

Experience and
identity: an analysis
of barn burning by
william faulkner and
ever...



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Strong Similarities are found between “ Barn Burning” by William Faulkner and “ Everyday Use” by Alice Walker. Both stories feature characters that are unsure of themselves and are affected by someone in their family; most importantly these characters have an experience which give them a new and much needed identity. In “ Barn Burning” the main focus will be on Sarty’s emotions and his eventual acceptance of self. I will focus primarily on Ms. Johnson and her two daughters with special focus on Maggie when discussing “ Everyday Use”.

Although the themes found in both stories are similar, circumstances surrounding the gained identity and independence are different. The following analysis aims to portray the similarities and differences found in Barn Burning and Everyday Use, concerning the experiences and identities described in both. A significant similarity between the two stories is loyalty. The characters portrayed in “ Barn Burning” and “ Everyday Use” has an inner conflict in which they question their ability to be loyal to their blood.

In Faulkner’s “ Barn Burning”, Sarty, the son of Abner, spends the majority of the story in emotional confusion.

Loyalty to his father causes him mixed emotions as to what is the right thing to do when dealing with his father’s barn burnings. The story begins with Sarty attending the meeting of the Justice of the Peace, where his father once again is accused of burning down a neighbor’s barn after an argument. The narrator tells of Sarty’s confusion and desperation to do what is right. “... the smell and sense of just a little fear because mostly of despair and grief, the old fierce pull of blood (Schwiebert, 423). This description of an

ongoing inner battle explains Sarty's guilt of not hating the neighbor as his father does. "...our enemy he thought in that despair; ourn! Mine and hisn both! He's my father! " Such fierce desire to feel the loyalty his father expects is displayed. When Sarty is called up to possibly testify, the reader can feel Sarty's relief when told to sit down with out testimony. The young boy is caught between loyalty and the morals instilled in him from society (Ford, 1). This pull towards family loyalty is only reinforced by the boy's conversation with his father following the departure from their town of residence. Abner addresses his son, knowing that Sarty was close to telling the truth during the hearing.

Abner says to Sarty; You're getting to be a man. You got to learn. You got to learn to stick to your own blood or you ain't going to have any blood to stick to you. Do you think either of them any man there this morning, would? Don't you know all they wanted was a chance to get at me because they knew I had them beat? Eh? (Schwiebert. 426) It is Abner's paranoid thinking and quiet threats that give Sarty the inner battle between what's morally right and family loyalty. It is this ever-present pull that causes such feelings of guilt for Sarty.

In one scene he defends his father's actions but shortly after he is angry with his father for putting the family in such dire conditions (i. e. constantly having to move, poverty stricken, etc.). Sarty's true test of loyalty comes at the end of the story when it becomes clear that Abner will be burning the landlord's barn down after the incident with the rug. Sarty is enraged, but the guilt never subsides. For a short period of time, Sarty is actually an

accomplice to his father's actions by running to the stable and getting the oil to use to set the fire; this he does in the name of loyalty.

This is the old habit, the old blood which he has not been permitted to choose for himself, which has been bequeathed to him willy nilly and which had run for so long (and who knew where, battenning on what of outrage and savagery and lust) before it came to him. I could keep on, he thought. I could run on and on and on and never look back, never to see his face again. Only I can't. I can't... (433). The reader can sense his desperation. The child is so desperate for a way out, but the loyalty to his father overwhelms him. Ms. Johnson of "Everyday Use" expresses a similar sense of loyalty.

At first her loyalty is seen as defending her daughter Dee because she is so extreme. Dee has always had a "nothing can stop me" attitude, which has caused her to become cold and condescending, even to her family. It's Dee's self-righteousness that Ms. Johnson tries to defend in the beginning of "Everyday Use" by making excuses for her daughter, much like Sarty did for his father. Dee wanted nice things...She was determined to stare down any disaster in her efforts...At sixteen she had a style of her own and knew what style was...Her feet were always neat-looking, as if God himself had shaped them with a certain style.

