Heroes: An Idea Versus a Reality

What does it mean to be a hero? Most people probably think of the comic book heroes such as Spiderman and Batman. While those people are good examples of heroes, not all heroes are that grandeur. A hero is a person who sticks to his/her morals and always does the right thing no matter how hard it is. Being a hero can be liberating in some cases. In William Faulkner’s “Barn Burning,” Sartoris makes the wrong choices and is unhappy until he corrects his mistakes. In John Updike’s “A&P,” Sammy faces a similar situation. However, both characters eventually act right and become heroes. While Sammy faces regret in the end, he is still a hero in the sense that he does what he believes is right.

To begin, “Barn Burning” tells the story of Sartoris who is constantly torn between right and wrong. His father burns barns, something Sartoris knows is wrong, yet Sartoris still lies to protect his family. His father says, “‘You got to learn to stick to your own blood or you ain’t going to have any blood to stick to you’” (Faulkner 3), which adds to the weight of Sarty’s decisions. Doing the right thing would mean that he would lose his family which is the only thing he has. Throughout the first half of the story, Sarty continues to lie and help his father, despite knowing it is wrong, and because of this, he is unhappy. “In choosing to disobey his father, Sarty must make a decision that is attractive in theory but personally negative in its practical results…” (Evans para. 4). A young boy of Sarty’s age should not be put into this kind of position. Family obligations would obviously seem to be the most important loyalty that Sarty
has. If he were to lose his family, how would he survive? He does not only just protect his father because he thinks he is not entirely evil, but Sarty is dependent upon him. Unfortunately for Sarty, when sticking up for his father, something he believes is a noble cause, feelings of self-doubt and guilt begin to manifest themselves within the young boy.

However, in the second half of the story, Sarty becomes more rebellious. He begins to grow restless of his father’s evil doings. He nearly rats him out at the courthouse saying, “‘He ain’t done it! He ain’t burnt…’” (Faulkner 8). This illustrates how Sarty is coming to terms with the evil doings of his father, and perhaps he is even recognizing that by sticking up for his father, Sarty himself is in the wrong. Roy F. Baumeister, a social psychologist, explains, “...that guilt is something that happens between people rather than just inside them. That is, guilt is an interpersonal phenomenon that is functionally and causally linked to communal relationships between people” (para. 3). When examining Sarty’s situation, it is evident that the guilt that builds up in him is caused by his father. The “communal relationship” is represented by Sarty and his father. In another life without the deception of his father, there is a chance that Sarty would have grown up as innocent as a child should, but because his father gets Sarty to lie, Sarty grows up with a life of guilt that consumes him until he reaches his breaking point.

In the end, Sartoris stops his father. The cost for his heroism is his father dies. Sarty accepts a personal loss in order to contribute to a greater cause. Eventually, Sarty begins to feel liberated. The author uses phrases such as, “Dawn and then sun-up…” and “…liquid silver voices of the birds calling unceasing…” (Faulkner 11) to show that freedom and brighter days are heading towards Sarty. These phrases illustrate how Sarty gets a weight off of his chest and is finally happy. Although it is hard, Sarty does what is right, and, because of that, he is a hero. “Small h Heroism refers to small but challenging good deeds. Small h Heroism does not
necessarily imply grand or exceptional moral character or abilities. It usually happens in
everyday circumstances and goes unnoticed by the public” (Keczer para. 7). Just because the
public expects a hero to be somebody who can fly or shoot lasers from his/her eyes, a hero can
be somebody like Sarty. The “challenging good deed” Sarty eventually does is turning his back
on his father. Although it is incredibly hard, Sarty upholds his choice and sticks it out, leading to
a brighter future filled with happier and more promising days.

