

4-26-2009

# Faulkner the Humanist: How His Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech Changed How We Interpret "Barn Burning"

Jessie L. Magee

Western Kentucky University, [jessie.magee@wku.edu](mailto:jessie.magee@wku.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/sel\\_pres](http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/sel_pres)

 Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Business Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [Life Sciences Commons](#), [Medicine and Health Sciences Commons](#), [Physical Sciences and Mathematics Commons](#), and the [Psychology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Magee, Jessie L., "Faulkner the Humanist: How His Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech Changed How We Interpret "Barn Burning"" (2009). *Student Research Conference Select Presentations*. Paper 15.  
[http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/sel\\_pres/15](http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/sel_pres/15)

This Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Research Conference Select Presentations by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact [topscholar@wku.edu](mailto:topscholar@wku.edu).

Faulkner the Humanist:

How His Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech Changed How We Interpret "Barn  
Burning"

By: Jessie Magee

When William Faulkner was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1949, he traveled to Stockholm, Sweden for the celebration in 1950. It was there that he gave his acceptance speech, which quickly became the speech that changed the way his readers all over the world viewed his work. Because of his address upon accepting The Nobel Foundation's prestigious award, critics and readers took a second look at his writing, interpreting it this time through the eyes of his apparent humanist perspective. The speech changed the way the world saw William Faulkner, and brought a whole new interpretation to the stories he created. This paper will use Faulkner's short story "Barn Burning" as a primary example of humanism in Faulkner's work.

Until the world heard him speak in Stockholm, readers had assumed Faulkner and his writing to be very naturalistic. Critics employ the idea of naturalism and the scientific method to literature exploration of human beings. Writers who utilize this naturalistic philosophy and techniques attempt to find the underlying forces behind a realistic event. These forces can include environment, heredity, and instinct. The forces can be so strong that, even if the character wishes to do good and perhaps tries to do good, she is unable due to extreme

natural forces holding him back. Humanism, on the other hand, is a philosophy that contends all human beings are capable of determining right and wrong by use of rational thought. According to humanist writers, all people have value and have within them the potential to be good, and essentially will be good unless they choose otherwise.

In William Faulkner's "Banquet Speech" to The Nobel Foundation, upon accepting his Nobel Prize in Literature in 1949, he discusses man's enduring spirit and ability to prevail above problems humans must inevitably face. Following are selected lines from his speech:

I feel that this award was not made to me as a man, but to my work--a life's work in the agony and sweat of the human spirit...I decline to accept the end of man. It is easy enough to say that man is immortal because he will endure:...I refuse to accept this. I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail. ("Banquet Speech")

With this speech, Faulkner shocked the world. His words reflect such a humanist view these words could almost be used to explain what humanism is. Faulkner argues that man has "a soul, a spirit" and is blessed with strength in many aspects. Additionally, he proves he believes the writer's purpose is to express these human qualities that "he alone among creatures" possess. When Faulkner gave this wonderful speech about the human being, about human nature, he

also demonstrated that, because he believed it was the writer's duty to express this, he intended for his own writing to be read as portraits of human life and from a humanist point of view. This drastically changed what critics and other readers thought of his work and caused many people to reread his work after his Nobel Peace Prize speech.

One can see how it is possible to read Faulkner's work and think that he was a naturalist or that he was a humanist. In fact, Faulkner created his own world which is the setting where most of his stories take, Yoknapatawpha County; in his created world are two categories of characters, one which represents humanism – the Sartoris – and one which represents naturalism – the Snopes – both of which are used as family names occasionally. The short story "Barn Burning" is one example of these names being used, as Faulkner presents the Snopes family, of which ten-year-old Sartoris (called Sarty) is the youngest member. Sarty's father is an angry man who expresses his feelings of anger, frustration, and resentment by punishing others by burning their barns. Because of this, the family has moved around many times, from farm to farm, and each time Mr. Snopes becomes angry at another farmer, and he chooses to burn down that man's barn so the pattern continues.

