

Individualism vs. Community: A Comparison of “Barn Burning” and “A&P”

Establishing a sense of identity is more than just recognizing what society expects of you. It is also deciding how you feel about yourself, discovering what is important to you and learning how to stand up for what you feel is correct. It is very rarely that we are able to understand all the different facets of life that contribute to our decisions or how our decisions will ultimately affect other people, but we must make decisions on a nearly constant basis anyway that shape and define the person we will be. This conflict between the emerging identity and the expectations of society is a common theme through William Faulkner’s short story “Barn Burning” and John Updike’s “A&P”. The concept of individualism, which both of these characters face, holds that “every person is an end in himself and that no person should be sacrificed for the sake of another” (Stata, 2002). In “Barn Burning,” Sartoris’ increasing awareness of his father’s activities causes him to realize that it is his father’s fault that the family has had to move so many times. The disrespect they receive from the communities they visit is well-deserved by the type of man his father is and he ultimately decides he wants a different sort of life for himself. In “A&P,” Sammy comes to a realization of the deeper nature of people as he watches the pretty girls walk around the store and sees the way others react to them. Although he sees the girls in the same way at first, he begins to realize the human qualities of the girls and to feel ashamed of himself and others for not having the decency to recognize it as well. Like Sartoris, he finally decides he wants to be defined as a different sort of man and quits his job. A common theme between these characters Sartoris and Sammy is the struggle of the individual against the community.

Sammy is the narrator in Updike's short story "A&P". The small grocery store he works at is about five miles from something called 'the point' and is considered far enough away from the beach-style resort that they don't get much of the holiday traffic. One day when he is working at the cash register, he notices three girls in the store wearing nothing but bikini bathing suits. He describes what they look like in very vulgar, street-slang terms that focus mostly on their physical attributes and usually uses food-like imagery to refer to those parts considered impolite to mention. He refers to their bottoms as 'cans,' their breasts as 'melons' and, because he enjoys their exterior so much, he even goes so far as to question whether they have a brain within their skulls or just marbles that rattle around in there. In Sammy's mind, the girls have been reduced to mere prototypes, confined in their behavior to expectations based upon their physical characteristics alone (Hayes 2000). This description also reveals that his focus of attention is completely centered on the physical aspects of the girls and his own base appreciation of the girls as objects. When he describes the image of the girl he's dubbed 'Queenie' approaching his register, he could as easily be describing the image of a stone statue as a living, breathing human being. "They [the straps of Queenie's bathing suit] were off her shoulders looped loose around the cool tops of her arms, and I guess as a result the suit had slipped a little on her, so all around the top of the cloth there was this shining rim ... With the straps pushed off, there was nothing between the top of the suit and the top of her head except just her, this clean bare plane of the top of her chest down from the shoulder bones" (Updike 189). He seems to completely miss the idea that she has a personality inside and just manages to appreciate her for the aesthetic image of her.

Sammy's immaturity begins to change as he watches the girls move through the store. His immaturity is illustrated in the way that he describes their behavior as they move through the store towards the beginning of the story. "The whole store was like a pinball machine and I didn't know which tunnel they'd come out of." However, his thoughts begin to take on more sophisticated considerations as he starts to examine the beauty of the person inside the package. This change comes about as Sammy begins to notice how the other people in the store are reacting to the girls. He sees the lecherous look that the butcher throws toward the girls' back and this disgusts him in his association with it. He doesn't want to be associated with such a gross appreciation of the girls because he wants to think that there's something higher and better in him than just carnal lust. At the same time that he is beginning to distance himself from his childish way of thinking, Sammy also begins to notice that Queenie responds to this uncomfortable scrutiny by defiantly raising her head and continuing her shopping trip. Saldivar (1997) describes in detail how Sammy's profound change in perspective regarding the girls is similar to an analysis of Botticelli's painting "The Birth of Venus." According to Saldivar (1997), Botticelli's painting was a tasteful presentation of a nude, which was strongly questioned and largely criticized, but that defiantly radiated beauty regardless and was ultimately accepted as the epitome of the beautiful and lovely. Through this discussion, Saldivar (1997) illustrates how the example of Botticelli is both central to Updike's considerations when writing this short story and also demonstrates how this is a progression in thought from the base observation of the exterior to the finer appreciation of the individual. This connection of attempting to find a balance between the reality of the individual and the expectations of society is made

even stronger when Queenie asserts that she and her friends 'are decent' in response to Sammy's manager, who has suggested that they are wrong or immoral in some way because they happen to cause others to stare.

