

As I Lay Dying Study Guide

As I Lay Dying by William Faulkner

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Introduction

Although it achieved little commercial success at the time of its publication, *As I Lay Dying* has become one of William Faulkner's most popular novels. At first put off by its controversial subject matter and confusing style, commentators and readers have come to appreciate the novel's vivid characters, elusive tone, and complex narrative techniques.

As I Lay Dying chronicles the death of Addie Bundren and the subsequent journey to bury her corpse in her family's cemetery several miles away. This disastrous and darkly comic tale is enriched by Faulkner's innovative narrative technique, which features narration by fifteen characters, including a confused child and the dead woman, Addie. In addition, Faulkner mixes vernacular speech with "stream-of-consciousness" passages to enhance this unique narrative style.

Through his characters, Faulkner addresses subjects that challenge stereotypical perceptions of poor Southerners. For instance, characters contemplate issues of love, death, identity, and the limitations of language. Their actions and adventures draw attention to rural life, class conflicts, and the repercussions of desire and selfishness. Significantly, Faulkner explores the potent, complex workings of the human mind. Difficult to categorize, *As I Lay Dying* has provided a rewarding, illuminating, and, at times, unsettling experience for generations of readers.



Author Biography

William Cuthbert Faulkner (changed from the original spelling, Falkner) was born on September 25, 1897, in New Albany, Mississippi. He was the first of four sons born to Maud and Murry, a prominent local businessman. The Faulkners moved to Oxford, Mississippi, when William was five; for the rest of his life, Oxford remained his primary home.

Though an avid reader, Faulkner did not like school. In 1914 he quit high school and worked in his grandfather's bank. During this time, he was devastated as a result of a broken marital engagement with Estelle Oldham, who married another man under familial pressure. In 1918 he was refused admission into the armed forces because of his size. Determined to fight in World War I, he falsified his credentials to enter the Royal Air Force in Canada, but the war ended before he completed his military training. He attended the University of Mississippi for two years as a special student, from 1919 to 1921.

After his tenure at the University of Mississippi, he worked briefly in a New York bookstore. He returned to Oxford and became postmaster at the university until 1924, when he was fired for writing and socializing while on duty. In 1924, he published his first book, a collection of poems entitled *The Marble Faun*.

In 1925, he lived for a few months in New Orleans. During that short time he socialized with Sherwood Anderson. It was Anderson's wife, Elizabeth Prall, who encouraged Faulkner to abandon poetry for fiction. He subsequently left New Orleans and traveled to Paris, toured Europe, and began to write his first novel.

His first three novels, *Soldiers' Pay* (1926), *Mosquitoes* (1927), and *Sartoris* (1929) (a shortened version of *Flags in the Dust*, published in 1973) garnered little attention. In 1929, Faulkner married Estelle Oldham, who had recently divorced her husband. She already had two children, and the couple had two daughters, one of whom died in infancy. Early on, Estelle attempted suicide; this event signaled the beginning of an unhappy union for the couple.

In 1929 Faulkner published his most ambitious work to date, *The Sound and the Fury*. It garnered much critical praise but was not commercially successful. While working the night shift as a power plant stoker, he wrote and revised *As I Lay Dying* in under three months. Published in 1930, the novel was praised by critics but attracted little commercial attention.

For the rest of his life, Faulkner made his living as a writer of fiction and Hollywood screenplays. His most accomplished works during the 1930s and 1940s include *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *The Hamlet*, and *Go Down, Moses*. In 1946 Malcolm Cowley's editing and publication of *The Portable Faulkner* helped to cement Faulkner's literary reputation and commercial viability.

Faulkner received the 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature and the 1954 Pulitzer Prize for his novel *The Fable*. During the last ten years of his life, he traveled, lectured, and became an outspoken critic of segregation. From 1957 until his death, he was writer-in-residence at the University of Virginia, near his daughter Jill and her children. In 1962, after years of drinking and a succession of physical problems, he died of a heart attack on July 6 in Oxford.



Plot Summary

Addie's Death

As I Lay Dying chronicles the dark, comic story of a Mississippi family's long and arduous journey to bury Addie, the family matriarch. Respecting Addie's request to be buried in her family's burial ground in Jefferson, Anse Bundren and his five children disregard the advice of friends and neighbors and embark on a forty-mile, nine-day trek in the wake of a devastating storm.

The story of the journey is presented by a variety of narrators: family members, friends, acquaintances, and objective onlookers. Each narrator provides a different perspective on individuals and events.

When the novel begins, Addie is on her deathbed. Outside her bedroom window, Cash slowly and meticulously builds her coffin. On the front porch, Jewel and Darl confer with their father about taking a last-minute job to make a bit of money. Anse reminds his sons of his promise to their mother but agrees to let them go, even though he knows that Addie may die before they return.

When Peabody, the local doctor, is finally summoned to the Bundren home, he predicts that it will be too late to do anything for Addie. Sure enough, she dies shortly after Peabody's arrival at the Bundren farm. After sending Dewey Dell away to prepare supper, Anse stands over his dead wife, listens to the sound of Cash's saw as he works on the coffin, and says: "God's will be done. Now I can get them teeth."

The Journey Begins

Cash finishes the coffin later that night in the pouring rain. Addie is kept in the coffin for three days before Darl and Jewel return home with the wagon. On the first day, the family wakes to find that Vardaman has bored the top of the coffin full of holes—two of which bored straight through Addie's face.

By the time the family finally gets the coffin on the wagon, the bridge to town has been washed away by heavy rains, adding several days to their journey. Jewel, refusing to travel with the family, follows some distance behind on his beloved horse.

Just before sundown they complete the first eight miles of their journey. They spend the night in a neighbor's barn and start off again early the next morning, trying to find a bridge that hasn't been completely destroyed by a recent storm. They finally find one near Vernon Tull's farm.

After consideration, it is decided that Anse, Dewey Dell, Vardaman, and Vernon Tull will walk across the remains of the bridge and that Cash and Darl will lead the wagon across the river at the ford. Jewel crosses ahead of them on his horse. Halfway across



the bridge, the wagon is hit by a floating log and is dragged off by the current. The wagon and Addie's coffin are recovered, but the mules drown and Cash breaks his leg.

The narrative action pauses as Addie narrates a section in the novel. She describes her youth, her miserable life as a schoolteacher, and her decision to marry Anse. Unfortunately, her marriage is an unhappy one.

After giving birth to Cash, she suffered from depression; after giving birth to her second son, Darl, she makes Anse promise to bury her in Jefferson when she dies. Her revenge, she says, would be that Anse would never know that she was taking revenge. Addie also reveals her secret affair with Reverend Whitfield—a union that produced Addie's favorite child, Jewel.

From Bad to Worse

After the disastrous river crossing, the Bundrens spend the night at Armstid's farm. In the morning, Anse rides off on Jewel's horse to purchase a team of mules. During his absence, the heat intensifies the already putrid stench of Addie's corpse. Outraged, Lula Armstid thinks Anse "should be lawed for treating [Addie] so."

When Anse finally returns, he announces that he has traded Jewel's horse for a team of mules. The family's journey resumes the next morning with Cash lying on a pallet placed atop Addie's coffin.

Like Anse, Dewey Dell has personal reasons for wanting to go to town. She is pregnant and her boyfriend, Lefe, has told her that she would be able to "get something at the drugstore" to induce an abortion. When the procession passes through the town of Mottson, Dewey Dell speaks to the druggist but is told that she will not get what she wants in his store.

Meanwhile, Darl buys cement for Cash's leg at a hardware store. Anse, waiting outside in the wagon, is told by the town marshal that he will have to leave town. After eight days in the stifling heat, Addie's body is endangering the public health.

The family leaves town, stopping briefly to apply fresh cement on Cash's broken leg. Jewel, who disappeared after Anse traded his horse, reappears and rejoins the family.

They spend the last night of their journey on a farm belonging to Mr. Gillespie. During the night, Darl sets fire to the barn and Jewel's back is burned rescuing the coffin from the flames.

When Gillespie discovers that it was Darl who set the fire, he threatens to sue unless Darl is committed to the mental institution in Jackson. Cash thinks that Darl "done right in a way," trying to get Addie "outen our hands," but decides that it does not excuse setting fire to a man's barn and endangering his property.

Journey's End-and a New Beginning

As they arrive in Jefferson the next day, Anse finally concedes that they will have to find a doctor for Cash's infected leg. But first, they bury Addie. Anse borrows a couple of spades on the way to the cemetery and—nine days after Addie's death—finally lays his wife to rest in her family plot. As they leave the cemetery, Darl is jumped by Dewey Dell and Jewel and handed over to the men waiting to take him to the mental institution in Jackson.

When Cash finally gets to the doctor, Peabody cannot believe that Anse treated his son's broken leg with raw cement. Shocked at the damage they have done to him, the doctor wonders why Anse simply didn't bring Cash to the nearest sawmill and stick his leg in the saw.

