THESIS

LISA HECK

"VARDAMAN BUNDREN AND SARTORIS SNOPES: AN UNLIKELY BROTHERHOOD"

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Norman Findahl
Advisor
9/9/08
Date

Judy Allen
Co-Advisor
9/9/08
Date

Alison Russell
Chair
9/9/08
Date
Lisa Heck

MA Thesis

Dr. Finkelstein/Dr. Williams

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In the vast realm of William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County, population 15,611, live two young boys who, unlike other members of their imaginary territory, never grow old. One grows into adulthood during the 1890s, whereas the other is born about three decades later. Each is a product of what William Crowley calls “Faulkner’s mythological kingdom…on the border between the sand hills covered with scrubby pine and the black earth of the river bottoms” (34). Neither boys are members of aristocratic families, like the Compsons or Sartorises, nor are they old enough to be cognizant of the effect their families’ lot in life will have upon them. They each face a life near or within Frenchman’s Bend that, by virtue of their birth, allows them none of the pleasures known to the antebellum families who live in nearby mansion plantations. Unlike other Faulknerian characters who are developed over the course of many stories, Vardaman and Sartoris never re-emerge in Faulkner’s work, yet the two boys creep into the lasting crevices of our minds as they live out their struggles.

Vardaman Bundren of As I Lay Dying experiences a tremendous amount of psychological devastation in a relatively brief span of time. His mother succumbed to a disease that caused her to waste way before his eyes; he stood along the bank of a river while his eldest brother, Cash, nearly drowned; he witnessed his closest brother commit arson and then get committed to an insane asylum, and lastly, his father remarried a new Mrs. Bundren just hours after his mother was finally buried. Just one of these difficult events would challenge an adult’s capability to cope, but Vardaman, who is the most naive of all the Bundrens, maintains a charming innocence despite these troubling circumstances. At this critical juncture of his brief life, he is “discovering his identity, which formless as it is, needs definite shape if he is to make any sense of the disorder he
suddenly faces” (Bakker 226). In the character of Vardaman Bundren, Faulkner gives us a subtly tragic figure who often acts as the perpetrator of the plot and facilitator of dark humor. Though he is utterly forgettable to some readers because he is overshadowed by his more complex, problematic siblings, he demands to be revealed as more than simply the boy whose mother is a fish.

The fundamental nature of Vardaman’s circumstance—namely, that he must discover and come to terms with his place within the family dynamic—echoes Colonel Sartoris Snopes of Faulkner’s “Barn Burning.” Sarty Snopes knows two things for sure: he loves his father, Abner Snopes, and he has recently come to realize that Abner is corrupted by his own personal, perpetual disappointment. As a member of a destitute, share-cropping family, Sarty must kowtow to Abner, whose most destructive behavior include unpredictable anger and repetitive acts of criminal arson. Every new fire creates the need to relocate his family, yet each move causes Sarty to further examine his father’s destructive nature. In a world of purely patriarchal power, Sarty believes he owes Abner his devotion, but he also feels a great internal pull toward personal integrity and truth. Each time Abner levies a dose of fiery justice toward a neighbor, Sarty’s ability to justify his father, and the way in which his family operates, disintegrates little by little.

Though Faulkner wrote *As I Lay Dying* in 1929 and “Barn Burning” nearly a decade later, the significance of the striking similarities and occasional differences between the young male characters in each story are valuable and, though not initially so, inevitably apparent. While experiencing Vardaman for the first time, I found my previous experience with “Barn Burning” looming over my shoulder, often in comparison and sometimes in contrast, but always with regard to the youngest of each family.
Vardaman’s words, motivations, and actions conjured up images of young Sartoris Snopes, even when I wanted only to focus on Vardaman and his family’s fascinating journey to Jefferson.

The boys have some obvious similarities. Sarty shares Vardaman’s youthfulness, his introspection, and his childlike desire to please his father, yet each is traumatized by recent events, seemingly alone in his grief and struggle, and manipulated by those who are supposed to love him. Though their similarities echo each other, their differences almost always serve to harmonize what the other lacks. When considering the way in which they cope with the troubling events of their lives, it is important to note that Sarty is anywhere from two to three years older than Vardaman; during pre-pubescent and pubescent years, such an age difference greatly matters in terms of maturity, personal viewpoint, and courage to comprehend and manage adversity.

It is probable that until Addie’s death Vardaman was a fairly normal six or seven-year-old. Experts in childhood development suggest that at that age the “world is an enclosed, encapsulated area where he feels at home, a sort of operational basis from there he reconnoiters the outside world and takes the knocks inflicted by it.” However, just a few short years later, between the ages of nine to twelve, children “start to ask critical questions and their relationship with good and evil slowly starts to change. Their view of contemporaries and adults also change” (Lievegoed 85). Though sometimes Vardaman appears to be largely unaware of the severity of his circumstances, if he were just a few years older, his perspective would be vastly different. Likewise, when Sarty was slightly younger, he undoubtedly encountered the first pangs of realization that Abner had terrible shortcomings as a father and a person. Whereas Vardaman may not fully recognize the
way in which he is treated or the significance of his family’s choices, Sarty sits on the precipice of recognition and initiation into the adult world. With some slight conjecture, it is easy to see that Vardaman might have been as rebellious as Sarty if Faulkner had ever written of him again. The psychological significance of their ages coupled with the obstacles they face within the context of their families allow them to be considered as continuations of one another—Sarty, at the age of ten, had emerged from the stage of childhood that Vardaman recently entered.

Faulkner once wrote, “Man performs, engenders, so much more than he can or should have to bear. That's how he finds that he can bear anything.” Vardaman and Sarty share this experience: a world in which they simply must build a solid foundation for adulthood by learning to bear what they should not have to. Ironically, some of what they must endure is created by those who are supposed to love, nurture, and advise them. Though they are very young men, they are the manifestations of “man perform[ing] and engender[ing]” obstacles that have broken or forever changed their fathers and brothers.

Faulkner’s work often reflects the destruction of the old order of the South; therefore, the exegesis herein focuses on the social and moral scenarios that best reflect these conflicts, as well as their implications. Morality and the responsibility of family, especially paternal and fraternal responsibility, play a key role in the boys’ development and the significance of their similarities. Unlike many characters who willingly participate in moral or ethical conflicts, Vardaman has no other choice but to go to Jefferson, and Sarty must bear witness to his father’s destructive behavior simply because he is helpless to stop it. The characters who surround the boys break social and moral codes that affect society and the individual. The nature of their youth, inexperience, and
inability to make choices for themselves, coupled with the fact that they are often manipulated by those around them, prompted me to sometimes analyze Vardaman and Sarty through a moral lens. Further, I found it useful to primarily employ a close reading technique that includes the identification of various psychological and historical significances.

Vardaman and Sarty have something valuable to say—something that is difficult and terrible and tragic, yet both are silenced and/or inhibited by family dysfunction, their place within the family structure, and a cautious insecurity only evident in vulnerable, young people. Though it is doubtful that the similarities in their characterization and circumstance were purposeful, they do provide a basis to speculate on the particular trouble young males of Yoknapatawpha County—and by extension, young males of the real American South—faced during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Whereas other young Faulknerian males have similar moments of recognition, turmoil, and condition, these two fit together like juxtaposed images, blurred by the imposing edge, but certainly created out of the same essence. Vardaman and Sarty experience moments when much of their youth ceases to be surrounded by the soft and comfortable elements of childhood and they must learn to bear what no young child should have to endure: not only the death of a mother or father, but the intricately conditional relationships with immediate family members. Within these events and relationships, Faulkner allows us to witness a defining period when they become careful, quiet spokesmen for Southern male youth, innocent strength, and risky but unlimited potential.

Faulkner is known for creating much more than what lay on the surface of his words, thus presenting a world that is complexly layered and sometimes complicated, but
never insipid. In “On the Writings of William Faulkner,” Portia William Weiskel states: “All great writers ask their readers to look more closely, but Faulkner felt particularly compelled to do so and conveyed this conviction, almost as an ethical imperative, to his readers. Nearly all his major characters have moments in childhood of ‘seeing for the first time’ that become unforgettable and transfiguring forces later in life” (41). By examining the “unforgettable” moments that initiate change in Vardaman’s and Sarty’s lives, we are able to evaluate who they are as individual characters and their identity in relation to others around them, how their youth and inexperience perpetuate and complicate their conflicts as well as the audience’s experience of those conflicts, and what we, as a close reading audience, can discern about their most salient similarities.

**Who are they? The Importance of Names and Introductions**

The source of the boys’ names are noteworthy because of their obscurity and significance in relation to factual and Yoknapatawpha history. According to Faulkner, Mississippi politicians were often the namesakes of rural children simply because they would “come out and shake their hands and say, I am one of you all, even if I do have a white shirt every day. I’m just—you’re just as good as I am and I am one of you, and so they name their children after successful politicians” (Luce 21). James K. Vardaman served as a Mississippi Senator and Governor, and United States Senator during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He was popular with his constituent farmers because he campaigned in rural parts of the state while riding on the back of an oxen-drawn wagon. He maintained shoulder-length hair and often wore white suits. His racial message likely appealed to Mississippi’s poor white males who, unlike blacks of the
same financial circumstance, possessed the right to vote. According to history “he gained tremendous popularity with the state’s small farmers by appealing to their fear of economic competition from Negros” (Luce 21).

There is no textual way to know exactly who named Vardaman or why, but it is not a stretch to imagine that Anse would have been attracted to James Vardaman’s eccentric nature and therefore want to name his youngest son after him. Though it is clear that James Vardaman’s message appealed to farmers and the common people, Anse—a man unwilling to do anything that would promote sweating—would have been taken by James Vardaman’s white suit. From Anse’s perspective, his attire undoubtedly typified a man who avoided physical labor simply because he could, for Mississippi red clay and sweat are not compatible with white suits. From his mother’s perspective, Vardaman Bundren was considered a replacement for the child she had robbed Anse of by virtue of her affair with Whitfield and Jewel’s subsequent birth. Therefore, it is likely that she cared little about whom he was named after, for in her own words Vardaman was one of the “three children that are his and not mine” (176).

Like Vardaman, Sarty Snopes was named after a famous Yoknapatawpha civil servant, the Confederate Civil War hero, Colonel John Sartoris. In Sarty’s case, his parent’s choice of names reflects their ineptitude for cultural history and a lack of awareness concerning their own personal circumstances.

Colonel John Sartoris raised the first regiment of soldiers from Yoknapatawpha County and brought them to Virginia to fight the Union. Eventually, his reputation for successful military action caused the Union to establish a reward for his death. Thus, he was a very popular and successful war hero who was widely recognized for his bravery.
After the Civil War, Colonel Sartoris became a business man, built a railroad, and, like James Vardaman, ran for Mississippi legislature (William Faulkner on the Web).