This is the climax of the story, according to Saldivar, because it is at this point in the story that Sammy fully makes the transition from common thinking to thinking in terms of the sublime. Sammy doesn't want to be associated with the common thinking of the butcher because he realizes that the butcher is incapable of seeing anything deeper than the surface of the girls as something potentially pleasurable for him to play with. At the same time, Sammy is well aware that he has managed to discern, for a moment, a glimpse of beauty that exists far deeper than even his manager was able to see in understanding the beauty of the individual inside the skin and the way that she dealt with scrutiny. Although these thoughts are completely new to him and he is still not sure just how to communicate his thoughts, Sammy has matured and cannot bring himself to shrink back into the very limited understandings of his old world. He is well aware that very few people will ever understand just how he feels, which is confirmed in the way that his manager remains confused about Sammy's decision to quit, but Sammy has taken his own first step toward individuality in rejecting the common understandings of his community and in beginning to push toward a newer and deeper understanding of life. What makes this story particularly difficult is that Sammy is unsure of just how to communicate his new ideas and feelings. As a result, they are like mountains hidden behind clouds and the reader is left with the impression of something momentous happening, but has to do a great deal of personal discovery in order to find what it might be.

Young Sartoris is the narrator in “Barn Burning” and tells his audience how his similar struggle with individuality vs. community. This occurs as he begins to piece together the various actions of his father and starts differentiating himself from those actions that strike him as being somehow unjust. At the beginning of the story, Sartoris is located in front of a crowd of people comprising the community he and his family had moved to not long ago. Not even having the chance to introduce himself to the reader yet, the young boy is put on the spot as he is asked to testify against his father in an arson case. As the narrator, he is able to tell us in private that he realizes he is little more than an extension of that strict man he calls his father and understands that he has no choice but to do whatever his father expects him to do, even if it means lying on oath. This understanding is made clear in the first paragraph of the story as the boy describes the scene in the courtroom: “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 hisn both! He’s my father!)” (1621). At this point in the story, Sartoris knows that he will lie on the stand if he’s called to answer questions because that is what his father expects him to do and he cannot conceive of himself as doing anything other than what his father expects. This reveals how Sartoris identifies himself as an inextricable part of this community of his family. His inability to identify with the townspeople is the consequence of the constant moves that are undertaken by the family and the way in which the greater community always seems to judge him in association with a particular class and associated expectations.

His class is revealed as the family returns home after the trial and move to a new town. The house that this sad little family moves to is emblematic of their migrant class

as Sartoris describes it: “a paintless two-room house identical almost with the dozen others it [the family] had stopped before even in the boy’s ten years” (1624). The sisters take one look at the shack they are expected to live in and accurately and quickly deduce that it is not fit to house hogs, but they recognize it as the only shelter they have and resolutely begin the process of moving in. Although the girls easily recognize squalor for what it is, the shack is typical of Sartoris’ young experience and it is difficult for him to imagine living in anything better. In this respect alone, Sartoris’ family was emblematic of an entire element of society that emerged during this time period. “Wretched men, including veterans, looked for work, hawked apples on sidewalks, dined in soup kitchens, passed the time in shantytowns dubbed ‘Hooverilles,’ and some moved between them in railroad boxcars. It was a desperate time for families, starvation stalked the land, and a great drought ruined numerous farms, forcing mass migration” (Avery, 2007). For most people trapped in this endless shuffling from one poor place to another, there was very little opportunity to escape. For characters such as Abner, Sartoris’ father, all that was left in them was rage against the injustice of their present situation and a desire to try to make things equal by punishing those who had more.

