



Barn Burning

William Faulkner

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"Barn Burning" is a short story by the American author William Faulkner which first appeared in Harper's in 1939 and has since been widely anthologized. The story deals with class conflicts, the influence of fathers, and vengeance as viewed through the third-person perspective of a young, impressionable child. It is a prequel to The Hamlet, The Town, and The Mansion, the three novels make up the Snopes trilogy.

Barn Burning Details

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?λσα says

Ξεκ?νησα την πρ?τη μου επαφ? με τον Ου?λλιαμ Φ?κνερ μ?σω αυτο? του διηγ?ματος. Η γραφ? του ε?ναι αδιαμφισβ?τητα πολ?πλοκη. Πυκνογραμμ?νη τ?σο δομικ? ?σο κ νοηματικ?. Κυριαρχε? ο μακροπερ?οδος λ?γος εμπλουτισμ?νος με πληροφορ?ες, νο?ματα κ συναισθ?ματα.

Ο συγγραφ?ας λοιπ?v, περιγρ?φει μ?α πατριαρχικ? οικογ?νεια στην οπο?α ο πατ?ρας εξουσι?ζει ?λα τα μ?λη. Εμφαν?ζεται ?τεγκτος και βλοσυρ?ς και φ?ρεται αυταρχικ? και πολλ?ς φορ?ς β?αια στο δεκ?χρονο γιο. Β?βαια, ε?ναι σχ?ση σεβασμο?, εξ?ρτησης, φ?βου αλλ? κ εκβιασμο? μεταξ? πατ?ρα και υιο?. Το παιδ? βρ?σκεται σ ?να μεγ?λο δ?λημμα. Θα πρ?πει να επιλ?ξει αν?μεσα στην υποταγ? του στον πατ?ρα και στην επ?δυνη χειραφ?τηση. Στο τ?λος αιωρε?ται η πεπο?θηση της ελευθερ?ας.

Επ?σης, στο δι?γημα διαφα?νονται οι τοξικ?ς κ φυλετικ?ς διακρ?σεις, ο ρατσισμ?ς που μολ?νει τις ανθρ?πινες σχ?σεις, τα προβλ?ματα της καθημεριν?τητας των αγροτ?v κ οι συνθ?κες διαβ?ωσ?ς τους.

Η ιστορ?α δε με ενθουσ?ασε ?μως, δεν μπορ? να αγνο?σω το ταλ?ντο κ τη δεξ?τητα του Φ?κνερ, εξο? κ το 4/5.

Lizzie says

Well. I *thought* I didn't like this story very much at all. I figured two stars, but the more I thought it over, the stronger my feelings got. I didn't have very much *fun* while I read it, it's true. This story is the perspective of a little boy, named after a Colonel of the Civil War (during which his father seems to have un-heroically just stolen horses), as his family is uprooted when his father gets kicked out of town for the dozenth time, for arson. His father is a horrible man, and the story is of Sarty's struggle with his loyalty to his father. This loyalty is the highest feeling of his world, and he wants to defend his father through the indefensible. And he does. But after the last upheaval, he begins to change his mind, and wishes the cycle to break. Unfortunately, he has to break it with honesty, and honesty won't do his family very much good.

It is written in a very Faulkner voice -- loose and anxious at the same time, streaming through the child's thoughts. This really works for the emotional content in the story, and was what began to win me. The characters are so awful here, it was hard to care for a while. The father is monstrous, the sisters are repeatedly called fat lazy pigs, the mother can't do a thing but cry, and the father's boss deserves everything he gets. In the mess, Sarty is understandable. And as he starts to cope with his feelings, wanting to protect his father as well as set him right, the battle is huge.

The truth is, I just can't get over the ending of this story. It is so much bigger, darker, harder than anything I expected while reading. Even though what you expect to happen happens, it becomes so much worse, so fast. (view spoiler) It seems that Sarty may be referenced in another of Faulkner's short stories, and his brother and other Snopes relatives make up a trilogy of novels. I want to know what happens next, and perhaps what happened before, but as is always the case... I also, partly, do not.

Edit: I've spent some more time with this story this week and I'm changing the darn rating. There's still things I don't like about it, but that doesn't mean I don't love it. I feel like I could think about it for years, and I think you should too.

Esmay says

3,5 stars

I feel like this short story has so many layers to uncover and while the story itself seems simple and straightforward the deeper meanings make it very interesting!

