somewhat, reveals itself in various ways in the conclusion of the story—in the off-stage location of Ab's apparent demise, in the irresolution of the question of whether he actually dies, and (regrettably) in the narrator's censorious reminder, after Sarty affirms the truth of his father's bravery, that Ab went to war "a private in the fine old European sense . . . giving fidelity to no man or army or flag." These moderating touches have an air of existing independently of the story and of intruding into it. They gloss over the story's explosive tensions to some degree, but they do not greatly alleviate our sense that the action of the story pulls against itself in a troubling way.

Faulkner's failure—or inability—to accommodate the demands of psychic growth to the realities of social existence is by no means limited to "Barn Burning." It characterizes relations between parents and children in much of his fiction. One thinks, for example, of the destructiveness of the encounters between Mr. Compson and Quentin Compson, Simon McEachern and Joe Christmas, and the Old General and the Corporal—to mention only relations between fathers (or father-figures) and sons. The accuracy of these depictions as descriptions of an aspect of human experience cannot be denied. But the exclusivity of Faulkner's emphasis may trouble us. One need not be a Pollyanna to insist that the symbolic father can be, and usually is, slain without irremediable damage being done to the social relation between father and son. The widespread absence of this optimistic view from Faulkner's fiction has implications that merit attention.

If we cast our minds back over American literature in search of a precursor for Sarty Snopes, one figure comes immediately to mind—Huckleberry Finn. The resemblances are obvious: a tyrannical father who dies, an initiation—extended in the one case, brief in the other—into an awareness of American social and economic injustice, a final journey into freedom. But the differences are equally obvious. *Huckleberry Finn* is gentler and more optimistic than "Barn Burning" not merely because Huck, unlike Sarty, escapes responsibility for his father's death but because the final condition of freedom into which he moves has a geographical and temporal plausibility Sarty's lacks. It is true that in important ways Huck Finn remains always a child. As James Cox argues [in

Mark Twain: The Fate of Humor, 1966], the subversive power of the novel lies in its enactment of the dream of a timeless condition of innocent, prepubescent, polymorphous pleasure. But it is also true that the "territory" toward which Huck "light[s] out" had a real existence when the novel was being written, one capable of sustaining an opposed dream of human growth and maturation. "Turn your face to the great West," Horace Greeley counseled, "and there build up a home and fortune"—or, in Greeley's more familiar phrasing, "Go west, young man, and grow up with the country."

By comparison, what space and time does Sarty move toward at the end of "Barn Burning?" The only space mentioned is the "dark woods" toward which he walks at the end of the story; the only time, the period "twenty years later" when he tells himself, "If I had said they wanted only truth, justice, he [Ab] would have hit me again." This space and time are symbolic, not real. The space, unlocatable on any map, is the dark terrain of the self through which Sarty must journey if he is to become a mature adult. The time is a moment somewhere beyond the completion of this journey. But this moment, like the space itself, connects only tenuously to any realistically construed understanding of Sarty's post-adolescent life. The truth and justice Sarty mentions can best be understood privatively, as terms without positive content, for we have no reason to believe that a truth and a justice so casually alluded to can encompass the after-trauma of inadvertent father-slaughter or the *in* justice of Sarty's family's subjection to the quasi-slavery of turn-of-the-century tenant farming. This truth, this justice, this vision of Sarty's future resembles Sarty's own naive hope that the de Spain mansion might embody a peace and dignity exempt from social and economic inequalities and from the rage that accompanies them. It intimates a successful completion for Sarty's journey into moral adulthood, but at the expense of diminishing that journey's complexity.

We risk breaking the butterfly on the wheel if we load large cultural implications onto a single short story. Nevertheless, behind "Barn Burning" looms the cultural transformation symbolized by the contrast between the story and *Huckleberry Finn*, and this transformation also looms behind literary modernism generally. The relation of modernist writers to their American heritage is, of course, ambivalent. They certainly exhibit an eagerness, in Ezra Pound's phrase, to "make it new," to break free of stultifying conventions and outworn ideologies. But they also exhibit a pervasive melancholy over the passing of an earlier, more spacious, more optimistic America. Out of this melancholy arises (to cite three examples from among many) the urgent depiction, in Willa Cather's *My Antonia,* of a frontier arrested in a condition of pastoral timelessness; the equally urgent account, in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises,* of a quest for regenerative contact with an agrarian culture; and the elegiac description, at the end of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby,* of Gatsby's dream as "already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity . . . where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night."