The oxymoronic nature of Sarty’s full name includes the colonel’s heroism, the old, Southern, traditional values of the Sartoris clan and the renegade behavior of the Snopeses. Because Faulkner “likened the appearance of Snopesism to slow-growing mold on cheese,” (Weiskel 59), the family’s choice of names like Montgomery Ward Snopes, I.O. Snopes (who incidentally had twin boys named Biblio and Vardaman), and Wall Street Panic Snopes is consistent with Faulkner’s effort to portray them as at least ignorant, if not pernicious. The act of naming a child is not a flattering function of the Snopes family, but no one within it seems to notice or care much. Perhaps Sarty’s parents had no newspaper headline to consult on the day he was born. Perhaps they thought a heroic name might be in order since the consideration of their first son, Flem, makes one wonder if they merely spelled a bodily fluid incorrectly. Regardless of their motivation, their decision to name their youngest son Colonel Sartoris is both ironic and appropriate because, excluding Sarty, there is little honest heroism to be had in the Snopes line.

Sarty’s mother is portrayed as utterly helpless against his father’s forceful, patriarchal style of maintaining family order. Therefore, it is likely that the only way she named him was if Abner had no interest and left the task to her. At the time of his birth, his father was a washed-up horse thief who had formerly stolen horses from Union soldiers just to sell them to the Confederates, and vice-versa. Abner Snopes held allegiance to only himself; thus, it is easy to speculate that he must not have considered the affect such a prominent name would have on a young boy growing up in the 1890s.
One such occurrence happened early in "Barn Burning" during Abner's first hearing when the Justice of the Peace asks Sarty to state his name. Upon hearing it he replies, "Colonel Sartoris? I reckon anybody named for Colonel Sartoris in the country can't help but tell the truth, can they?" (417). It's highly likely that the historical recognition of his name would have been mentioned often by people he encountered. Sarty could hardly escape his namesake's legacy—and in contrast, the legacy of his father as well.

Most scholars agree that there are two types of characters in Faulkner's work: the Snopeses, who are anti-traditional, self-centered and live by their own social and moral code that equates to amorality, and the Sartorises, whose aristocratic, ambitious ancestry caused them to believe in a distinctive social order. Thus, Sarty had no choice but to live up to the name his father gave him, both because he is named after a famous military hero and because his name encompasses what George Marion O'Donnell calls "the Sartoris-Snopes conflict, [which is] fundamentally a struggle between humanism and naturalism" (24). As if to confirm this theory, ten short years after his birth, the nobility his name suggests manifests itself via the climax of the story.

In addition to their names, it seems significant just how Sarty and Vardaman are introduced. Characterization in As I Lay Dying is obscured by the narration itself; often the characters seem to get in the way of the narrative they seek to convey, each character relating the story piecemeal and in fragments, seeing what they want to see and telling it from various, unreliable and often bias viewpoints. There is no forthright exposition that explains the wherefores of the Bundrens, their circumstances, or their neighbors. Only within fragmented narratives does the characterization of the others unfold, each within
another’s experience and perception. In retrospect, the delay of Vardaman’s introduction is significant if only to allow the reader to consider his insignificance.

Darl (by virtue of narrating the first chapter), Jewel (and his horse as well), Cash, and Dewey Dell are adequately illustrated by the conclusion of the third chapter and play a significant part in creating the intrigue of the story. Cora Tull, the narrator of the sixth chapter is the first person to mention Vardaman, but not by name, and certainly not at length. At the time of this sixth narration, Darl, Dewey Dell, and Cash, three of the four Bundren children, have been identified by other characters and have expressed themselves in a chapter of their own. Cora provides the reader with two minor pieces of information that do little to illustrate Vardaman’s worth: she confirms he exists and is clearly younger than his siblings. She simply identifies him as “...that little one almost old enough now to be selfish and stone-hearted like the rest of them” (23). Despite the definite disproportion of character development and a growing curiosity on the part of the reader, she says nothing further about the boy and continues on in her analysis of Addie’s three other children.

Therefore, from her outsider’s perspective, one which the reader has no reason to consider inaccurate at this early point, we are presented with a boy who is not much more than a phantom, for he is not even included in her judgmental, inventory-like description of the older Bundren children. At best her omission may be considered a slight foreshadowing that Vardaman will become and remain an enigma for much of the story.

Soon after Cora provides her limited information, but long before we witness a narration by Vardaman himself, he is characterized by Tull and Anse. His introduction comes via Vernon Tull’s first narrative and, in direct contrast to his wife’s profile, he
provides more important clues to Vardaman’s character. Vardaman’s first appearance reveals his desire to be one of the men of the family. As he witnesses Vardaman’s approach, Tull says, “That boy comes up the hill. He is carrying a fish nigh long as he is. He slings it to the ground and grunts ‘Hah’ and spits over his shoulder like a man. Dun nigh long as he is” (30). Vardaman spits and grunts because he is proud of his fish, he wants to act like a man—the way he has seen his brothers act—and he hopes Anse will recognize his behavior and his accomplishment. Because there have been so few moments through which the reader can familiarize himself with Vardaman, these initial, brief encounters convey both psychological and physical information. Soon after Tull makes this observation, Vardaman’s height is emphasized through the description of his using Anse’s leg for protection. The account of his size in relation to his enormous fish provides subtle indictors that he is probably barely school age.

Joseph Gold contends that “the people of Frenchman’s Bend are basically self-interested” (25) and though he goes on to praise them for their sense of community, it is clear that most characters’ narrative and personal needs are, indeed, primarily self-motivated. Every aspect of Vardaman’s lack of introduction confirms to the audience that we are allowed to forget him; he is unimportant when compared to his siblings. He is overlooked by all the early narrators (including Cora, who is tasked with providing information about each child) because, unlike his father, brothers and sister, Vardaman has no hidden agenda with which to complicate the trip to Jefferson. In contrast, Sarty Snopes cannot be ignored, as Abner and the audience of “Barn Burning” immediately realize. If Sarty had not been put in the position to incriminate his father, he would also have been unworthy of description; however, the story starts with the moment of possible
incrimination, so he is thrust to the forefront. If "Barn Burning" had been initially narrated by Flem, Vynie, Abner, and Major de Spain’s wife, Sarty would likely been as invisible as Vardaman. But instead, he becomes a threat to the foundation of the family and Abner himself.

Sarty Snopes’ identity and conflict are unmistakably centralized, for his father is a criminal and the story begins with the possibility that Sarty may have to testify against him. Cash and his adze are to *As I Lay Dying* as Sarty and the Justice of the Peace are to “Barn Burning”: they act as a central, focused spotlight; there is no murkiness with regard to the background tension they provide the plot. Even so, “Barn Burning” is laced with clues that reveal Sarty’s identity both quickly and effectively, at least within his own mind and through the filter of the third person limited narrator. Because Sarty is the focal point of the story we learn about the most fundamental conditions of his existence within the first paragraph.

The store in which the Justice of the Peace’s court was sitting smelled of cheese. 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 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. He could not see the table where the Justice sat before which his father and his father’s enemy (*our enemy, he thought in that despair; own! mine and hisn both! He’s my father!*) stood, but he could hear them, the two of them that is, because his father had said no word yet:… (417).

We discern quite a lot from this paragraph: Long before we know his name we are sure he is young, for he is referenced as “the boy” and described as using a nail keg as a
place to crouch to watch the proceedings. He is illiterate because the letters on the cans of food mean “nothing to his mind.” Perhaps the two strongest initial character traits are his hunger and his fierce devotion to his father. Though the first of these descriptions is most prevalent within the opening paragraph, “the boy… knew he smelled cheese… tin cans whose labels his stomach read… and the hermetic meat which his intestines believed he smelled,” what follows is the most powerful and represents an initial glimpse at what will become his intense, internal conflict. His recognition of hunger turns to detection that the smells in the room also include “a little of fear” but “mostly of despair and grief, the old fierce pull of blood.”

Here Sarty sits on the precipice of a very important revelation. The “old fierce pull of blood” is what drives Abner Snopes to commit crimes against his neighbors. If nothing else, the opening paragraph provides a foundation for the conflict he will eventually face at de Spain’s house: whether or not to betray his father. In this regard, the short story structure provides fewer places for Faulkner to obscure the significance of Sarty’s involvement.

In these initial introductions, it has been establish that Vardaman is often overlooked by the other characters—and sometimes by the reader himself—because he is less likely to be a central figure of the plot as compared to his siblings. Conversely, Sarty’s initial unfolding is direct and unmistakable. We are able to create a decent mental image of him, based on the ample description, because it is critical to “Barn Burning” that the reader know as much about him as possible. Initially, if the reader feels a similar emotion for both boys, it is one of compassion. One can’t help but feel compassion for Sarty because he is young, hungry, poor and slightly edgy. However, a significant
difference in the pity felt for the boys is in the urgency with which it is created. Though it is initially unclear exactly what caused his conflict, Faulkner creates a much more intense feeling of sympathy for Sarty because of his predicament. He has obviously been dealt some injustice that will become the central conflict. Vardaman’s initial appearance extends no sense of doom; however, we still offer him sympathy because his mother is dying and because the other early narrators do not deem him important enough to include him in the story. There are absolute differences in the introductions of the young men, but the differences are fundamental to the characters they become as the story progresses. Vardaman and Sarty utilize their introduction (or lack thereof) to bring about a tremendous sense of pathos and to forge unexpected accomplishments later in their respective stories.

Conflict: To tell or not to tell...

Vardaman’s and Sarty’s most prevalent conflict occurs because of an actual fire; likewise, their family environments create a symbolic internal fire that eventually forces them to grow in unexpected ways. Penguin Books’ Dictionary of Symbols states that “according to the I Ching, fire corresponds to south, the colour red, summer and the heart, perhaps because fire symbolizes the passions (especially those of love and hate)...” (379). Though there is no evidence to suggest that Faulkner intentionally referenced the symbolic nature of the fires that occur in As I Lay Dying and “Barn Burning” with the meaning associated within an ancient Chinese text on Taoist philosophy, the fires initiated by Abner and Darl are ignited because of passion, love and hate. As a result, the fires force the boys to face a new reality. For both Sarty and Vardaman, the fire creates a
dangerous knowledge that, if revealed, will change the family dynamic. The only notable
difference is the possibility that Vardaman may not have intentionally incriminated Darl
whereas Sarty’s decision, though difficult for him to make, is absolute and intentional.

Vardaman’s knowledge that Darl is responsible for the barn fire is the source of
his greatest conflict. Darl ignites the fire because his mother’s corpse is rotting, buzzards
are circling, and Anse is unrelenting in his insistence that they continue on despite many
setbacks; he considers the fire a means to ending the journey to Jefferson. Darl ignites
the fire because of his love for Addie—a love that (unlike the other members of her
family) recognizes the indecency of her extensive, degrading funeral procession.
Regardless of his mental state, and considering the destructive nature of the fire itself,
Darl must have felt intense passion in order to execute what he thought was an illegal, yet
justified action. Vardaman had witnessed Darl’s part in the blaze, and he felt he must do
something with that knowledge—the repetitive method by which he relates his
involvement establishes how heavily it weighs on him. His conscience will not allow
him to bury it.