Meanwhile, Dewey Dell finds another drugstore. After requesting something that will terminate her pregnancy, she is given a box of useless capsules by the drugstore clerk. The deceitful clerk proceeds to seduce her. The next morning, Anse disappears only to reappear with a new set of teeth and a new Mrs. Bundren—a local woman who loaned him the tools to bury Addie.

Darl - Chapter 1

Darl - Chapter 1 Summary

Darl and Jewel walk back to their house from the field. When they near the house, they pass Cash, who is making a coffin for their dying mother, Addie Bundren.

Darl - Chapter 1 Analysis

The name used for each chapter is the name of the person narrating that chapter. The author, Faulkner, moves between characters in order to show different viewpoints of the same events.

Darl, Jewel and Cash are brothers. Their mother is Addie Bundren.



Cora - Chapter 2

Cora - Chapter 2 Summary

While Cora is in the Bundrens' kitchen, helping them with the cooking, she remembers how she made some cakes for Miss Lawington, but Miss Lawington decided that they were not needed. Cora tells herself that she does not feel bad about losing the money, but her daughter, Kate, continually says that Miss Lawington should have purchased the cakes that Cora made for her, even though she did not need them. However, Cora reassures herself that the lost money is no loss at all, and she recites some religious sayings to herself in order to feel better.

Nearby, Addie Bundren is lying under a quilt, slowly dying. While Cora looks at Addie, she hopes that Addie will be up and around soon, but she also says that she hopes Addie's illness will show Addie how she has gone wrong. Then, while Cora continues her cooking, Darl enters the room.

Cora - Chapter 2 Analysis

Kate's concern over the lost money shows that the people in this area are poor. This is made clear through the fact that the amount of money that Cora lost was relatively small, but she still feels the need to justify the loss to herself.

Darl - Chapter 3

Darl - Chapter 3 Summary

Darl, returning to the house to take a drink of water, sees his father and Vernon Tull sitting on the back porch together. When he sits and takes a drink, he notices that rain is on the way, and it is coming soon. While Darl sips his water, Darl's father asks where Jewel might be. Darl responds by telling him that Jewel is in the barn, hitching up the mules.

However, in the barn, Jewel is actually approaching his own horse to take it out for a ride. This wild, seemingly untamable horse rears and kicks at him, but Jewel ducks out of the way and mounts him easily. Once he is on the horse, Jewel takes it out and expertly rides it around the yard, and then returns it to the stall. However, after he has dismounted, Jewel curses and strikes the horse.

Darl - Chapter 3 Analysis

Darl is the only narrator who knows what is happening someplace other than where he is located. He may actually know what is going on, or he may just be imagining it, but he is a reliable narrator throughout the book.

Jewel's natural understanding of the wild horse and his snap decision to beat the horse provides some initial hints as to Jewel's wild streak.



Jewel - Chapter 4

Jewel - Chapter 4 Summary

Jewel is angry about the fact that Cash is building Addie's coffin right outside her window. To Jewel, it seems that Cash actually wants to see their mother die.

Jewel - Chapter 4 Analysis

For all his wildness, this chapter shows that Jewel genuinely loves his mother.



Darl - Chapter 5

Darl - Chapter 5 Summary

Darl and Jewel are trying to leave in order to do some work that will pay them money. However, their father -- Anse Bundren -- does not tell them to either stay or go but keeps dawdling in his decision. It is unclear why they are asking their father's opinion on the matter, because they seem to be old enough to make their own decisions. While Jewel listens to Anse waffle, he finally makes the decision that he and Darl will leave to do the job.

Darl - Chapter 5 Analysis

Anse Bundren -- Darl and Jewel's father -- always says he "mislikes" things, as though he does not actually like them. However, he usually says this about anything that he would prefer, but does not want to say that he prefers.

Anse Bundren is a lazy man, who does not think he is lazy. As Darl points out, Anse believes he will die if he sweats. Of course, the best way for him to ensure that he does not sweat is for him to do no work at all.

Jewel is an impatient man who gets things done. Therefore, he does not like people who make slow decisions, like his father is doing in this chapter. This explains his impatience with Cash in Chapter 34 when Cash is trying to think of a plan to get the wagon across the river.



Cora - Chapter 6

Cora - Chapter 6 Summary

Cora believes that Darl wanted to stay at his mother's side, but Anse and Jewel forced him to leave. Cora also thinks that Addie was too proud for her own good. Then, in her final complaint about the Bundren family, Cora insists that Anse is going against Addie's wishes when he insists on taking her back to Jefferson for her burial. Vernon Tull, Cora's husband, disagrees with Cora on this final point, but Cora stubbornly shouts him down.

Just then, Darl enters the room, and then stares at his mother's dying body. While she fans Addie, Dewey Dell asks Darl what he wants. However, Darl does not respond to her question.

Cora - Chapter 6 Analysis

The reader is invited to distrust Cora as a narrator in this chapter, because we know that Cora's assessment of Darl, Jewel, and Anse are wrong. This tells the reader to question the opinions that Cora offers later in the novel.

Dewey Dell is Addie's daughter and Darl's sister.



Dewey Dell - Chapter 7

Dewey Dell - Chapter 7 Summary

Dewey Dell remembers a time when she was picking cotton with Lafe, her boyfriend. As she recalls, Lafe was trying to get Dewey Dell to have sex with her in the woods at the end of the row, but Dewey Dell said she would only do it if her sack was full at the end of the row. Lafe, of course, threw all his cotton in her sack so that he could have sex with her.

When Dewey Dell came back from the fields, Darl knew immediately that they had had sex in the woods. It is just like the way that he knows, like Dewey Dell says, that Addie will die before he and Jewel get back from their errand.

Dewey Dell - Chapter 7 Analysis

From reading the terrible English of Dewey Dell, we can tell that she is not very intelligent.

When Dewey Dell says that Darl knows Addie will die, it clearly foreshadows Addie's death.



Tull - Chapter 8

Tull - Chapter 8 Summary

Vernon Tull and Anse are discussing what Anse should do, though it is not clear what Anse's decision concerns. Tull is trying to reassure him that Darl and Jewel will get back in time to see their mother die, but Anse is not convinced, because he thinks that Addie seems ready to die soon.

While the men are discussing Darl and Jewel, Vardaman arrives, carrying an enormous fish that he caught. Seeing the fish, Anse tells Vardaman that he has to clean it. Vardaman protests, but Anse's insistence finally sends him sulking off with the fish.

While Vernon watches Vardaman walk off toward the barn, Cora comes out of the house and tells Vernon that it is time for them to go. Before he leaves, Vernon offers his help to Anse, if he needs it, and then he, Cora, Kate, and Eula get into their wagon and ride off from the house.

Tull - Chapter 8 Analysis

Early in the chapter, Anse continually says he dislikes something, but what it is that he dislikes is never clear.

Tull constantly mentions the coming rain, further foreshadowing the massive rainstorm.

Tull says that he and everyone else around has helped Anse so much that they cannot stop now. All this labor that Anse receives contradicts his claim that he and his family will not owe anybody anything.

Kate and Eula are Cora and Vernon's daughters.



Anse - Chapter 9

Anse - Chapter 9 Summary

Anse expects a lot of rain before Jewel and Darl return and chalks it up to the bad luck that comes with living by a road. While he thinks about his bad luck, he remembers how Addie used to tell him to move if he did not like living by a road and suffering all the bad luck that it brings. However, Anse has decided that people should not move, because they are built upright like trees. To Anse's thinking, only things that are built sideways -- like wagons or roads -- are meant to travel. To add to the bad luck brought about by living by a road, Anse also blames the road for giving Cash the idea to become a carpenter -- a trade Anse disapproves of -- and for making Darl wish to leave the farm.

While Anse continues to ponder his bad luck, the local doctor, Peabody, arrives, even though Anse did not call for him. Upon seeing the doctor, Anse is immediately concerned about the cost of Peabody's visit.

Anse - Chapter 9 Analysis

Here, Anse is shown to be a man who can justify his actions to himself, even though his justifications are simply wrong. Anse refuses to move from a house he hates, in a location he hates, because only flat things move. However, roads just lie there, too. Only things traveling on the roads move. Anse is simply justifying his own laziness.

Darl - Chapter 10

Darl - Chapter 10 Summary

Darl and Jewel are in the wagon on the way to their paying job. Darl asks Jewel if he realizes their mother is dying, but Jewel does not respond. Then Darl's thoughts turn to the fact that Dewey Dell wants Addie to die so that she can leave the farm. After pondering this, Darl again asks Jewel if he knows that Addie is dying.

Darl - Chapter 10 Analysis

Darl refers to Addie Bundren as though she is not his mother, but only the mother of Jewel and Dewey Dell. This shows that he does not have a particularly strong attachment to her.



Peabody - Chapter 11

Peabody - Chapter 11 Summary

Peabody arrives, but he does not particularly want to save Addie, because, if he does, she will have to put up with Anse that much longer. When Peabody thinks about it, he figures that Anse will have sent for him too late anyway, like he always does.