Jess ✶Harbinger of Blood-Soaked Rainbows✶ says

3.5 stars

I realized I never reviewed this one because I am a dummy with a crazy friggin life right now:(

Thank you to Miss Tadiana who pointed me in this little shorty's direction. I seem to have missed all the classes in high school and college where Faulkner was being taught. I remember my brother reading (and loathing) *As I Lay Dying* in eleventh grade, but the only Faulkner I ever read that year was the short story, *A Rose for Emily*. And while I loved that short story (and even more upon an adult re-read), I wish I had the opportunity to read more of his longer works in school where a critical eye and class discussions would have helped me appreciate and understand him. I also wish that my class had read this short story as well.

This short story from Faulkner is vastly different from *A Rose for Emily* and from what I understand of Faulkner, it is more akin to his particular style and subject matter addressed in more of his novels. Where *Rose* was very haunting, and lyrical, and slightly but beautifully macabre, *Barn Burning* was crass, and raw, and gritty, and exposed, and while those are all things I love in my stories, I just feel like there was an overdose of it here.

I have heard many many things about Faulkner's overabundant use of detail and description and since *A Rose for Emily* is the only thing I had thus far read of his, I had a hard time understanding that particular representation of him. Oh boy, I saw it here. This story was swimming in detail. And unfortunately, it did detract from my enjoyment of it. But only slightly.

There is no doubt that Faulkner is a master of his craft, and though he does have a very particular style of writing, he is very good at it. But you have to know and understand what you're getting yourself into and be prepared to take your time, study, and trek through his beautiful details instead of just zipping straight forward into the marrow. Because this story does have some delicious marrow to it, but you have to search for it. And I don't think I was quite prepared to do that.

Above all, this story is an amazing character study of a young boy who is torn between following his own instincts to become the man he wants to be and following his tough callous prick of a father and defending his own flesh and blood to the end. This story definitely delves into that persistent dilemma that ensues when

you know what you're doing is wrong, but pressures out of your control force your hand to take part. This short was jam-packed with raw emotions and a lot of tough questions with not so black and white answers. This story was extremely haunting just like *A Rose for Emily* but in a totally different way. Highly recommended for those who love grit lit and supercharged emotional and character-driven stories. But remember, take your time.

Read this short online for free [here](#).

annie says

anyone who actually understands this short story is braver than any us marine

Matt says

Thing is, this is the story that gets so widely anthologized that it becomes people's first- and only-exposure to the world of Faulkner; the runonsentences; the stream-of-consciousness; the family drama (or what Freud called 'the family romance'); the pervading fatalism and doom and shame and endurance on the part of the characters, no All-American hero or come from behind, Horatio Alger here, no sir...

What happens, as I see it at least, is that unsuspecting kids who have to take a higher-level English class in high school sort of peruse it and turn the pages and write notes for the test or the 5 page paper that's due by the end of the month or something and therefore don't get the chance to adjust the mental scenery enough to absorb Old Bill's gravitas and pensiveness and rare and sparkling immediacy...

The thing is, style is destiny. Always has been and always will be. What I mean by that, at least in part, is that style is the very thing that sets a writer apart from the thousands of other scribblers. It's the unified field theory of a particular writer. The writer in question here, remember, went broke and saw all his books go out of circulation and was pretty much living on Hollywood money (David Thomson called it a form of grant) and it took Malcolm Cowley and several years' reflection to appreciate the moral sweep and tragic *oomph* of Yoknapatawpha County.

Water runs slow through flat land, friends and neighbors. It just do.

So anyway the writer's style is his substance in large part because it's the individual stamp they put on their texts. I mean, Shakespeare is Shakespeare and Coltrane is Coltrane and Godard is Godard, y'know?...the minute they step into the room the whole atmosphere changes. The air crackles in a different way. And that also counts for the space between the ears of the audience that sits down to read or listen or watch what these guys come up with.

Style is a huge part of things because I can't shake the thought (I believe, voiced by Sartre) that a writer's style is his metaphysics. It's the relation between the individual consciousness of the human making art and the more nebulous and ephemeral insights into Being and Time and Faith and Action and Agency and Desire and Fate and Society and all that business...

It anchors the words or music or images or colors or clay or whatever within the space of the work itself; emphasizing one aesthetic attribute or another, one image or insight that the artist is trying to put together. Style's the whole ball game in a sense, because you know it when you see it and what you're seeing and reacting to (positively or negatively) is what's pretty much at stake with the whole experience itself.

So what happens is, of course, since Old Bill has ambled his way into the canon- you can't really talk about truly Great Writers in America in the 20th Century without mentioning him, let alone giving him a plumb position as chronicler, bard and *seer*- that means that a fairly respectable High School English class has got to offer him, a la carte if you will, as an example of foreshadowing or symbolism or what-you-will...