Sarty’s conflict also revolves around a fire, one that his father is about to ignite in
Major de Spain’s barn. Unlike Vardaman, who may have been confused by Darl’s
seemingly extemporaneously destructive behavior, Sarty had wrestled with the
knowledge that his father is an arsonist for some time. Faulkner creates a crescendo
effect in portraying Sarty as caught between feelings of love and hate as, page by page,
he realizes that Abner is a selfish, terrible man. By the time Abner decides to burn de
Spain’s barn, Sarty, like Vardaman, has lived through a briefly tumultuous period of
time. In short, during the week leading up to Abner igniting de Spain’s barn, Sarty had
been called forward to testify against Abner in a previous court hearing about a barn fire that precedes the story. Although he never testified against Abner, he was later physically and mentally abused by this father for his potential in doing so. Within days, the family relocated to Major de Spain's land, which was the twelfth move in Sarty's short memory. Shortly thereafter, Abner justifiably angered this new employer/landlord and found himself before another magistrate in a second official hearing. Sarty knew that the twenty-corn-bushel judgment imposed against Abner would provoke him to burn down de Spain's barn. He was emotionally and psychologically drained and pushed to a breaking point. All of these circumstances caused his conflicted feelings for Abner to surface with a vengeance and thus, he decided to warn de Spain. He could no longer sit silently by while his father disrupted the lives of everyone around him.

Like Vardaman, Sarty had information that seems destined to cause the family strife if exposed, but he also felt an obligation to do something about it. Vardaman and Sarty have an awareness that requires action if they are to remain true to themselves and, in addition, they possess an internal conscience that will not allow them to continue on with that knowledge secretly tucked away. Jean Pouillon, in her essay "Time and Destiny in Faulkner," stated a similar observation about much of Faulkner's work: "Few novels are more charged with destiny weighing heavily over them than those of Faulkner. We have the impression of characters irretrievably choked by fate, not only when we look back with some detachment through the development of the story, but at the very moment the events are being told" (79). Three similarities emerge when analyzing the boys' destinies: both conflicts focus on barn fires, each deal with knowledge that the bearer feels an obligation to reveal, and their revelation results in the downfall of a close
family member.

Vardaman’s conflict is one of the best constructed conflicts of *As I Lay Dying* because it is so slight against the backdrop of the other issues related to the journey to Jefferson. Faulkner blends innocence, curiosity, stupidity, and fear and presents them in seven consecutive and aptly woven narrative accounts of the fire scene. Three of these narratives are written from Vardaman’s perspective, four from Darl’s; Faulkner gives no other character the right to tell of the fire, providing us with a hint of the importance of the interweaving technique. Prior to this, Vardaman fully establishes that he keeps a close count of the buzzards and their activities, but once they get to Gillespie’s house, his attention shifts from how many there are to where they go when they disappear for the night. In fact, he is so consumed with where they go, and the knowledge he carries as a result of his curiosity, that he repeats himself twelve times over the course of nine pages of narration (210-211; 214-217; 223-225). Only when the references to the buzzards location are broken down for their individual significance, in conjunction with variants of the same concern, does a clear picture of Vardaman’s struggle emerge.

Darl’s first narrative within the context of the barn fire (206-209) focuses mostly on Cash’s cement cast, but really it shapes the setting and the tone for Darl’s eventual decision to burn the barn. He displays the emotions of a man who has come to an important consideration: “How do our lives ravel out into the no-wind, no-sound, the wearily recapitulant: echoes of old compulsions with no-hand on no-strings: in sunset we fall into furious attitudes, dead gestures of dolls” (207). These might be the ravings of a man on the edge of insanity, or they may also be the whispers of a mind focused on ending the madness of staying one step ahead of the buzzards. It does, however, set up
the basis for Darl’s decision to burn Mr. Gillespie’s barn.

Vardaman’s brief narrative that follows is similar to Darl’s because it serves two purposes that build in response to Darl’s previous one. In it, Vardaman reminds us that the attention span of children is often fleeting; in just a few moments his thoughts glide from his present physical state to Jewel’s return, from an inventory of his brothers (interestingly, minus Darl) to informing us that Cash’s leg is fixed, and from counting the buzzards in the sky to reminiscing about the toy train. All of these thoughts may seem random, and they are, but they act to blanket the most important line—a line which is presented as its own paragraph: “Tonight I am going to see where they stay while we are in the barn” (211). It seems so much like just another one of Vardaman’s random thoughts, but only in retrospect do we see that it is not random at all. Vardaman’s boyish curiosity is the key to his decision to investigate the buzzards’ place of origin. By doing so he witnesses the arson, which causes his greatest conflict: to tell or not to tell.

Later, after returning from his darkly humorous scene with Darl, Addie’s coffin, and the “murmurous bubbling,” Vardaman has a brief moment of internal dialogue that leaves no doubt that this account is a recollection, because it merges present verb tense with future occurrences. For example, after Darl suggests they go see Cash, Vardaman thinks, “And I saw something Dewey Dell told me not to tell nobody” though the fire has not happened yet (215). Then, they check on Cash, who is of course doing fine as always. Therefore, we must interpret this act as a distraction tactic on the part of Darl, who must rid himself of Vardaman in order to set the fire.

For the purposes of examining Vardaman’s conflict, the details of the fire itself are largely unimportant. Therefore, the opening lines of Vardaman’s next narration,
which follows immediately after the fire scene, reinforce the intensity of his conflict:

"When I went to find where they stay at night, I saw something" (223). This thought—
indicated by italics—is interrupted by inquiries concerning Darl’s location, which
prompts Vardaman to give us a description of the destruction of the fire that will later
symbolize the destruction of his faith in Darl.

Vardaman is most vulnerable during this particular, intermittent series of events,
yet Faulkner’s style serves to obscure his vulnerability amid the chaos. Thus, many
readers may miss the complexity of the phrase that is repeated throughout his sequential
narratives of the fire scene. Consider not that his mother is dead, that he has tremendous
trouble understanding the implication of death, that his family is on a strange and smelly
odyssey with scavenger birds following like aviary stalkers, that his brothers almost
drown, one disappears and then returns, or that he thinks his mother is a fish. Here is a
boy who realizes that what he has witnessed is serious—so serious that it weighs on him
more than any other circumstance: his brother has tried to burn down a neighbor’s barn in
order to burn up the decomposing, fetid corpse of his mother. And, because he went
wandering around in the middle of the night to find out where the buzzards slept, he was
the sole eyewitness to the act.

Even after Vardaman unburdens himself to his sister, he repeats himself again and
again, and when nothing seems to help he plays a game every child has played at one
time. He says: I saw something; I can’t tell you who it was about, but I guess I can tell
you who it wasn’t about. Vardaman, so young and burdened by this knowledge, leaves
this chapter still repeating what he cannot eradicate from his mind: “...and then I went to
find where they stay at night and I saw something that Dewey Dell told me not to tell
nobody” (217). Later, acting simultaneously empowered and brave, he expands his
cildlike game and provides more information including who started the fire and just how
painful and difficult it is for him to possess the truth: “It’s not about Pa and it’s not about
Cash and it’s not about Jewel and it’s not about Dewey Dell and it’s not about me”
(215).

Faulkner also employs Vardaman to describe the aftermath of the fire. “The barn
was still red, but it wasn’t a barn now. It was sunk down, and the red went swirling up.
The barn went swirling up in little red pieces, against the sky and the stars so that the
stars moved backward” (223). This description is reiterated in similar imagery at the
conclusion of the chapter: “The barn is still red; it used to be redder than this. Then it
went swirling, making the stars run backward without falling. It hurt my heart like the
train did” (225). Vardaman must articulate his pain by comparing the longing of a child
for the ultimate toy—the beautiful train he will never possess—to the pain he feels
knowing that his brother started the fire. His “stars” are “running backward without
falling,” for he can neither abandon the knowledge he carries, nor does he have the
maturity to understand how to handle the severity of the experience. Vardaman’s final
sentence finishes the thought that was interrupted two pages previously on page 223—
“When I went to find where they stay at night, I saw something”—as if to emphasize that
had he not been interrupted, he might have had only one thing to get across, one sole
purpose for narrating: “When I went to find where they stay at night, I saw something that
Dewey Dell says I mustn’t tell nobody” (225).

Vardaman’s repetitive use of this line, though undoubtedly recognized by readers,
is considerably more significant once it is acknowledged as an outward representation of
a deeply troubling problem. Vardaman is a victim of his own naïveté—all he wanted to accomplish was to see where the buzzards lived at night—and the subtle tragedy is that his actions unintentionally brought more turmoil upon him. Unfortunately, he ended up losing another close family member because of innocent curiosity.

Like Vardaman, Sarty’s motivation for revealing what he knows originates from a selfless internal drive, as sense of integrity. Throughout the story, Sarty is caught between his devotion to his father and his emerging responsibility to his own integrity. In this regard, there is only one significant difference between the boys’ experience. Whereas Vardaman had to wrestle with his integrity after the barn fire because he could not have predicted it, Sarty had to consider the inevitability of de Spain’s barn fire and the knowledge that his action in response to it would have to be swift.

The conflicted nature of his struggle is evident in the narrator’s description of his emotion and in Sarty’s internal dialogue, which is scattered throughout the story. Prior to the fire, the narrator, who seems to intimately know both Abner and Sarty, states:

Likely his father had already arranged to make a crop on another farm before he… Again he had to stop himself. He (the father) always did. There was something about his wolflike independence and even courage when the advantage was at least neutral which impressed strangers, as if they got from his latent ravening ferocity not so much a sense of dependable as a feeling that his ferocious conviction in the rightness of his own actions would be of advantage to all whose interests lay with his (419).

Herein the narrator describes Abner, but many comparisons can be made to his son; consider his “wolflike independence,” “courage when the advantage was at least neutral,” and a “ferocious conviction in the tightness of his own actions [that would be an] advantage to all whose interests lay with his.” These attributes have been genetically and culturally passed down to Sarty; they are the required, dominant traits that provide him
with the courage to incriminate his father to Major de Spain. Ironically, the very characteristics that consistently leave Abner feeling slighted provide Sarty with the tools to combat his growing discontent with the way he is forced to live. Though it causes his greatest conflict, the only remedy for that discontent is to stop Abner. However, this evolution of character is profound given the Snopes’ legacy created by Faulkner. “In Faulkner’s myth of the Snopeses, the tribe descends from bushwackers, those who had no side in the Civil War and merely exploited it. That is, the modern Snopeses (Abner, Vynie, Sarty, Flem, and their twin sisters), being descended from people who had no commitment to moral reality in the past, can recognize no commitment in the present” [parenthesis mine] (Warren 256). Colonel Sartoris Snopes is the first Snopes to fracture the family tradition by sacrificing familial protection to personal truth. The act of betraying one’s father for the sake of righteousness is appalling and incomprehensible to those who have “no commitment to moral reality.”

