

# Depiction of moral dilemma in barn burning novel

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Moral dilemmas can sometimes become complex. In *Barn Burning*, there are several different scenes where a character is in a moral dilemma. Most of the moral conflicts take place from the perspective of Sarty. His father travels around with their family in attempts to provide for them. He knows that his father means well, but he also witnesses his father commit some immoral acts that are unprovoked. Near the end of the story, Sarty is faced with the choice of getting his father in trouble and saving the stranger's barn, or sitting by while his father commits an immoral act. A major theme in the story relates to the concept of how morality can sometimes depend on perspective. People have a strong desire to take care of their close relatives, but that desire can sometimes conflict with their moral judgment. This story is about family ties and how they can sometimes conflict with our desire to achieve justice.

In the beginning parts of the story, Sarty holds a clear view that justice relates to the truth. The boy witnessed the real events that took place and knows that his father was guilty. There is an inner conflict within Sarty over whether he should side with his father or with the truth. The inner conflict is accurately captured by the following quote: "father's enemy (our en- he thought in that despair; our! mine and his both! He's my father!)". This passage comes from near the beginning of the story. It is useful for understanding the boy's perspective because it shows the difficulty that he is having in viewing the court people as enemies. From his perspective, he knows that his father actually is guilty. The judge and other party are merely trying to get to the bottom of the issue and find out what really happened.

As such, it is not easy for him to view them as being immoral by trying to figure out what happened.

In contrast to witnessing his father occasionally commit immoral acts, Sarty holds a positive view of his father. The moral conflict that is central to the story is dependent on Sarty having respect for his father. Despite the bar burnings, his father has other behaviors that are admirable. For example, the respect that Sarty has for his father's independence is evident in the following quote: " He (the father) always did. There was something about his wolflike independence and even courage,". This quote is referring to the father's ability to travel to new places and make a living there. This passage comes from a portion of the story in which the family is leaving the farm. They are all scared and are uncertain of where they are headed. Despite their scary circumstance, the boy trusts that his father will take care of them. He has respect for his father's independence and his ability to keep moving. He is faced with moral conflicts later in the story when he witnesses his father commit other acts that are less commendable.

A change in Sarty's perspective happens after the incident with the rug. Before the rug incident, Sarty typically expressed agreement with whatever party was bringing an argument against his father. He witnessed his father commit an offense and lie about it in the first incident. In the rug incident, however, Sarty changes his mind. He determines that the punishment being imposed is too severe and does not match the wrong that was done. In addition, he watched his father put his best effort forth into cleaning the rug. When he hears about the punishment, he remarks to his father that it is

unfair and that they should not pay for it. This is an important point in the story because it is the first time that Sarty has been vocal about taking sides with his father over perceived injustice.

However, from a different perspective, it could be argued that the real injustice happened when Sarty and his family came to the farm and chose to live and work there. The owner of the farm was also in a moral dilemma when his wife was more angered about the damaged rug than he was. He expressed empathy with the fact that the rug was damaged unintentionally. However, his wife was angered over it and he was forced to decide between family ties and his perception of justice.

Sarty later changes back to valuing justice when he sees that his father is attempting to burn the barn. He knows that his father is planning to burn down the barn of the people that they are working for. Although he sided with his father on the repayment of the ruined rug, he did not side with him in this instance. He knew that it was unethical to ruin other peoples' property. In addition, it was not provoked and his father often made up his own version of justice outside of the courtroom (Wagner, 2013). His father brought him and his family to this location to work for people. If they had not visited the farm, then none of the resulting chaos would have happened (Barn Burning, n. d.). As such, Sarty knew that his father was in the wrong. He was faced with a challenging situation in which he was forced to decide whether he valued his own family ties or justice more strongly.

A recurrent theme throughout the short story is the conflict between family ties and justice. People generally see it as positive to have close ties with

their family (Heineman, 2005). However, issues can arise when family members take immoral actions. It first appears in the beginning when the father is faced with a conflict. He wants to avoid being charged with a crime, but also does not want to expose his son to the stressful court scenario. The same concept applies when Sarty is being questioned by the judge. On the one hand, he wants his father to be free so that he can continue to provide for and live with them. On the other hand, his inherent sense of morality is upset by witnessing his father commit a wrongful act and then lie about it.

The concept of a conflict between family ties and morality is powerful because it applies to many different people. For example, people in abusive relationships are in similar dilemmas. From one side of the issue, they do not want their spouse or significant other to be sent to jail for abusing them. On the other hand, they know that they are being mistreated. In addition to being unfair, it is also painful. People in such situations are forced to choose whether they value justice and freedom or ties to their family or spouse more.