Barn Burning

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM FAULKNER

William Faulkner grew up in Oxford, Mississippi, part of a family that had been in the American South for generations. He was in the Air Force during World War I before studying at the University of Mississippi (though he never graduated). He began writing mostly poetry, and in 1924 he published a collection of poetry entitled *The Marble Faun*. He worked for a time at a bookstore and for a newspaper. But he is most known for his fiction, his "golden period" beginning with the publication of *The Sound and the Fury* in 1929 and lasting until *Go Down, Moses* in 1942. Most of the works written during this period are evidence of Faulkner's fascination with the presence of the past (particularly the Southern past), the way history presses on individual people, and the bleak, immoral, or amoral attitudes of the downtrodden. During this time, Faulkner also supported himself and his family by writing screenplays for Hollywood. For almost all of his life, however, Faulkner lived in Oxford, Mississippi. In 1950 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, and his acceptance speech is recognized as one of the best in the prize's history. He died of a heart attack, following a fall from a horse, at the age of 64.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While "Barn Burning" was written at the end of the 1930s, a decade during which the Great Depression created its own set of struggles for many people in the American South, Faulkner—here as in his other fiction—reaches back to an earlier moment for his setting. We know that Abner Snopes was wounded "thirty years before" during the Civil War, which sets the story around the late 1890s. In the decades after the Civil War, known as the Reconstruction Era, the euphoria that followed the liberation of slaves led to a more somber viewpoint. Many whites in the South strove, and were largely successful, in keeping black people in a position barely a step above slavery, whether through sharecropping, extra-legal violence such as lynchings, or discriminatory laws. Meanwhile, poor whites also continued to struggle, and some became increasingly bitter at having to compete with former slaves—and at being considered like them, rather than above them because of their race. While Reconstruction was meant to rebuild the South and reunite it with the North after the material devastation of the war, by the 1890s it was clear that the effort had in many ways been a failure.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"Barn Burning" can be understood as a prequel of sorts to Faulkner's Snopes family trilogy, which explores the lives of a number of members of the same family as they struggle to ascend the social hierarchy—through any means necessary. These novels, *The Hamlet* (1940), *The Town* (1957), and *The Mansion* (1959) concentrate mostly on Flem Scopes, the brother of Sarty who remains unnamed in "Barn Burning," as well as a number of his cousins and other relatives. "Barn Burning" can also be positioned within what is known as the "Southern Renaissance" in American literature: this literary period sought to portray the South and its history in a more nuanced, often darker way than in earlier works (such as the glorification of the pre-Civil War South in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*); examples are Tennessee Williams's works, including *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), which takes place in New Orleans as well as the books of Zora Neale Hurston, including the 1937 *Their Eyes Were Watching God*).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "Barn Burning"
- **When Written:** 1938-1939
- **Where Written:** Oxford, Mississippi
- **When Published:** 1939 in *Harper's*; 1950 in the *Collected Stories*
- **Literary Period:** Modernism, Southern Renaissance
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** Yoknapatawpha, a fictional county in Mississippi that serves as the setting for almost all of Faulkner's works.
- **Climax:** Sarty breaks free from his mother's grasp and races up to the de Spain house to warn the Major that Abner, Sarty's father, is about to burn down his barn—the first time Sarty blatantly challenges his father's authority and chooses to follow his own values.
- **Antagonist:** Abner Snopes, Sarty's father, is a complex antagonist—in many ways Sarty admires him and searches for his love and approval. But Sarty also, for most of the story, is too reluctant to admit that in another way he despises his father, whose resentment, defiance, and bitterness Sarty tries to avoid and replace with another set of values.
- **Point of View:** Faulkner is famous for his stream-of-consciousness technique, which moves in and out of characters' minds in a way that can be both powerful and, at times, confusing. The third-person narration closely follows Sarty's own perspective, and we do often gain access into Sarty's thoughts at certain moments. But the narrator also informs us of certain things that Sarty does not know and could have no way of knowing. As a result, it is sometimes unclear whether the narration is taking Sarty's perspective or is enacting a broader third-person narration.

EXTRA CREDIT

Prized Goods. "Barn Burning" won the O. Henry award—a prize that is still given out today—the year it was published, for the best short story written in 1939.

Post it? After briefly serving as a Mississippi postmaster, a position he despised, Faulkner resigned in a letter that stated, "I will be damned if I propose to be at the beck and call of every itinerant scoundrel who has two cents to invest in a postage stamp."

PLOT SUMMARY

"Barn Burning" opens in a general store that is being used for a courtroom, where a ten-year-old boy—Colonel Sartoris (Sarty) Snopes, though he's usually referred to as "the boy"—is crouching in the back, barely able to see his father, Abner Snopes, and his neighbor, Mr. Harris, who has made a complaint against Abner. According to Harris, Abner allowed his hog to get into Harris's yard several times—after Harris finally kept the hog and ordered Abner to pay if he wanted it back, Abner allegedly set his barn afire that night. Since Harris has no real proof, he wants Sarty to testify. With a rush of fear, Sarty realizes he'll have to lie and defend his father, but then Harris changes his mind. The Justice says he can't find Abner guilty, but advises him to leave town: Abner says he was planning to anyway.

Abner, Sarty, and his brother go outside, where his mother, aunt, and two twin sisters are waiting with their meager possessions loaded into the wagon. That night they stop and make a small **fire**. Abner pulls Sarty aside and accuses him of having wanted to betray him to the Justice during the trial. He hits Sarty, deliberately but without rage, and tells him that being a man means being loyal to one's own **blood**.

The next day the family arrives at a two-room house, just like all the other ones where the family has lived. Abner tells Sarty to accompany him to the main house where his employer, the Major de Spain, lives. Upon seeing the mansion Sarty feels a surge of joy, imagining that it's impervious to his father's destructive tendencies. But as Abner marches up to the house, he (seemingly on purpose) steps in horse droppings; a black servant opens the door and says the Major isn't at home, but Abner brushes past him and stamps his foot into the fancy imported **rug**, soiling it. He turns around, Sarty following him, and after they leave he scoffs at the fact that black laborers built this house.

Later that day, the servant brings the rug to the Snopes family house to be cleaned. Abner orders the two sisters to clean it, and they do reluctantly and lethargically—but he throws a stone fragment into the homemade lye, ensuring that it will streak the rug. The Major comes back to the house and, almost shocked, tells Abner that he ruined a hundred-dollar rug, but since Abner will never make that amount in his life, he'll charge him twenty bushels of corn against the next crop.

Sarty works hard the rest of the week, and on Saturday his father orders him to prepare the wagon. He takes his two sons to another courtroom. Sarty is confused and begins to protest to the Justice that his father didn't burn anything, but his father orders him out. Instead, however, he remains at the back of the courtroom, where he can see the Major de Spain, incredulous that Abner has dared to sue him for charging him the bushels of corn. The Justice finds against Abner, but thinks twenty bushels is too much for a sharecropper, so he modifies the amount to ten.

After the trial, Abner takes the boys to the blacksmith's, where he regales the shop owner with false stories about his prior days as a horse trader. He buys the boys some cheese, then takes them to a horse lot, where he watches the horses and comments on them. They finally return home.

Soon, however, Sarty hears his mother's cries, and realizes that his father is filling a kerosene can with oil. He orders Sarty to get more oil from the stable, and although Sarty doesn't want to, he can't stop himself from racing to get it. Once back, he asks his father desperately if he's going to send someone to warn the Major, like he did last time. His father orders Sarty's mother and aunt to restrain him. They do so, although the aunt claims that if Sarty isn't let go, she'll go up to the main house herself. Finally Sarty wriggles his way out of his mother's grasp and races up to the main house, where he shouts, "Barn!" in the Major's face before wheeling around again. He hears the Major on his horse behind him and waits in a ditch for him to pass; then he continues to run, this time away from his house—as he's running he hears one shot, then two, and begins to cry out for his father. He reminds himself that his father was in the war, though he doesn't know that his father was only it in for his own, private gain. Cold and grieving, Sarty prepares to continue walking away from his home and family.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Colonel Sartoris "Sarty" Snopes – The youngest son of the Snopes family, ten-year-old Sarty is named after a Confederate officer named Colonel Sartoris who comes up in a number of William Faulkner's other works. The story often calls Sarty simply "the boy." Sarty is in the process of developing his own character and values over the course of the story. He feels a fierce, instinctive loyalty to the rest of his family, but that loyalty coexists both with a feeling that his connection to his family is inevitable, and with a hunger after other, alternative kinds of connections. Sarty has an implicit idea of justice that conflicts with his father's, for instance, and he also—unlike

other members of his family—manages to retain a sense of hope for the future, as epitomized by his reaction to the elegant, welcoming-looking home of Major de Spain family.