When the actual fire sequence begins, the course of action seems inevitable to Sarty, and his voice must be heard before the damage is done. Abner sends Sarty to the barn to “get that can of oil,” which is the final indicator to Sarty that the burning will commence shortly. The sense of hopelessness that follows demonstrates how trapped Sarty feels and strangely echoes Vardaman’s similar run to his barn immediately after Addie’s death: “Then he was moving, running, outside the house, toward the stable: this the old habit, the old blood which he had not been permitted to choose for himself, which had been bequeathed him willy nilly and which had run for so long (and who knew where, batten on what of outrage and savagery and lust) before it came to him” (426). At this moment all the nagging doubt that had been plaguing Sarty is gone and he has
fully committed to his truth, for his father’s truth has been nothing but a lie. Though Vardaman’s conflict does not have the same sense of urgency, they are equally intense: one internal and nagging, one external and inevitable.

Upon delivering the oil and soon after escaping from the hold of his mother, Sarty runs to do the only thing he can: betray his father by warning de Spain before his barn and stock are lost.

Then he was out of the room, out of the house, in the mild dust of the starlit road and the heavy ripeness of honeysuckle, the pale ribbon unspooling with terrific slowness under his running feet, 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: he saw the astonished face of the Negro in the linen jacket without knowing when the Negro had appeared.

“De Spain!” he cried, panted. “Where’s…” then he saw the white man too emerging from a white door down the hall. “Barn!” he cried. “Barn!”

“What?” the white man said. “Barn?”

“Yes,” the boy cried. “Barn!” (427)

Once Sarty bursts through de Spain’s door there is no turning back; a sequence of events is set in motion that will ensure Abner is shot. Similarly, once Vardaman tells Dewey Dell what he saw when he went to see where the buzzards sleep at night, Darl is as good as on the train to the asylum. Each case has a distinct sense of determination, an endurance that reaches toward truth. They are both simplistic, obscure and require a degree of detection to decipher, Sarty because he is physically exhausted and has little time to communicate the information and Vardaman because he must articulate it in a way that feels like the right thing to do, even though part of him knows it will implicate Darl in something serious.
In both cases, the boys’ revelations are equalizing factors. Abner, like Darl, feels that setting de Spain’s barn fire serves to balance an injustice, just as all the other barns he has torched have been a necessary form of retaliatory, personal justice. Abner’s sense of what is honorable is not equivalent to mainstream propriety, and neither is Darl’s. To Darl and Abner, the fires are compulsory, but because they are witnessed by the boys, they also symbolize the first time in Vardaman’s and Sarty’s lives when they must take a stand for virtue. These are moments of truth witnessed by boys who have yet to be corrupted by a ruthless, rural Southern world. They come face to face with a painful reality that, if it is to be reconciled, must be known. Fire provides the vehicle for their maturity. “In that it burns up and consumes, fire is a symbol of purification and regeneration... Water, too, purifies and regenerates but fire is distinct from it, in that it symbolizes purification through understanding to the highest degree of spirituality, by enlightenment and by truth” (Chevalier 382). Vardaman and Sarty characterize righteousness and truth; and what better way for Faulkner to portray these characteristics than through two young boys whose greatest personal struggles result in new, unexpected sorrow.

_Fathers and Sons_

Faulkner’s characters are reflections of local conditions, impending modernity, and Southern issues that extend far beyond an individual character’s control. The Bundrens and the Snopeses come from the same part of Yoknapatawpha County, Frenchmen’s Bend, which may account for the fact that, though Anse and Abner are very different people, there are numerous similarities in Sarty and Vardaman’s relationship
with their fathers. Anse and Abner are incapable of perceiving the indecency of their own parental weakness, and both men consciously choose to ignore their children’s emotional needs. This similarity is most vividly witnessed when Abner recognizes that his barn burning addiction is disturbing Sarty on an ethical level and when Anse emotionally abandons Vardaman, thus leaving him to feel completely alone after Addie takes her final breath.

Like many Faulknerian families, the Snopes and Bundren clans represent disintegrated values, mainly because modernity has crept into their daily lives and changed the system of principles that had existed in the South prior to the Civil War. Abner and Anse feel no obligation greater than the one they feel to themselves, which (for Sarty and Vardaman) creates a childhood environment that is rife with confusion. In his essay “The Literary Myth-Makers,” Ignatius Melito argues that Abner’s and Anse’s South became a breeding ground for people of weak character.

The South portrayed by Faulkner is a land of crumbled values. The traditional order—an aristocratic, stable order, governed by a code and administered by the great landowners...—was wrecked by the Civil War. Although its founders had worked to make this order endure, their descendants were morally too weak and incompetent to rebuild upon the ruins. As a result, the South was an easy prey to a new breed of invaders—personified in the carpetbaggers and the Snopeses—who act from no fixed, traditionally values but only from self-interest. This violation of the South by modernity is Faulkner’s view of his homeland” (167).

Though Melito’s observations appear to be a plausible reason for Abner’s and Anse’s behavior, the primitive and manipulative way in which they raise their sons also proves to be a significant factor in Sarty’s and Vardaman’s development. If they are to break free of their family’s cultural dys-functionality and thus become healthy Southerners, they
must first recognize the injustice of their fathers’ behavior and consequently break from it.

In comparison to Anse who feels justified in allowing others to do what should be accomplished by him, Abner Snopes has a much more forthright way of manipulating his son. In Abner’s mind, every barn he torches is done so justifiably. He recognizes no authority greater than himself and in return for his enforcement of vigilante “justice,” he expects unyielding support from every member of his family. They are fathers who have created an unhealthy reality for themselves and their family. Abner manipulates through action and Anse manipulates through inaction, but both fathers do their sons a disservice through ignorance and selfishness.

Abner, a Civil War horse thief, manipulates his family and believes that his truth is reality, though authentic honor and righteousness have nothing to do with his way of life. “He will do anything to maintain his own integrity, and refuses to bow to any other person’s will or rights. Just as Sarty is inherently good, Abner is the embodiment of evil. Like Satan, Abner is shockingly strong and full of purpose. He denies both the social and physical boundaries” (Bloom 69). Somehow, however, Sarty has not completely callused himself against his father’s abrasiveness. Abner is a duality to him, both worthy of his respect and his disgust. His greatest struggle is the decision that perpetually tears at his psyche: whether to follow in his brother’s footsteps and acquiesce to his father’s repulsive behavior or to stand up against it and better himself in doing so. This struggle is mostly internal because the consequences of him showing it outwardly would be swift, violent, and severe. His decision is the fundamental focus of “Barn Burning,” for there is no more important component than Sarty’s tormented, ever-variable view of his father.
While in the wagon outside the general store, bloodied from the fight for his
father's honor, Sarty thinks to himself: "Forever...Maybe he's done satisfied himself
now, now that he has..." He cannot finish the sentence because he is "not [able] to say it
aloud even to himself" (418). Though Faulkner does not allow Sarty to complete that
statement, an analysis of it yields interesting possibilities and proves how deeply he
wants Abner to be virtuous, or at least to become virtuous. "Now that he [Abner]
has"...what? Been caught for sure this time? Been kicked out of the area for good? Put
his son in the predicament of lying to protect a parent? Sarty still believes that his father
might possess the potential to see that, at least this once, he has mostly gotten away with
his retaliatory act of arson. Rather than Abner continue on his previous course, Sarty
dares to contemplate that this occasion could potentially be his last. At this critical point
he still has hope, but as the story progresses that hope dwindles, and little by little his
faith in his father dries up and evaporates. Sarty embodies Faulkner's "heart in conflict
with itself." Should he follow his bother and continue the cycle, or break away?
Ultimately, it is a calamitous decision for a ten-year-old boy.

To understand the depth of Abner's character, we must examine the way in which
he views his world. The most telling and highly repetitive phrase of the story is "without
heat." By virtue of its repetitive and ironic utilization, each incident provides the reader
with essential insight into Abner's disposition. Sarty looks at his father in the moonlight,
"against the stars but without face or depth—a shape black, flat, and bloodless as though
cut from tin in the iron folds of the frockcoat...the voice harsh like tin and without heat
like tin" (419). When Abner confronts Sarty about his near confession at the store he
"struck him with the flat of his hand on the side of the head, hard but without heat,
exactly how he had struck the two mules at the store.” Later, Abner enters the de Spain house and the servant asks him to wipe his feet before entering, to which Abner replies: “Get out of my way, nigger” and the narrator adds that this is stated “without heat too” (421).

For Abner Snopes, there is nothing in life that has heat, even in spite of his severe actions; his life is emotionless, a series of days that must be balanced with his version of justified action. Barn burning is a way for Abner to feel better about his fate, for he feels the same “old blood... which had been bequeathed to him willy nilly and which had run for so long” (426). This is the same emotion that Sarty feels, for he too must manage the blood that was created in him, one-half bitterness and gall, one-half decency and integrity. Though Sarty feels an intense pull toward righteousness, which becomes a way to break the cycle of apathetic violence, Abner feels a powerful urge to strike a match in response to injustice. Each is passionate in his intensity. To Sarty, there is nothing “without heat.” When the story begins he already has an internal fire sparked by disbelief. He quietly holds his father suspect—he might not be the man he has for so long thought he was. We come upon him at the point where that niggardly fire of subtle incredulity has broadened into one of rage. Sarty lives in the heat of consequence and destruction, the heat of actual barn blazes, the heat of a silent mother, a wrongfully obedient brother— and all that heat amounts to a rage that will incinerate some aspect of his character if he does not respond to it.

Abner has reared Sarty in an environment that is fraught with corruption presented as a form of justice. Sarty knows of no other way, even though on a very basic level he senses that the way he is is not the way he ought to be. To the Snopeses, “the
fierce old pull of blood” is family loyalty whether morally right or not. “Faulkner’s fathers are often absent and sometimes they also expect blind obedience from their children. Although from the time of the Civil War the Southern male was no longer invested with his former power, many of the Faulknerian fathers still attempt, at least, to assume it” (Chabrier 111).

Abner is a man who has no power outside his family circle; therefore, like some men who recognize their limited power and who thus must abuse what they have, he wields his authority in a thoroughly destructive way. The scene in which Abner calls Sarty away from his dinner is the first moment of foreshadowing with regard to the severity of Abner Snopes’ motives. However, just as Sarty begins to recognize even the smallest truth about his father, the devotion that he thinks he owes Abner by virtue of being his son serves to entrap him. For Sarty, the ultimate betrayal would be in failing to defend his father. Therefore, Abner’s enemy is Sarty’s enemy, despite the observation that his last line, “He’s my father!” seems more of a reminder to himself than a declaration of conviction.