Because the Bundrens' house sits atop a ridge, and Peabody is a big man, they have to send a rope down so that Peabody can climb. Once he gets to the top of the ridge, Peabody enters the house and examines Addie. When he looks at her, Peabody realizes that there is no point in trying to help her; she is going to die soon. After he finishes his analysis, Peabody comes out of the house and yells at Anse for taking so long to call for him when he could have helped Addie earlier.

Peabody - Chapter 11 Analysis

The doctor's talks about nihilism and fundamentalism show that he is very well educated in areas other than just medicine.



Darl - Chapter 12

Darl - Chapter 12 Summary

Addie asks for Jewel, but Anse tells her that he is gone. Then, using the last of her strength, Addie sits up in bed to watch Cash work on her coffin. Cash only responds by showing her the boards he is working on, before returning to his work. Finally, Addie lies back down, takes a final look at Vardaman and dies.

Shocked at her sudden death, Dewey Dell falls across Addie's knees and tries in vain to wake her. Vardaman, who is saddened and angered by his mother's death, runs out of the house. However, Anse's only response is to curse Jewel and Darl for not being there.

Hearing the commotion, Cash enters the room. Seeing his son, Anse offers to get him help with the coffin, but Cash is not listening. Instead, Cash stares at Addie for a bit, and then goes back to work.

With nothing left to do for her mother, Anse tells Dewey Dell to make supper. However, Dewey Dell does not leave immediately. Instead, she arranges the quilt neatly on Addie before she goes into the kitchen. Seeing Dewey Dell's final act of devotion, Anse tries to imitate Dewey Dell's quilt smoothing. However, Anse's rough handling of the quilt merely makes a mess of it.

Darl - Chapter 12 Analysis

When Anse sees that his wife is dead he says, "Now I can get them teeth." (52) This shows the reader Anse's selfishness, because Anse's only thought upon the death of his wife is for himself.

Dewey Dell is able to make the quilt look nice on her dead mother, while Anse only ruins Dewey Dell's nice work. This symbolizes the way that Anse has ruined Addie's life.



Vardaman - Chapter 13

Vardaman - Chapter 13 Summary

Vardaman runs from the house, blaming Peabody for killing his mother and, finding Peabody's horses, he lashes out at Peabody by striking his horses with a stick, scaring them and sending them running. Not content with smacking them once, Vardaman chases the horses as long as he can, giving vent to his frustration and rage. After his emotions spend themselves, Vardaman cools down and goes into the barn to hide and think about the fish he caught.

Vardaman - Chapter 13 Analysis

Vardaman's terrible, almost incomprehensible English shows that he is not only unintelligent, but probably retarded.



Dewey Dell - Chapter 14

Dewey Dell - Chapter 14 Summary

Dewey Dell wishes someone would do things for her, but she never specifies about whom she is talking. However, her thoughts are interrupted when Cash comes in looking for Vardaman, because Peabody's horses ran away and Cash suspects Vardaman had a hand in it. Dewey Dell does not know where he went, but she does report that dinner is ready.

When Cash and Anse sit down to eat, Dewey Dell goes out to the barn to milk the cow. Thinking she is alone in the barn, she is suddenly aroused by her solitude. However, her implied intention to masturbate in the barn is interrupted when she sees Vardaman.

Alarmed and angered at the thought that Vardaman was spying on her, Dewey Dell shakes Vardaman and yells at him for sneaking around. Vardaman, however, cannot do anything except blubber that Peabody killed their mother. Finally, Dewey Dell realizes he was not trying to spy on her, so she calms down and sends Vardaman into the house for dinner.

Dewey Dell - Chapter 14 Analysis

Dewey Dell is probably referring to Lafe when she thinks about the person who could do things for her.

When Dewey Dell says, "What you got in you aint [sic] nothing to what I got in me," (63) it foreshadows the revelation that she is pregnant.

Vardaman - Chapter 15

Vardaman - Chapter 15 Summary

Vardaman watches Cash finish the coffin while he thinks about his dead mother. He tries to place her into his knowledge bank and finally decides that she is the fish that he caught and cleaned earlier.

Vardaman - Chapter 15 Analysis

The mixing of Addie and the fish in Vardaman's mind shows his confused reaction to Addie's death, as well as his inability to deal with the fact that she is just as dead as the fish he caught.



Tull - Chapter 16

Tull - Chapter 16 Summary

Much to the confusion of the Tull family, Peabody's team arrives at their house. Cora takes it to mean that Addie Bundren has died, and she needs to go to the Bundren's, but Vernon is not so sure. Instead, Vernon refuses to go to the Bundren's until they actually call for him.

Outside, it starts to rain, and the rain falls heavier and heavier, Vardaman arrives at the Tulls, soaked through from the storm. Surprised by Vardaman's sudden appearance, Cora and Vernon ask him what happened, and, after muttering some nonsense, Vardaman finally indicates that Addie has died. Hearing this, the Tulls decide to take Vardaman back home in their wagon.

When the Tulls arrive at the Bundren's with Vardaman, Vernon helps Cash finish the coffin. Tull notices how Cash carefully works to complete the coffin. In fact, his only mistake occurs when he is drilling holes in the coffin, and he accidentally bores two holes into Addie's face.

Tull - Chapter 16 Analysis

The religious philosophy of this chapter shows that Vernon is a meek Christian who does not agree with Cora's self-righteous Bible-thumping. However, he does not have the energy to argue with her and her brand of Christianity, so he just lets her say what she will.



Darl - Chapter 17

Darl - Chapter 17 Summary

The story jumps to the night when Cash is trying to finish Addie's coffin. Even though the rain is soaking through his clothes, Cash does not rush the job. Instead, everything he does is precise and absolutely right. Eventually, Anse comes outside to offer his help, but Cash tells him to go back indoors, which he quickly does. However, when Vernon arrives, Cash gladly accepts his assistance.

Cash continues to carefully work with Vernon, and, despite the fact that beveling the edges is a time consuming process, Cash does it, because it makes for a better job. Finally, after working long through the night, Cash finishes the coffin, wipes off his tools and puts them away.

Darl - Chapter 17 Analysis

Anse's selfishness is shown, once again, when he shows up in a raincoat, but does not have one for Cash. Even though Anse goes back inside where it is dry, he does not give the raincoat to Cash.

Cash's distaste for Anse is shown in this chapter. Cash refuses Anse's help when he offers it, but accepts Vernon Tull's offer of assistance. This illustrates the fact that Cash is happy to have help in his work, just not the help of his father.

Cash's careful work on the coffin shows that he is very concerned about craftsmanship for its own sake. He is not being careful for Addie's sake because, if he is worried about Addie, he would not have bored holes into her face. Cash's concern for his work is also shown in his cautious care for his tools, which he wipes off carefully before he puts them away. This foreshadows his concern for them when they are dumped into the river along with Addie's coffin.



Cash - Chapter 18

Cash - Chapter 18 Summary

Cash lists his reasons for beveling the joint between the lid and the box. This numerical list gives each of his reasons in precise order, ending with "It makes a neater job." (83)

Cash - Chapter 18 Analysis

Cash shows his careful, methodically precise nature in his explanation of why he beveled the joints. However, he merely refers to the body in the coffin; he does not say anything about the fact that his mother is the body in the coffin. This further shows how he is more concerned with craftsmanship than his own mother.

Vardaman - Chapter 19

Vardaman - Chapter 19 Summary

This chapter only says, "My mother is a fish." (84)

Vardaman - Chapter 19 Analysis

This sentence shows Vardaman's way of dealing with death: he turns it into something that he knows and can deal with. He does not know how to deal with death on a philosophical level, so he thinks of his mother as a dead fish.



Tull - Chapter 20

Tull - Chapter 20 Summary

Tull returns to the Bundrens' driving Peabody's wagon. When he arrives, there are some other men there discussing the fact that Anse still wants to bury Addie in Jefferson even though the bridge across the river has washed out.

Meanwhile, Cash is carefully making plugs for the nail holes in Addie's coffin, despite the fact that nobody would notice or care if he did it or not. Tull observes that this is nothing new because he has seen Cash do such exacting work on simple wedges.

Eventually, the rites of the funeral begin as they lay Addie in the coffin and nail it shut. Tull notices that the women put a net over Addie's face to cover the auger holes that Cash put into her. Just then, Whitfield arrives saying, "The Lord comfort this house" (88). He explains that he is late because the bridge has washed out, and he had to cross the river at the old ford.

Having finished the plugs, Cash joins the men. In order to make conversation, Armstid asks him about his broken leg and mentions that it is a good thing that he was not hurt more in his fall off Tull's barn. Cash, however, is silent on the topic.

The funeral service is a simple affair where the women and men take turns singing their portion and, when the women finish the final portion, everyone turns to go their separate ways, including the Tulls. When they return home, they see Vardaman off to the side of the road, fishing.

Tull - Chapter 20 Analysis

The concerns about the washed out bridge foreshadow the problems the Bundrens will face when they try to cross the river.