And so of course the real meaning or statement or ambiance or ascertainable quality of the work gets passed over completely. Cat's got a style that doesn't harmonize with your own predilections as a reader (and, let's face it, what kinds of predilections as a reader does a Sophomore English student have, when they don't have a passion or a particular interest in mind) and so it all seems like a bunch of boring, droning, over-written stuff and gets shoved in a distant mental drawer forever.

I only say this because it happened to me.

Thank god I took a class on Faulkner in undergrad and I had the calm and the quiet and the peace of mind to focus my attention on the scene that was being set for me as I read *As I Lay Dying* for the first time ever.

Something about the hushed, portentous opening chapters with the drinking water from a wooden bucket ("water should never be drunk from metal"- why? Because then you lose the churning of the autumn wind moving through the thin, prickly leaves of the pine trees, and the warmth of the sun radiating off the ripples- that's why, city boy!)

Not to mention the "Chuck. Chuck. Chuck" of the adze. Mama's in the coffin, boay, and we gotta cut it down ourselves. Woosh. Chill runs through me, still. And then there's Darl's soliloquies, Dewy Dell's desperate helplessness in puberty, Addie's furious and unsparing monologue from the Great Beyond..

See Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (if you haven't already) for a similar multiple-perspective narrative, which also gains momentum and power from being explained and narrated from both outside and inside the story proper almost simultaneously- Reality as explained and lived through, a distinction without a difference in these hermetic worlds- by both immediate participants and observers and re-tellers alike. Kurosawa knows how to do justice to a pissed-off, disembodied, avenging soul come back from the grave to tell you all, like Eliot's Tiresias. So does Faulkner.

The effect is sublime.

I mention all this not just to digress (though that's sort of an ancillary benefit) but to make the familiar point that, after all, one doesn't always necessarily remember the PLOT of these kinds of stories as much as one remembers all the little detours and ephemeral moments of recognition while they're on the way up the Freytag Pyramid.

When you travel, getting there should be half the fun. Style is the transportation device that puts you into that other world, the diagesis, the *mise en scene*. Style is what they can't teach you in English class but its what is retained and kept and what one is nourished by after the initial shock of the text wears off and you numb up and adjust to the various shallows and depths.

I think this is what passionate readers talk about when they call a text 'rewarding' or 'enlightening' or

'enchanting' or whatever. I think it's not only the meat and potatoes, it's the wine and the dessert, too.

As in romance, as in literature: it's not the climax that you remember, not quite, it's the infinite amount of details that one holds onto in the steady onrush of oblivion. The way you wear your hat, the way you sip your tea...

So anyway poor Barn Burning gets to be the sort of introductory Faulkner and thus becomes that which can only lose its enticement through it being suggested by your teacher before you really know anything for certain and are on the road to find out.

FotisK says

"Εξ ?νυχος τον λ?οντα" ?λεγαν οι παλι?τεροι. Το απ?φθεγμα ισχ?ει απ?λυτα για το συγκεκριμ?νο δι?γημα του Φ?κνερ, το οπο?ο εμπερι?χει σε μικρογραφ?α τα στοιχε?α εκε?να που τον καθιστο?ν ανυπ?ρβλητο συγγραφ?α. Αρκε?

Tadiana ☆Night Owl? says

I try to mix up my reading diet, including some more literary and thought-provoking reading along with F&SF and ~~brain-candy~~ romances. William Faulkner is always good for a mental workout, and his short story "Barn Burning" is free online [here](#).

I studied two Faulkner short stories in college, this one and A Rose for Emily. "Barn Burning" doesn't have quite the shocking impact that "A Rose for Emily" does, but it is a profound and moving story of an impressionable young boy living in the South during the post-Civil War period. He's burdened, or perhaps uplifted, by his given name of "Colonel Sartoris Snopes," or "Sarty" for short. Colonel Sartoris was a Civil War hero and a symbol for truth and justice. But the "Snopes" part of his name reflects his low class, degenerate family. So, Sarty's full name epitomizes his internal conflict between his yearning for beauty and honor and justice, and his desire to be accepted by his family, especially his cruel, grim, mean-minded father.

As the story begins, Sarty's father has been hauled before a Justice of the Peace in a small town, accused of setting fire to a richer man's barn. In rural 19th century society, losing your barn and all of its contents would have a devastating effect on a person's livelihood. The Justice lacks sufficient evidence to find Abner Snopes guilty, but warns him to leave the county. The family does leave, but they carry their troubles along with them, particularly inside of Abner Snopes' vindictive, jealous heart. And as the title suggests, it's only a matter of time before his hatred of those who have more than him leads to another barn burning.