Abner Snopes – The patriarch of the Snopes family, Abner claims that he was once a "horsetrader," though he was actually little more than a stealer of horses during the Civil War, as well as a mercenary (someone who fought for money rather than out of loyalty or patriotism). This is perhaps the reason he was shot during the wary by a member of the police, and now walks with a limp. Now, Abner attempts to support his family through sharecropping, though he never lasts long in one place before being forced or pushed away. Tall, stiff, and somber, Abner's physical appearance is bolstered by his psychological resentment and bitterness with respect to his position in society. His rage against what he sees as the unfairness of this position leads him to ultimately self-defeating actions, like burning barns and soiling Major de Spain's rug. Abner cannot see any way out of his predicament other than defiantly challenging the status quo, despite (or perhaps because) he knows nothing will change.

Lennie Snopes – Abner's wife Lennie is only named once in the story; she is usually referred to as Sarty's mother. Unlike Abner and Sarty, Lennie does not seem to have much of an independent life outside the home, where she dutifully works in support of her family's needs. Instead she lives in perennial fear of Abner's next moves, even while she understands that it's useless to try to stop his actions. Lennie loves her children, but her main emotion is desperation: just as Abner sees himself as unable to control society, which he so desires to conquer, she feels out of control within the family.

Sarty's sisters – While Lennie faces the difficulties of sharecropping life within the home with quiet determination, Sarty's sisters deal with their lot with pure passivity. The sisters are described (from Sarty's perspective) as large, lazy, and "bovine" or cow-like. Dressed in flouncy dresses and tacky ribbons, the girls seem out of place, if not merely irrelevant to the struggles with justice and authority that characterize Sarty's childhood. Lennie deals with their passivity and unhelpfulness as with any other difficulty: even as their mother, she refrains from trying to mold or change them.

Sarty's brother – Also unnamed, the brother is older than Sarty and seems to have traveled farther along the path of becoming their father. Sarty considers him to be more an adult than a fellow child: several times Sarty becomes confused when he assumes that not he but his brother is being spoken to. The brother is mostly sullen and quiet: we don't learn anything about his own fears or desires, though it does seem that he either agrees with Abner most often or else is willing to choose loyalty over any other sense of values.

The aunt – Lennie's sister, Sarty's aunt, lives with the family, but is mostly portrayed as simply another woman in the household who, ultimately, will give in to Abner's desires. Only at the end does she begin to assert her own opinions, when she claims that she'll tell Major de Spain that Abner is planning to burn the barn down if Lennie doesn't release Sarty.

Major de Spain – Abner's new employer after he is asked to leave his former community, the Major de Spain is a wealthy rural landowner and is the Snopes family's landlord as well as their employer. He thinks of himself as fair and even-tempered, but he also is incredulous at the idea that his authority might be questioned, as it is by Abner.

Mr. Harris – Mr. Harris is a fellow farmer and a neighbor of the Snopes family at the beginning of the story, who takes Abner to trial for burning his barn, after Mr. Harris complained about Abner's hog constantly getting into his own pen. While he initially asks the judge to make Sarty testify against his own father, he ultimately gives up and retracts his wish.

The Justice (II) – The story's second judge presides over the community where the Snopes family has just moved, and oversees the case in which Abner has sued Major de Spain over the twenty bushels of corn that, the Major has calculated, Abner owes him for soiling the rug. The judge is immediately recognizable to Sarty as a judge because of his glasses and air of authority. This justice does find against Abner, although he lessens the punishment, given the Snopes family's poverty.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Justice (I) – The judge in the Snopes family's first community finds that Mr. Harris has insufficient proof that it was Abner who burned his farm; even so, he suggests that the Snopes family leave the community for everyone's peace of mind. Sarty describes him as a bespectacled, aging, and shabby-looking man.

Major de Spain's servant – A black man who works at Major de Spain's house, this unnamed character is elderly and neatly dressed, contrasting with Abner's own shabby appearance in a way that makes Abner cling to his racial prejudices even more.

Miss Lula – A female servant, also black, who works for the de Spain family, and reacts with despair to Abner's soiling of the rug.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RESENTMENT, RACE, AND PREJUDICE

The Snopes family is made up of poor white sharecroppers, an economic class from the post-

Civil War American South through which poor farmers earned their living by working off land of owned by another, a landowner who provided certain materials and sometimes housing in exchange for the labor and a percentage of the resulting crop. While former slaves often became sharecroppers in the upheaval after the Civil War and Reconstruction, struggling white people increasingly turned to it as well, even though the system could be grueling and unforgiving, with many sharecroppers entering a cycle of debt to their landowners from which they might never emerge.

Abner Snopes, the patriarch of the Snopes family, is deeply resentful of his economic situation—but this resentment is also racial. Economically, the Snopes family has much more in common with other black sharecroppers, or even with the black servants who work at the de Spain house, than with the white landowners. And racial prejudice is not, of course, limited to the Snopes family, in American history or in this story. It appears that part of the reason the black servants at Major de Spain's house are so terrified when Abner soils the rug is that they live in such fear of their master.

But Abner in particular finds it vital to distinguish himself from black people in order to cling to one last sense of superiority and self-respect. And Abner uses his prejudice to justify his own superiority to everyone else. For instance, he positions himself as superior to the much richer de Spain family because their house is built, he says derogatorily, from "nigger sweat." In other words, Abner has found a way to make his own status as a poor white person one of "purity" based on his prejudice. He holds black people as naturally inferior to him because he is white. But he also holds wealthier white people as inferior to him because they use their money to hire black labor, and thereby are surrounded by black people. Under this prejudicial logic, Abner as a poor white person is superior because he neither is black nor can hire blacks. And his ideas seep into the rest of the family—Abner's son, Sarty, also uses derogatory language in talking about blacks, even if he hasn't developed as full-bodied a logic of racism as his father.

Yet the story also makes clear that Abner's viewpoint is ultimately motivated by resentment at the fact that he and the black servants are in the same position, his "white sweat" mixing with theirs. Such ugly prejudices are, the story suggests, meant to be seen in part as an element of Abner's own personal resentment and selfishness. But they are also portrayed, through the story's broader portrait of the society in which Abner lives, as indicative of the larger racial and economic relationships that underlie—and warp—the entire American South.

ASPIRATION, DESPERATION, AND DEFIANCE

The world of "Barn Burning" as Abner Snopes sees it—and as his son Sarty originally does as well—portrays social and economic inequalities as a given. One's professional and class-based identity, as a judge, sharecropper, servant, or landowner, is understood as inescapable, and Abner seems to feel these inequalities more acutely than most. Other members of the family deal with their economic reality differently. Sarty's sisters, for example, who are described somewhat condescendingly as "bovine" and passive, embrace lethargy rather than actively trying to defy the system. His mother, in turn, seems mainly fearful and desperate. She knows that there's little she can do to stop her husband's defiant actions, though she frets over them all the same.

Abner, indeed, chooses an openly defiant attitude, one that embraces actions that seem to do nothing other than signal his refusal to accept his lot—and he seems, initially, to be succeeding in encouraging his two sons to adopt the same stance. Like the other adults in the family, Abner sees the wealth and success around him and recognizes that it is outside his reach. Because he likes to think of himself as a once-successful "horsetrader," his social and economic descent is only more painful. At the same time, he's fully aware that setting a barn afire or soiling an expensive rug will ultimately do little to nothing to change things. But his destructive bent is also a kind of self-destructiveness—and, at the same time, a reminder that for the family's place in Southern society at this moment in history, passivity and defiance are in many ways the only choices available to the poor.