Whitfield's beautiful, heartfelt singing at Addie's funeral foreshadows the revelation of their earlier relationship.

The scene of Vardaman fishing symbolizes his desire to get his mother back.

Darl - Chapter 21

Darl - Chapter 21 Summary

Jewel and Darl return from their job to learn that their mother is dead. Jewel is frustrated and angry that he has missed Addie's death and her funeral, but Darl is completely indifferent. In his impotent rage, Jewel curses both Darl and Anse for making him miss the death and funeral of his mother.

Darl - Chapter 21 Analysis

Darl says, "Jewel's mother is a horse," (95) because Jewel loves and understands horses in the same way he loved and understood his mother. However, Darl says that he has no mother because his mother is dead and, therefore, non-existent.



Cash - Chapter 22

Cash - Chapter 22 Summary

In this short chapter, Cash notes that the coffin is being carried wrong. One of the men carrying it is yelling at the others, but it is not clear who is yelling.

Cash - Chapter 22 Analysis

Cash is interrupted because he is so analytical that nobody wants to wait for him to say anything.



Darl - Chapter 23

Darl - Chapter 23 Summary

Jewel yells at the other pallbearers, urging them to walk faster. Unfortunately, none of them can keep up with Jewel. Anse is the first to fall off the pace and Cash quickly follows, hobbled by his broken leg. However, Jewel keeps moving and pulls the coffin so fast that he even leaves Darl behind. Jewel is unaffected and keeps going, carrying the coffin and manhandling it into the wagon all on his own.

Darl - Chapter 23 Analysis

The way that Jewel carries the coffin by himself symbolizes his singular love for his mother.

Vardaman - Chapter 24

Vardaman - Chapter 24 Summary

The Bundrens prepare to take Addie's body to Jefferson, but everyone seems to have separate agendas for the trip. Jewel goes into the barn and gets on his horse with the intention of riding behind the wagon, Cash brings his tools along in order to work on Tull's barn on the way back, and Dewey Dell gets into the cart with a package that she says contains Cora's cakes, which she intends to sell along the way. However, Anse says that they are all being disrespectful of their mother by putting their own concerns above that of their mother.

Vardaman - Chapter 24 Analysis

Because none of Anse's offspring listen to him, this clearly shows that Addie was the only person holding the family together. Once Addie is gone, Anse's children feel no need to listen to their father.

Darl - Chapter 25

Darl - Chapter 25 Summary

When the family leaves in the wagon, Jewel walks toward the barn. Seeing Jewel sulk off, Cash thinks that Jewel is intending to stay behind, but Darl says that Jewel will ride his horse and catch up with them along the road.

Darl - Chapter 25 Analysis

This scene reinforces that Darl has a better understanding of Jewel than Cash.



Anse - Chapter 26

Anse - Chapter 26 Summary

Anse complains that Jewel is not riding in the wagon with the rest of the family while they are traveling down the road. After a while, Jewel finally appears and, when Darl sees Jewel riding up on the prancing horse, he starts laughing at him. Hearing Darl's laughter in the same wagon as Addie's coffin, Anse complains about Darl, too.

Anse - Chapter 26 Analysis

Anse complains about a number of things, but they are all minor. This is a sign that something bigger is bothering him.



Darl - Chapter 27

Darl - Chapter 27 Summary

Here, Darl is giving his version of the ride near the Tulls' house. Jewel rides up to the Bundrens' wagon and, like he did in the last chapter, Darl finds the sight hilarious. However, farther down the road, Cash says that the coffin is not balanced properly. Darl hears him, but does not worry about it.

Darl - Chapter 27 Analysis

The improper balance that Cash mentions foreshadows the wagon tipping over in the river.

Anse - Chapter 28

Anse - Chapter 28 Summary

Anse thinks about his farm and considers his reward in heaven for toiling on the land for so long. In fact, he concocts a string of Biblical phrases that justify his belief. However, his thoughts then turn to the dentures he will get at the end of the journey.

Anse - Chapter 28 Analysis

Anse is shown to be a hypocrite here. He thinks he works hard, but the reader learned earlier that he refuses to work.

Once again, Anse's selfishness is symbolized by his concern for getting a set of dentures.



Samson - Chapter 29

Samson - Chapter 29 Summary

When the Bundrens arrive at Samson's house, he tells Anse that all the bridges are out over the river. However, Anse stubbornly refuses to either go another way or turn around and go back. Listening to Anse justify his decision to press on, Samson chalks up his stubbornness to a byproduct of his detestable laziness. However, as Samson sees that the Bundrens need a place to stay, Samson offers them the use of his barn, which the Bundrens accept. However, they refuse his offer to come into the house and eat with his family.

Samson - Chapter 29 Analysis

The petty meanness and insensitivity of Anse is shown in this chapter. He is so determined to maintain the fiction that he does not owe anybody that he offends Rachel by refusing her hospitality.

The buzzard in the barn foreshadows both the buzzards that follow the wagon and the horrible smell of Addie's decaying body.



Dewey Dell - Chapter 30

Dewey Dell - Chapter 30 Summary

The story returns to the time shortly after the Bundrens left their own house. Dewey Dell is fascinated by the sign for New Hope Church and she thinks that hope is gone, though the reason she thinks that is not explained.

While the journey continues, Dewey Dell's mind wanders and she begins to daydream. She first imagines herself riding in the wagon naked. However, her thoughts quickly change and she imagines watching Vardaman clean a fish. Then she imagines taking Vardaman's knife and killing Darl with it. However, her thoughts return to the present as the wagon passes by Tull's house.

Dewey Dell - Chapter 30 Analysis

Dewey Dell's hopelessness is overtly symbolized when they pass the sign for New Hope instead of making the turn toward it. It seems that she has lost hope. However, what she is hoping for is not clear.

Dewey Dell's daydream symbolizes her dislike of Darl and foreshadows her crazed attack on Darl after Addie's burial.



Tull - Chapter 31

Tull - Chapter 31 Summary

After seeing the wagon pass by his lot, Tull follows the Bundrens until they arrive at the washed out bridge. Riding up next to the wagon, Tull sees Anse staring blankly at the place where the bridge used to be. Though the two ends of the bridge are still visible, the middle has fallen into the river and logs and debris float by and over the bridge on the fast, dangerous current. Anse merely mutters about how easy it would be to cross the river if the bridge was still up, while the rest of the Bundrens try to figure out how to cross safely.

While they are assessing the situation, Cash says that Vardaman, Dewey Dell, and Anse can cross the bridge safely on foot. Jewel points out that they could easily hitch Tull's mule and cross the river at the ford. However, Tull does not want his mule to enter the river.

Tull - Chapter 31 Analysis

Tull's unwillingness to let his mule cross the river foreshadows the death of Anse's mules in the ford crossing.



Darl - Chapter 32

Darl - Chapter 32 Summary

Darl remembers a time when Jewel was fifteen years old and prone to sleeping during the day. His father pushed him hard, despite his obvious exhaustion, but his mother was concerned for his health. Because his daily sleepiness continued, the rest of the family took care of his chores for him. Fortunately for Jewel, Anse was none the wiser.

Cash and Darl thought the reason for Jewel's exhaustion was a nightly tryst with a woman. Cash was determined to see this woman, so he followed him one night to see what she was like. However, when Cash returned from his night of following Jewel, he did not tell Darl what he saw.

One morning, the family woke up and found that Jewel was not in bed. Everyone was concerned by this new development, until he showed up riding a horse with a prancing gait and an explanation that he had cleared 40 acres on Mr. Quick's farm in order to earn the horse. However, upon seeing the horse, Anse only worried about the food the horse would eat. Jewel, indignant, replied that he would rather kill the horse than let it eat his father's food.

Darl - Chapter 32 Analysis

This is the first time in the book that a character's age is mentioned. However, the story about Jewel is in the past and the reader only knows that he is currently older than fifteen.

Jewel's refusal to give Anse's food to his horse shows Jewel's hatred toward his father.



Tull - Chapter 33

Tull - Chapter 33 Summary

Tull, Anse, Dewey Dell, and Vardaman walk across the remains of the bridge as Darl, Cash, and Jewel prepare to take the wagon across the ford. Tull notes that the water is fast, cold, and scary. In fact, it is so scary that he is afraid to make the return trip to the side of the river he started on.

Tull - Chapter 33 Analysis

We are shown the danger of the river, and the fear it causes. This foreshadows the imminent disaster.



Darl - Chapter 34

Darl - Chapter 34 Summary

The current is strong, and the brothers are putting together a plan to cross it. Cash analyzes the situation slowly and cautiously, while Jewel is impatient to just cross the river and get it over with.

Finally, Cash comes up with a long, involved plan that includes Jewel crossing the river on foot and running a rope from the other bank to the wagon. Jewel hates the plan and simply wants to force the mules into the water to cross the ford. After listening to his brothers, Darl comes up with a compromise plan with which they can both live: Cash will force the mules into the river, while Jewel rides ahead holding a rope tied onto the wagon. However, the plan comes undone when a log comes up and hits the wagon.