After the first official hearing, once he has removed himself and his family from the threat of being caught, Abner confronts Sarty about his potential for telling the magistrate the truth and thereby incriminating him. He seems to be cognizant that Sarty questions his virtuosity and probity. In spite of the fact that Sarty did not speak against Abner in the court proceedings, fought with the boys outside the courthouse who called Abner a “barn burner,” and unquestioningly followed his father’s demands, Abner’s actions show little regard for Sarty’s demonstrated allegiance to him. After calling him away from his dinner, Abner says, “You were fixing to tell them. You would have told
him...You’re getting to be a man...You got to learn to stick to your own blood or you ain’t going to have any blood to stick to you. Do you think either of them, any man there this morning, would?” (419). What does this impart to young Sarty? Abner’s words are manipulation for the future because he likely recognizes that Sarty is at a crossroads. Flem, Abner’s oldest son, probably went through the same phase in his childhood; Sarty’s questioning Abner’s actions is predictable and typical, though Abner’s response to it is not.

The act of calling him away “up the slope and on to the starlit road where, turning, he could see his father against the stars but without face or depth” thereby isolates Sarty in an attempt to either make him feel fear at being called away, or hope that he might be of some significance to Abner. His first statement (“You were fixin’ to tell them. You would have told him.”) tells Sarty that he recognizes he is a boy with a conscience who was just inches away from turning on him. Likewise, it lets Sarty know that his inner conflict is not a secret as he may have previously thought. Consequently, this revelation may have been the catalyst that later hastened Sarty’s decision to tell de Spain of the fire.

Sarty has recently found a way to understand that Abner’s decisions are not honorable, but Abner gives Sarty the impression that family loyalty transcends the importance of what is right or wrong. The message is clear: without family a boy has nothing, therefore he will be nothing if he does not remain loyal to his father. Likewise, it is possible to consider an alternate interpretation of the same line: “You got to learn to stick to your own blood or you ain’t going to have any blood to stick to you.” This could easily be a manipulation of a young boy’s fear of his father, in essence saying that if
Sarty does not always stick up for his father (and by continuation, his family) Abner will intentionally cause physical harm to him.

Sarty’s adult assessment as filtered through the omniscient narrator is more revealing than what Abner may have meant by those statements. Sarty describes Abner as “stiff back, stiff and ruthless limp, without face or depth—a shape black, flat, and bloodless...the voice harsh like tin.” These are not images sons typically use to describe their fathers; rather, they evoke images of power, endurance, and enigmatic fear, all of which must be negotiated and reconciled by a ten-year-old mind.

Vardaman and Sarty exist on the precipice of childhood security that is doomed to crumble away. Though Vardaman has no desire to escape his father, one side of Sarty’s conflicted self does seek Abner’s approval. Similarly, there is a great lack of understanding between Vardaman and Anse. Like Abner, Anse feels no responsibility toward making sure Sarty is appropriately coping with Addie’s death, the flood or the fire. In fact, rather than assuage their stressors, Abner and Anse often appear to be responsible for their sons’ anxiety. They are anti-traditional; they feel no moral or ethical duty to rear their children in a socially acceptable and appropriate fashion. Though there is a distinct dichotomy between the extremes to which Anse and Abner’s inability to be a good father are presented, they are similarly and equally implicated in failure.

With regard to Vardaman, the reader’s first validation for this theory appears just before Addie’s death when Vardaman is dismissed by Anse to go clean the fish he has caught. Consequently, this dismissal comes after absolutely no positive recognition on the part of his father for such a feat, for he will not even look at his son, and Vardaman’s personal pride in catching the fish leaves little doubt that validation is what he was
hoping for. Vardaman physically enters the scene while carrying a fish that Tull describes as being a “hog...durn nigh long as he is” (30). This is undoubtedly an accomplishment for a young country boy, one that gives him the feeling of being a grown-up. For a boy Vardaman’s size to reel in a fish of that magnitude, a great struggle must have taken place, and his triumph over the fish was a moment of recognition of his impending maturity. His demeanor reflects his mood, for he “spits over his shoulder like a man” (30) and “cusses like a grown man” (31). Therefore, as he totes his prized accomplishment toward the house, he is no doubt seeking the approval of his father.

“The Southern male perpetually measures himself against his father, whom he worships. For the Southern boy...is convinced that ‘if you’re half the man your daddy was you’ll be all right’ (Chabrier 112). This attitude, though made evident with Vardaman and his fish, also accurately reflects Sarty’s relationship with Abner.

Tull’s narration of the exchange between Vardaman and Anse evokes equal parts curiosity and pity within the mind of the reader, but it also serves to lay the foundation for the non-relationship that Anse has with Vardaman. The reader (who is yet early in the novel and experience of Anse) has not determined that Anse is deceitfully selfish. Therefore, though his reaction is “normal” for such a self-interested man, curiosity turns to pity when Vardaman is ultimately disappointed by his father’s lack of reaction to his accomplishment. According to Tull, “That boy comes up the hill. He is carrying a fish nigh long as he is. He slings it to the ground and grunts ‘Hah’” (30). Anse, in reaction to this, says: “Are you aiming to leave it laying there?” This is undoubtedly not the reaction Vardaman was looking for. After he tells Anse that he was “aiming to show it to ma,” Tull reports that “He looks toward the door. We can hear the talking, coming out on the
draft. Cash too, knocking and hammering at the boards...” Vardaman looks down at the fish, which is still lying in the dust. “He turns it over with his foot and prods at the eye-bump with his toe, gouging at it. Anse is looking out over the land.” Then, in the most important moment of the scene, as Cash’s hammering fills the air and members of Addie’s deathbed spectacle converse, and when it should have been absolutely clear to Anse that Vardaman needed him for some degree of explanation and/or comfort, “Vardaman looks at Anse’s face, then at the door. He turns, going toward the corner of the house, when Anse calls him without looking around” (31). Just as one might anticipate that Anse has figured out some comforting line to assuage Vardaman’s confusion and distress he says: “You clean that fish.” The power of this neglect, coupled with the absence of any real, lasting experience of Vardaman up to this point, assists in creating an initial sense of melancholy that later grows exponentially when Vardaman is forced to cope with his own grief alone in the barn.

In Vardaman’s world, a lack of acknowledgement and compassion is just the right recipe for introspection. Therefore, early in the novel we find that Vardaman must seek out answers from the only person who will allow him to ask the difficult questions: himself. The audience accepts the dismissal and fatherly neglect of the young boy because of the extreme circumstances of Addie’s active death and the incessant sounds of Cash’s construction work. We do not know, yet, the extent to which the adult members of the family are so emotionally detached from each other and that they are incapable of or unwilling to assist each other.

As Vardaman realizes his mother is dead, Anse’s absence looms heavily upon the scene and thus creates an intensely heart-wrenching reality for the reader: though he is
physically surrounded by the members of his family, Vardaman is utterly alone in his
grief. Addie’s death causes a heightened sense of wretchedness and anxiety, and because
Anse is emotionally absent by choice, Vardaman uses his senses to decipher the choking
flood of emotion welling within him. Consider how Vardaman tries to understand
Addie’s death and find comfort the only way he knows how. “I begin to run . . . I begin to
cry . . . I can hear the bed and her face and them and I can feel the floor shake...” He
emerges from the house: “My hands grab at the bushes; beneath my feet the rocks and
dirt go rubbing down.” Finally, he gets to the barn and into the stall where comfort
awaits. “The life in him [Jewel’s horse] runs under the skin, under my hand, running
through the splotches, smelling up into my nose where the sickness is beginning to cry,
vomiting the crying...I can smell the life running up from under my hands, up my arms,
and then I can leave the stall. The crying makes a lot of noise. I wish it wouldn’t make so
much noise” (53-54). Vardaman’s imagery gets to the heart of what Cleanth Brooks
means when he wrote that Faulkner is primarily concerned with “what they [his
characters] reveal about mankind everywhere and at all times,” (WFFE 91) even those
who are the youngest and most inexperienced.

This section of the novel depicts Vardaman’s first dealings with loss, and like
Sarty before him, he is utterly alone. And where is Anse? Dewey Dell? Why has not
someone, anyone, come into the barn to find the boy? Clearly, he is of no concern, and if
this is evident now, upon the death of his mother, what other circumstance could present
itself as a more necessary time to be sought after?

Because of the audience’s lack of familiarity with Anse as a father, the reader
might consider forgiving him this neglect due in part to the circumstance of his wife’s
suffering and eventual death. However, it begins a suspicion that will later be confirmed: either he just doesn’t care or he is not capable of caring. Anse’s neglect is a subtle but powerful manipulation of his son’s mental state. He chooses to ignore Vardaman during a time when this type of neglect seems exceptionally harsh; yes, Anse’s wife is dying, but so is Vardaman’s mother. Portia Weiskel suggests that “it is still possible to see the family as an existential unit, each member an isolated maker of meaning” (46). Because Anse neglects his fatherly responsibilities, Vardaman becomes a creator of his own meaning—he has no parent to guide him through the understanding of loss; therefore, he must create an understanding himself. Because his mother died while he was cleaning the fish, he combines its death with her death, therefore creating a plausible amalgamation that his mind will accept: His mother is a fish.

Through Vardaman we are able to witness the degree to which members of the Bundren family cannot extend beyond their inner needs and desires in order to see beyond themselves—Cash has his simplicity and his craft, Darl has his suspicions and introspection, Jewel has his anger, Dewey Dell has her need for an abortion—and in no one is this thread of selfish motivation more obvious than in Anse. The way in which Anse and Abner parent may be different when examining their actions, but the personal characteristics that drive their motives are often quite the same.

*Brothers*

Vardaman and Sarty are either too young or too inexperienced in the matters at hand—namely, death and destruction—to consider and be disappointed by their older brother’s lack of sympathy. Though Darl and Flem are dissimilar, the result of their
behavior is the same: each has the potential to guide their younger sibling toward a clearer understanding of their trying circumstances, but in the end they are an utter disappointment in this task. Both Flem and Darl are characterized in a way that suggests they could, if they sought to, assist their younger sibling in understanding the adversity they must face. Flem prefers to be a spectator in his brother’s conflict and thus consciously decides to be of no assistance to Sarty when Abner’s wrath intensifies. Darl simultaneously exists in an intuitive and concrete realm; like other family members, he does not concern himself with Vardaman’s grief despite that his intuitive self may recognize Vardaman’s inability to rationalize Addie’s death.

Flem, who has dealt with and learned to accept Abner’s violence for many more years than Sarty, chooses silence and inaction over Sarty’s welfare. Darl, by guiding Vardaman to his mother’s decomposing corpse, actively includes him in a darkly humorous, yet deeply troubling outward display of his own despair. Though Darl had witnessed death and decomposing corpses while fighting in WWI, he seems not to consider the detrimental affect his actions could have on Vardaman, therefore the cathartic game seems to come at Vardaman’s expense. Flem, who is virtually silent, manipulates Sarty via silence. Darl, on the other hand, manipulates Vardaman through imagery and ideas. Darl and Flem could have had a much more positive impact on Sarty and Vardaman if they had taken the opportunity to provide guidance.