Faulkner's tendency to use long, complex, layered sentences is on full display in this story. Here, for example, is the second sentence of the story:

The boy, crouched on his nail keg at the back of the crowded room, knew he smelled cheese, and more: from where he sat he could see the ranked shelves close-packed with the solid, squat,

dynamic shapes of tin cans whose labels his stomach read, not from the lettering which meant nothing to his mind but from the scarlet devils and the silver curve of fish - this, the cheese which he knew he smelled and the hermetic meat which his intestines believed he smelled coming in intermittent gusts momentary and brief between the other constant one, the smell and sense just a little of fear because mostly of despair and grief, the old fierce pull of blood.

It's a mouthful, but it tells you so much about Sarty's confusion, his hunger, his despair, and the pull of his family ties.

I love Faulkner's imagery and the way he uses words and symbolism to build tension:

[T]he 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 . . .

Faulkner's words pull me into Sarty's head and heart, and made me feel both the tragedy and the hope in his life. Highly recommended.

George K. says

Το δυνατ? και πολ? καλογραμμ?νο αυτ? δι?γημα αποτελε? την πρ?τη μου επαφ? με το ?ργο του Γου?λιαμ Φ?κνερ. Εδ? και αρκετ? χρ?νια ?χω κ?μποσα βιβλ?α του στη συλλογ? μου, ?μως π?ντα κ?τι με ?φηνε σε απ?σταση απ? αυτ?ν. ?μως η ολοκα?νουργια ?κδοση της Κ?χλης μου φ?νηκε σαν μια καλ? ευκαιρ?α να γνωρ?σω επιτ?λους και αυτ?ν τον μεγ?λο συγγραφ?α. Το δι?γημα απ? τη μια ε?ναι μια κλασικ? ιστορ?α ενηλικ?ωσης, αφο? ουσιαστικ? παρακολουθο?με τα γεγον?τα απ? την πλευρ? εν?ς παιδιο?, το οπο?ο καλε?ται να επιλ?ξει αν?μεσα στην υποταγ? στον β?αιο πατ?ρα του και τη χειραφ?ησ? του, εν? απ? την ?λλη ασχολε?ται και με δι?φορα σοβαρ? θ?ματα ?πως οι ταξικ?ς και φυλετικ?ς ανισ?τητες στον Αμερικ?νικο Ν?το κατ? την περ?οδο της Ανασυγκρ?ησης, οι συνθ?κες διαβ?ωσης των αγροτ?ν και των φτωχ?ν, οι αναμεν?μενες συγκρο?σεις των ανθρ?πων που αν?κουν σε διαφορετικ? κοινωνικ?/οικονομικ? τ?ξη, και π?ει λ?γοντας. Η γραφ? ε?ναι πραγματικ? πολ? καλ? και οξυδερκ?ς, αρκετ? ιδια?τερη αλλ? συν?μα ε?ληπτη. Τ?λος, η ?λη ?κδοση της Κ?χλης ε?ναι εξαιρετικ?, με προσεγμ?νη μετ?φραση, ?να πολ? καλ? επ?μετρο, χρ?σιμες σημει?σεις και χρονολ?γιο του συγγραφ?α.

Kay says

Read it for class, because I had too!

Dimitris Patriarcheas says

A very nice story, in just a few pages you are immersed as a reader in a family complex relationship between father and son, which is highlighted by the son's point of view inner phychology and thoughts.

Matt says

Not my favorite - but fuck, Faulkner, I would have liked a drink with you.

[3.5 stars for Faulkner being, well, Faulkner.]

Stephanie says

Faulkner wrote some very powerful short stories aside from his novels, and this is one of my favorites. It came to me like most things related to Faulkner do, by chance, when I decided to attend an American Literature class last minute.

Abner Snopes and his family are run out of town after he sets fire to the landlord's barn, and this isn't exactly the first time this arsonist has caused trouble. None the less, his family endures him, but his son Sarty cannot understand why his father has such an issue with authority. When Abner is first convicted of arson, Sarty defends him wholeheartedly, no questions asked.

The last straw for Sarty comes when his father plots to burn down the new landlord's house, and Sarty just cannot stand by and watch his family become uprooted and starved yet again. So he goes to de Spain (the landlord) in hopes of thwarting any attempts to burn the house down. What he feels is the right thing to do, turns into an ending that is heavy and abrupt, leaving a pang in your heart.

Connie says

"Barn Burning" is a short story that is a prequel to William Faulkner's Snopes trilogy. It shows the conflict between the father and son, and the inequity between classes. It's a story to be read more than once for its many layers of meaning. 3.5 stars.

Shaimaa says

I like Faulkner's style, mostly.

Faulkner is a great maximalist, and he writes wonderfully. Except, there were too many long sentences which make one loses the meaning of what one is reading. However, this style worked very well with the last paragraphs of this story.

I understand why this is a highly-praised classic; the themes it reflects are really important.