The only way the story challenges this attitude, is through the ambivalence of Sarty regarding his father's choices. In many ways, Sarty wants to align with his father's defiance: he babbles on about how they'll refuse to give up the ten bushels of corn due to the de Spain family for the soiled rug, for instance (though much of this may well stem from his general desire to be loved by his father). At the same time, though, Sarty does have the imaginative capacity to picture other realities, to choose a posture that wouldn't be his sisters' passivity, mother's desperation, or father's defiance. That posture is one of hopeful aspiration, epitomized by the sense of "peace and joy" that he feels in looking up at the de Spain home. When Sarty looks at wealth, he sees not inequality, unfairness, and unattainable dreams, but safety and security, as well as an idea that things *could* be different for him.

INDEPENDENCE AND JUSTICE

The Snopes family is entirely dependent on their landowners for their livelihood, but Abner Snopes constantly tries to assert his own independence anyway—even when that involves bending the wills of the other members of his family, too, to his own desires. Abner deeply resents having to work for other men to support his family, and many of his defiant actions, his lack of concern towards the rules and regulations of others, can be understood as stemming

from such resentment. Yet even while asserting independence, Abner also appeals to other systems, such as the courts, becoming dependent on them at the same time as he refuses to play entirely by their rules.

Justice, then, plays an ambivalent role for the Snopes family, even as ten-year-old Sarty—watching his father as well as the other characters in the story—struggles to determine what "justice" might mean for him. Abner's activities entangle his family, and Sarty in particular, in so many court proceedings that Sarty—who is eventually able to recognize any judge by his formal, bespectacled appearance—has trouble keeping them straight. Indeed, at one point Sarty confuses one trial with another, and as he and his father enter the courtroom, begins defending his father against the charge of burning a barn—when, in fact, it's his father who is suing Major de Spain.

Abner may appeal to official court-sanctioned justice just as often as other people make formal complaints against him—but when justice doesn't go his way, he's willing to disregard what he's told and claim independence once again. When a judge tells him he'll owe ten bushels of October corn to Mr. de Spain, for instance, he tells his son that they'll just wait until October and then see. Once again, Sarty seems to want to support his father even as he possesses a distinct, more innate sense of justice. It's Sarty, for instance, who objects to the fact that his father appears to be planning to burn the de Spain barn without sending a man ahead to warn the de Spains, like he did the last time. And it's Sarty who ultimately warns the Major as a result. But it is as a consequence of what Sarty understands to be justice that his father and brother (presumably) are shot—in the Major's own form of vigilante justice. In the stuffy courtroom, verdicts can often seem unfair; yet as Sarty learns, the apparently independent system outside it turns out to function along an even more unpredictable logic of individual "justice."

LOYALTY, FAMILY, BLOOD

What "Barn Burning" calls the "old fierce pull of blood" is a profound motivating force for Sarty—a force that, he both expects and fears, may turn out to determine his own life as well. In the story, blood is referred to in almost a genetic sense: young Sarty has inherited his father's blood, and various similarities can be traced between the other family members as well. By discussing both past and future generations of the family, the story suggests that this blood lineage makes certain features, certain attributes, crop up again and again in a family through history.

The stable, enduring legacy of blood has several implications for Sarty. It suggests that he must be loyal to his father, putting blood above justice or truth, for instance, and being willing to lie in order to do so. But it also suggests that Sarty may well be fated to repeat his father's actions.

Indeed, the bonds of blood can seem like real, physical chains to Sarty, wedding him to his family even when he wishes he could escape them. When he first thinks of running away, Sarty realizes that he simply can't—that he's indelibly bound to this family. He does, nonetheless, end up betraying his father by warning Major de Spain that Abner is going to burn down his barn. Yet this betrayal results in Sarty's bonds to his family being irrevocably severed—with his father and brother shot by de Spain and possibly dead, Sarty's sense of justice or honor has physically and not just emotionally separated him from his family and blood. And whatever has happened to his father and brother, at the end of the story Sarty walks away without looking back, making clear that he will never return to his family. In acting in a way that led to his father's shed blood, Sarty has shed the "blood" of his ties to his family. What does remain an open question in the story, though, is the extent to which Sarty's escape will, or won't, prevent him from following in his father's footsteps and fulfilling what is contained in his blood.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

FIRE

Abner Snopes asserts his independence, his defiance, and his own view of justice through fire – by setting fire to the barns owned by those who he feels have slighted him. But fire, in "Barn Burning," is not solely related to Abner—it is a generally ambivalent element that can signal both creative power and comfort as well as destruction. The Snopes family, for instance, crouches around a small, "neat" fire while they are between homes on the road, using the fire to warm themselves, to cook, and to keep themselves comfortable by a potent source of light. Fire was, after all, necessary to the development of civilization at all. And yet this same element can also be used for destruction and retribution, as Abner lights up both Mr. Harris's barn and Major de Spain's, enlisting both Sarty's brother and Sarty (at least at first) in these tasks by filling up cans of kerosene. While fires can be restrained through vigilance—Abner's neat, "niggardly" (that is, stingy) fire is an example—they can also quickly careen out of control. Fire's dual function thus represents the junction between authority, control, and desperation at which the Snopes family's experiences are located.

BLOOD

While "blood" can be a metaphorical way of referring to genetic relationships—an important

theme in "Barn Burning"—blood is also referred to symbolically on a more basic, visceral level throughout the story. Sarty's mother attempts to wipe off his bloody face after he fights with other children who call his father a barn burner, thus attempting to express her own affection for him, even as he brushes her off. Abner Snopes, in turn, is referred to as "bloodless," an adjective that only underlines his generally strict, stiff, and rigid attitude.

Much of the thematic significance of blood in the story has to do with its inevitability: the adjective "old" is often affixed to the word "blood," as in "the old fierce pull of blood." Surviving through various generations, blood represents (as in terms of "bloodline") the way in which the past works inexorably on the present, even in ways that are not immediately evident. In addition, though, the fact that Sarty cannot escape from his family heritage, the physical presence or absence of blood is more related to how the family responds to such bonds—with affection, for instance, or not.

THE RUG

The rug at the entrance to the home of Major de Spain becomes the crux of one of the Snopes family's numerous struggles with justice and authority. After Abner defiantly steps in horse droppings and then drags his shoe across the rug's surface, he orders his daughters to clean the rug (which the Major has dropped off at the family shack), and he himself uses a rough, jagged stone, which ensures that the delicate object will not be left unscathed. Both within and beyond the family, then, the rug allows Abner to assert his own authority over others, while he can maintain a superior position with respect to them.

We later learn that this rug, adored by Mrs. de Spain cost a hundred dollars and came from France. Its exotic provenance and enormous cost—it's worth more than the Snopes family will ever make in their lifetime, as the Major says—lend the rug symbolic importance in terms of the entrenched inequalities of Southern life following the Civil War. The Snopes and the de Spain families live near each other, and yet occupy entirely separate worlds. While Abner may never be able to afford the rug himself, what he can do is ruin it for good—the only way out of such vast social difference that he can imagine.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Collected Stories of William Faulkner* published in 1995.

Barn Burning Quotes

He could not see the table where the Justice sat and before which his father and his father's enemy (*our enemy* he thought in that despair, *ourn! mine and him both! He's my father!*) stood.

Related Characters: Colonel Sartoris "Sarty" Snopes (speaker), The Justice (I), Mr. Harris, Abner Snopes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

As the story opens, Sarty is in a general story that doubles for a courtroom, where Mr. Harris—his "father's enemy"—has made a complaint against his father for allegedly burning Harris's barn down. Sarty cannot quite see what is going on—as a ten-year-old boy, he is only partially granted access to and participation in the world of the adults. But he knows enough to recognize that Mr. Harris and his father are opponents, and that for this reason he too should consider Harris as his own enemy.

Nonetheless, this passage makes clear that Sarty is struggling to align himself wholeheartedly with his father. He corrects his own thoughts in "despair," as if conscious of the huge effort that this takes him. And he cannot find a rational justification for being loyal to his father—blood alone, the fact that the man is his father, will have to suffice. At this point, we do not yet know much about Abner Snopes, but we do immediately get a glimpse of Sarty's tumultuous attempts to define himself in relation to his father, and determine his own sense of justice at the same time.

It was not even sadistic; it was exactly that same quality which in later years would cause his descendants to over-run the engine before putting a motor car into motion, striking and reining back in the same movement.