Darl - Chapter 34 Analysis

Once again, Cash is slow and analytical while Jewel is impatient and just wants to get things done. Jewel's impatience with Cash's analytical nature leads to a plan, Darl's, that inevitably fails.

Both Cash and Jewel get things done in their own way, but they get them done. Cash uses analysis and planning while Jewel uses speed and strength. However, a compromise between these two methods fails, symbolizing the idea that compromise is an inevitable road to failure.



Vardaman - Chapter 35

Vardaman - Chapter 35 Summary

Vardaman watches the log strike the wagon, knocking Cash and Darl out of the wagon, while the mules are carried off in the current and drowned. Watching the disaster unfold in the river, Vardaman thinks that Darl has a hold on Addie's coffin, but then he sees Darl climb out of the river empty-handed.

Vardaman - Chapter 35 Analysis

The tragic scene unfolds. When Darl emerges empty-handed, the loss and tragedy is exposed—Addie's coffin has been lost to the river.



Tull - Chapter 36

Tull - Chapter 36 Summary

The timeline of the story moves forward with Tull, sitting at home, and going to tell Cora the story of the wagon tipping over. Cora says that the log was the hand of God tipping the wagon, but Tull shows her that her idea is a contradiction in logic. Then the story moves back the wagon crossing the river.

The log strikes the wagon, knocking it partially off of the ford. While he drives the suddenly unbalanced load, Cash fights with the wagon, the coffin, and the current while he also tries to get everything stabilized. That is when things get out of hand. The mules kick loose, are caught in the current and killed in the water. Riding back to help, Jewel and his horse get mixed up in the mess, creating complete chaos in the river.

While things get untangled in the river, Tull sees Jewel's horse ride up from the water. However, the horse is dragging Cash behind him, not Jewel. Instead, Jewel struggles against the current as he stands on the ford, still holding the rope that is attached to the wagon and the coffin.

Tull - Chapter 36 Analysis

The rope that Jewel holds is compared to an iron bar. This symbolizes the iron-hard, unbreakable bond between Jewel and his mother. The dead piglet that bumps against it symbolizes the way that even death cannot affect that bond.



Darl - Chapter 37

Darl - Chapter 37 Summary

Dewey Dell tends to the semiconscious Cash, who lies on the riverbank, asking if his tools are safe. Meanwhile, Jewel, Vernon Tull, Darl, and Vardaman look for Cash's tools in the river. Matters are made worse by the fact that Cash broke his leg when he fell out of the wagon. However, everyone considers it lucky that it is the same leg he broke in his fall off the barn roof.

Darl - Chapter 37 Analysis

After nearly being drowned in the river, Cash's first concern is for his tools. In fact, he never asks about Darl or Jewel, who were also dumped in the river. This further shows that Cash cares about his work, much more than he cares for other people.



Cash - Chapter 38

Cash - Chapter 38 Summary

Cash thinks about how the coffin wasn't balanced right. In Cash's mind, it caused the wagon to tumble in the current after the log hit it.

Cash - Chapter 38 Analysis

Cash blames himself for the accident.



Cora - Chapter 39

Cora - Chapter 39 Summary

Cora thinks back on her attempts to bring Addie to her church. Despite all of her attempts, Addie refused all of Cora's attempts. Cora even tried to explain to Addie that Jewel was God's punishment on her, but Addie maintained her faith in her son.

Cora - Chapter 39 Analysis

When Cora said that Jewel was Addie's punishment, Addie replied by saying that he would save her from the water and the fire. This is a kind of after shadowing of the event in the river and a foreshadowing of Jewel pulling her body from the burning barn.



Addie - Chapter 40

Addie - Chapter 40 Summary

The story moves back to the time before Addie and Anse married. Addie is working as a schoolteacher, hating her life and hating her students. In fact, she hates her students so much that her only pleasure is in punishing them.

One day, after classes are over, Anse comes into her school. She knows who he is, because he has been driving his wagon by the door for several days in order to get a look at her, but this is their first real meeting. While he uncomfortably tries to talk to Addie, he mentions that he would like to marry her. Soon after, Addie and Anse are married.

Unfortunately, their marriage is far from happy. In fact, after Addie has Cash, and then Darl, she resents Anse entirely and begins to sleep with another man. However, despite her happiness with this unnamed man, the affair ends. It is not until two months after the affair ends that she learns she is pregnant with Jewel. After giving birth to Jewel, Addie has Dewey Dell with Anse, to "negative Jewel" (176) and, finally, Vardaman.

It is then that Addie's story comes to the time that Cora tries to convert Addie to her church. However, Addie does not like her brand of Christianity and ignores her.

Addie - Chapter 40 Analysis

The timeline of Addie's children is now clear. Cash is the oldest, followed by Darl, then Jewel, Dewey Dell and Vardaman. Dewey Dell seems to be in her mid-teens, while Darl and Jewel are in their late teens or early twenties. Cash is probably in his early to mid-twenties. Vardaman is probably between 10 and 14. However, these are approximate guesses; there are no solid dates or ages given anywhere in the book.

Addie's attachment to Jewel is clearer now; Jewel came from a man she actually cared for.



Whitfield - Chapter 41

Whitfield - Chapter 41 Summary

Returning to a time much earlier in the story, Whitfield hears that Addie is dying. Shocked at the news, he prays fervently, and God tells him to confess to Anse and ask his forgiveness. So he rides through the ford near the washed out bridge and on to the Bundrens,' arriving just in time to take part in the funeral.

Whitfield - Chapter 41 Analysis

Whitfield is Jewel's father; the man with whom Addie had an actually loving relationship.

The line "God's grace upon this house" (179) is a helpful reminder of who Whitfield was in Chapter 20.



Darl - Chapter 42

Darl - Chapter 42 Summary

Cash is ill and still not fully conscious while he rides in the wagon. He vomits regularly, but he is not worried about his health; he only worries about his tools. The Bundrens have borrowed Armstid's mules and are driving the wagon to his house.

Once they arrive at Armstid's house, they put the wagon in the barn and take Cash into the house. Then the rest of the Bundrens stay with the wagon and Addie's body, again refusing the hospitality of their hosts.

Darl - Chapter 42 Analysis

We see Cash's protectiveness again, here for his tools.

Armstid - Chapter 43

Armstid - Chapter 43 Summary

Anse is trying to figure out from whom to buy mules, but he is very choosy for a man with few choices. Armstid recommends Snopes, but Anse does not like the idea. However, he eventually relents and decides that Snopes is their best choice.

After supper, Jewel goes out to fetch Peabody, but comes back with Uncle Billy instead. Uncle Billy, a veterinarian, sets Cash's leg and puts a splint on it. Once again, the woozy Cash asks to see his tools.

It is hot the next morning and the buzzards are attracted to the scent of Addie's rotting body. Lula, Armstid's wife, says that it is an outrage to carry Addie's body around like that: stinking badly with buzzards circling it. Armstid talks to Jewel in the hope of getting him to move the wagon someplace less exposed, but Jewel does not acknowledge him. Instead, he calls Darl over to help him move the wagon. However, Darl refuses, saying that the body has to be somewhere.

That evening, Anse comes back with a strange look in his eyes that seems to imply that he has done something entirely underhanded. Anse slowly explains that he bought a team from Snopes with money he stole from Cash, the offer of Jewel's horse, and a mortgage on some of his farm equipment. Jewel, of course, is furious at Anse for offering his horse, so he jumps onto his horse and rides off. Seeing Jewel's anger, Armstid expects that they will never see Jewel or his horse again. The family gets Cash ready to travel anyway.

The next morning, Eustace Grimm drops off Anse's mules. She explains that Jewel's horse was sitting in the barn that morning, so Snopes told her to take the mules to Anse.

Armstid - Chapter 43 Analysis

Once again, we see Anse's selfishness. He tells everyone about his sacrifices for his family, when he is actually forcing his family to sacrifice for him. In this case, he is forcing Jewel to give up a horse he loves so that they can replace the mules that were killed when Anse wanted the wagon driven across the ford.

Vardaman - Chapter 44

Vardaman - Chapter 44 Summary

The Bundrens are riding down the road while buzzards circle overhead. Cash is lying in the back of the wagon, claiming that his broken leg does not bother him, even though it is obvious that he is in pain. Darl tries to help him by tightening the ropes on Cash's splint. Seeing how badly Cash is hurting, the family decides to stop for medicine in Mottson.

Vardaman - Chapter 44 Analysis

Cash wants to not be a burden, but the family (along with the buzzards, anticipating his death) see the severity of the situation.



Moseley - Chapter 45

Moseley - Chapter 45 Summary

Moseley, a pharmacist in Mottson, sees Dewey Dell in his drug store. His assistant, Albert, tries to help her, but she refuses to speak with him. So he passes her on to Moseley and, when Moseley asks her what the problem is, Dewey Dell is evasive and asks to go to the back of the store to discuss her problem.