Similar to Sarty’s story, Sammy’s story in “A&P” is one of upholding morals. Sammy
quits his job in order to stand up for the girls that come into the store. “‘You didn’t have to
embarrass them’” (Updike para. 24) Sammy says to his boss, showing that Sammy knows what
his boss did was wrong. Like “Barn Burning,” this quote from “A&P” shows the beginnings of
how the hero begins to question what is happening in his/her life. This questioning usually leads
to a dramatic choice that will make people such as Sarty and Sammy heroes. Like Sarty, Sammy
has losses that come with quitting. “‘Sammy, you don’t want to do this to your Mom and Dad,’”
his boss says. “‘It’s true, I don’t” (Updike para. 27) Sammy replies, proving that by quitting, he
will anger his parents. The reader is left to interpret how grave this loss may be. Because Sammy
really considers how angry his parents will be, it can be reasoned that angering his parents will
cause an emotional and/or physical distance between Sammy and his parents. Because Sammy
chooses to quit despite the risk of upsetting his parents, he is a hero. He puts others’ needs before
his own. He decides to stand up for the girls rather than keep a comfortable job and the safety of
his mother and father’s love.

While Sammy’s story is nearly identical to Sarty’s, the ending of Sammy’s is quite
different. Sammy immediately has regrets about quitting. “...my stomach kind of fell as I felt
how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter” (Updike para. 29) Sammy thinks, showing
that he is realizing his choice and its consequences. Perhaps he did not realize how difficult the consequences would be, or maybe he did not realize that there would be consequences at all. After using the story to talk about the pretty girls, the author then describes a mother and her screaming kids. This could be a symbol to show how Sammy is let down. After thinking about the pretty girls for the entire time, he thinks they will be waiting on him. Because some may argue that Sammy did his good deed just to win the girls’ hearts, the credibility of his heroism could be undermined. However, it can be argued that Sammy did not quit for the girls but instead for himself. Perhaps the first time, Sammy wants to quit in order to seem brave in front of the girls, but then, “[the girls] keep right on going...leaving me with Lengel…” (Updike para. 24), making Sammy once again think if he seriously wants to quit. The second time he says he wants to quit, there is nobody for Sammy to impress. Because of this, it can be determined that Sammy truly did quit in order to be the bigger person and protect the girls, even though they were not there to witness it. The outcome he got wasn’t the one he expected; however, he is still a hero since he sticks with his decision.

As seen, “Barn Burning” and “A&P” both offer two drastic outcomes to being a hero. But, why? One explanation can be in that the authors are very different people. Faulkner’s “...confidence would be badly shaken by disappointments, but never destroyed. As a youth he had a natural tendency toward isolation, detachment, and observation…” (Witkoski para. 4). This depletion in Faulkner’s confidence could explain how in “Barn Burning,” Sarty is constantly scared to upset his father. It takes Sarty a long time to build up the courage to finally defy his father. The “isolation, detachment, and observation” are also very evident in “Barn Burning”. Although he is with his family, Sarty feels distant because he questions his father’s motives. He is not as close to his family as he would like to be because of this emotional barrier. In the end,
Sarty is finally happy, but as a cost, he is by himself. Perhaps Faulkner wanted to express the happiness that he lacked as a child. Updike on the other hand, grew up with parents who, “...wanted John to leave Pennsylvania and thrive” (Fidler para. 2). Updike’s mother supported him throughout his childhood and even taught him to write. Why is it that Updike, the man with a loving family, chose to write a story with a doubtful ending? It is the same reason that Faulkner, the man with the unhappy childhood, wrote a story with a very decisive ending. “He did not look back,” (11) Faulkner writes, showing that he was ready to leave his life behind without a second thought. Once Sarty got a taste of freedom, he knew he could never return to his old life. Faulkner more than likely sees himself in Sarty. “I look around for my girls, but they’re gone…” (para. 29) Updike writes. This shows how Sammy knows he will be missing the good life he previously had, and doubt about his decisions begins to surface. Updike more than likely sees himself in Sammy. Simply put, the authors childhoods affect the way that they write since their characters are reflections of themselves.

In the end, there are many ways that a person can be a hero. It does not take the strength of Superman or the speed of the Flash to be one. It is the little things in life that make one a hero. Sarty and Sammy are both heroes because they both uphold their morals even though it is hard. Being a hero is tough, and, as Sammy saw, the results can be disappointing; but, the situation can end up like Sarty’s in that positive results can happen, making it a worthwhile gamble. While some may think that only fate decides who is a hero, that is simply not true. Anyone can be a hero, so long as he/she does the right thing, no matter how big or small.
Works Cited


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