

# Characters in barn burning short story

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In William Faulkner's *Barn Burning*, there are only a few characters introduced. Many of these characters are static, yet somehow Faulkner is able to provide a complex story with those characters and the few dynamic ones. Faulkner himself held a few occupations apart from being a writer, including being part of the Royal Canadian Air Force in 1918. He was eventually encouraged as a writer by Sherwood Anderson (196). Starting roughly in 1929, Faulkner created recurring characters set in his fictional county for many different works. Given his background as being part of the Canadian Air Force, he was likely able to experience what war was like and, as such, was able to develop Abner Snopes, the father of Sartoris Snopes, to be similar to him. Abner Snopes, in turn, attempted to impose upon Sarty a necessity to maintain loyalty to his family, as well as follow in his own footsteps. With this being said, it seems possible that the oxymoronic nature of Abner Snopes' words versus his actions led Sarty to sever his ties with his family in the end and warn the Major about the soon to come burning.

The story itself begins in a Justice's court, with Mr. Snopes on trial for having someone's barn burned down. After some inconveniencing occurrence between Mr. Snopes, the defendant and Mr. Harris, the plaintiff, a black man was sent to recovery Snopes' item. The black man told Mr. Harris, in more modern dialect, "Wood and hay can burn." The following night, his barn burned (197). Sarty was then about to be questioned per the request of Mr. Harris, but he rescinded the request. Eventually, Mr. Snopes wasn't able to be convicted but was advised strongly to leave the town. In this scene, Marty's thought is shown to believe that his father's enemy is automatically his enemy. This can be seen in the passage when he thinks "our enemy he

thought in that despair; ourn! Mine and hisn both! He's my father!)" (197). We then find ourselves considering their trip out, their campfire, and them arriving in the next county over. Here, Sarty's mother is shown to be caring to him; he tripped and got blood on himself. Sarty's mother is trying to show sympathy, but Sarty is slightly standoffish, eventually asking the mother to leave him alone. At the campfire, he seems to think of his father as an omniscient being. He's thinking of how his father always manages to set things up ahead of time but then also thought about the significance of the fire that his father created. The author said that if the boy were older, he might have wondered why a bigger fire wasn't made and, if he got to the point, he might even answer the own question himself such as if his fires were made in this manner because this is how he used to create fires to hide from either side during the civil war (199). The fact that the author shows us, the reader, that Sarty is potentially capable of such thoughts shows us that Sarty is able to, and also sort of foreshadows, betray or go against his father's wishes.

Moving forward, once Sarty's family gets to their final setting, Abner decides to visit the Major of Spain's house. However, he isn't currently there; only his wife. Abner purposely wipes his foot on the carpet rather than wiping his shoes outside before coming in. This created anger and tension and the Major requested that Abner clean the carpet. Abner proceeded to cleaning the carpet back at his own residence, but Mrs. Snopes tries to intervene, asking Abner to let her do it. Abner refuses and continues to do it himself. After finishing the cleaning and some conversation, eventually the Major tells Abner that that's not the condition the carpet was in before - believes that

Abner purposely damaged or burned the rug. Abner denies, and they end up going to court for 20 bushels of corn. The Justice finds Abner guilty as, regardless of its current state now, Abner did not return the rug itself back how it was before. However, the fine wasn't as bad as 20 bushels of corn, simply \$5 (205) - which was worth more in the past, but not as much as the \$100 value of the 20 bushels. After the court adjourns, Abner tells Sarty to get him oil. Sarty immediately knows what it's for and tries to convince his father not to do it, or at least to send a black man to do it instead. His father struck him again. Reluctant, he got his father the oil. Most of this story revolved around Sarty maintaining family loyalty but, here, he has a decision to make. He thinks that his father's previous barn burning was wrong and that the first court introduced at the beginning was simply trying to get justice. He also eavesdrops a conversation which hints that his father stole from both sides during the civil war, and potentially deserted the war as well. Conflicted, he eventually gives in to the urge to tell the true and it is said that " He went on down the hill, toward the dark woods... He did not look back." (209). It can be inferred here that, at the very least, he's leaving his family. I think it's not a stretch to infer that he has decided and chosen to tell the Major what's going to happen next.

I personally understand the conflict that Sarty has here, although my situation was quite a bit different. Mine was merely that of internal family conflicts over time but it still led me to choose a side - albeit Sarty chose a side outside of his family. As stated, my immediate family was having issues, primarily my mother and father. Day and night, yelling about things that usually seem arbitrary took place and grew in frequency as well as more

vicious. Eventually, physical attacks were thrown and the police was brought into the picture at this point. Both sides claim something else happened and, eventually, they split. Similar to Sarty, when questioned (197), I didn't answer the question about whose fault it was - although, in my situation, it was really both of their faults. At the point of the split, my brother and I both went along with our mother out of the house. My parents eventually divorced, and I was given a schedule as to when I could visit my father's house until I was 18. Once I hit 18, interestingly enough, I seemed to stop going to my father's. Really, when I went over to his house, it didn't really feel like anything was being accomplished. My brother continues to go to his house, so I sort of feel as if I may have betrayed my father in that sense, but my father doesn't say a word about it. Similar to Sarty's father, he seems to keep his emotions bottled up and tries to be a man of few words when it comes to that type of conversation - shown when Sarty repeats several times in similar words throughout the story " his father had said no word" (197). My mother was, at first, similar to Sarty's mother prior to the split. In general, I can likely say that I relate to the Snopes family, even though my conflict is quite unlike theirs.