Related Characters: Abner Snopes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

Leaving the courtroom, Abner Snopes pulls back harshly on the mule's reins as he prepares to leave town with his family in a wagon. Here, as in many instances in the story, the

narrator takes a step back in order to shuttle between different time periods. We are reminded here that the story takes place in a particular historical moment, at the end of the nineteenth century, when horse and carriages were the main means of transportation. In later generations, Abner's descendants would be finding their way around in cars instead.

Nonetheless, that the narrator points out such similarities between Abner's movements and those of his descendants underlines the story's interest in how behavior gets transmuted through generations, and how one may or may not ultimately be able to escape from one's own family. Sarty is struggling to figure out how he wants to act, and to what extent he wants to align with his father: this passage suggests tha, just as his father's gestures will be repeated by his descendantsyears in the future, there is an aspect of inevitability to Sarty's own decisions, as much as he wants to think himself free.

> And older still, he might have divined the true reason: that 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.

Related Characters: Colonel Sartoris "Sarty" Snopes (speaker), Abner Snopes

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 7-8

Explanation and Analysis

Once again, the narrator moves back and forth through time, positing a number of hypotheticals regarding the relationship between Sarty and his father, as Abner makes a small, "niggardly" (that is, stingy) fire while the family rests on the way to their next community. Abner has a reputation for playing with fire, of course, for setting fires that extend and expand out of control—making it in some ways odd that he takes care to make such a small, puny one now. But this passage suggests that Sarty is still too young to understand something vital about his father's character, and about his relationship to fire. Fire is in fact something—one of the few things—that Abner feels like he can control. He can manipulate it exactly as he wants to, whether that means keeping it small or ensuring that it will be as destructive as it can be. Abner takes solace in fire's dual power for civilization and comfort and for destruction—it is a "weapon" for him which he can use against others, even when it seems that nothing else he does will change the way things are.

> He could see his father against the stars but without face or depth—a shape black, flat, and bloodless as though cut from tin in the iron folds of the frockcoat which had not been made for him, the voice harsh like tin and without heat like tin: "You were fixing to tell them. You would have told him."

Related Characters: Abner Snopes (speaker), Colonel Sartoris "Sarty" Snopes

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Abner has pulled his son aside in order to tell him that he suspects him of disloyalty: he saw Sarty's anxiety and desperation in the courtroom, and interpreted that to mean that if Mr. Harris had made him testify, Sarty would have told the truth and betrayed his father. Abner does not recognize that Sarty had, in fact, committed himself to lying and defending his father—and Sarty cannot find a way to let him know.

This quotation, however, is also significant in terms of the way that Abner is described from Sarty's own viewpoint. Sarty often sees his father as flat, as two-dimensional, and as unemotional or "bloodless." To him this is a puzzle, since many of his father's actions seem to stem from rage, like setting barns on fire. But the rage is siphoned into these acts, while Abner's personality remains cold and impassive. By seeing his father as a two-dimensional shadow, Sarty intuits (even if he cannot fully put into words) what an impenetrable mystery his father remains to him, and how little he can imagine making his father understand his own fears.

> "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."

Related Characters: Abner Snopes (speaker), Colonel Sartoris "Sarty" Snopes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Abner says these words as he is about to strike Sarty as punishment for his disloyalty—or what Abner imagines is his disloyalty, since he is simply conjecturing what Sarty would have done if Mr. Harris had made him testify in the courtroom.

Here Abner lectures his son on the proper attitude to have regarding his family. For Abner, what it means to grow up is to "stick to your own blood," even if that means lying in a court of law. Abner seems to see this loyalty as justifiable for its own sake rather than for some larger purpose—or rather because it is the best way to ensure one's own safety in a hostile world. Throughout the story, Sarty attempts to figure out to what extent he buys into such a view of loyalty and family heritage. Here, he is still eager to please his father and to work harder at maintaining a wholeheartedly loyal attitude to him.

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 by not heavy enough to keep him footed solid in it, to resist it and try to change the course of its events.

Related Characters: Abner Snopes, Colonel Sartoris "Sarty" Snopes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

Sarty is thinking about the fact that although his father had hit him at other times before the previous night, he had never stopped afterwards to explain why he had done it. And yet this passage suggests that his father's explanation did not really clear anything up—it "divulged" nothing to Sarty in terms of helping him to understand how he should act or what his father wants from him.

What Sarty is beginning to recognize, however, is the painful awkwardness of his particular age. He is, as the story has made clear, especially good at noticing what goes on around him, and as he is growing older he understands more and more about what is at stake in the various characters' actions. But Sarty is still only ten years old, and he is yoked to his father and to his family in general with what seem like unbreakable bonds. He is just old enough, then, to perceive the injustices and unfairnesses of the world, but not old enough to choose how to respond to them himself, and it is this feeling of being so out of place, out of joint, that accounts for much of Sarty's anxiety.

Hit's big as a court house he thought quietly, with a surge of a peace and joy whose reason he could not have thought into words, being too young for that: *They are safe from him.*

Related Characters: Colonel Sartoris "Sarty" Snopes (speaker), Abner Snopes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Sarty has accompanied his father up to the entrance of the de Spain house, the home of the Snopes family's employers. Sarty has only known "poor country" until this point, and has never seen a family home this big—the only building he can think to compare it with is a courthouse. Abner's reaction to such wealth and disparity with his own situation is resentment mingled with defiance, along with a desire to scoff at such wealth. Sarty has an entirely different first reaction. His feeling is not one of resentment but of "peace and joy." Sarty has never known much security or stability, and to him this house represents both.

But Sarty's initial impression also has something darker about it, something that we learn as readers through the narrator, even if Sarty himself cannot put it into words. That is, Sarty so appreciates the house because it seems impervious to his father's destructive power. Sarty may not even want to admit it to himself, but he does have a different set of values and different sense of justice than his father—though the only way he can articulate this difference is through emotion rather than language.

> And now the boy saw the prints of the stiff foot on the doorjamb and saw them appear on the pale rug behind the machinelike deliberation of the foot which seemed to bear (or transmit) twice the weight which the body compassed.

Related Characters: Abner Snopes, Colonel Sartoris "Sarty" Snopes

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Step by step, Abner slowly and deliberately begins a process of destructiveness (and self-destructiveness) that will prove nothing has changed, despite Sarty's hopes to the contrary. In this passage, we watch through Sarty's eyes as Abner, who has stepped in horse droppings on purpose, now makes sure to step on the expensive imported rug at the entrance to the de Spain house, and to rub it in.

Like so many of Abner's actions as perceived by Sarty, this one is "stiff" and yet very intentional. At the same time, Sarty is left to attempt to intuit the meaning of Abner's actions, since Abner never explains himself, nor gives his son any other lesson than the importance of sticking to one's own family. Sarty—or rather the reader, since as we know, Sarty is in a profoundly in-between stage of childhood and maturation—is left to interpret Abner's action as reflecting his defiant scorn of the fine house of his employer, and of its fine rug that cost more than Abner will ever make in his life. Ruining the rug, of course, will not give Abner the wealth of the de Spains—indeed, it can only harm his own chances to stay afloat—but it is one small way he can assert his own independence and self-control.

> "Pretty and white, ain't it?" he said. "That's sweat. Nigger sweat. Maybe it ain't white enough yet to suit him. Maybe he wants to mix some white sweat with it."

Related Characters: Abner Snopes (speaker), Major de Spain

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

After Abner soils the de Spain's rug, he turns around and leads Sarty back out of the house. He's been mostly silent this entire time, refusing to tell Sarty why he's acted the way he has. Here, he still doesn't explain himself to his son. Instead, he looks back up to the house and, rather than the feelings of peace and joy that characterized Sarty's reaction to the house, expresses his own reaction of scorn and ugly prejudice.

Abner attempts to deny the value or beauty of the house by saying that it was built by black people, who to him have no value. The de Spains, in this prejudiced logic, also lose much of their sheen precisely because they have enough money to hire black labor.

In addition, Abner scoffs at the idea that he should be thought of on the same plane as such black laborers. Mixing "white sweat" with their sweat is a travesty, in this view of racial superiority. And the de Spains are even more subject to scorn because they are willing to hire both races and have them "mix." Unfortunately, such ideas were prevalent in the South after the Civil War. The story shows them to be both an aspect of Abner's own flawed character, as well as a source of the real poverty and desperation of sharecropping in the South. Poor whites often responded to their own economic anxiety by clinging to the one sense of superiority they had left, racial superiority, even as wealthy whites exploited both black and white laborers.