The mother's loyalty to her child is an extension of the "pleasure principle" in which Dee lives by, she is "naturally attracted to her pleasure driven daughter" (Guerin, 154). Although loyal to her other daughter Maggie in the sense of maternal loyalty, she does not exhibit this until the end when she makes a decision to give the quilts to her, instead of Dee. It is once Ms.

Johnson's moral vision oversteps the pleasure-vision, that she sees both daughters as they are (154). Dee wants it all.

As she goes through the home, taking the churn top and dasher, to know doubt be used as conversation pieces back at school, she comes across the old quilts passed down by her great-grandmother. Maggie is understandably upset when she hears her sister asking to have them after they had been promised to her. However, Maggie, the shy, emotionally and physically scarred young woman will not speak up for herself. In fact, she gives in to her sister's demand telling her mother that Dee can keep them. An argument between Dee and her mother is brought on when Ms.

Johnson tries to rally for Maggie as the one who would appreciate and use the quilts, not just display them as Dee wished to do. Ms. Johnson has a moment of clarity after Maggie gives in to her older, wiser and more beautiful sister. She saw in Maggie not fear but a telling of life and her acceptance that life for her is unjust. She looked at her sister with something like fear but she wasn't mad at her. This was Maggie's portion. This was the way she knew God to work. When I looked at her like that something hit me in the top of my head and ran down to the soles of my feet.

Just like when I'm in church and the spirit of God touches me and I get happy and shout. I did something I never had done before: hugged Maggie to me, then dragged her on into the room, snatched the quilts out of Miss Wangero's hands and dumped them into Maggie's lap. Maggie just sat there on my bed with her mouth open (396). It was this moment of clarity that Ms. Johnson demonstrates her family loyalty. That is not to say she chose to be

loyal to one daughter and not the other, but to be loyal to herself and her emotions.

By being true to herself she was able to reach out to Maggie as well as show Dee that she did not always have to get her way. The point of view found used in these two stories differed; giving the reader a different reading experience for each. "Barn Burning" had a third person, "multiple narrative presence" (Ford, 1), whereas "Everyday Use" was first person. The narrator in Faulkner's "Barn Burning" was textured with both an anonymous narrator and one of Sarty's character twenty years after the events in the story take place. Using this technique, Faulkner allows the readers the full experience of what Sarty is going through.

Faulkner's use of foreshadowing depicts Sarty's survival through the time of his father's barn burnings and his confusion as to his loyalty to his father and family. The mature Sarty is able to reflect upon his traumatizing childhood. Mature Sarty is able to interject with hindsight allowing the reader a well rounded reading experience. For example, when the heated discussion of loyalty between father and son comes up as noted above, mature Sarty comments that "...had I said they wanted only truth, justice, he would have hit me again" (426). Third person narration is used in Walker's "Everyday Use". Ms. Johnson, the mother of Maggie and Dee, tells the story of the day she chose her heritage over the glitz and glam of Dee's modern world as well as the day Maggie became comfortable with herself. There is a contradiction within the narration of "Everyday Use". In *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* the authors' state that although Ms. Johnson claims to be uneducated... the reader must soon note that the mother does not

narrate as one without education would; nor does she speak in a less than standard dialect, although with a few colloquialisms, to be sure; nor is she at loss for words, whether as narrator or as speaker (119).

It is my opinion that the mother's low regard of herself is based on the fact that her daughter Dee has always treated her as less than intelligent. For instance, the mother comments on how Dee would read to her and Maggie, getting them as involved as possible, only for Dee to stop just at the point when the two listeners might finally understand. Dee places herself on a pedestal because of her college education, but as the reader finds out, her education taught her nothing of the importance of heritage and family tradition.

She regards herself as better than her family members who "choose" to live in poverty, unaware of the rising political agenda of that time. All this causes Ms. Johnson to believe her daughter is better than her and thus she claims to be uneducated, when really life has educated her well. The final similarity to be discussed is that of identity. The two characters which will be analyzed take different roles in the two stories. Sarty is a main character in "Barn Burning", whereas Maggie takes a minor character with an important roll in the story of "Everyday Use".