In As I Lay Dying, after the sequential Darl/Vardaman narratives prepare for the fire to be ignited and witnessed, Faulkner uses one of the “Darl” narratives to demonstrate the extent to which he will go to end the absurdity of the family’s quest. Within one narrative he briefly discussed taking Vardaman to listen to their mother “talk
in little trickling bursts of secret and murmurous bubbling” (212) while he simultaneously antagonized Jewel about the identity of his mother, the horse. In many ways, this chapter serves to solidify our suspicion that Darl is psychologically unbalanced. In addition, it once again prepares the reader to see Vardaman walk blindly into an appalling situation because he knows absolutely no better—and Darl proves here that he is not the type of brother who will be helpful to a seven-year-old who is thoroughly confused by the death. In fact, like Dewey Dell, Darl would rather use Vardaman for his own immediate need.

Faulkner heightens the reader’s sense of pathos by making Vardaman the facilitator of the dark, yet humorous scene to which Darl had previously alluded. The first time Faulkner used Vardaman for dark humor—when he accidentally bore into his mother’s head while trying to create holes in the coffin as a means for her to breathe—one might think someone in the family would have sat the boy down to discuss his mother’s death, or at least death in general. However, this did not occur and Vardaman’s response—to reconcile his mother with the fish—is often the only aspect of his involvement in the novel for which he is given critical attention. Darl is no help to his understanding of death and only validates Vardaman’s idea that Addie has merely transformed herself rather than died.

“Hear?” Darl says. “Put your ear close.”
I put my ear close and I can hear her only I can’t tell what she is saying.
“What is she saying, Darl?” I say. “Who is she talking to?”
“She is talking to God,” Darl says. “She is calling on Him to help her.”
“What does she want Him to do?” I say.
“She wants Him to hide her away from the sight of man,” Darl says.
“Why does she want Him to hide her away from the sight of man, Darl?”
“So she can lay down her life,” Darl says.
"Why does she want to lay down her life, Darl?"
"Listen," Darl says. We hear her. We hear her turn over on her side. "Listen," Darl says.
"She’s turned over," I say. "She’s looking at me through the wood."
"Yes," Darl says.
"How can she see me through the wood, Darl?"
"Come," Darl says. "We must let her be quiet. Come."
"She can’t see out there, because the holes are in the top," I say. (214-215)

Cleanth Brooks, in his essay "Regionalism in American Literature" stated that
"literature has always mirrored [the] world of fallen but aspiring human beings" (38).

Darl is a fallen young man, and tragically, what he aspires to accomplish is an act of
propriety. However, his actions are truly disconcerting when considering that Darl knows
better than to facilitate Vardaman’s misconceptions; he has been to war and understands
the dying process of the flesh. Darl’s behavior is a subtle commentary on the affects of
WWI on the American young man. He is the only son who went to war, and though we
never know him prior to his service, one can easily infer that (at least in part) his odd
behavior stems from his witnessing the devastation of trench warfare.

Vardaman does not find himself by the coffin by accident; Darl intentionally takes
him ("I took Vardaman to listen" (212)) to the corpse to experience a turning point in his
own grief, a perverse initiation of sorts. Darl must do something about the journey that
has allowed Anse’s stubbornness to inhibit decency. In addition, by taking Vardaman to
the rumbling coffin Darl was able to show him the meaninglessness of life, a lesson he
earned while in World War I. The war had broken him in a way that no longer allowed
him to see the world in a two-dimensional way. This fallen-ness affected his identity
within the family—and in this scene it is clear that it also affects his relationship with
Vardaman. Darl knows that death is the paramount representation of the man’s
destruction, the loss of all that encompasses one’s reality and hope for the future; however, his dismay at the Bundren’s current position and his anger toward Addie for never loving him as much as Jewel, clouds his ability to recognize that taking Vardaman to the corpse is an act of irresponsibility. This scene offers Darl a chance to share his turmoil—his love for Addie, though misunderstood, and the finality of her death—via carefully loaded language. But what purpose did it serve to Vardaman? In terms of child development, it could be quite detrimental to his growth. According to child psychology, at Vardaman’s age

the foundation is laid for the existence as true individuals... What is assimilated by the child at this stage is experienced deeply; he wishes to identify with everything as intensely as possible so that it can become part of the world of the self. However, there is one difficulty: the outer world of perceptions does not yet reveal itself in its naked reality (this only happens after puberty). The child still needs an intermediary. He is dependent on other and older people for receiving things into his own inner world... Adults must offer the child images from the inner world they formed themselves. This can only be done through stories, and in this way the older person offers his own kingdom of the self, thus providing the nourishment needed during this period. (Lievegoed 148-149)

On one hand, it appears that Darl is truly the only one who pays attention to him, the only one who can provide the “stories” that will “nourish” him. Many readers inaccurately assume that because Vardaman displays intuitive tendencies like Darl, and because Darl converses with Vardaman more extensively than any other family member, then they must have a special relationship—one that is equally and mutually beneficial. However, the way in which Darl interacts with Vardaman confirms his desire to end the farce, and truly demonstrates how dark and fallen he was. Though Vardaman is never aware of it, this scene vividly illuminates the void Darl’s neglect creates: a continuation of Vardaman’s profound misunderstanding of death.
As we witness Vardaman lean over and place his ear on his mother’s coffin to listen to her “turn over,” we are concurrently aware of how horrifically this scene plays out and how utterly selfish Darl’s reasons for initiating this conversation truly are. Darl cannot tell any other member of the family that he is tormented by their journey and plans to burn Addie’s body in the barn—but that is exactly what he tells Vardaman, for he is the only member of the Bundren family who would be willing to listen to Darl’s bizarre ramblings.

He [Darl] exists in a kind of limbo where the firm, defining shape of objects and of people is continually dissolving. Only by a painful process of reasoning can he establish the physical existence of himself, his mother, and the loaded wagon: “Yet the wagon is, because when the wagon is was, Addie Bundren will not be. And Jewel is, so Addie Bundren must be. And then I must be, or I could not empty myself for sleep in a strange room” (240).

Vardaman is also the only member of the family who can be manipulated by this particular aspect of Darl’s warped nature. Vardaman appears to carry the personality trait that causes Darl and Addie to be introspective and intuitive, but after considering his character as a whole, it is likely that Vardaman is intuitive because he is still a child. The ideas surrounding intuition are as old as the philosophers like Descartes who ponder the concept that “we are to know that intuition is without instruction” (Weissman 31). If that is true, and I assert that this is the case for Vardaman, then he is more aware of his grief than words and self-expression can articulate. In addition, he is largely unaware that Darl is experienced at coping with death and potentially could guide him to understanding it more fully.

Similarly, Darl is aware that no other member of the family would willingly participate in his listening game. They are older and more aware of the reality of their
mother’s rotting corpse; therefore, not one of his other siblings could provide Darl with the disturbing outlet of grief and humor Vardaman affords him. Though Darl is preying upon Vardaman’s confusion, like the scene with Flem and Sarty, fear drives Darl’s actions. He must figure out a way to end the Addie Bundren death parade. He has seen too much death in the past to allow his self-absorbed father to continue with his journey. Therefore, when we examine Darl’s dialogue, we see that he is really asking permission, or at least some small level of consent, from Vardaman because he knows Vardaman will not understand his stratagem. Omit Vardaman’s dialogue and narration and consider Darl’s words in chronological succession:

Hear? Put your ear close.
She is talking to God.
She is calling on him to help her.
She wants him to hide her away from the sight of man.
So she can lay down her life.
Listen.
Listen.
Yes.
Come. We must let her be quiet. Come.

Darl indirectly, yet clearly, tells Vardaman of his intention to “hide her away from the sight of man” where no one can consider her a spectacle anymore and to “let her be quiet,” for her stench announces her arrival before the wagon appears and lasts long after it has gone. Undoubtedly, Vardaman does not discern the message, but what he does take away further damages his already inaccurate perception of his mother and further scars a boy who is in dire need of guidance and explanation. All of Addie’s offspring are forced to confront who they are without her, two of whom don’t yet have the time because they are preoccupied by more pressing matters (Dewey Dell must confront her pregnancy and Cash feels a responsibility to build her a proper coffin, then later is
distracted by his injury) and the other three struggle with it at various times and to varying degrees. Now that Addie is no longer there to be any sort of mother to him, Vardaman must come to understand himself, and the stressors he encounters act as a mold that shapes who he will be once he emerges from his mire of perplexity.

Whereas Vardaman’s quest may be how to determine who he is without his mother, Sarty must come to understand himself separate from his father. In the process of doing so, Flem’s inaction has much the same affect on the reader and Sarty as Darl’s does on Vardaman. Flem never directly speaks in “Barn Burning,” but his presence is significant because he is the only other male of the family and he is characterized as unyieldingly loyal to Abner. Though his participation in the story is quite minimal, he too is the older brother who is much more experienced in the matters at hand.

In no other scene are we better able to analyze the significance of Flem’s relationship with Sarty than just after the second hearing, while he and Sarty plow the field. Flem is shown to have neither the desire nor the ability to recognize the extent of Sarty’s internal turmoil.

They were running a middle buster now, his brother holding the plow straight while he handled the reins, and walking beside the straining mule, rich black soil shearing cool and damp against his bare ankles, he thought Maybe this is the end of it. Maybe even that twenty bushels that seems hard to have to pay for just a tug will be a cheap price for him to stop forever and always from being what he used to be; thinking, dreaming now, so that his brother had to speak sharply to him to mind the mule: Maybe he even won’t collect the twenty bushels. Maybe it will all add up and balance and vanish—corn, rug, fire, terror and grief; the being pulled two ways like between two teams of horses—gone, done with forever and ever. (424)

They are out in the field, away from Abner, able to discuss the troubling events of the previous few days. Flem is the more capable boy, older and more experienced in how
to cope with Abner’s behavior. In a simple use of narrative metaphor, Faulkner describes their task as “running a middle buster.” Normally, plows are equipped with one curved iron plate that cuts, lifts and turns the soil. However, a middle buster plow contains two curved iron plates that are designed to move dirt to either side of a central groove in the soil. Though subtle, this peculiarity must be considered important, for there is no other reason to make this distinction than to call attention to the task.

They are literally and jointly creating a divide, one that Flem is guiding and Sarty precariously controls. In retrospect, we find this to be an authentic assessment, for Sarty’s future actions prove that his voice is his power over the others; but for now, this small scene is a metaphor for their relationship. Flem holds the plow and guides it along the ground as it creates the divide between them. Though he could speak to Sarty at any time, he only does so when he notices Sarty’s attention wanes, and Faulkner, in order to maintain Flem’s characterization as a non-speaking part, offers his criticism indirectly through muted, indirect dialogue.