In many ways Mr. Snopes represents a naturalist character because he seems unable to stop himself from his pattern of moving somewhere, getting angry at someone, and then going to burn down his barn. It could be argued that some of his actions are deliberate and planned, and he continues with

them again and again despite the consequences which he simply chooses to ignore. The question is whether he has the knowledge or if he is ignoring this knowledge at all, and, if he is ignoring it, if it is because of environmental causes – perhaps he feels it is the only way to settle his problems – or because of heredity, because the evil is just a part of who he is. Conversely, Sarty is in every way a humanistic character. In naturalism, because he is his father's son, he would be stuck to his father simply because of his blood, and would follow in his father's footsteps, simply because he was born from his genes – and there would be nothing he could do to change that. There are times in the story where he attempts to convince himself his father is not a bad man, but in his heart he has always known the truth. The goodness is simply in him, despite his horrific family and never having been exposed to good morals of any kind.

Joseph Gold, in his book William Faulkner: A Study in Humanism from Metaphor to Discourse, suggests that the goodness is simply in all of the children in Faulkner's work. He comments on the children in Faulkner's writing in general, a category in which he includes Sarty:

(T)he child, not yet fully conditioned by usage and acquaintance, assumes a special significance in Faulkner's work, because the child, being newer and less rigid, is capable of the greater sympathy and more ready willingness to judge each individual as an individual... (they) are able to see with clearer, more innocent eyes, and to judge by more human and less abstract standards. (Gold 78)

Gold makes the point that the child, in Faulkner and perhaps in everyday life, is more able to judge circumstances with a humanist outlook than an older person with less innocent eyes. This suggests that Faulkner might even choose to have

children characters because he can use their innocence to express his humanistic philosophy.

This humanist-child character is certainly seen in "Barn Burning" with Sarty. The story begins in a general store that also acts as the town's courtroom. Mr. Snopes is being accused of burning down Mr. Harris' barn. Mr. Harris has no real proof of Mr. Snopes' guilt because he cannot find the "strange nigger" ("Barn Burning" 2) who came to tell Mr. Harris that "wood and hay kin burn" ("Barn Burning" 2) right before his barn was burned to the ground. As a last resort, Mr. Harris exclaims that the little boy, referring to Sarty, knows what happened. This, of course, is true, which is why Sarty becomes anxious and scared, thinking to himself, "He aims for me to lie...And I will have to do hit" ("Barn Burning" 2). Because Sarty knows his father is guilty of burning down Mr. Harris' barn, he also knows he would have to lie in order to protect his father if they chose to question him, and it seems he would have done so because at this point in the story he believes it is a son's job to support his father in everything. Thankfully, he is dismissed as a witness and he is not forced to lie; the Justice declares there is no proof so he cannot find Mr. Snopes guilty. Instead, the Justice advises Mr. Snopes to take his family far away from the town.

That night, on the family's way to their next living arrangement, they camped outdoors; because it was cold, Mr. Snopes built a fire. A few times in "Barn Burning" Faulkner inserts thoughts Sarty would have later in his life that he could not have at ten years old in order to develop the story and the characters

without going outside of such a young boy's realm of knowledge. In this passage, Faulkner does this, supposing what Sarty would think much later in life of his father's pitiful campfire when his retaliation method so often was gigantic, well-planned fires:

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. ("Barn Burning" 6)

In this quotation are implications of the naturalism within Mr. Snopes. The suggestion is that the desire to use fire is deep inside of him, and his choice not to use the fire to its fullest extent for a campfire is because it is worthy of being a weapon, and should be "used with discretion." The idea that the fire inside of Mr. Snopes is inextinguishable should be terrifying to the reader, and is terrifying to Sarty, though he has not yet figured out how to express why.

Upon arrival at Major de Spain's plantation, on which the family will live and farm for a while, Sarty's father asks Sarty to follow him, and Sarty feels he cannot ask his father where they are going. He feels helpless due to "the terrible handicap of being young, the light weight of his few years, just heavy enough to prevent his soaring free of the world as it seemed to be ordered but not heavy enough to keep him footed solid in it, to resist it and try to change the course of its events." ("Barn Burning" 8) This passage shows Sarty is beginning to understand the world more, and is struggling with seeing it as fixed, with his life and personality predicted only by his parental lines, which can also be viewed

as his struggle with the naturalist philosophy. What sets Sarty apart from his family is his desire to change it; he knows what is going on is wrong, but he feels like he doesn't have the power to do anything about it.