> *Maybe he even 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 two ways like between two teams of horses—gone, done with for ever and ever.*

Related Characters: Colonel Sartoris "Sarty" Snopes (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

As he sometimes allows himself to do, here Sarty imagines an alternate reality for his family, one in which his father's destructive and self-destructive actions might cede to a more stable harmonious way of life. Specifically, Sarty is referring here to the twenty bushels of corn that the Major de Spain has decided to count against Abner's crop, as payment for ruining the rug—though more as punishment than payment, given that Abner would never make enough

in a lifetime to pay for the rug entirely.

Here Sarty indulges in a different kind of calculation, which for him implies a different kind of justice. Rationally, the balance sheet that he sets up doesn't make too much sense—it's not clear how the corn, the rug, and the fire all will add up to nothing, though there is an implication that Sarty is thinking that if his father doesn't go burn down de Spain's barn perhaps in some way that will cosmically balance the scales of justice. And, if his father refrains, then it does seem to Sarty that, in the tribunal of life if not in the courtroom, his family has paid for their sins.

Sarty also makes a connection between the system of crime and punishment by which Major de Spain seeks to deal with Abner, and the balance sheet that he feels in his own relationship with his father. Sarty is constantly being "pulled two ways": one way encourages him to be loyal to his father no matter what, and follow him in his resentment and defiance; but the other way pulls him to insist on his own sense of justice, distinct from his father's.

> He saw the man in spectacles sitting at the plank table and he did not need to be told this was a Justice of the Peace; he sent one glare of fierce, exultant partisan defiance at the man in collar and cravat now, whom he had seen but twice before in his life, who wore on his face an expression not of rage but of amazed unbelief which the boy could not have known was at the incredible circumstance of being sued by one of his own tenants.

Related Characters: Major de Spain, The Justice (II), Abner Snopes, Colonel Sartoris "Sarty" Snopes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17-18

Explanation and Analysis

For the second time in the story, Sarty is entering a courtroom, this time because his father is suing the Major de Spain for charging him twenty bushels of corn against his crop after Abner ruined de Spain's imported rug. As he enters the room, Sarty recognizes the Justice of the Peace from the physical marks of authority and stability, from his spectacles to his position at the front of the room. Just as he did before, when his father was in a trial against Mr. Harris, Sarty embraces a "partisan" stance: that is, he firmly takes his father's side against whomever the enemy might be. While Sarty's loyalty has begun to waver throughout the story, such an event as a trial makes it easier for him to want to be loyal to his father.

Meanwhile, the Major de Spain's incredulity reflects both the entrenched inequality between landowner and sharecropper in the South, as well as Abner Snopes's refusal to acquiesce to these social norms. Having gotten to know the justice system at first hand, Abner now imagines he can manipulate the system to his own advantage, using its tools against the Major de Spain. The Major, in turn, is shocked rather than angry—just as he had been when he realized that Abner ruined the rug even more by cleaning it—that Abner would even dare to sue him, rather than submit to being punished. The Major de Spain has never had to question his superiority, as indeed many people in the South at this time did not. Abner, then, comes off more sympathetically here, even if he cannot really claim the moral or legal high ground. Abner does have the nerve to challenge a legitimately unfair and exploitative situation, even if he is doing so in both horribly destructive (and self-destructive) ways.

> Then he was moving, running, outside the house, toward the stable: this the old habit, the old blood which he had not been permitted to choose for himself, which had been bequeathed to him willy nilly and which had run for so long (and who knew where, battening 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 never look back, never need to see his face again. Only I can't. I can't.*

Related Characters: Colonel Sartoris "Sarty" Snopes (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

Abner has once again begun to prepare to burn down a barn. He has ordered Sarty to go fetch more oil, and although Sarty doesn't want to, he runs outside the house to the stable to do so anyway. Here, while running, Sarty reflects on the choices that he understands to be available to him. He recognizes that he is running to get the oil not because of anything he believes himself, but because of his "blood," his connection to his family—which means both loyalty to his father, and an inability to be free from his

father even if he could choose not to be loyal.

Indeed, for the first time Sarty doesn't halt his thoughts before they go too far; instead he allows himself to imagine running away from his father and his family. Acknowledging the fact that, on some level, he despises his father is a major event for Sarty. Even so, however, he still feels that he is unable to take the next step, to actually keep running away. It is this inability that Sarty has more trouble articulating, as he only repeats, "I can't"—but it clearly has to do with the ties of "blood" that remain so strong for him.

> "Ain't you going to even send a nigger?" he cried. At least you sent a nigger before!"

Related Characters: Colonel Sartoris "Sarty" Snopes (speaker), Abner Snopes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

Sarty is watching his father carefully, deliberately prepare the oil in order to burn down the de Spain barn. He has watched his father do this before—indeed, young as he is, Sarty sometimes has trouble distinguishing certain instances of his father's defiance from others, as when he began to yell and defend his father to the Justice for an entirely different charge. This time, though, there is something different: at the beginning of the story, we learned, Abner had sent a black man to warn Mr. Harris about the burning—now it looks like there will be no warning. Further, earlier Sarty had hoped that if his father didn't burn down de Spain's barn, perhaps everything would somehow even out. But, of course, his father does plan to burn down the barn, and even more mercilessly than he has in the past.

Sarty's derogatory racial language comes straight from his father, as well as from the white society around him—in that sense Sarty is no different from them. But in other ways, Sarty does feel an innate sense of justice that distinguishes him from his father. He may not be able to stop his father from burning down a barn, but he cannot stand the idea that there will not even be a warning. While, in the past, Sarty has put his head down and obeyed his father, daring to question him only in his own thoughts, now his thoughts break out into speech, as he dares to challenge his father directly.

> But there was no glare behind him now and he sat now, his back toward what he had called home for four days anyhow, his face toward the dark woods which he would enter when breath was strong again, small, shaking steadily in the chill darkness, hugging himself into the remainder of his thin, rotten shirt, the grief and despair now no longer terror and fear but just grief and despair. *Father. My father,* he thought.

Related Characters: Colonel Sartoris "Sarty" Snopes (speaker), Abner Snopes

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

After racing to the de Spain house to warn the Major about the father, Sarty has raced away, running just like he ran to fetch the oil for his father—though this time he is running away from his family in a way that, earlier, he still could not imagine doing. While racing, he has heard two shots ring out, and while we are not explicitly told what happened, we are left to conjecture that Abner and Sarty's brother both have been shot by de Spain, and possibly killed.

Now Sarty recognizes that he has definitively abandoned his family—indeed, he has betrayed his family's loyalty, in the interest of a greater justice, to the extent that his father and brother may be dead. It is at this moment that Sarty's fear turns to grief, and he begins to think once again of the more admirable qualities of his father—even though, as the narrator will go on to tell us, Sarty isn't aware that his father was actually mercenary, in the war for his own private benefit, rather than as a patriot or hero. This passage underlines the ambivalence with which the book ends: on one hand, Sarty never turns back to his home and family; on the other hand, he continues to think of Abner as "my father," someone to whom he will remain indelibly bound. He has abandoned his family in fact, but perhaps in doing so is bound even more closely to it in spirit.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

BARN BURNING

The story opens in a general store that is also being used for a court of the Justice of the Peace, where a boy—Sarty Snopes, though we're not yet told his name—is crouched at the back, smelling the cheese and processed meat that crowds the shelves. He tries to identify a number of his feelings, from fear, despair, and grief to a sense of loyalty to his **blood**.

The fact that a country store is also being used as a courtroom underlines the rural setting of the story, while Sarty's sensitivity to the smell of meat and cheese suggests that he may be hungry and his family poor. That he sees his "sense of loyalty to his blood" as a feeling also establishes how that feeling of family loyalty is treated in the story as instictual, as being a deeply embedded and inescapable part of a person.

Sarty can't see his father (Abner Snopes) nor his father's "enemy" at the front; then he tells himself that it's both his and his father's enemy.