Over the course of the story, Flem’s sporadic and brief characterization provides a foundation for his inaction. Early in the story, just after Abner is told to leave the area by the Justice of the Peace, Flem appears from within the crowd and is described as “no taller than the father but thicker, chewing tobacco steadily, between the two lines of grim-faced men” (418). He is a young adult, “thickened” by Abner’s ways, toughened to withstand this chaotic lifestyle. Later in the story, while Sarty, Abner and Flem are in town waiting for the wagon to be fixed, Flem’s demeanor is portrayed in the description of his eyes, “the older brother with his muddy eyes and his steady, inevitable tobacco” (425). Flem is a part of the machine Abner created; if he ever battled with his
conscience, it was a struggle that has long since surrendered to acceptance. These characterizations merge near the end of the story when he is portrayed as unflappable. Abner directs the women of the family to tie Sarty to the bed post so he can burn Major de Spain’s barn without Sarty’s interference.

This time his father didn’t strike him [Sarty]. The hand came even faster than the blow had, the same hand which had set the can on the table with almost excruciating care flashing from the can toward him too quick for him to follow it, gripping him by the back of his shirt and on to tiptoe before he had seen it quit the can, the face stooping at him in breathless and frozen ferocity, the cold, dead voice skipping over him to the older brother who leaned against the table chewing with that steady, curious, sidewise motion of cows. (426)

Though this is not the most significant scene between Flem and Sarty, it does perfectly portray Flem’s apathy toward his brother’s behavior and struggle. He appears to be undisturbed, leaning on the table nonchalantly, chewing his tobacco, just as he had been described in almost all previous scenes. In addition, Flem’s attitude is overshadowed by Abner’s aggression and power, therefore displaying his place within the structure of the family: second to Abner and ready to follow in his father’s footsteps.

Though Sarty Snopes never plays a role in Faulkner’s later work, in The Hamlet the Snopeses move to Frenchman’s Bend and live on Will Varner’s farm as tenants. To ensure his barns would not meet the same fate as so many who have rented land to Abner Snopes, Varner gives Flem a job in his store. Flem later marries his daughter and begins a life of manipulation and ambition, the roots of which were planted by his father during and prior to the days in which “Barn Burning” occur. In The Town Flem eventually rises to the position of president of the Sartoris Bank in Jefferson and manipulates others by way of various underhanded techniques.
There is a stark irony and dichotomy of the fate of Abner’s sons. Both have what Robert Penn Warren called “an unidentified tension and smoldering rage” that exists beneath the surface of Southern life as depicted in Faulkner’s work (2), yet the noble son is forgotten and the corrupted one eventually flourishes.

A direct correlation can be drawn between Sarty and Vardaman’s preoccupation with reconciling their stress. Sarty’s internal dialogue: “Maybe this is the end of it. Maybe even that twenty bushels that seems hard to have to pay for just a rug will be a cheap price for him to stop forever and always from being what he used to be... Maybe it will all add up and balance and vanish—corn, rug, fire, terror and grief; the being pulled two ways like between two teams of horses—gone, done with for ever and ever” (424) in many ways mirrors Vardaman’s thoughts on his own stress: “But Jewel’s mother is a horse. My mother is a fish. Darl says that when we come to the water again I might see her and Dewey Dell said, She’s in the box; how could she have got out? She got out through the holes I bored, into the water I said, and when we come to the water again I am going to see her. My mother is not in the box, My mother does not smell like that. My mother is a fish” (196).

These moments provide the basis from which we look to someone, anyone to assist them in their confusion. But there is no one. The attitude projected by Flem and Darl echoes something Mr. Compson once told Quentin in The Sound and the Fury: “All men are just accumulations, dolls stuffed with sawdust swept up from the trash heaps where all previous dolls had been thrown away” (175). They exist together yet alone, in need of more than what they have and always in search of what they cannot find.
What Vardaman and Sarty will become, if nothing diverts them from their current course, is debatable and impossible to correctly predict. Perhaps Flem and Darl thought that, in the end, all men become useless to each other. If they did, then Sarty and Vardaman were better off lacking their intervention; perhaps Darl and Flem’s guidance would have destined their younger brothers to follow in their footsteps. Regardless, Vardaman and Sarty never grew into men who no longer needed guidance because neither boy appeared in any future Faulkner work. Though many other characters who shared their pages continued on living in Yoknapatawpha County, they simply weren’t useful to Faulkner after *As I Lay Dying* and “Barn Burning” were completed.

*A Consideration of Style and Structure*

Differences in point of view comprise the greatest disparity with regard to structural differences in “Barn Burning” and *As I Lay Dying*. Because *AILD* provides the reader with an intimate and highly personalized relationship with Vardaman, and “Barn Burning” keeps much of the intense inner struggle Sarty faces at bay by virtue of its third person point of view, what one method lacks the other provides. Therefore, consideration of length aside, each method complements its respective story well. *AILD*’s subtle structure allows Faulkner to create Vardaman as a secretly dominant, yet virtually forgettable character; for he is thought of as simply the poor little boy who thinks his mother is a fish, yet he narrates nineteen chapters. His depth, though always present, is manifestly enigmatic considering the novel in totality. On the other hand, “Barn Burning” requires narrative restraint with regard to Sarty’s character; the third person narrative neither allows the reader nor Sarty himself to succumb to his inimical
circumstances. No events of the stories assists in demonstrating the way in which structure affects plot better than Vardaman’s flood scene and Sarty’s few moments alone after his climactic final scene with Abner.

Vardaman’s narration allows us into his heart and mind, therefore putting words to his motivations. He allows the reader to feel the struggle of the conflicts he faces, whether they are heartbreaking realities, average childhood difficulties, or simply his peculiar way of considering a particular occurrence. Often, like in the case presented below, his narrative structure creates a vivid sense of pathos, “so [he] can bear it” and as a consequence of this we must “bear it,” as well. This affect, if fully realized by the reader, creates an intimate connection to him.

Faulkner’s purposeful style is difficult to follow, much like the mind of a seven year old. Conrad Aiken described this aspect of Faulkner’s style as “a process of immersion, of hypnotizing his reader into remaining immersed in his stream” and an “elaborate method of deliberately withheld meaning, of progressive and partial and delayed disclosure, which so often gives the characteristic shape to the novels themselves” (48). Though Vardaman’s narration, heartbreak, confusion and passion are felt often during his narratives, the flood scene combines all of these elements and eloquently reminds us that his narrative style is a purposeful exercise of his character.

Faulkner recognized the relevance of the flood scene as quoted by Joseph Blotner, in his article entitled “How As I Lay Dying Came to Be”: “I took this family and subjected them to the two greatest catastrophes which man can suffer—flood and fire, that’s all... That was written in six weeks without changing a word because I knew from the first where that was going” (115). If Faulkner “knew from the first” that these two
events would be the most important aspect of the Bundren’s trip to Jefferson, then the structure of how the narratives are portrayed must be important as well. The flood scene is narrated by way of a combination of overlapping narratives from the perspective of Darl, Vardaman, Tull, and Darl again. Initially, the narrative order may not appear significant; however, upon examination we find a careful stratagem that establishes “Faulkner’s search for the most expressive way of representing his characters...his own proper object, the direct communication of a complex and sorrowful human reality” (Mayoux 162).

By using Vardaman as a narrator of the flood scene, Faulkner allows the reader to experience the events through the eyes of a child before Tull’s much more objective explanation of it. This structure strengthens and perpetuates the notion that Vardaman is not able to fully comprehend the incredible events that occur. Because Vardaman is biased by his faith in Darl’s abilities to save his mother the fish, his account almost completely misses the true drama. It does, however, show us how much faith he has in his very troubled brother.

In order to appreciate the importance of Vardaman’s account of the flood scene, and the way in which Faulkner’s use of style works within it, the chronology of how it appears is significant. Time is fragmented by the three narrators; a technique certainly consistently Faulknerian, but also very symbolic when considering the Bundren quest. The flood is the quintessential representation of the chaos of the journey itself; further, it represents life and death, ignorance and strength, and utter confusion. Why shouldn’t Vardaman, Tull, and Darl tell of it? Because of their dissimilarity they are most unlikely to be paired in a joint effort. Though Faulkner allows Vardaman to tell the majority of
the story, Darl and Tull are necessary because Vardaman needs them to fill in the gaps created by his distorted view of the action. Vardaman’s misrepresentations parallel the chaos and confusion of the act of trying to adhere to Anse’s absurd demands.

Darl ends his account of the flood scene at the point where he abandons the wagon: “I jump from the wagon on the downstream side. Between two hills I see the mules once more. They roll up out of the water in succession, turning completely over, their legs stiffly extended as when they had lost contact with the earth” (149). Tull and Vardaman’s account also serve to allow Darl to stop narrating at a time when he would have had to mention that he had no interest in saving his mother’s body; as if to support this theory, his next narrative picks up exactly when the horror has passed and Cash “lies on his back on the earth” (156). Darl’s absence during the lengthy dramatic action is no accident, but in the meantime, Vardaman picks up where Darl left off. However, he is so blinded by his admiration for Darl that during most of his account he focuses on Darl, the wrong brother, whom he gives credit for trying to secure the coffin when he should have been watching Jewel and Cash. “... and I couldn’t stop hollering because Darl was strong and steady holding her under the water even if she did fight he would not let her go he was seeing me and he would hold her and it was all right now it was all right now it was all right” (151). Because Vardaman mentally linked Addie’s death with the death of his fish, he mistakenly assumes that Darl, who is submerged up to his head in water, understands the transubstantiation of the mother/fish and secures her for the family. He has blind faith in Darl, but the reader is only able to see this in retrospect. This realization is also used as a means of manipulating the reader’s experience, for none of
what Vardaman narrates can be made inaccurate until the series of narrations is complete.

At this point, the way he tells it is the only way we experience it.

There is no other style that would have conveyed Vardaman’s faith, hope and agonizing frustration better than Faulkner’s unique first person method. It reads like an out-of-breath six year old has just run up to you, pulled down hard upon your arm, and frantically begins a very lengthy barrage of information. It is frantic and frightening.

There are no sentences, no periods, and no moments to take a breath. Such luxuries do not exist for Vardaman, so they are not provided to the reader either. In the end, he is the only one who can calm himself, there is no adult to run to, no arm to be pulled, only a young boy who must comfort himself with words that should come from someone who loves him: “…and it was all right now it was all right now it was all right” (151).

