“Barn Burning”

Abner Snopes, in William Faulkner's **“Barn Burning,”** is everyone's double, and that is the source of the misery in which he immerses his family and all of those with whom he comes into contact. Snopes feels challenged, it seems, by the pure existence of others and succumbs on each occasion to the demon of incendiary rivalry. At the conclusion of the first courtroom scene, for example, when the justice of the peace, failing to find Snopes guilty of arson against Mr. Harris, nevertheless orders him to “leave this county,” Faulkner reports the following as Snopes' reply:

[Abner] spoke for the first time, his voice cold and harsh, level, without emphasis: “I aim to. I don't figure to stay in a country among people who . . . he said something unprintable and vile, addressed to no one.

Faulkner appears to have understood what philosophical anthropologists like René Girard and Eric Gans have understood: That human beings are mimetic (or imitative) creatures and that the problem of violence is directly related to mimesis (or imitation).

The utterance performs two rhetorical tricks revelatory of Abner's essential character. First, it wrests an order, directed at him by an authority figure, from the authority figure, and presents it as Abner's own prior determination, as if to say, “You can't order me to leave since I've already decided to leave of my own volition.” Second, it attempts to reverse the moral judgment that the justice of the peace has ascribed to Abner by vilifying (“he said something unprintable and vile”) those who would condemn him; if you call me a **barn**-burner, Abner implicitly says, then I'll call you something even worse. A third observation might be added. Abner's vilification is addressed, Faulkner writes, “to no one.” Abner does not look his accusers in the eye when he insults them, he simply mutters the insult as if to himself. His rivalry is also, then, a cowardly rivalry.

The phenomena of doubles and rivals is extremely important to **“Barn Burning,”** as to Faulkner's work in general. Faulkner appears to have understood what philosophical anthropologists like René Girard and Eric Gans have understood: That human beings are mimetic (or imitative) creatures and that the problem of violence is directly related to mimesis (or imitation). Perhaps the most common type of problematic imitation in which people engage is acquisitive imitation. When Smith possesses something and makes a show of it, then Jones wants it, too, and to the extent that there is only one object of ownership, it is easy for Smith and Jones to come to blows in a struggle over possession (Smith defensively, Jones aggressively). But there are subtler forms of acquisitive imitation, as when Smith thinks that Jones enjoys a richer life, gets more attention, commands more prerogatives, or wields more authority than he. In such a case, what Smith ends up desiring is Jones's very existence; Smith becomes an unwitting double of Jones and challenges Jones for his very existence. If Smith then fails to become Jones by appropriating Jones's richer life, and so on, then Smith might instead seek a kind of revenge against Jones for being—as Smith sees it—unjustly and unbearably superior, a model whose greater amplitude seems to mock Smith's perpetually wounded dignity. Social order, with its roots in religion, is based on channeling the imitative impulse in human nature; the net gain when people follow the laws that inhibit uncontrolled imitation is a lessening of conflict and a corresponding increase in peace and happiness.

Abner Snopes is not only at odds with other people, in this sense, but he is also at odds with the very notion of social order. Abner's son Sarty thinks, as they leave town for the de Spain plantation (their next domicile), that *“maybe he's done satisfied now; now that he has. . . .”* But Abner, wounded by the perceived superiority of everyone to himself, cannot be satisfied; he remains trapped in a cycle of rivalry of which his fire-setting is the perfect symbol. Abner's injunction to Sarty “to stick to your own blood” is really a demand, by Abner to his family, that they actively endorse his “ferocious conviction in this rightness of his own actions.” Faulkner's diction is important. The word “ferocious” is related to the word “feral,” or “wild.” Abner is literally a wild-man, someone unassimilated and perhaps inassimilable to society, which requires a suppression of ego and individual appetite for the net good of the community. Morality is reciprocity, and Abner's only notion of reciprocity is revenge for imagined or grossly magnified slights.

Take Abner's behavior on arriving at the de Spain plantation. “I reckon I'll have a word with the man that aims to begin to-morrow owning me body and soul for the next eight months.” Approaching the impressive manor, Sarty sees Abner bring his stiff left foot “squarely down in a pile of fresh droppings where a horse had stood in the drive and which his father could have avoided by a simple change of his stride.” Abner now barges into the de Spain house, tracking manure on the rug; he frightens Mrs. de Spain and humiliates the servant. Everything in this chain of actions suggests deliberate provocation by Abner spurred by his own prior assumption that the de Spains have insulted him. But in Abner's “ferocious” psychology, the mere existence of the de Spains, with their fine house in contrast with the Snopeses' “battered stove” and “broken bed and chairs,” constitutes an insult; it strikes at Abner's haunting sense of his own diminution before others. Abner has thus immediately picked a fight with Major de Spain, a conflict which he exacerbates by ruining the rug further when de Spain bids him (reasonably) to clean it up. Abner's resentment, pumped up by his own provocative misbehavior, now incites him to the usual climax, setting fire to his rival's **barn**.