Once they are in the back, Dewey Dell indicates that she is pregnant and she wants something that will abort the fetus. She explains that her boyfriend -- whose name she does not offer -- gave her ten dollars to purchase something for it, but she does not know what it might be. Upon learning what she wants, Moseley is offended and kicks her out.

Later, Moseley hears that the Bundrens' wagon was sitting outside a hardware store while Addie's body was stinking up the entire street. They were stubbornly refusing to move, because Darl was talking the owner of the hardware store into selling him ten cents worth of cement. The marshal wanted them to move on, bury the body, and take Cash to a doctor, but they waited for Dewey Dell and Darl to return before they drove toward Jefferson.

Moseley - Chapter 45 Analysis

The "female trouble" Dewey Dell refers to is her period. It stopped two months before, showing that she is pregnant.



Darl - Chapter 46

Darl - Chapter 46 Summary

The Bundrens stop along the road to mix the cement, which they use to form a cast on Cash's leg. While they sloppily arrange the cement around the splint on Cash's leg, Jewel returns.

Darl - Chapter 46 Analysis

The shoddy application of the cast foreshadows the problems Cash will have with it.

Vardaman - Chapter 47

Vardaman - Chapter 47 Summary

Vardaman, Dewey Dell, Darl, and Jewel are walking up a hill behind the wagon. Watching the buzzards circling the wagon, Vardaman asks Darl where the buzzards stay at night. Because Darl says nothing, Vardaman decides to find out on his own.

Vardaman - Chapter 47 Analysis

Vardaman's decision to spy around at night foreshadows him seeing Darl set fire to the barn.



Darl - Chapter 48

Darl - Chapter 48 Summary

While the Bundrens are preparing to spend an evening at the Gillespies,' Darl asks Jewel who his father is, if his mother is a horse. When Jewel hears Darl's question, he gets angry and calls Darl a liar. However, their argument is interrupted when they see Cash's foot. It looks like it has been boiled and, furthermore, Cash says that his cast is getting hot. In order to relieve Cash of the heat, they pour water over the cast to cool it down.

Darl - Chapter 48 Analysis

Darl's strange question to Jewel partially shows that Darl's mind is going. However, it also shows that he has an idea that Anse is not Jewel's father. Jewel's angry response shows that he is probably also aware that Anse is not his father.

Cash's foot looks boiled because of all the blood that is collecting in it; the cement cast is blocking a vein. The reason that Cash's leg is hot is that cement heats up as it hardens.



Vardaman - Chapter 49

Vardaman - Chapter 49 Summary

Darl and Vardaman listen to Addie's coffin. Vardaman does not hear anything, but Darl tells Vardaman that Addie told him to hide her away from the sight of man. After Darl says this, he says that they should go see about Cash. Returning to the events of the previous chapter, they pour water on Cash's cast.

That night, the family prepares for their sleep in the barn. Vardaman and Dewey Dell will sleep on a pallet together but, while Dewey Dell tries to sleep, Vardaman gets up to find the buzzards. However, instead of seeing buzzards, Vardaman sees something that Dewey Dell tells him not to tell anybody.

Vardaman - Chapter 49 Analysis

When Darl hears Addie tell him to hide her away, it further shows that he is losing his mind. However, it also foreshadows him setting fire to the barn in order to destroy her body.

The water poured on Cash's cast is a marker in the timeline of the story. It shows that Darl and Vardaman's conversation by Addie's coffin occurs just before he asks Jewel who his father is.

The secret that Vardaman never mentions foreshadows the revelation that Darl sets fire to the barn.



Darl - Chapter 50

Darl - Chapter 50 Summary

The story picks up when Gillespie's barn is on fire. Jewel runs toward the burning barn, telling Darl to come with him. Anse, Gillespie, Mack, Dewey Dell and Vardaman follow.

Mack, Gillespie, Darl, and Jewel run into the barn to get the animals out of the fire. Mack and Gillespie use their nightshirts to cover the animals' heads in order to keep them from getting spooked by the flames. Meanwhile, Jewel knocks a hole in the wall that allows the cow to escape. After the cow escapes, Jewel and Darl run through the hole that Jewel put in the wall. Not content to stay out of the fire, Jewel circles around the barn and goes back through the barn's door in order to pull Addie's coffin out to safety.

Darl - Chapter 50 Analysis

This chapter is the climax of the book.

Darl wants Gillespie to stop Jewel, because Darl wants Addie's body burned into ashes. In Darl's mind, it is better to burn her body than to have it carted around with buzzards circling overhead.



Vardaman - Chapter 51

Vardaman - Chapter 51 Summary

Gillespie's still-burning barn has collapsed. However, Addie's body is safe and some of the men there carry Addie to a space under an apple tree.

They find that Cash's foot has turned black, so Mr. Gillespie breaks the cement off with a hammer. However, the pain is so bad that it knocks Cash unconscious. Meanwhile, Dewey Dell is applying medicine to Jewel's severely burned back.

Leaving the house, Vardaman goes out to look for Darl. Vardaman finds him lying on top of Addie's coffin, crying. Vardaman tries to comfort him by telling him that Addie's body is safe because of Jewel, but Darl just keeps crying.

Vardaman - Chapter 51 Analysis

Darl is crying because he failed to destroy Addie's body. Vardaman, however, does not understand this.

Darl - Chapter 52

Darl - Chapter 52 Summary

The Bundrens approach the town of Jefferson. Before they enter the town, Dewey Dell asks to take a bathroom break. When the wagon stops, she runs into the bushes with her package, and then runs back, dressed in her nice clothes. Meanwhile, Anse continually wonders aloud why he did not call ahead to have a grave dug, but Jewel adamantly demands that they can do it themselves.

When they get close to Jefferson, a group of black men wonder what stinks so badly in the Bundrens' wagon. Jewel gets angry at their question and insults them. Hearing the insult, a white man leading the group of black men takes offense, and a fight nearly breaks out. However, Darl finally gets everyone calmed down and they ride away peacefully.

Darl - Chapter 52 Analysis

The smell of the corpse is noticed, and set against the outside world, which has no idea of the family's tragedy. We see the family fighting for normalcy, but fraying.



Cash - Chapter 53

Cash - Chapter 53 Summary

Jewel and Anse discuss the fact that, somehow, Mr. Gillespie knows that Darl set fire to his barn. That means that they will have to send Darl to jail or Gillespie will sue them. Jewel and Anse decide to wait until they bury Addie, and then they will have Darl arrested.

When they enter Jefferson, the rest of the family wants to leave Cash at the doctor's house. However, Cash refuses to be left behind because he wants to be there for the burial. Instead, they only make one stop -- at a house where a "graphophone" (235) is playing music -- to borrow two spades.

Arriving at the cemetery, the Bundrens dig a grave and bury Addie. Soon after they finish, two men come to arrest Darl. Dewey Dell, outraged at Darl, attacks him and one of the officers has to struggle to pull her off of him, while the other officer, Jewel, and Anse bring Darl down. Once he is handcuffed, Darl sits on the ground, laughing for no reason.

Cash - Chapter 53 Analysis

The graphophone they refer to is actually a gramophone -- an early record player.

Anse seems to know exactly where he needs to go when he needs to borrow two spades. This foreshadows the idea that he may very well know exactly who is in the house. In fact, Cash refers to the woman with the gramophone as Mrs. Bundren. This foreshadows the revelation of the marriage between Anse and the woman.

The music from the record player stops when Anse enters the house. This symbolizes the way he removes everything good or happy from womens' lives.



Peabody - Chapter 54

Peabody - Chapter 54 Summary

Peabody examines Cash's leg as he chews out the entire Bundren clan for allowing Anse to cover Cash's leg in cement. However, Anse is not there because he is returning the spades he borrowed.

Peabody - Chapter 54 Analysis

Anse escapes blame by running errands.



MacGowan - Chapter 55

MacGowan - Chapter 55 Summary

In a drug store in Jefferson, Jody, who works the counter, tells MacGowan that a country girl, Dewey Dell, is looking for a doctor. MacGowan, who also works the counter, refuses to see her until Jody says she is good-looking. Once MacGowan sees her, he decides that he has to have her and pretends to be a doctor when he meets Dewey Dell. Again, she wants to talk in the back, so MacGowan brings her into the basement where the medicine is kept.

Once they are in the basement, Dewey Dell explains that she is pregnant and that she heard there is something she can buy to abort the fetus. MacGowan, who knows nothing about medicine, gives her a dose of something that tastes particularly foul, and then tells her to come back after closing for the rest of the treatment.

Later that night, MacGowan is taking care of his closing duties when Dewey Dell arrives, and he lets her in. MacGowan sees a kid standing outside and he yells at him before taking Dewey Dell into the basement.

MacGowan - Chapter 55 Analysis

The fact that Jody knows exactly what MacGowan is doing seems to indicate that they have done this before.

The "hair of the dog" (247) treatment MacGowan mentions foreshadows MacGowan essentially raping Dewey Dell.