Faulkner fully participates in this work of mourning and remembrance. To a far greater extent than is commonly acknowledged, he descends from Emerson and Whitman, and his fictional avatars—Quentin Compson, Isaac McCaslin, Gavin Stevens—fight desperate, even if usually unsuccessful, rear-guard actions in the service of a nineteenth-century vision of America's promise. In the second half of his career,

Faulkner's allegiance to this vision manifested itself in attempts to become, as he said in a letter written in 1942, "articulate in the national voice." In a variety of willingly assumed roles—State Department Cultural Representative, university lecturer, writer of public letters—he sought to remind both his fellow citizens and a world audience of their great heritage—of what he called, in the Nobel Prize Speech, "the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of [mankind's] past." And he sought as well to remind his readers and listeners of the social and ethical obligations these values entail.

This effort at recollection and reaffirmation was generous and courageous—more so, given the political tensions of the times, than is sometimes now understood. But it was also relatively ineffectual, and it is now not very convincing. This is so because the abstractions and ethical imperatives Faulkner invokes in the Nobel Prize Speech and elsewhere are as void of contact with lived experience as are the truth and justice of his comment about Sarty's future. As Richard H. King has argued [in *Southern Literary Journal*], Faulkner had a strong political impulse, but no very coherent political program or ideology, nor even any very strong belief in the usefulness of collective action. Hence his affirmations of traditional values do not arise out of a political commitment but out of the absence of one. They entail, in King's words, "a violent wrenching away *from* necessity . . . which is only momentarily an intervention *in* history." They inhabit, that is, a transcendental vacancy, a timeless space outside and above, but only tenuously in contact with, the realities of mid-century American life.

As I have argued elsewhere [chapter 5 in *The Crossing of the Ways,* 1989], the emergence of Faulkner's desire to be articulate in the national voice was accompanied by a change in his attitude toward teaching. In the first half of his career—in *The Sound and the Fury* and "Light in August" especially—his scenes of instruction tend to be strongly colored with negative emotions. These scenes, which focus almost exclusively on parents and children (especially on fathers and sons), depict teaching as an act of violence, an imposition by force of a parental identity on the mind of a vainly resisting child. As Faulkner's career advanced, and his desire to inculcate moral and ethical values grew, he moderated this negative image of teaching, replacing it with scenes in which instruction is more-or-less freely given and received. But this shift never fully completes itself. Although in *Go Down, Moses, Intruder in the Dust,* and elsewhere Faulkner depicts positive and successful scenes of instruction, these always involve father-surrogates, never fathers. Only by moving outside the patrilineal line of descent, it seems, could Faulkner affirm the possibility of a life-sustaining transmission of values from one generation to the next. But this is a formal equivalent of the vacancy of his transcendentalizing rhetoric. It affirms the possibility of the transmission of values from one generation to the next, but at the expense of avoiding one of the more important questions about family life in our time: how fathers may legitimately and successfully teach their sons.

"Barn Burning" occupies a pivotal position in the career-long transformation just described. What might be termed the first half of Faulkner's contemplation of the theme of instruction reaches its culmination in the closing chapters of *Absalom, Absalom!*, with the depiction of a life-and-death struggle between brother-brother and father-son modes

of teaching and learning. "Barn Burning" inaugurates the second half of Faulkner's contemplation of the theme. Written in 1938, it is the first of his works of fiction to admit of the possibility of identification with an adult teacher as well as with a child pupil. In depicting this possibility in a father-son relation, in fact, the story comes closer than *Go Down, Moses* or *Intruder in the Dust* to exposing some of the more important psychic issues at stake in inter-generational acts of instruction. But the story also foreshadows the problematics, and the incompleteness, of Faulkner's presentation of scenes of instruction in his later fiction. Where is narrator sympathy invested in "Barn Burning?" Everywhere and nowhere. It is invested in Sarty, and in Ab, but never, sadly, in the two of them together.

Source: Karl F. Zender, "Character and Symbol in 'Barn Burning'," in *College Literature,* Vol. XVI, No. 1, 1989, pp. 48-59.

Adaptations

"Barn Burning" was adapted as a film in 1980, starring Tommy Lee Jones and Diane Kagan. It runs forty-one minutes and can be purchased from Monterey Home Video, Karol Video.

Topics for Further Study

Read another Faulkner story, "Turnabout," in which an American aviator in World War I meets a British torpedo-boat pilot and experiences the war from the sailor's perspective. Compare the "conversion experience" of the aviator at the end of the story, when he wishes that the German target he is bombing were in fact the Allied Headquarters, with Sarty Snopes's "conversion experience" in "Barn Burning."

"Barn Burning" relies on Sarty's point of view, and to a lesser extent on Abner's and the narrator's, to convey its events; but Sarty's older brother, his mother, an aunt, and two sisters are also present. Read the story carefully and try to construct an account of events as one of these others might see them.

Explore the symbolic expressions of fire in "Barn Burning." What are the properties of fire in general that make it an apt symbol for certain human traits? What particular manifestations of fire does Faulkner deploy in his story to give his readers insight into the character of Ab Snopes?

Compare and Contrast

1941: Fire damage to personal property in the United States is estimated at $286,000.