With a fierce burst of loyalty, Sarty aligns his own feelings with those of his father. He sees – has been trained to see – anyone opposing his father as not just someone who disagrees but as "enemy."

The Justice asks the other man (the enemy), Mr. Harris, for his proof. Mr. Harris says that Abner's opponent's hog got into his corn several times: first he warned him, then gave him wire to fix his pen, then told him to pay him a dollar to get his hog back. That night a black man, a "nigger," he says, came with the dollar and warned him that wood and hay can burn—later that night, his barn burned to the ground.

Mr. Harris is describing the actions of Sarty's father, whom Harris portrays as wilfully defiant and careless about other people's property. This is also the story's first case of derogatory language used to describe African Americans, a word that was often used by whites at the time.

Since Mr. Harris doesn't know anything more about the man who threatened him, the Justice says this doesn't count as proof. Harris says the boy should come up and vouch for Abner—not the protagonist's brother, who's older, but the boy, who looks so muich like his father.

Sarty initially imagines that he's only an observer, that he can't have any part to play in this trial. But in being called on to testify it is made clear that he is implicated in his father's actions. His resemblance to his father further highlights that familial connection, while also suggesting the way that inheritances are passed down in families in ways that the family-members themselves can't control.

Sarty looks at the serious faces and at the shabby, older Justice beckoning him up. His father doesn't look at him, but he realizes his father wants him to lie, and he frantically realizes he'll have to.

Sarty knows what Mr. Harris is saying is true, and that lying would mean going against justice, but he can't imagine another option. Yet his frantic realization that he will lie suggests his discomfort with being made to lie, even if his loyalty to his father compels it.

The Justice asks for his name, and he whispers "Colonel Sartoris Snopes." The Justice says a boy with that name must tell the truth, while the boy continues to think "enemy" when he looks at Harris. He doesn't notice the justice's kind face or worried tone when he asks Harris if he really wants the boy to testify.

Colonel Sartoris is a character in some of Faulkner's other stories who was a noted Civil War officer. Naming Sarty after that office suggests that Abner has some sense of honor about his service during the civil war (though later in the story this sense will be deeply complicated). Anxious and afraid, Sarty deals with these feelings by continuing to remind himself of the loyalties he must keep. He can't recognize the kindness in the judge's face as his world is defined solely by a sense of justice on one hand and loyalty to his family/father on the other.

Finally, after a long pause, Harris violently curses and yells, "No!" For Sarty, time seemed to have halted, but now begins to flow again. The Justice says he can't find Snopes guilty but advises him to leave the area for good. Snopes agrees, saying he doesn't want to stay in a place with certain people—and he curses them in an unprintable way.

Harris has some basic decency, and realizes – despite his frustration – that it's unfair to make a boy testify against his father. Abner's defiance is evident in his insistence that the Justice's advice is no punishment, and instead is just what he already wanted. His lack of decency is evident in his unprintable curse.

Sarty follows his father in his stiff black coat out of the room. His father walks stiffly, since a Confederate musket ball had lodged in his heel when he'd stolen a horse thirty years before. The brother also joins, chewing tobacco, and as they leave someone whispers, "Barn burner!"

Sarty often thinks of his father as stiff and upright, an aspect both of Abner's old war wound and of his general demeanor. Sarty's brother seems to fashion himself after his father more naturally than Sarty.

Sarty whirls around and sees the face of another boy in what looks like a red haze: he pounces on the boy and begins to beat him until the boy runs away. Sarty's father grabs him, ordering him to get in the wagon.

This impressionistic scene is confusing, but its confusion mimics Sarty's own frantic feelings as he lunges unthinkingly in his father's defense.

Sarty's two "hulking" sisters, his mother, and his aunt are waiting for them with their old, run-down pieces of furniture loaded into their wagon, including the broken mother-of-pearl clock that had been his mother's dowry. She begins to cry once she sees that Sarty is hurt, but the father orders her to get back in the wagon.

The clock, stopped at an unknown day and hour, reflects the family's poverty, the mother's attempt to cling to any small symbol of past joy, and the way in which life for the family repeats itself, making time irrelevant. Sarty's mother cares for him in ways his father simply doesn't, but she can never stand up to Abner.

Abner gets in the wagon and strikes the mules savagely: it is the same movement with which his descendants in later years would over-run a car engine before starting it.

Abner's viciousness toward the mules reflects his actual resentment and anger, despite his assertion that he wants to leave this area. Also, note how the story often moves back and forward in time, making the family's saga a multigenerational one, and further establishing the idea that a family's traits are naturally and inevitably passed down.

Sarty wonders to himself whether his father is satisfied, now—maybe it's over. His mother asks Sarty if his shoulder hurts, and he brushes her off. He doesn't know where they're going—no one in the family ever does, though it's always some house waiting for them a day or more away. It's even possible his father had already arranged a job at another farm before… but here the boy stops his thoughts.

Sarty wants desperately to be loyal to his father, but he also knows that what his father does is wrong, but finds it painful to think about. Here he hits upon the thought that his father might have set up this next house ahead of time, which would imply that he burned down Harris's barn not in a fit of rage but in cold blood. But Sarty stops that thought before he has to face the implication.

His father, Sarty knows, always can stop himself—he has a "wolflike" independence and courage that impresses strangers, in his insistence that his actions are right and that anyone who shares his interests will also share his advantages.

Sarty's father is not just rigid and despised: here we learn that his faults can also be strengths, and in another situation could well benefit the family.

The family camps that night and makes a small, neat **fire**, something the father excels at. If Sarty was older, he might have wondered why the fire was so small, given his father's experience in war and his own voraciousness with whatever is not his. He might then have imagined that this small blaze was what resulted from his father's nights spent during those four years of war hiding from both sides of the conflict with his "captured horses."

The narration here uses a number of hypotheticals to, once again, shuttle between the past, present, and future, as well as to allow the reader to enter into knowledge of the father that Sarty does not now possess, including that his father's role in the Civil War was not as honorable as Sarty thinks, as it seems to have involved stealing horses from both sides.

And if Sarty was even older, the story suggests, he might have realized that **fire** spoke to something deep inside his father and was his only weapon. Now, though, Sarty just thinks of it as normal. He is almost asleep when his father tells him to follow him up to the road, where he looks at his father's stiff, sharp outline.

In another hypothetical, the narration settles on what is actually the case: that there is a deep connection between fire and Sarty's father, for whom it represents a way for him to maintain control over a world in which he otherwise feels powerless.

When they are alone, Abner says that his son was going to tell them during the trial—would have told on him. He strikes Sarty on the side of the head like he'd struck the mules. He tells Sarty that he must learn to stick with his own **blood** in order to survive. Twenty years later, Sarty would understand that if he said the men only wanted truth or justice, his father would have hit him again. Now, though, he says nothing, and then simply whispers, "yes," before his father sends him back to bed.

In the courtroom, Sarty had believed it was necessary for him to lie, but it appears that his father saw only his fear and anxiety and interpreted that as disloyalty. Again, the story moves forward in time to suggest that in the future, Sarty will have a more confident, rational understanding of his father, and his father's belief that family loyalty, and loyalty specifically to Abner himself, outweighs any other principle. Now, though, Sarty can only obey.

The next day they arrive at a two-room house identical to all the dozen others they've lived in since Sarty was born, ten years ago. The mother and aunt begin to unload the wagon, while one sister says the house probably isn't fit for hogs. But her father tells her to help unloading, and the two sisters, bovine and passive, wearing ribbons, begin to unload as well.

This particular journey of the family from one place to the next is the only one in this story, but we are meant to understand that such journeys define the family's existence. While the mother and aunt are stoic and dutiful, the sisters deal with their reality with lazy passivity.

Abner tells Sarty to accompany him to see their new employer, who the father says will own him for the next eight months. Sarty recognizes that before last night, his father had struck him but never explained why. Young as he is, Sarty is both "heavy" enough to prevent him from taking pure joy in the world, but not "heavy" enough to take a stand in it, to try to resist or change it.

Abner's claim about ownership underlines his resentment, but it also highlights the very real nature of sharecropping in the South, which is barely a step up from slavery (a fact that of course only increases Abner's resentment, but also levels a subtle condemnation of the structure of Southern society more generally). Sarty, in turn, feels out of place, too old for innocence and too young for responsibility or control over his social familial situation.