Vardaman - Chapter 56

Vardaman - Chapter 56 Summary

It is nighttime, and all the stores are closed when Dewey Dell and Vardaman walk through Jefferson. Vardaman hopes to see a toy train that he wants to buy, but Dewey Dell heads to the drug store. Dewey Dell knocks, and a man, MacGowan, comes to the door and lets her in. With nothing else to do, Vardaman stands outside the drug store, waiting for Dewey Dell to come back out. While he waits, Vardaman thinks about how Darl went crazy and was then taken on a train to Jackson.

After a long time inside, Dewey Dell comes out complaining that it will not work. Vardaman asks her what she is talking about, but she just keeps saying that it will not work.

Vardaman - Chapter 56 Analysis

Darl goes to Jackson, because that is where either the mental hospital or the jail is located.

MacGowan has sex with Dewey Dell and tries to pass it off as an abortion method. Dewey Dell does not think it will work, but she does not have enough knowledge to know that it will not work.



Darl - Chapter 57

Darl - Chapter 57 Summary

Darl, laughing insanely, is put on a train by plainclothes policemen. While the train leaves, Darl sees his family sitting in their wagon eating bananas. Then, at the end of the journey, he finds himself in a cage in Jackson.

Darl - Chapter 57 Analysis

Darl talks to himself and refers to himself as though he is another person entirely. This symbolizes the fact that his mind has completely fractured. He says that Darl is his brother, but Darl is the narrator here. It seems that his personality has split entirely in two.



Dewey Dell - Chapter 58

Dewey Dell - Chapter 58 Summary

Anse finds Lave's money and tries to take it from Dewey Dell. Despite all her attempts, Dewey Dell cannot keep Anse from taking it, because he manages to make her feel sorry for him. Now she has lost the money that was supposed to help her get an abortion.

Dewey Dell - Chapter 58 Analysis

Dewey's compassion causes her to lose the money.



Cash - Chapter 59

Cash - Chapter 59 Summary

Anse goes back into the house where they heard the music playing in order to return the spades and stays in the house a long time. Cash and Jewel wonder what is taking him so long, before their talk turns to the possibility of buying a gramophone. Finally, Anse returns and takes Cash to Peabody so that he can get his leg properly set and splinted.

The next morning, Anse sends his children off and tells them he will meet them later. While they sit in the wagon eating bananas and watching the train go by, they see their father coming toward them, looking taller and prouder than ever, with his new dentures. They also notice that he is carrying a suitcase and leading a woman who is carrying a folded gramophone. He introduces her to them as his wife.

Cash - Chapter 59 Analysis

Anse meets his children with a woman he introduces as Mrs. Bundren. This may indicate that he has been after this woman for a long time and may have been having an affair. Or he may have been married to her before, making him a bigamist. This means that Anse's stubborn insistence on going to Jefferson may not have had anything at all to do with Addie's wishes; it may have been Anse's idea all along. In fact, it may have merely been a cover story that allowed him to fetch this woman. However, the story does not give a definitive answer to this possibility.



Characters

Armstid

A local farmer, Armstid provides shelter for the Bundren family after their disastrous river crossing. He makes cryptic comments on the treatment of Cash's injury, Anse's trade for a mule team, and the rotting smell coming from the casket.

Addie Bundren

The family matriarch, Addie is Anse's wife and the mother of the Bundren children. She dies early in the book from a lingering illness, and the action of the novel revolves around transporting her body to her family's burial ground. As a young woman, Addie was a schoolteacher in Jefferson. To escape this life, she married Anse, a local farmer. She was happy when she gave birth to her eldest son Cash; but with her next child, Darl, she began to resent her situation.

Years into her marriage, she had a passionate affair with the Reverend Whitfield. During the affair, she became pregnant with Jewel, her favorite child. She had two more children—Dewey Dell and Vardaman—more out of obligation than anything else. Considering Darl, Dewey Dell, and Vardaman products of an unhappy time, she does not feel affection for them; instead, she favors Cash and Jewel.

Anse Bundren

Anse is the patriarch of the Bundren family. A selfish and lazy man, he claims sweat will kill him, and therefore refuses to work. Instead, he connives to get others to work for him. Physically, he is hunchbacked, and his hands are gnarled.

Though his wife is dying, he allows Darl and Jewel to leave her deathbed to work. He considers himself to be a right-thinking, hard-working man who is victimized by God. In what first seems to be a selfless move, he pushes for the journey to bury Addie at her family cemetery. Later his true motive is revealed: to buy a set of false teeth in Jefferson.

When the family's mules die in the flooded river, he steals Cash's money and barter away Jewel's beloved horse to obtain new mules. During the trip, he scrimps on money wherever possible, even borrowing shovels to bury his wife. While in Jefferson, he takes Dewey Dell's money, buys false teeth, and secretly woos a local woman. He ends the novel with his new teeth, introducing his new wife to his surprised children.



Cash Bundren

The oldest son of Anse and Addie, Cash is a carpenter of extraordinary precision and skill. As his mother is dying, he carefully builds her coffin, holding up each board for her inspection. He even decides to bevel the edges of the coffin, despite the extra work it requires.

When the Bundrens try to cross the flooded river, Cash is knocked out of the wagon and suffers a severely broken leg. After the bone is reset, he rides for three days on top of the coffin before the family buys cement to cover the leg. Unfortunately, they apply the cement directly to his skin, which causes a horrible infection. Despite intense pain, Cash remains stoical. When the doctor removes the concrete from his leg, Cash loses over sixty inches of skin along with it.

While in Jefferson, Cash is torn by the decision to commit Darl to an insane asylum. On one hand, he feels empathy for his brother; on the other hand, he recognizes that a man cannot simply burn down another man's hard-earned property. He eventually agrees with the decision to commit him.

Darl Bundren

The second of the Bundren children, Darl is a veteran of World War I. He narrates more sections of the book than any other character. He is profoundly jealous of Addie's obvious preference for Jewel, and throughout the book, he scrutinizes and often goads his brother. He even connives to separate Jewel from Addie when she is dying by volunteering both himself and Jewel to haul lumber. While on this trip, a wagon wheel breaks. As Jewel tries to fix the wheel, Darl narrates his mother's death for the reader and informs Jewel of her death. This form of "second sight," or telepathy, also manifests itself in his knowledge of Dewey Dell's pregnancy.

Darl participates in the journey to Jefferson, but he is never committed to it. Embarrassed by his family and the experience of dragging his mother's corpse all over the county, he burns down Gillespie's barn with Addie's coffin inside. For this act, he is committed to the insane asylum in Jackson. He ends the novel on a train, laughing and talking about himself in the third person.

Dewey Dell Bundren

Seventeen years old, Dewey Dell is the only daughter of the Bundren family. Like Darl and Vardaman, she feels rejected by her mother, Addie. Because Darl knows about her pregnancy, she resents and fears him. She desperately wants to go to Jefferson so she can obtain "medicine" that will illegally abort the pregnancy. Her first fumbling attempt to acquire the medicine fails when the druggist Mosely refuses to give it to her.



While she is in Jefferson, Anse steals her money. To make matters worse, a sleazy drugstore clerk, Skeet Macgowan, gives her worthless pills filled with talcum powder. He then seduces her. After Addie's burial, Dewey Dell is strongly in favor of committing Darl to the mental institution.

Jewel Bundren

Jewel, in his late teens, is Addie's third son and her favorite child. The product of her affair with Reverend Whitfield, Jewel does not know his true paternity. After a lifetime of being his mother's favorite, he loves his mother fiercely and feels a strong devotion to her.

Described as tall and wooden in appearance, Jewel is a reticent young man. When he does talk, he usually curses, exhibiting a persistent rage. His favorite possession is his horse, which he bought by working nights for several months. The horse is as fierce as Jewel, and they engage in battles that exhibit both Jewel's violence and intense love. He loses the horse on the third day of the journey when Anse trades it for a new team of mules. Giving up his horse is one indication that Jewel is the family member most committed to fulfilling Addie's wish to be buried in Jefferson.

In addition to this sacrifice, he helps retrieve his mother's coffin when it gets thrown from the wagon during the river crossing. He also saves the coffin single-handedly from Gillespie's burning barn, suffering many burns as a result. Like Dewey Dell, he is in favor of committing Darl to the mental institution.

Mrs. Bundren

Mrs. Bundren is Anse's second wife. A "duckshaped" woman with "hardlooking pop eyes," she marries Anse after he woos her in Jefferson.

Vardaman Bundren

Vardaman is the youngest Bundren child. He cannot fully comprehend the reality of his mother's death. At first, he blames Dr. Peabody for taking her away and releases Peabody's horse team for revenge. Then, he believes that Addie is not dead but has mutated into a fish. He bores holes in her coffin to give her air, mutilating her face. Later in the novel, his belief that Addie has become a fish causes his excited fear when Addie's coffin falls into the river. He runs along the bank, yelling for Darl to catch her so she will not escape, a thought he cannot bear.

