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## A Comparison of the Presentation of Selfishness in

William Faulkner's "Barn Burning"

And

Jean Stafford's "In the Zoo"

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William Faulkner's "Barn Burning" (491) and Jean Stafford's "In the Zoo" (1446) both present selfish antagonists in positions of authority; however, the motivations for their selfishness are different. Father's selfishness in "Barn Burning" comes out of a desire for integrity; Mrs. Placer's selfishness in "In the Zoo" stems from self-righteousness. Both protagonists suffering under their caregivers' selfishness must ultimately choose between freedom and security. These choices reflect the individual styles of the writers.

Father's selfishness demonstrates how it is possible to have integrity with misplaced morals. When his "ferocious conviction in the rightness of his own actions" (Faulkner, 493) is challenged, he lashes out in vengeance. By burning his neighbor's barn he believes "he [has] them beat" (493). Assuming his son was "fixing to tell them," Father attempts to ensure the boy "stick[s] to his own blood" (493). Striking him hard but "without heat" implies the abuse is premeditated, ergo justified in Father's eyes. Another example of Father's "voracious prodigality with material not his own" (493) occurs when he defaces Major De Spain's rug. By disrespecting "the man who aims to... [own his] body and soul for the next eight months" (494) he expresses his view about De Spain profiting from his "white sweat" (496). Father's fanatical regard for integrity causes him to discount the interests of others.

Mrs. Placer's self-righteousness causes her to be less than altruistic. Seeking veneration from her sacrifice, she humiliates the girls by reminding them about their "right to be orphans, paupers, wholly dependent of her" (Stafford, 1449). Blind to her own disingenuous generosity, Mrs. Placer ironically condemns the good-hearted Murphy and his failed attempt to stop drinking by stating "the way to hell is paved with good intentions" (1450). Her misappropriation of Laddy and his consequent corruption shows

Mrs. Placer's inability to accept any being that chooses a path different from her own. Believing she is justified because of Murphy's deviance from her moral view, Mrs. Placer becomes an accomplice to the murder of Murphy's monkey. As life is "essentially a matter of being done in, let down, and swindled" (1149) Mrs. Placer has no choice but to fight back by being selfish.

The authors' portrayal of the protagonists' reactions to their care givers' selfishness differ. After Colonel Sartoris in "Barn Burning" realizes Father will never stop "[being what he used to be]" (498), he breaks for freedom. "The weight of his years" (494) finally becomes heavy enough to resist injustice. The unceasing "liquid silver voices of the birds" (503) in the dark woods imply everything will be all right. This escape reflects Faulkner's style of portraying "[virtue prevailing] through the corruptions of modern life" (Cassill, 490). The girls in "In the Zoo" internalize their resentment and view it guiltily, as they are "enjoined" to give Mrs. Placer "eternal thanks" (Stafford, 1448); "Vitiated," (1459) the girls never run away. The story of a "self-conscious, vulnerable child, viewing the promises of the world with an aching mistrust" is a common theme in many of Stafford's stories (Cassill, 1446).

The causes of selfishness in both stories differ, but the affects on the protagonists are the same. Father believes his actions are justified as they work towards preserving his integrity. Mrs. Placer believes she is just as she holds others up to her moral code. She is also merely responding to the repression she feels she endures from others. Regardless of the different causes for selfishness, the interests of both protagonists are impeded: among many more hardships, Colonel Sartoris is physically abused and the girl is humiliated. True to what Oscar Wilde said, "[s]elfishness is not living as one wishes to live, it is asking others to live as one wishes to live" (Wilde, *De Profundis*), both antagonists try to convert the protagonists to their way of thinking. Father uses the flat side of his hand; Mrs. Placer uses guilt. In reflection of Faulkner's style, Colonel Sartoris breaks for freedom and hope. Stafford portrays her style by not allowing the girls to run away; instead, the girls must find happiness in spite of hardship. When self-interest impedes the freedoms of others, it becomes selfishness.

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