Another kind of imitation is at work in **“Barn Burning,”** however. This is the type of constructive imitation by which the child becomes assimilated to society. Sarty, from whose viewpoint Faulkner largely tells the story, has up until now had only his father as a primary model. In the first trial scene, however, something happens which undoubtedly affects Sarty. Mr. Harris, who has brought the charge of incendiarism against Abner, designates Sarty as one who one who “knows,” that is to say, knows the truth about his

father's guilt. Harris wants to boy to testify. Sarty knows that his father *"aims for me to lie."* In the end, Harris will not make the boy choose between lying for his father and betraying the paternal bond by telling the truth. Sarty feels reprieved from the "abyss" that such a choice would have constituted for him. Harris has thus provided a model of concession and decency not available to Sarty in Abner. Again, at the de Spain plantation, Sarty sees the manor as an image of order, *"as big as a courthouse"* exuding a *"spell of peace."* The metaphor of the courthouse links the manor to Harris; the notion of "peace" contrasts with Abner's imposition of eternal dislocation and terror on his family. Sarty then witnesses his father's willful disruption of the manorial serenity.

When Major de Spain appears with the rug, he assumes an image which can only arouse Abner to further rancor. Sarty sees "a linen-clad man on a fine sorrel mare" with a "suffused, angry face." Considering the provocation, de Spain maintains remarkable control; but Abner, despite his wife's pleas, insists on amplifying the insult by **burning** the rug with lye in a sham attempt to acquiesce in the employer's direction. When de Spain lays an indemnity of twenty bushels of corn against Abner, Abner surprisingly sues de Spain to get the indemnity dismissed. The justice of the peace upholds the charge, but he does reduce the indemnity, to ten bushels. This fails to mollify Abner, of course, who now determines to execute his usual retribution. He will burn down de Spain's **barn**.

Sarty is acutely aware of the probable course of events and for the first time articulates his own dilemma: *"corn, rug, fire; the terror and the grief, the being pulled two ways like between two teams of horses."* On the one hand, there is the blood-bond between father and son. "You got to learn to stick to your own blood or you ain't going to have any blood to stick to," Abner has told Sarty. On the other hand, there is an abstract morality, the foundation of community, modeled by Harris and by the life of the de Spain plantation. But Sarty now understands that the blood-bond entails his acquiescence in his father's violence and his own submission to an authority whose demonic character he begins to recognize. The nature of that authority is suggested by his mother's pathetic cries when she divines that Abner is about to go incendiary again: "Abner! No! No! Oh, God, Oh, God. Abner!" By invoking God, Mrs. Snopes invokes the morality, the transcendental model of ideal human relations, which Abner's egomaniacal rivalry with all and sundry repeatedly and terrifically violates. Mrs. Snopes's cries also implicitly ask for deliverance from the cycle of violence.

Sarty's actions—escaping from his mother, whom Abner has charged to keep him confined to the house, running to the de Spain manor to warn the Major about his father's likely plans—do not form a perfectly calculated or transparent whole; Sarty, a ten- year-old illiterate, responds to partly assimilated intuitions about right and wrong. It seems to be the case that he has no clear intention except to thwart an act of violence, and to thwart thereby the continuous dislocation and meaninglessness of his family's wretched life. De Spain, of course, takes heed quickly and decisively, shooting Abner dead in the very moment when he sneaks into the **barn** with his pail of oil. This occurs "offstage." Sarty is running away from the manor, in aimless flight, and is aware only of two gunshots, at the sound of which, recognizing (one guesses) what they mean, he yells "Pap! Pap!" and then again "Father! Father!"

Exhausted on a hilltop as morning approaches, Sarty thinks with pity that his father, who had been a soldier during the Civil War, "was brave!" Faulkner obtrudes as narrator to contradict the lad: "His father had [in fact] gone to that war a private in the fine old European sense, wearing no uniform, admitting the authority of and giving fidelity to no man or army or flag, going to war as Malbrouck himself did: for booty—it meant nothing and less than nothing to him if it were enemy booty or his own." The phrase "that war" might casually be read as, simply, the Civil War, but it must be treated carefully and credited with the ambiguity that it deserves, for "that war" was only chronologically the Civil War. Faulkner's comments make it clear that Abner fought his own war, against everyone, for his own purposes; his entire life was "war," and war, as they say, is Hell. Is it coincidence that Abner's war-wound is a minie-ball lodged in his left foot? The Devil, in folklore, limps in his left (cleft) foot, and given his connection with fire there is something truly devilish about Abner Snopes.

Sarty's situation at the end of **"Barn Burning"** is still unenviable; but some progress has occurred which must be recognized as such. Sarty has, by an act of his own will, turned from a primitive bond (the supposed blood-bond) toward an abstract morality which, because it is not a person, tends to minimize the resentment of those who espouse it. The "slow constellations" which rotate in the sky as Sarty watches from his hilltop symbolize the raising (however meager) of the pitiable boy's consciousness. The price of wisdom is suffering, but the price of freedom, of whatever kind, is wisdom, and this, painfully, in some tiny measure, Sarty has gained.

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