Both stories involve the making of an identity after a life changing experience. Throughout Faulkner's story "Barn Burning", Sarty is seeking his true identity. The confusion caused by his father's actions cause him to question who he is. Is he a trader for feeling the moral duty to tell the truth of his father's actions? Or is it his duty to be loyal to his blood and hate the men his father hates and lie to protect him? After he is struck by his father

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for almost telling the Justice of the Peace the truth about the fire, Sarty expresses his confusion, especially since this particular slap came, for once, with an explanation.

His father had struck him before last night but never before had he paused afterward to explain why; it was as if the blow and the following calm, outrageous voice still rang, repercussed, divulging nothing to him save the terrible handicap of being young, the light weight of his few years, just heavy enough to prevent his soaring free of the world as it seemed to be ordered but not heavy enough to keep him footed solid in it, to resist it and try to change the course of its events (Schwiebert 426).

When reading this, I was reminded of what it was like to be a teenager, the inevitable question of identity and knowing but not knowing enough. Sarty felt the pressure to be what his father wanted him to be, but in his heart he knew his father was wrong. He did however try to rationalize his father's behavior in order to be what he thought he should be. He told himself his father was once a soldier, he should respect and honor him; he even tried to convince himself that his father was done with his criminal behaviors.

After the landlord demanded twenty bushels of corn as pay back for the rug which Abner had ruined, Sarty thinks: Maybe this is the end of it. Maybe even that twenty bushels that seems hard to have to pay for just a rug will be a cheap price for him to stop forever and always from being what he used to be...maybe he won't collect the twenty bushels. Maybe it will all add up and balance and vanish-corn, rug, fire; the terror and grief, the being pulled to ways like between two teams of horses-gone, done with for ever and ever (431). This thinking is what causes Sarty his identity crisis.

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However as the reader listens to the mature Sarty, one realizes that Sarty did in fact survive his childhood and is able to look back on it rationally. As a child he felt his father could not help but be what he was; but as an adult Sarty knew the truth of his father's criminal behavior. Faulkner writes: ...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 (425).

The night of the final barn burning Sarty makes the decision on a subconscious level to warn the landlord of his father's actions. That night his father is killed and Sarty is set free; he knows he has done the right thing. As he runs to the flaming barn, he is running through his childhood. As he screams that it is his father, not to hurt his father, he suddenly becomes calm and clear headed. He's free. The identity found in "Everyday Use" is not only Ms.

Johnson coming to terms with her heritage but more importantly Maggie. After years of feeling inadequate in her sister's shadow, she is given an identity when her mother stands up for her and gives her the quilt rather than Dee. In this simple gesture, Maggie realizes that she too is deserving of the finer things in life. Maggie and her mother had very little, and Dee was threatening to take what little valuables they had by taking the quilt, which had been passed down through the generations.

Giving this important piece of heritage to Maggie gave her a sense of belonging, not only to the family but to the world. She was accepted. Maggie went from the homely, shy, insignificant girl to a proud and important young

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woman. After the tense emotion displayed during Dee's visit, the day is ended on a peaceful note; with Maggie smiling a real smile and her and her mother enjoying the peaceful evening together (Guerin 396).

It was not an easy task deciding on what topics to cover when analyzing Faulkner's "Barn Burning" and "Everyday Use" by Alice Walker. There are so many points to make in each story that it would require a much longer essay. However, the comparisons made were, in my opinion, ones of a less obvious, yet equally important nature. Culture, history and politics, for example, could have been discussed but I felt loyalty and identity were key experiences in both stories. The narration used in either story was essential to discuss.

Faulkner's narrative voice gave readers a look inside Sarty's emotions both during his childhood and as an adult looking back. The first person narrative in "Everyday use", although it could be construed as one-sided, allowed the reader to experience not only the characters actions but to get a feel for what was happening in the world at that time, such as the civil rights movement. Both stories were intense and beautifully written, which is why decades later they are still discussed among the literary world as well as in educational institutions.