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The Emotional Separation Caused by Selfishness

There were escalating presentations of selfishness by each antagonist, the mother in “Rules of the Game” by Amy Tan and the father in “Barn Burning” by William Faulkner. The selfishness caused significant emotional separation and led to dramatic attempts to resolve the conflicts experienced by both Waverly and Sartoris, the respective protagonists in each story. A comparison of the selfishness demonstrated will be made by presenting examples from mild to more severe and will demonstrate the resulting emotional separations experienced by both protagonists.

In the beginning the selfishness of Waverly’s mother was milder compared to the selfishness of Abner, Sartoris’ father. We are shown that Waverly’s mother is stubborn and selfish in her view of right and wrong as Waverly states that she was six when her mother taught her “the art of invisible strength. It was a strategy for winning arguments” (Tan, 1423). In contrast a starker example of selfishness was presented by Abner as he expected Sartoris to lie to cover up his wrong doing. Sartoris realized that his father’s behaviour was wrong and was conflicted with obeying his wishes as was evident in Sartoris’ thoughts as he was called to testify by the Justice of the Peace, “He aims for me to lie, he thought, again with that frantic grief and despair. And I will have to do hit” (Faulkner, 536). The presentations of selfishness by both antagonists became more prominent as the stories progressed.

There was an increased display of selfish behaviour while Waverly’s two brothers were playing with the used chess game and while Abner was cleaning the Colonel’s rug. As Waverly’s brothers were playing her mother pretended to read the rule booklet and commented that “Every time people come out from foreign country, must know rules. You not know, judge say, Too bad, go back” (Tan, 1426).

Waverly's mother demonstrated discontent with her children's increased capability over her by learning something that she didn't understand and it was a selfish attempt at holding them back. Similarly Abner was selfish when he refused his wife's help to clean the rug while she even begged, "Abner. Abner. Please don't. Please, Abner" (Faulkner, 541). His ignorance and selfishness wouldn't allow him to accept help from his wife because that would have meant that she was more capable than he was. The increased selfishness of both antagonists was building into two significantly different conflicts for both protagonists.

The diverse conflict resolutions for both stories began as Waverly was paraded around while her mother bragged about her and when Sartoris was forcibly restrained by his mother. Waverly became annoyed by her mother's selfish need to show off and asked "Why do you have to use me to show off? If you want to show off, then why don't you learn to play chess?" (Tan, 1429). Waverly ran off leaving her mother in the street and when Waverly returned home her mother commented that "We not concerning this girl. This girl not have concerning for us." (Tan, 1430). Waverly's mother demonstrated complete selfishness and was unable to understand the feelings Waverly was experiencing as it was more important to prove she had the upper hand over Waverly. In contrast we are shown the determination of Sartoris to confront the selfishness of his father as he breaks free from his mother's restraint, "Then he was free. His aunt grasped at him but it was too late" (Faulkner, 546), in order to warn the Colonel which resulted in the decisive liberation of Sartoris and loss of his father as he was shot to death. Both conflict resolutions appeared to have negative emotional effects on the respective protagonists.

Ultimately the presentations of selfishness by the respective antagonists and the attempts to resolve the conflicts resulted in undesired resolutions that led to the emotional separations of both protagonists. In the end it was the "Strongest wind cannot be seen" (Tan, 1430) that pushed Waverly