The two come to a huge house: when Sarty sees it he forgets his father, his terror and despair. He's never seen anything like this house, and, with a feeling of joy, he thinks to himself that the owners of this house are safe from his father, beyond his touch—even their barns are stable and impervious to his flames. This feeling ebbs, though, when he looks at his father's stiff, limping figure and realizes his father never seems dwarfed by anything, even this house.

Sarty's feelings of joy and security on seeing the house make a notable contrast to his father's sense of resentment and defiance. Here, Sarty allows himself to separate himself a small amount from his father in imagining this massive home as an impervious, safe one. His sense of his father's inability to touch it is not a source of frustration but one of hope that such places might exist, even, for him. And yet this sense dissolved when he looks again at his father and sees his inexorable resentment and anger.


Abner's stiff foot comes down into a pile of fresh horse droppings, which he could have easily avoided. Sarty wonders if his father's rage will be tempered by falling under the spell of the house. They cross the portico and the father marches up to the door, his wide black hat formal but ratty.

Sarty still has the capacity to imagine that his father might change, that he might be affected by the beauty of the house just like he was. But his father's purposeful step into the horse dung along with his stiffness and rigidity signal that Sarty's dreams of his father changing are no more than that: dreams.


An old black man in a linen jacket opens the door and tells the "white man" to wipe his feet, and that the Major isn't home. The father orders the servant, calling him "nigger," to get out of his way, and flings open the door. Sarty watches a dirty footprint appear on the pale **rug** inside the door, as if his father is stamping the footprint in. The servant shouts for Miss Lula: a lady in a gray lace-necked gown and apron rushes down, looking amazed and incredulous.

Abner's behavior here, insane as it is, seems completely planned out: from stepping in the horse dung to soiling the rug. It is clear, then, that Abner is purposely and proactively announcing his defiance, that regardless of his status as a sharecropper he refusese to acknowledge the superiority of the landholders for whom he works. That the black servants are so much better dressed than Abner only further emphasizes his social position, and feeds his resentment and need to assert superiority, which he does by ordering the servants around and calling them by racial epithets.


Shakily, Miss Lula asks Abner to go away. He doesn't speak again or look at her: he pauses, then just as deliberately pivots, smearing the stain into the **rug** without looking at it, and marches back out with the sound of a woman's wail behind him.

Abner has such contempt for the servants that he barely considers them as other people: instead, he is fixated on the defiant purpose at hand, ruining the rug. Meanwhile, the story subtly implies through the black servants horror that they don't just fear Abner but also what de Spain will do to them when he finds out what they couldn't stop happening. The story thereby subtly portrays how racism in the South was deeply embedded everywhere (not just in Abner), even if it took many forms.

Abner stops to clean his boot, and looking back at the house, tells his son disparagingly that "nigger sweat" built it, and now the Major presumably wants to mix "white sweat" with it.

Abner's ugly prejudices reveal that he feels himself superior than both the blacks who built the house, and the whites who deigned to hire them. He manages his resentment and prejudice in such a way that, by his logic, only he is truly pure or superior.

Two hours later, Sarty is chopping wood while the women of his family are inside preparing food (though not his sisters, who are lazy and idle). Sarty watches the male servant trot by on a horse, followed by a black boy, his face angry, on a carriage horse carrying the rolled-up **rug**. They deposit the rug at the corner of the house where his father and brother are sitting and gallop back.

Sarty, his mother, and his aunt all take up the necessary work of chores and errands, while his sisters refuse to join in (and their mother seems unwilling to force them to). Sarty may be too young to influence his father, but he is aware enough to pay close attention to everything around him. Meanwhile, the dropping-off of the rug indicates that de Spain expects Abner to clean what he soiled, but the passive aggressive way in which it is dropped off also shows the way that de Spain simply and naturally expects such cleaning to occur not only because Abner should clean up the mess he made, but because Abner, as an inferior, should of course show deference to de Spain.

The father begins to shout for his daughters, one of whom drags the **rug** into the house, and tells the other to set up the wash pot (though she tells Sarty to do so). With the mother looking on anxiously, he orders the daughters to clean the rug: lethargically, they pick it up. The mother says she'll do it, but he orders her to go back to making dinner.

While it was Abner who soiled the rug, he now takes pleasure in asserting his own authority within the family by ordering his wife and children around. His wife wants to avoid conflict at all costs, but even that is something overrules.

Sarty watches them all afternoon, lazily and reluctantly cleaning the **rug** with harsh homemade detergent while the father stands over them implacably. Then the mother comes over and looks at them in despair. Abner picks up a fragment of field stone and puts it into the wash pot, though his wife is begging him not to.

Abner seems to enjoy ordering his daughters to work. However, in throwing the stone into the wash pot he also renders the washing effort useless, since now the rug will be stained and even more ruined. His wife fears this, but Abner seems unable or unwilling to stop himself from defiantly showing his independence from his "superiors" through destructive acts.

They eat the cold food left over from their afternoon meal and then go to bed. Abner, though, is not yet in bed, and the last thing Sarty remembers before going to sleep is his harsh silhouette bending over the **rug**. It feels like he's hardly slept when that same silhouette is standing over him, and his father orders him to get the mule.

Sarty often perceives his father as almost two-dimensional, a flat though intimidating silhouette: it is as if flattening his father in his mind is a way for him to try to come to terms with his father's incomprehensible decisions and impenetrable mind.

When Sarty comes back with the mule his father is standing with the rolled **rug** over his shoulder, and he orders his son to help him onto the mule. Together they go back up to the now dark house. He asks his father if he wants help, but Abner doesn't answer. He walks up to the portico and thunderously dumps the rug onto the ground. A light goes on, but they don't stay and return to their shack together.

Abner often does seem to want his son around, but not to help or assist him in anyway—merely as a witness to his actions. Perhaps he is providing a model for his son to follow, as Sarty's brother seems to have learned to do, or perhaps for Abner his defiance only can register if it is witnessed.

Early that morning, father and son are equipping the mules for plowing when the Major rides up. He tells Abner, who remains stooping with his back to the Major, that he must realize he ruined the **rug**, which cost a hundred dollars. Since that sum is far too large for Abner, the Major continues, he's going to charge Abner twenty bushels of corn against his crop—it won't make Mrs. De Spain happy, but it might teach Abner a lesson. Then the Major leaves.

Major de Spain seems more surprised than angry, which only underlines the rarity of someone in a position so far beneath him ever even being able to cause him harm. Their economic statuses, indeed, are so radically distinct that the Major struggles to find a punishment that might be "fair" for both, as the rug in house costs more than Abner will make in a lifetime. The economic inequality on display in the story is staggering.

Sarty calls to his father and cries that he did the best he could. Mr. de Spain won't get his twenty bushels: he'll gather and hide it, he says. His father simply asks if he's put the cutter back like he asked, and when Sarty says no, he orders him to do it.

Sarty almost instinctively begins to blurt out expressions of loyalty to his father about how they'll never give up the twenty bushels, yet despite Abner's prior insistence that Sarty be loyal to him, here he's just as dispassionate to his son as to the Major.

For the rest of that week Sarty works steadily and dutifully, which he's learned from his mother. With the older women he builds pens for the animals. One afternoon, when his father is absent, Sarty goes to the field where his father is plowing. He wonders if perhaps the twenty bushels will be a cheap price to actually change his father. He thinks that perhaps Major de Spain won't try to collect the twenty bushels, that somehow the whole thing will all balance out between the corn, **rug**, and **fire**, or between the terror and grief.

Unlike his sisters, and unlike his father, Sarty knows how to work hard and obey authority—an element of his "blood" that seems to stem from another member of the family, his mother. As he has before, here Sarty tries to imagine an alternate reality to his situation in which his father changes and does not pursue the kind of "justice" than the one his father insists on. That Sarty even thinks of "fire" as part of the "balance," though, shows that Sarty already senses that his father is going to resort to burning things. Even as he hopes that things will change, Sarty's inclusion of a "fire" that has not occurred in his thoughts shows that nothing will.

On Saturday, Sarty's father orders him to gear up the wagon, and the father and two sons go to the store, mounting the steps and once again looking at a sea of faces. Sarty sees a man with glasses and understands it's another Justice of the Peace, and also sees the Major in collar and cravat. The Major has an expression of unbelief, not rage, at being sued by his tenant (though Sarty doesn't know this).