1997: Arson is the second leading cause of residential deaths in the United States, claiming 740 lives. Personal property losses from arson total nearly $28 million.

Early 1900s: Although the United States is shifting from an agrarian to an industrial society, a large portion of the country's gross national product results from agricultural production. Due to the abolishment of slavery, many landowners turn to tenant farming for their workforce. There are an estimated 250,000 sharecroppers in the United States.

1990s: Many farmers begin to sell off large parcels of their land to real estate speculators because of high land values. Most food production is left to large corporations.

1930s: William Faulkner's regionalist Southern subject matter, featuring the fictional Yoknapatawpha County, meets with criticism on two fronts: Northern critics find Faulkner's work too narrow, while Southern critics feel his work casts the South in an unfavorable light.

1990s: Regionalist Southern writers including Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Cormac McCarthy, are praised for the detail with which they portray their subject matter.

What Do I Read Next?

The stories in Faulkner's *The Hamlet* form a cycle of tales dealing with the Sartoris and Snopes families, tracing their intertwinings and degenerations from the time of Abner Snopes to the early twentieth century.

Faulkner's *Sanctuary* (1931) is a novel of irrationality and violence that has been criticized for exploiting the violence that "Barn Burning" seems to condemn. Written as a potboiler, *Sanctuary* will also give a sense of Faulkner's more commercial side.

Like Faulkner, H. P. Lovecraft was an agrarian anti-modernist who took a keen and almost obsessive interest in the phenomenon of degeneration. Lovecraft's "Shadow over Innsmouth" (1936) is a story of inbreeding, isolation, and violence in a small New England town. Lovecraft's "Whisperer in Darkness" and "The Dunwich Horror" make use of a fictional

American region, Arkham County, in Massachu-setts, which has many points in common with Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha. These stories appear in Lovecraft's *The Dunwich Horror and Others.*

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) deals with the moral and emotional growth of a young girl in Alabama. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1961, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is regarded as an excellent example of Southern regionalism.

The California poet Robinson Jeffers wrote narrative verse which explores nineteenth-century California in much the same manner as Faulkner explores the nineteenth and early twentieth-century South. Jeffers's "The Roan Stallion," in *Selected Poems of Robinson Jeffers,* is a strong example of regionalism used to convey a universal vision.

Further Study

Beach, Joseph Warren. "William Faulkner, Virtuoso," in *American Fiction, 1920-1940,* New York: Macmillan, 1941, pp. 147-69.

Beach devotes his attention to Faulkner's style; this chapter is a perceptive early attempt to deal with Faulkner's prose innovations.

Brooks, Cleanth. *William Faulkner, First Encounters,* New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983, pp. 16-19, 97- 101.

From the perspective of decades of familiarity with his subject, Brooks undertakes a reasoned and objective assessment of Faulkner; in the sections on "Barn Burning," Brooks is especially sensitive to the moral nuances of the tale.

Geismar, Maxwell. "William Faulkner: The Negro and the Female," in *Writers in Crisis (The American Novel: 1925-1940),* London: Secker and Warburg, 1947, pp. 123-83.

Geismar offers a full discussion of the roles played by blacks and women in Faulkner's fiction; the critic deals with the importance of outsiders and pariahs in Faulkner's vision of things.

O'Donnell, George Marion. "Faulkner's Mythology," in *The Kenyon Review,* Vol. I, No. 3, Summer, 1939, pp. 285-99.

O'Donnell addresses the mythic structure of Faulkner's fiction, his building-up of a purely fictitious world complete with its own distinctive geography and traditions; the critic also examines the archetypal nature of this world and its relation to myth in the tragic sense.

Bibliography

Bassett, John E. "Faulkner in the Eighties: Crosscurrents in Criticism," in *College Literature,* Vol. XVI, No. 1, 1989, pp. 1-27.

Beck, Warren. "Faulkner and the South," in *The Antioch Review,* No. 1, 1941, pp. 82-94.

———. "Faulkner's Style," in *American Prefaces,* Vol. VI, No. 3, Spring, 1941, pp. 195-211.

Boynton, Percy H. "Retrospective South," in *America in Contemporary Fiction,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940, pp. 103-12.

Carruthers, James B. *William Faulkner's Short Stories,* Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985, pp. 61-7.

Kazin, Alfred. "Faulkner: The Rhetoric and the Agony," in *The Virginia Quarterly Review,* Vol. 18, Summer, 1942, pp. 389-402.

Lisca, Peter. "The Hamlet: Genesis and Revisions," in *Faulkner Studies,* Vol. 3, No. 4, 1954, pp. 5-13.

Volpe, Edmund. "'Barn Burning': A Definition of Evil," in *Faulkner: The Unappeased Imagination: A Collection of Critical Essays,* edited by Glenn O. Carey, New York: Whiston Publishing Company, 1980, pp. 75-82.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Short Stories for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535