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## Stereotypes And Humour In The Short Story Barn Burning

William Faulkner's short story "Barn Burning" is set in a rural southern town during the late 1800s. This story is about an abusive pyromaniac of a father, Abner, who is constantly seeking "justice" for the unfair hand he was dealt, and his family. The main character, Sarty, is the youngest child and is constantly looking to find some shred of decency and redemption within his father. While at first glance this story seems tragic, humor can be found all throughout. If "Barn Burning" is read without the preconceived notion that it is a tragedy and if the smaller details of the story are exaggerated, humor can indeed be found within Faulkner's short story.

The Humor of William Faulkner's "Barn Burning", he states, "A discussion of Faulkner and humor in "Barn Burning" will acknowledge that humor stoops to low levels and crudity," (5). I agree that the humor contained in "Barn Burning" is, in fact, unrefined and not the usual type of humor seen in classic literature, but that does not diminish its existence. Throughout his story, Faulkner draws attention to Abner's limp that he got from being shot in the leg twice during the Civil War. While laughing at a disability seems cruel, it appears that Faulkner's intention was for the reader to find humor in it as he made Abner perform certain acts rather dramatically. For example, when Abner and his family go to Major de Spain's house looking for work, he sends a rather excessive but efficacious middle finger to the upper class when he takes his crippled leg and dramatically smears actual feces on de Spain's prized rug.

Faulkner's use of stereotypes also shows a discreet use of humor throughout his story. After the carpet incident Faulkner plays on the husband-wife cliché of 'if the wife is not happy, no one is happy.' Major de Spain says that the fine he places on Abner "won't keep Mrs. de Spain quiet but maybe it will teach [Abner] to wipe [his] feet off before [he] enter her house again," by saying this, Faulkner not only implies that de Spain's life will now be a living hell because of Abner's action and Mrs. de Spain's upsetness, but that Major de Spain is controlled by his wife because he refers to it as her house. During the time period that "Barn Burning" is based, the house was no doubt Major de Spain's, not his wife's, but by referring to it as her house, he makes it clear that she is in charge. This is a humorous play on the stereotypes often brought up with the thought of marriage. Another stereotype Faulkner plays in to is the role of women. When describing Abner's daughters, he makes them seem even less important and inadequate by making them not only ugly but lazy and bad at the housework they're supposed to excel at as women. Faulkner refers to the girls as bovine and lazy. Women are stereotypically supposed to be good at the housework that the daughters are bad at and be beautiful and dainty enough to attract male attention; this was especially important during the time period as women were married off and provided for by their husbands. By making the girls the opposite of all that is feminine, Faulkner makes them laughable in this story.

Faulkner's piece is filled with irony that is intended to make it humorous. Abner is supposed to seem like a tough veteran who is getting revenge against the evil upper class when in reality he is just an angry white man who is mad that he does not have the riches and comfort he thinks he deserves. Abner's injured leg comes from a war injury, which makes it sound noble at first, but it is revealed that this red badge of courage really came from being shot while attempting to steal horses. This sheds a new understanding on his job as a "horsetrader," in reality Abner is just a thief. It is also ironic that Abner fought in the Civil War for the Confederate side and is

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then forced to do similar work to the black men that he classifies as so far below him. While his racist viewpoint is sad it does bring some sort of humor to his anger as he is mad because he thinks he deserves better purely because he is white.

The conversations in "Barn Burning" can also be found amusing if read with the correct tone. When Abner is being put on trial for the destruction done to the rug, Sarty interjects that he did not burn it (referring to a barn, not the rug as he does not quite understand what is happening) but before he can finish his thought and accidentally expose his father, Abner tries to send him back to the wagon. The Justice follows Sarty's interjection by asking "Do I understand this rug was burned too?" to which Abner replies "Does anybody here claim it was?" if this is read in a sarcastic tone rather than a harsh tone, it is hard not to see the humor in the interaction between the confused Justice, the addled Sarty who is trying to defend his father, even if it is for the wrong instance, and Abner who is just trying to save his own skin. Another interaction that can be seen as comical is when Abner is planning on burning de Spain's barn. Sarty asks his father "Ain't you going to send even a [black person]," followed by saying that at least he did that last time, as though sending a warning makes his father's actions somewhat more acceptable. While this interaction is quite appalling because of the tragic act that is about to take place, it can be amusing to see Sarty struggling to find even some shred of redemption in his terrible father. These interactions are horrid at first as Abner is an abusive and not nice man, but if read with the right tone, it is very much possible to see the humor in them.

While Faulkner's "Barn Burning" is no doubt a tragic story filled with horrifying events and interactions, it is completely possible to find the humor within this tragedy. I completely agree with Kirchdorfer's findings of humor in this short story. It is completely dependent on the mindset the reader uses when interpreting this story. If it is only looked at as a sad story, the humor will be most definitely be overlooked, but if the reader were to disregard their preconceived ideas and look at certain interactions and actions in a light-hearted way, humor can be found within the conversations and events of Faulkner's short story.