It is not until Abner takes a stronger interest in indoctrinating Sartoris into the ‘family business’ that Sartoris finally begins to understand that the persecution he’s experienced all his life is not the result of a community looking down on him alone. He begins to understand that a great deal of the persecution is actually encouraged by his father’s behavior. It is primarily through this realization that Sartoris begins to differentiate himself from the group as he realizes stopping destructive behavior might open some opportunities through which the family might improve its situation. One of

the first events that cause Sartoris to pay closer attention to what is happening is the way in which his home is different from the home of the de Spain family. The de Spain house can only be described in segments as it is revealed to the boy in bits and pieces. Sartoris and his father approach through “a grove of oaks and cedars and the other flowering trees and shrubs ... They walked beside a fence massed with honeysuckle and Cherokee roses and came to a gate swinging open between two brick pillars” (1624). His comparison of his father against the impressive figure of Major de Spain gives Sartoris a better understanding of why his father feels so much rage all the time. He sees that there are very few differences between the two men on a basic level but, because Major de Spain had different friends and a different approach, he has the large house and the nice family while Sartoris’ father, having made different choices, has received the condemnation of the community at large. While he understands that some of this blame is not his father’s fault, Sartoris also recognizes that his father’s choices and actions have only reinforced the social beliefs regarding his class and shut away any potential opportunities before they had a chance to grow.

Although he begins the story in complete identification with his family and particularly with his father, the actions of the story continue to drive the boy further away from this association to achieve a sense of individuality independent of his father’s influence. Having made up his mind that he will lie on the stand at the beginning of the story to protect his father, Sartoris is never actually brought to this point, but watches in astonishment as his father refuses to even attempt to make the seemingly fair amends that were handed down. He stands and watches in horror and shock as his father, unprovoked, deliberately drags his dirty boots across the de Spain’s expensive rug. Then

he can do nothing but watch in amazement as his father insists the two incompetent girls set about cleaning the rug, damaging it beyond repair in the process. Watching this series of events, immediately upon the heels of the frightening court trial, Sartoris begins to conclude that he does not want to be the kind of man his father reveals. Having witnessed this process, Sartoris is unable to ignore his inner sense of justice as he realizes that de Spain was justifiably angry over the loss of the expensive rug and that the man tempered his penalty imposed upon Abner in recognition of the family's depressed state yet Abner intended to burn down the man's barn anyway. At this point, Sarty's individuality bursts through as he decides to warn de Spain and run away from his family. "Sarty's final, climactic decision to break away from his father's rule is seen as proof of his own ultimate moral correctness against the demonic qualities of Ab (Zender cited in Pinion, 2003). By the end of the story, Sarty, like Sammy, has become a full individual, disassociating himself from the community of his family and actively seeking a society more in keeping with his own inner nature.

Both short stories deal with a young person's awakening to individuality over their social expectations. In "A&P", Sammy realizes that there is a deeper way of viewing the world that many people don't see. He realizes this as he watches other people react to three girls in bathing suits. Although he understands that his own way of thinking is very close to theirs, and that it is a very base and superficial way of understanding the world, he has managed to get a glimpse of the sublime and chooses to follow that path instead, choosing individuality over the group mind. In a similar way, Sartoris begins the story "Barn Burning" fully associating himself with the ideas and ideals of his father but comes to realize that his personal sense of justice is violated by his

father more than the community at large. In making the decision to turn in his father as an arsonist, Sartoris also decides to choose individuality over the group mind. While both of these stories are effective in communicating the importance of examining your own feelings as compared to social expectations, “Barn Burning” emerges as being more effective because it is placed in simpler and more concrete terms. Sartoris knows exactly what he’s doing and exactly why he’s doing it by the end of the story while Sammy only has a vague notion of what he’s seen and why he feels compelled to follow it .

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