Cash tried but she fell off and Darl jumped going under he went under and Cash holler to catch her and I holler running and holler and Dewey Dell holler at me Vardaman you Vardaman you Vardaman and Vernon passed me because he was seeing her come up and she jumped into the water again and Darl hadn't caught her yet

He came up to see and I holler catch her Darl catch her and he didn't come back because she was too heavy he had to go on catching at her and I holler catch her Darl catch her Darl because in the water she could go faster than a man and Darl had to grabble for her so I knew he could catch her because he is the best grabbler even with the mules in the way again they dived up rolling their feet stiff rolling down again and their backs up now and Darl had to go again because in the water she could go faster than a man or a woman and I passed Vernon and he wouldn't get in the water and help Darl he wouldn't grabble for her with Darl he knew but he wouldn't help.

The mules dived up again diving their legs stiff their legs rolling slow and then Darl again and I holler catch her Darl catch her head her into the bank Darl and Vernon wouldn’t help and then Darl dodged past the mules where he could he had her under the water coming in to the bank coming in slow because in the water she fought to stay under the water but Darl is strong and he was coming in slow and so I knew he had her because he came slow and I ran down into the water to help and I couldn’t stop holler because Darl was strong and steady holding her under the water even if she did fight he would not let her go
he was seeing me and he would hold her and it was all right now it was
all right now it was all right (150-151)

This first person account of a horrendous, tragic event is made all the more
frightening when offered to us by a very scared little boy who cannot shut up long
enough to breathe. The imagery is only subtly present in the words, but it powerfully
exists in the structure; the repetition, endurance of simplistic diction, scattered syntax
and omission of punctuation serve to exacerbate the emergency.

Vardaman’s adoration of Darl facilitates a vital mistake in his assessment. When
Tull objectively witnesses and narrates the events of the flood, we are able to see Darl’s
cowardice and Vardaman’s error in the first sentence: “When I told Cora how Darl
jumped out of the wagon and left Cash sitting there trying to save it and the wagon
turning over, and Jewel that was almost to the bank fighting that horse back where it had
more sense than to go...” (153). Tull confirms Vardaman’s inability to relate the flood
scene without bias. His admiration for Darl’s abilities and his immaturity obscures his
ability to witness and then relate the event objectively. Tull states: “…so I started
running along side the bank, trying to catch sight of Cash because he couldn’t swim,
yelling at Jewel where Cash was like a durn fool, bad as that boy that was on down the
bank still hollering at Darl” (154). There is little doubt that Vardaman thinks of Darl in
terms of a heroic older brother, he is the only sibling who spends much time with him in
discussion. Here again the tragic element of Vardaman’s character is revealed by the
careful way in which Faulkner manipulates the structure of the novel. Vardaman is in no
way at fault for what he feels, but when Darl’s hands emerge from the water without his
mother/fish, he is once again crushed by the disappointment of his own expectation, and
no one, neither Darl nor Tull, understand his actions. This scene also serves to remind us
that Vardaman is only a child with a child's view of the adults around him. If Darl is unwilling to report it, and Vardaman is unable to see the truth, then Faulkner utilizes Tull as a necessary balance—a creator of truth in a moment of chaos.

Much like Tull in *A W孕ld*, the narrator's role in "Barn Burning" functions as a voice of reason and truth. Because of the condensation of emotion within the story, Faulkner had to establish a trustworthy narrator who functioned as both a witness to and a knowledgeable, personal informant of the depth and breadth of the family's tumultuous circumstances. This voice provides the "necessary balance" the reader needs to cope with various levels of information provided within the story, but of these, three distinct layers emerge. The first is the most obvious: direct narrative voice that helps to establish Sarty's plight (which exists as Sarty's consciousness), shared only between Sarty and the reader. It establishes a bond between the boy and his witness. The second functions as an addition to the first, but takes the form of literary conceit, in which Sarty's thoughts morph into language and conceptual manifestations that are far too advanced for a boy his age. (Though these moments are provided in a third person form, this technique also mirrors the intuitive side of Vardaman's first person narrative—moments when his language and articulation far exceeds his intellect or experience.) The most sophisticated level of narrative, though like the other two, exists solely as an authorial, knowing voice from the future, one well aware of the Sartoris family characteristics. This level of narration knows about Abner's past and other aspects of the family of which Sarty is most likely not aware. Though this voice is far removed from the young Sarty, he clearly seems to know the man he will become; therefore, this third level provides salient insight given the story's lack of resolution. The way in which Faulkner weaves this extensively-
layered narrative voice creates a unique experience that occurs over a relatively short reading, one of condensed emotion, intense pathos and considerable dramatic effect.

Through this multi-leveled narrative effects are created intermittently within the text, they often appear after lengthier moments of traditional storytelling or an action sequence. Sometimes they transpire adjacent to one another, sometimes they are scattered about; however, regardless of where they occur in proximity to basic narrative, their function always lends itself to the appropriate aforementioned categories.

This occurrence is best exemplified after the climax of the story concludes. Each of the quotes below directly follows one another, yet when pulled out in terms of their narrative function, the impact of these three levels is fully realized. Sarty has run away and finds himself on top of a hill at midnight. The second voice, which represents a level of articulation that Sarty could not relate within his own mind, emerges: “...and he sat now, ... his face toward the dark woods which he would enter when breath was strong again, small, shaking steadily in the chill darkness, hugging himself into the remainder of his thin, rotten shirt, the grief and despair now no longer terror and fear but just grief and despair” (428). The narrator’s depiction of Sarty’s predicament suggests that what he feels is more intense than what he could ever express alone, through first person narration.

Immediately after this, as if to confirm that what he feels is in fact grief rather than fear, Sarty speaks first internally, then externally. Herein, the first voice is represented between the other two: “...just grief and despair. Father. My father, he thought. “He was brave!” he cried suddenly, aloud, but not aloud, no more than a whisper: “He was! He was in the war! He was in Colonel Sartoris’ cav’ry!” Though the
narrative continues, and it will be looked at momentarily, here concludes the first narrative voice that represents Sarty’s consciousness. The grief that was articulated by the second voice becomes agonizingly apparent when the first voice vocalizes his anguish, and the two work nicely in tandem with one another. However, the construction of narrative relationship continues immediately thenceforth.

Upon the conclusion of Sarty’s affirmation of Abner’s worth, the third, and more enlightened, experienced voice completes the process: “…cav’ry!” not knowing that his father had 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 of his own” (428). Here is the authorial voice who knows Abner’s secrets, who relates them to the reader prejudicially and without reserve, who establishes the irony that Sarty is trying to convince no one but himself that his father was an honorable and brave person deserving of respect and honor.

There are many times throughout “Barn Burning” when these voices emerge independently and in tandem with one another, but their value is neither determined by their frequency nor their interaction with the rest. They are the sole providers of depth; without them “Barn Burning” is just another story. Without this correlative relationship, the reader might easily become over stimulated by the destructive elements of the story, equally uncertain about Sarty’s emotions and Abner’s genuine nature.

Though he was not particularly discussing Vardaman and Sarty per se, in his essay entitled “The Edge of Order: The Pattern of Faulkner’s Rhetoric” Walter Slatoff stated that “sound and silence are frequently presented as existing simultaneously.
Silence often seems not so much the absence of sound as a container for it, a presence even while the sounds are occurring... The most common physical and psychological conditions presented by Faulkner are ones which simultaneously contain element of quiescence and turbulence” (175). Virtually every aspect of Vardaman and Sarty's role within Faulkner's narrative style proves that “quiescence and turbulence”—quietude and volatility—were necessities of their characterization. Their narrative structure, so different yet so eerily similar if considered in light of their emotional and psychological needs, supported the method that accentuated each boy's circumstance.

Vardaman was able to tell of his experiences in a simplistic yet deeply tender way, with a quiescence that confirmed the heredity of Addie's intuitive nature and a turbulence that simultaneously manifested his ignorance and made his narratives incredibly heartbreaking. Whereas Vardaman's quietude propelled his narrative, Sarty's turbulence produced his moments of quiescence—he must have time to contemplate the slow, steady realization that Abner is not worthy of his adoration. This contemplation, a container for "the absence of sound," left a void with which Faulkner filled a third person, carefully layered narrative voice. One can almost imagine that if Vardaman were older his actions and reflections would have mirrored Sarty's. In this regard, Vardaman appears to exist on the precipice of full realization, a place from which Sarty has just emerged prior to the events of "Barn Burning." We can imagine that sooner or later Vardaman would have shed his youthful inexperience and his turbulence would likely have turned inward.
Conclusion

During the late winter to early summer of 1957 and 1958, Faulkner was Writer-in-Residence at the University of Virginia. While there he participated in a series of interviews. In a brief preface, the editors of the collection state two fine observations about the material collected during that timeframe: first, that “there are some secrets of his creation that [an artist] is entitled to keep forever all his own” and “a reader [of the interviews] would be ill advised to treat these answers as consistently revealed truth” (viii). After reading Faulkner’s interview responses, always with the advice acting as a filter, I searched each passage for hints to Vardaman and Sarty’s character. Like much scholarly material, there was little to be found that dealt directly with the boys. However, two comments seemed to offer an interesting glimpse into Faulkner’s view of children in literature and real children in his life.

When the interviewer inquired about what Faulkner thought of Tennessee Williams, he said, “A play called Camino Real I think is best. The others were not quite that good. I saw Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and that was about the wrong people—the problems of children are not worth three acts. The story was about the old man, I thought, the father” (13). When he was asked about his hopes for his grandson’s future, specifically, “what of the Southern tradition and heritage [he hoped would] continue and what [wouldn’t].” His response, in part, was telling. He said, “I hope, of course, that he will cope with his environment as it changes” (13-14). This sentiment echoes the hope that pervades the reader when considering Vardaman’s and Sarty’s lives and future. Perhaps Vardaman plays a seemingly insignificant role during the trip to Jefferson because children are not worth three acts; only when looking back upon the course of the
novel—the way in which he is needed by others—are we able to see his value. Sarty, though such a force within the context of "Barn Burning" virtually disappears from the Snopes family at the conclusion of the story. Perhaps he vanishes because he has to, because he is a Sartoris-Snopes, and that contradictory nature cannot survive past the one act in which Faulkner allowed him to flourish. There is always the simple hope that Vardaman and Sarty, if they would have been granted a future—just one more act or two—would have continued to cope well with their changing environment, for Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County was not an idle place, much like the South in which he lived.

W.P. Warren once said that the profound tension and inner division that characterized Faulkner's South were the very "qualities that stir a man of a society to utterance" (2). Neither Sarty nor Vardaman were always appropriately able to express the tension that built within them, but their actions revealed how two young boys challenged their own inner turmoil and cultural adversity. Amid the lengthy list of Faulkner's characters they are minor, obscure, and forgotten—overshadowed by an array of other idiosyncratic, eccentric figures, but their duration is not what is important. Their quietude and subtle impact emerges from their stories to explore the social and moral conditions and possibilities that exist because of their unique perspective. Vardaman Bundren and Sartoris Snopes may forever be minor players in Faulkner's overall work, but they are forever a part of the moral courage that make the struggle of the South an integral part of American Literature.
Works Cited


<http://www.mcsr.olemiss.edu/~egjb/faulkner/glossary.html>.