

# Finding symbolism in barn burning by william faulkner

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The short story, *Barn Burning* by William Faulkner is full of literary devices. The story is about a family who moves from farm to farm to get by in life and the father burns down barns, hence the name *Barn Burning*. Which leads the little boy in this short story to decide if he wants to stick with his family or if he wants to break away from his family and do the right thing. Most readers will have to reread this story to pick up most of the symbolism. Throughout the story, Faulkner uses symbolism to show how the theme can be understood and found by the reader.

Faulkner uses a lot of symbolism in this story, but not all of it can be represent the theme or the choice Sarty (the little boy) will have to make. An example symbolism representing the theme could be, " he could see the ranked shelves close-packed with the solid, squat, dynamic shapes of tin cans labels whose labels read, not from the lettering which meant nothing to his mind but from the scarlet devils and the silver curve of fish" (Faulkner 1). Faulkner uses this sentence to show how the boy is hungry and he can not read, which tells the reader some backstory about the boy. More importantly this sentence shows the reader that the descriptions of these cans represents how the boy can choose how he wants to live his life by which can he can pick. If Sarty decides to pick the can that has a devil on it, then he will stay with his family and keep supporting his father when he burns down barns. On the contrary, if Sarty picks the can that has a silver fish (which represents Christianity) he will leave his family and not be associated with the illegal acts which his father does.

Faulkner tells his readers a lot of information that is not easily understood or perceived at first glance. Sarty is forced to be his father's alibi and help him commit the illegal actions at some point. This adds more pressure on the boy because he knows that his father is doing something wrong and he is forced to be a part of it or to help get his father out of trouble. In the beginning of the story Abner (the father) and his family are in a store and the father is being accused. Faulkner writes, "Get that boy up here" (Faulkner 2). This represents how the boy is always going to have to get his father out of whatever kind of trouble he is in. Later in this scene the justice asks what Sarty's name is and Sarty responds "Colonel Sartoris Snopes" (Faulkner 2). Abner named his son after a colonel who served in the civil war, who you would think would be honest but Sarty covers up for his dad.

Sarty goes through a lot in this story, but most things he faces can be connected to his choice that he makes by the end of the story. "The only space mentioned is the dark woods toward which he walks at the end of the story" (Zender 4). The point of Faulkner telling us that Sarty is walking through the dark woods is really symbolic of his life changing as stated, "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" (Zender 4) This just emphasizes how hard this choice will be for Sarty. If he does leave then he will be leaving his blood behind and will not be guaranteed anything in the future, but if he stays then he will continuously be following his father's footsteps and be associated with all the actions that his dad does.

The final scene of the book gives us an example of symbolism as stated, “The closing image of the constellations may symbolize Sarty’s past and future wanderings” (Billingslea 1). This is after Sarty runs from his family and he is just walking as far as he can. Faulkner says, “The slow constellations wheeled on” (Faulkner 14). Sarty is experiencing a lot of things in this scene but he kind of just slowly moves on and takes things as they come. This is also represented by Faulkner writing, “It would be dawn and then sun-up after a while and he would be hungry. But that would be tomorrow and now he was cold” (Faulkner 14). This shows how Sarty is taking his new life one step at a time and only worrying about what is currently a problem. He knows he will be hungry, but his main priority is trying to get warmed up. This becomes relatable to the reader because once someone makes a decision, one will not know how to do everything.

Abner is a man who does not express how he feels but he does make sure to let those around him know when he is mad or feeling upset. According to Charles Mitchell, “Abner’s wounded foot is used symbolically to suggest his ruthless but wounded will” (Mitchell 1). This shows how Abner is very persistent and will do whatever it takes to get done what he wants done. Mitchell also says, “Satan is linked with fire and sought to destroy God’s garden, so Abner burns barns” (Mitchell 1). There are many things to say about Abner and one of the most common things he is associated with is the Devil or Satan. One of the ways that Abner is linked to the devil is he loves to burn stuff, specifically barns.

Sarty on the other hand is the complete opposite of his father. Mitchell says, Sarty links his will with his heart or emotions; he tries to achieve freedom within moral limits. Which is very prevalent throughout the story. Everything Sarty does is nothing close to what his dad does or what he thinks. In the beginning of the story when the justice calls Sarty up to speak for his dad, Sarty thinks, " He aims for me to lie and I will have to do hit" (Faulkner 2). Faulkner depicts Sarty as one who is a rule follower and wants to make everybody or as many people happy as possible. Faulkner also writes, " Enemy! Enemy! he thought; for a moment he could not even see" (Faulkner 2). One of the ways he makes his father happy is by covering up his tracks and actions. Sarty later realizes that no matter what he does for his dad, Abner will never be grateful or thank his son for having his back. An example where the reader can find this is where Faulkner says, " You were fixing to tell them. You would have told them" (Faulkner 4). The readers know that Sarty was going to tell the justice anything but the truth, but his father thinks that Sarty would tell and snitch on him. Probably the most " aggressive" thing Sarty does is, " I don't want to have to hit you" (Faulkner 13). Sarty is trying to go warn the owner of the farm (Mr. De Spain) that his dad is going to burn his barn, but his mom grabs a hold of him and refuses to let go. This can be seen as Sarty starting to break his shell and is leaning towards leaving his family and doing the right thing.

In the final paragraph, Sarty is on his own and is experiencing life by himself. Faulkner says, " It would be dawn and then sun up" (Faulkner 14). This symbolizes Sarty's old life coming to an end and his new life is just beginning

and the journey he is about to endure once the sun rises. Faulkner also writes, " He did not look back" (Faulkner 14). This can be taken as a literal statement and a figurative statement. Sarty finally realizes that he has made the right decision and does not regret his decision at all. This also means that he is going to keep in walking and distance himself from his family.

Barn Burning is a very complicated short story that has a tremendous amount of depth and hidden meanings. Sarty starts off as a boy who is very shut in and thinks about everything else but himself. After every action his father does and after all the defending of his father Sarty must do, makes him slowly realize who his dad's truly is. Throughout the story Sarty begins to " evolve" and starts to change. It does not happen all at once; one thing normally changes at a time. He first figures out that his dad does not really care what he does, as long as Sarty does not snitch on him. Next, he figures out that he is done with his family and putting up with the illegal activities that his dad does. At the end of the story, Sarty is almost a different person. He puts himself first and stops worrying about what his dad will say or do and can finally do what he wants to do and be the man he wants to be.