When Sarty and his father arrive at the de Spain manor, Mr. Snopes enters the house uninvited, and deliberately does not wipe his soiled boot while he is on the porch, so it streaks the pale entrance rug brown. Upon leaving the home, he knowingly repeats his former action:

Then with the same deliberation he turned; the boy watched him pivot on the good leg and saw the stiff foot drag round the arc of the turning, leaving a final long and fading smear. His father never looked at it, he never once looked down at the rug....His father stopped at the top of the steps and scraped his boot clean on the edge of it. ("Barn Burning" 11)

This could be an example of Mr. Snopes' humanist qualities: he has chosen to stain the rug knowingly, seems to know it is wrong according to most morals, but he still does not care. It is also possible to interpret this passage from a naturalist perspective if one thinks Mr. Snopes was always inclined to be rude and disrespectful of the property of others (he is certainly known for it), and cannot change himself. The flaw in interpreting Mr. Snopes' actions in this specific passage with naturalist view seems to be that Sarty is watching the entire performance with disbelief and embarrassment growing inside of him because he knows it is wrong to treat others this way, but, again, feels helpless to change it.

Due to the rug incident, Major de Spain and Mr. Snopes go to court, in a style similar to the first time, and it is decided Mr. Snopes will pay Major de Spain

ten bushels of corn when he harvests his crop. This settlement is actually a good deal for Mr. Snopes because the rug is said to have cost one hundred dollars and his ten bushels of corn will really be worth only five dollars. Despite this, Mr. Snopes decides the time has come to burn down the de Spains' property. Sarty watches "his father, still in the hat and coat, at once formal and burlesque as though dressed carefully for some shabby and ceremonial violence, emptying the reservoir of the lamp back into the five-gallon kerosene can from which it had been filled" ("Barn Burning" 20). Mr. Snopes has given this barn burning quite a lot of thought for a few days, and has decided to do it, even though he knows he will have to uproot his family again. He cannot stand being the lesser man, and because he knows exactly what he is doing and is choosing to do it anyway, it makes it seem humanist. What Sarty sees is that his father is unable to let go of something he feels is necessary to uphold his honor. It could be that Mr. Snopes is ingrained with the need to start fires on property that is owned by people who have done him wrong, but it is hard to believe he is unaware that what he is doing is wrong, since he has been to court countless times and he must realize it is objectionable because that is why he chooses to do it.

When Mr. Snopes is preparing to burn down Major de Spain's property, he instructs his wife to hold Sarty so he could not escape to go tell the de Spains of his father's plan. When his father leaves for his mission, and Sarty hears his footsteps disappear, he starts struggling free from his mother's arms:

His mother caught him in both arms, he jerking and wrenching at them. He would be stronger in the end, he knew that. But he had no time to wait for it. "Lemme go!" he cried. "I don't want to have to hit you!"

"Let him go!" the aunt said. "If he don't go, before God, I am going up there myself!"

"Don't you see I can't?" his mother cried. "Sarty! Sarty! No! No! Help me, Lizzie!" ("Barn Burning" 22)

This passage reflects many things about the conflict in Faulkner's short story.

Sarty is no longer able to control his emotions about his father's intentions and cannot physically stand by and do nothing anymore, as we learn when he threatens that he will have to hit his mother if she does not free him. At the same time, his aunt is saying she will have to go warn the de Spains herself if Sarty is not allowed to do so, though the reader learns it is unlikely she would have done anything. Sarty's mother is in turmoil because she fully believes her husband should not burn down de Spain's property, but also knows she is tied to her husband and therefore must accept his actions and stay by him regardless.

