

Blood is thicker than
water, or is it?



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In William Faulker's short story "Barn Burning", a struggle erupts when Abner Snopes expects his son, Colonel Sartoris, to ignore his personal moral obligations in order to protect the family honor after a crime is committed. In their small town of Yoknapatawpha County, Faulkner creates a moral dilemma between the characters to analyze the complexity of growing into manhood. In "Barn Burning", Faulkner uses the arson trial, the Snopes family's move, and the burning of the second barn to illuminate the danger of blindly accepting a particular southern region's culture.

At the young age of ten, Colonel Sartoris is faced with his first test of manhood: will he lie for his father in court or will he be truthful about his father's crime? Even though he is very young, Colonel already understands the task his father has placed in front of him as he thinks of the man prosecuting his father as "our enemy" solely because he reasons, "He's my father!" (Faulkner 801). It is blatantly clear that Abner has raised Colonel Sartoris to support his actions in any situation, even if it means committing perjury. Young Colonel understands his mission in the court as he thinks, "He aims fir me to lie, And I will have to do hit" (Faulkner 802).

Faulkner uses regional dialect in the thoughts of Colonel to reflect his Southern roots and the prevalent culture, in which families are tightly knit and respecting your elders is very important. Even though Colonel plans to lie for his father, the first sign of his conscience appears when the Snopes are leaving town and Colonel hopes, "Forever. Maybe [Abner] is done satisfied now" (Faulkner 802). Here, Colonel Sartoris feels relieved that he does not have to lie and he hopes that he will not be put in a position to trespass his moral obligations again. The scene in the courthouse reflects

Colonel Sartoris's respect for his father which stems from his Southern upbringing. One thing his culture could not change is Colonel Sartoris's duty to his internal conscience.

Faulkner combines the strong Southern concepts of family and manhood in a conversation between the corrupt father and young son in a way that condemns the regional moral code. After the courthouse scene, Abner Snopes beats Colonel Sartoris as he screams, " You're getting to be a man... You got to learn to stick to your own blood or you ain't going to have any blood to stick to you" (Faulkner 803). Abner is both guiltless and threatening his son into accepting their culture. Abner appeals to Colonel's yearning to be a man so he will feel guilty for wanting to be truthful. Also, Abner threatens his son that he will be abandoned if he continues to stray away from Abner's corrupt moral standards. Abner rephrases the proverb " blood is thicker than water" when he threatens his son into conformity.

Ironically, as Faulkner probably knew, the proverb " blood is thicker than water" is constantly misinterpreted. The proverb is actually " the blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb", meaning that the blood soldiers shed while fighting is stronger than the water shared by siblings of the same womb. Abner blindly follows a quote that he does not fully understand, further displaying his ignorance. The real proverb confirms that Colonel Sartoris is morally right as he betrays his family in order to follow his conscience.

As Abner decides to set fire to the second barn, he is forced to choose between his family's honor and what he knows is right, even if it hurts him in

the end. As Abner commands his son to fetch the can of oil to start the fire, Colonel debates internally, “ I could run on and on and never look back... Only I can't. I can't” (Faulkner 810). Colonel obeys his father in getting the oil but he begins to think for himself, deciding that he can stand up to his father and run away from his criminal activities. As Colonel's mom struggles to restrain him, Colonel Sartoris wants to hit his mother to free himself, but his Southern values which stress chivalry towards women prevent Colonel from using violence. After he warns the owner of the barn, Colonel knows it is too late to save his father and he begins to feel guilty when he hears the gunshots that kill Abner Snopes.

Colonel Sartoris feels guilty after his father's death due to his young age and the way that manhood is suddenly thrust upon him. A combination of feelings well up inside of him, what Colonel describes as, “ despair now no longer terror and fear but just grief and despair” (Faulkner 812). In traditional Southern culture, boys are taught from a young age not to openly express their emotions. In the pure darkness of the woods where he is suddenly found alone, Colonel Sartoris is overwhelmed with pain. He cries out at the darkness, thinking loudly but whispering, “ He was brave!” (Faulkner 812) After all his father put him through, Colonel tries to comfort himself by reinventing his father's image as a brave man. Faulkner uses this scene to show how even in death, southern culture prevails through Colonel's emotions. Brave is considered the highest of praises in Faulkner region, as “ brave” is synonymous with “ manly”. Once again, Colonel struggles to fit into this particular mold of manhood that he has been raised to strive towards.

The irony of Colonel Sartoris remembering his father as a brave man is that he also claims that his father is patriotic, another prevalent southern ideal for men, although his father was no more than a thief during the Civil War. Abner Snopes built himself up as a wounded veteran because it places him into a respected social circle in their region. Ironically, Abner goes on to name his son after Colonel Sartoris, a man who he never fought for, because he was too busy attempting to steal the soldiers' horses. Colonel's memory of his father is another example of the way the boy has been deceived by his culture.

As he walks away from the scene of his father's death, Colonel Sartoris begins to breath easier as the weight of responsibility is lifting off of his chest. Now that he has become a man in his family's eyes, he has also betrayed them and therefore can not return to his mother and sister. Although he saved his family's honor by having his father killed, Colonel Sartoris has also disgraced his family by turning his back on his dad. In return, he walks off into the woods and does not look back (Faulkner 812). Abner Snopes's influence on the family has caused them to see Colonel as a traitor for following his moral responsibility. Colonel has matured and realizes that he does not have to accept this culture of " blood is thicker than water", so he moves on to start living by his own moral code.

In conclusion, Faulkner uses his particular brand of regionalism in " Barn Burning" to point out discrepancies in southern culture. The relationship between Colonel Sartoris and his father Abner condemns the way that boys are raised to be men in such a way that they trade their personal moral code for family ties. Colonel Sartoris's fear of abandonment plays into his ability to

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ignore his conscience in order to lie for his father's criminal activities. As manhood is thrust upon him, Colonel Sartoris steps into his new role and does not look back.