This court scene is in many ways a repetition of the one that started the story, though this time it's Abner who is trying to turn the system of justice to his own advantage by bringing a case against de Spain. Once again, the Major seems more incredulous than angry that Abner has dared to challenge his proper place in the world.

Sarty goes up to the Justice and cries that his father didn't burn—but his father interrupts him and orders him back to the wagon. Rhe Justice is confused.

To ten-year-old Sarty, his father's various misdeeds meld into one. He thinks he's been given another chance to defend his father and does so with vigor – he's always looking to gain his father's favor, to show his loyalty to his blood, though such a desire to do so communicates Sarty's conflicted feelings about that loyalty.


Rather than go to the wagon, Sarty remains in the back of the room, where he can hear the Justice ask if Abner thinks twenty bushels of corn is too high for the damage done. Abner says he washed out the tracks and took the **rug** back, but the Justice says he didn't carry it back in the same condition—and Abner refuses to answer.

At first, Abner does seem to want the Justice to understand him and confirm his sense of his own rightness. When it looks like the Justice is challenging his account, however, Abner refuses to participate any longer.


The Justice says he's going to find against Abner, but twenty bushels seems high for someone in his circumstances. October corn will be worth fifty cents, and given that Abner can stand a five-dollar loss he hasn't yet earned, he'll hold him responsible for ten bushels of corn to be paid out of the crop then.

This time the Justice does find against Abner, but like the Major he tries to find a fair balance between the two parties' vastly different social situations—but such "fairness" only further highlights that ultimate difference between de Spain and Abner's situations, and that is never something Abner will abide.

After the trial, while Sarty imagines they'll return home, his father instead marches past the wagon to the blacksmith shop. Sarty whispers to his father that de Spain won't get even one bushel. He continues to whisper until his father glances down at him, his voice almost gentle and pleasant, and says they'll wait until October anyway.

Sarty continues to try to win his father over by showing that he's on his father's side. Abner's uncharacteristically gentle response that they'll wait until October seems to indicate a kind of mellowing, but also might indicate that his father already has a plan.

In the blacksmith shop they fix some of the problems with the wagon, which has become run-down, and then Abner orders Sarty to hitch up the mules. Sarty listens to his father tell the blacksmith and another man a long story of when he was a professional horsetrader. As he listens, Sarty stares at posters of last year's circus taped up on one side of the store.

The narrator, and thus the reader, know more than Sarty does about his father's true past occupations. Here Abner exaggerates in order to make his relationship to horses sound more glamorous (rather than a horse-trader he stole horses during the war). What is evident, nonetheless, is that he does genuinely love horses. Sarty staring at the circus poster is a reminder of his youth, but also a reminder of the sort of world of fun and entertainment that is inaccessible to him.


The father gives his two sons some cheese and crackers to eat and they sit silently, eating and drinking. Still they don't go home, instead heading to a horse lot, where his father comments to no one in particular about some of the animals being shown.

Abner is perhaps in a better mood while boasting about horse trading: Sarty does get to eat some cheese, which he could only smell at the general store at the beginning. Though, again, Abner's cheer might actually be an indication of a planned response to the court decision against him.

After sundown they reach home and eat supper. Suddenly, as Sarty is sitting on the doorstep, he hears his mother cry her husband's name and repeat, "No!" He turns around and watches his father empty the lamp reservoir back into the kerosene can as his wife tugs at him, until he flings her back, hard but not viciously, into the wall.

After a more pleasant lull amid the anxious activity that has characterized most of the story, Abner puts his new plot in motion. This time Sarty's mother attempts to resist, but ineffectually. Abner's combination of cruelty combined with a lack of outright viciousness captures the sense that he feels that he is following a kind of principle rather than just rashly acting out: he believes he must assert his defiance and independence.


Abner orders Sarty to get the can of oil from the stable. Sarty begins to ask why, but his father orders him to go. Out of the "old habit of **blood**" Sarty rushes to the stable. He imagines continuing to run, never looking back to see his father's face again—but he can't make himself do it.

As he does only rarely, Sarty allows himself to imagine a life beyond and apart from his father, from the pull of his "blood." But at this point his connection to his father and hgis blood remains too strong for him to disobey Abner.

Sarty runs back and hands the can to his father, crying that at least his father sent a "nigger" before as a warning. Instead of striking him, his father grabs him by the back of the shirt. Sarty's brother advises his father to tie Sarty to the bedpost, but Abner only responds by ordering the brother to empty the smaller can into the bigger one. He then drags Sarty into the other room, telling the mother, "Lennie," to hold him, or else he'll escape to the main house. Abner departs.

Even though Sarty could not bring himself to disobey his father, he continues to retain his own sense of justice—he thinks it only fair for his father to warn the Major de Spain of what he plans to do. Now Abner is once again convinced that Sarty, unlike his brother, is the one whose loyalty is up for question.


Sarty begins to struggle, while his mother catches him in both arms. Sarty cries that he doesn't want to have to hit her, and the aunt cries to let him go, or else she'll go up to the house himself. His mother cries that she can't, and protests as Sarty struggles out of her grasp and races out of the house.

This is the only moment at which Sarty's aunt seems to express her own opinions and desires—she too thinks that what Abner is doing is wrong, and that Sarty should be allowed to escape to warn de Spain.



His mother cries at his sister to grab him, but his sister—a twin, we now learn—is too large, slow, and impassive. Sarty races out of the house and up to the gate, running up to the big lighted house. Sarty bursts in, gasping for breath, and sees the black man looking astonished. Then a white man, de Spain, emerges, and Sarty cries, "Barn!" into his face before wheeling around and back out the door.

Running as before, this time Sarty's desperate racing allows him to refrain from thinking too long about what he is doing, the disloyalty that he is showing to his father. Instead he simply works based on his own instinct of justice, even as he refuses to say more than a word to the Major.


Behind Sarty, the Major shouts for his horse. Sarty thinks he should cut across the park, but doesn't know how high the fence is, so he continues down the drive, hearing the galloping horse behind him and then overtaking him. Sarrty throws himself aside into the ditch to avoid it.

Now Sarty is caught between two homes, the mansion and the shack, and between two worlds. He knows, however, that his word to the Major has been effective, as he hears the man's horse behind him. The Major's own brutality in pursuit of "justice" is evident in the way he disregards Sarty's safety, such that Sarty has to thrown himself from the road to avoid being trampled.

Then Sarty springs up and continues racing, though he knows it's too late. Even after he hears one, then two shots he keeps running, crying, "Pap!" and then "Father!" and glancing backward at the glare of the burning barn.

We are not told what has happened, but are left, like Sarty, to conjecture that Abner and possibly Sarty's brother have been shot by the Major. The Major has enacted his own brutal "justice" in response to Abner's "justice."

By midnight Sarty reaches the top of a hill, not knowing how far he's come, his back still to the shack that was his home for four days. His face is towards the woods, which he'll enter when he's recovered his strength. Shaking and sobbing, he thinks of his father, then cries aloud that he was brave—he was in Colonel Sartoris's cavalry. He doesn't know that his father had actually served in war as a "true private," giving no one authority, and interested only in booty from any side.

While on his race to de Spain's mansion Sarty was momentarily poised between two worlds, the very position of his body now underlines the fact that he has left his family behind. Once again the narration separates from Sarty's own mind, in an instance of dramatic irony in which we come to know more about Abner than his son does. Sarty continues to feel the pull to find things to love and honor in his father, and finds it in his father's military service as part of Colonel Sartoris's cavalry. But the story makes it clear that his father, in fact, was just a mercenary looking for money. Sarty will never know this fact which makes his own name, given to him by his father, a kind of lie. And so, even as Sarty leaves his family, separates from his "blood," the story makes it murky indeed about whether he can ever actually escape his familial "inheritance."

While Sarty will soon be hungry, for now he is only cold, so he decides to keep walking, the sound of the whippoorwills telling him that it's almost dawn. He's a little stiff, but counts on walking to cure that. He doesn't look back behind him.

Sarty's stiffness serves as a final suggestion of his father's own stiff gait, creating a physical image that challenges the notion that Sarty might ever be able to rid himself of his father's heritage for good.

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