Finally, after an extended struggle, Sarty breaks free and everyone is too slow to stop him from reaching the door, and he runs at top speed all the way to the de Spains' property to warn them of the danger:

Then he was free...Then he was out of the room, out of the house,...reaching the gate at last and turning in, running, his heart and lungs drumming, on up the drive toward the lighted house, the lighted door. He did not knock, he burst in, sobbing for breath, incapable for the moment of speech;..."De Spain!...Barn!" he cried. "Barn!" ("Barn Burning" 22-23)

Faulkner presents Sarty here in a way that is almost as if he is physically

incapable of stopping his body from running to the de Spains' manor them to

warn them of the impending fire. Again, Sarty feels such evil inside of him from knowing the evils his father and brother intend to commit, and he will not be able to live with himself if he does nothing, even though he knows it will change everything.

As Sarty runs away from de Spain's house, and sees in the distance the fire starting, he begins to feel remorse, even attempting to believe his father was actually a good man:

a long, swirling roar incredible and soundless, blotting the stars, and he springing up and into the road again, running again, knowing it was too late yet still running even after he heard the shot and, an instant later, two shots, pausing now without knowing he had ceased to run, crying "Pap! Pap!," running again before he knew he had begun to run, stumbling, tripping over something and scrabbling up again without ceasing to run, looking backward over his shoulder at the glare as he got up, running on among the invisible trees, panting, sobbing, "Father! Father!"... "He was brave!" he cried suddenly, aloud but not loud, no more than a whisper: "He was! He was in the war! He was in Colonel Sartoris' cav'ry!" ("Barn Burning" 24-25)

Sarty begins to feel remorse about having contributed to his father and brother's deaths, which he hears with the shots in the distance. Once he knows he has caused his family to be killed, he begins thinking about his father, and tries to convince himself Mr. Snopes was a good man. Since he is only ten years old, and he still has a hard time convincing himself it is acceptable to go against his blood for what he knows in his heart is the right thing, his emotions are high.

As he calms down and begins coming to terms with what he has done, realizing he can never go back to his family, he accidentally falls asleep. At the end of the story, he awakens and decides he must keep walking in the same direction. "He went on down the hill, toward the dark woods within which the

liquid silver voices of the birds called unceasing - the rapid and urgent beating of the urgent and quiring heart of the late spring night. He did not look back" ("Barn Burning" 25). At the conclusion, Sarty fully understands he has gone too far to turn back now, both how far he has walked and how far he has journeyed from his family by betraying them. He knows he has messed everything up as far as ever going back to them, but he has accepted it because the sheer evil of what his father was doing had built up inside of him so long he could no longer allow it go on, so the lonely life ahead was better than being behind his father every step of the way, participating in activities he finds deplorable. Sarty is finally able to see that he is not his father; therefore, he can and must choose his own path and move on with his life – even if he is only ten years old.

Overall, in William Faulkner's "Barn Burning" many battling actions and intentions blur the lines of naturalism and humanism. In many ways, it is easy to read much of the story and see it all as inevitable, as naturalistic. However, it is hard to accept such a clear-cut interpretation of "Barn Burning" after reading or hearing Faulkner say, "(Man) is immortal...because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance" in his "Banquet Speech." That line alone speaks volumes about how Faulkner himself thought about naturalism, and of the things he believed to be basic truths about human beings. The "Banquet Speech" at the celebration at which he accepted his Nobel Prize in Literature truly changed how the world interpreted Faulkner's writing, from a completely naturalistic philosophy to a humanist one. If The Nobel Foundation

had not chosen William Faulkner for the Nobel Prize, it is possible his work might have been misinterpreted forever, which could have ultimately allowed his deep insights about human life and the human condition never to be introduced to the world.

## Works Cited

- Faulkner, William. "Banquet Speech." The Nobel Foundation. City Hall, Stockholm, Sweden. 10 Dec 1950. Retrieved from "William Faulkner – Banquet Speech." NobelPrize.org. 2008. The Nobel Foundation. 3 Dec 2008 <[http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1949/faulkner-speech.html#not\\_1](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1949/faulkner-speech.html#not_1)>.
- Faulkner, William. "Barn Burning." Selected Short Stories of William Faulkner. New York: The Modern Library, 1962.
- Gold, Joseph. William Faulkner: A Study in Humanism From Metaphor to Discourse. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966.