Vardaman grows closer to Darl during the trip. At the end of novel, he sees his brother set fire to Gillespie's barn, which disappoints him. He struggles to understand Darl's insanity and feels the loss when his brother is taken away to the mental institution in Jackson.



Gillespie

Gillespie is a farmer who allows the Bundrens to stay on his farm during their journey. Darl burns down his barn to destroy Addie's coffin and end the humiliating journey.

Skeet Macgowan

Macgowan is a drugstore clerk in Jefferson. He cons Dewey Dell, giving her fake abortion pills. He seduces her in the cellar of the store.

Moseley

Moseley is a drugstore owner in Mottson. A religious man, he refuses to sell abortion drugs to Dewey Dell and condemns her for trying to purchase them.

Dr. Peabody

Dr. Peabody tends to Addie on her deathbed. His help is limited, however, because Anse sends for him too late. He comments on the family's behavior from an objective perspective. He views the family as proud, but slovenly and ignorant. In Jefferson, Peabody tries to fix the damage done to Cash's leg.

Samson

Samson is a farmer who offers shelter for the Bundren family before they try to cross the river. He unfavorably comments on their refusal to accept his hospitality.

Rachel Samson

Rachel Samson is Samson's wife. She expresses outrage at the handling of Addie's body and relates it to the treatment of all women.

Cora Tull

Cora is Vernon Tull's wife. She narrates many of the early chapters in the book, offering her perspective on the Bundrens. Throughout the chapters she narrates, her judgments are almost always self-serving and wrong, often comically so.

Vernon Tull

Tull is the farmer who lives closest to the Bundrens. A thrifty, hardworking man, he is very successful as a farmer. He helps Cash build the coffin, tries to guide the family across the flooded river, and retrieves Cash's tools from the water. He feels especially drawn to Vardaman, and his interest in the boy may result from his own lack of a son.

Reverend Whitfield

A local preacher, Reverend Whitfield had an affair with Addie in their youth; in fact, he is Jewel's father. He has never admitted the affair to anyone. He visits Addie on the night she dies, supposedly to reveal the affair to the Bundren family. When Addie dies, he believes that he has been absolved of his sin by God and remains silent.



Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

Faulkner's use of multiple narrators underscores one of his primary themes: every character is essentially isolated from the others. Moreover, the characters in the novel do not communicate effectively with one another. Although the reader is privy to the characters' thoughts and emotional responses, none of the characters adequately express their dilemmas or desires to others. Outside of Darl, who knows Addie's and Dewey Dell's secrets through intuition, the characters can only guess at the motivations, beliefs, and feelings of others. When these guesses turn out to be wrong, misunderstandings ensue.

As a result of their communication problems, members of the Bundren family live alienated from each other - whether willfully (like Addie or Jewel), unknowingly (like Anse, Cash, Dewey Dell, or Vardaman), or painfully (like Darl). This alienation extends to neighbors, who misinterpret or simply cannot fathom the family's actions.

The more sensitive characters, especially Addie and Darl, recognize their alienation from others. In particular, Addie is a striking example of someone who both longs to transcend this isolation and stubbornly works to maintain an impenetrable individuality. As a schoolteacher, she would whip her students in order to overcome the barriers between her and others: "I would think with each blow of the switch: Now you are aware of me! Now I am something in your secret and selfish life, who have marked your blood with my own for ever and ever." One can see her selfishness here, however, as she violently imposes herself onto others without opening herself to them. Similarly, she holds back from her children, except for Cash and her favorite, Jewel. Her contradictions highlight the fundamental compulsion to maintain one's private self while yearning to connect with others.

Death

In a novel that features a disastrous journey to bury a decomposing corpse, one would expect death to be a central concern. Indeed, the outraged reactions of other characters to the journey of the Bundren family reveal both social expectations about the treatment of the dead and underlying anxieties over the basic truths of human mortality. Moreover, Vardaman's chapters revolve primarily around defining the nature of death, and his confusion proves both moving and unsettling.

The theme of death also takes other forms in the novel. Through Addie's narrative, Faulkner investigates the possibility of living in a deadened state. On the one hand, Faulkner has her "speak" from the dead. On the other hand, however, is Addie's thwarted desire to *live* life; the antithesis of her desire is Anse, who, to Addie, is dead and "did not know he was dead." To her, Anse symbolizes restriction, blindness, and



emptiness. Faulkner explores the implications of such an existence by exploring its potential in all of his characters, particularly those who use platitudes to avoid genuine feeling and self-examination.

Identity

Questions about the nature and strength of self-identity recur throughout the novel. Some characters, like Anse, Cash, Jewel, and the Tulls, possess a defined sense of self. Yet it is through the characters of Darl and Vardaman that Faulkner explores the fragile nature of identity. Vardaman almost compulsively defines his relationships with others, repeating "Darl is my brother" and, more famously, "My mother is a fish." Through these repetitions, Faulkner articulates the development of identity as Vardaman relates to others.

For Vardaman, the process is incomplete but progressing. For Darl, the process will never reach completion. The absence of his mother's love leads Darl to isolation not only from others but also from himself. He expresses the differences between himself and Jewel when he says, "I don't know what I am. I don't know if I am or not. Jewel knows he is, because he does not know that he does not know whether he is or not." In such passages, Darl's insights prove both compelling and disturbing since it calls into question the very essence of human consciousness.

Language and Meaning

One of Faulkner's central themes in the novel is the limitation of language. From the inability of the characters to communicate with one another, to Addie's singular distrust of words, to the unlikely vocabulary the characters employ in their narration, Faulkner explores the inadequacy of language to express thought and emotion. Many characters communicate only through platitudes. As a result, they create misunderstanding rather than understanding between people. These instances of ineffective communication are not as comprehensive as Addie's rejection of language, however. For Addie, words cannot express human experience because they are so distant from human experience. Only action matters for her (and for the inarticulate Jewel).

Faulkner also reveals the limitations of language by contrasting the thoughts of his characters with their actual words. In their narratives, the characters often employ vocabulary far beyond their educational level or speech customs. These passages underscore Faulkner's attempts to verbalize his characters' groping for meaning and adequate expression. In this way, Faulkner comments on the tenuousness of language itself.

Love and Passion

Love and passion are major themes of the novel. The relationships and destinies of the characters rely heavily on love and intense emotions. In particular, Addie is defined by



passion. Her affair with Whitfield results from genuine feeling, and the rejection of her husband and three of her children is equally intense. Her commitment to Cash and Jewel is fierce and loving. This love helps them to nurture a strong self-identity, which Darl, Dewey Dell, and Vardaman often lack.

Sanity and Insanity

By chronicling both the Bundrens' journey and Darl's descent into madness, Faulkner explores the themes of sanity and insanity. The fact that the Bundrens would undertake such an arduous journey strikes both the reader and other characters as deranged folly. For most of the Bundrens, however, the trip is perfectly sensible considering their ultimate goals: Anse's new teeth, Dewey Dell's abortion, and Jewel's loyalty to his beloved mother. They may be selfish and blind to social convention, but their desires are understandable, even if they seem misplaced in the current context. Since all of the narrators hold views that others may consider senseless, evaluations of people's sanity prove arbitrary in the novel.

Darl's case is different, however. He exhibits signs of telepathy, burns Gillespie's barn, is eventually committed to an insane asylum, and ends his final narration in a rant. Yet Darl is reacting to circumstances beyond his control. He cannot help feeling the lack of his mother's love, nor can he contain his hypersensitivity to the world. The other characters may remain "sane" simply because they work to maintain their isolation from the world. Because Darl cannot, or will not, be blind, he may be overwhelmed by *knowledge*. Perhaps, as Andre Bleikasten suggests in *Faulkner's As I Lay Dying*, "From the depths of his own madness, Darl discovers - and makes us discover - the madness of the universe."



Style

Setting

As I Lay Dying takes place in the northern part of Mississippi in 1928. The Bundrens must travel forty miles to bury Addie in Jefferson, the primary town in Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha County. The Bundrens live in a time of economic hardship for cotton farmers, who have had to suffer through a depressed cotton market and disastrously heavy rains. They also lack modern farming equipment, instead employing farm animals and their own labor.

The modern world exists in Jefferson, however, and the Bundrens often comment on the distinctions between country people and town people. The social environment of the time features a code of ethics that obligates farm families to house and feed travelers, although the Bundrens refuse such assistance. Faulkner also depicts a natural environment that is at best indifferent and at worst actively hostile, bringing floods, heat, and intrusive buzzards.

Point of View

As I Lay Dying consists of fifty-nine chapters narrated by fifteen different characters. Darl is the most frequent voice, narrating nineteen chapters; some characters, like Addie Bundren, Jewel Bundren, and various townspeople, narrate only one chapter. Many chapters appear to unfold as events take place, particularly those narrated by the Bundrens; others relate events that occurred in the past. At times, Faulkner extends beyond the realm of credible narration, such as when Darl narrates Addie's death when he is not present and when the deceased Addie recollects her life.

Through these varying perspectives, the reader witnesses both the events that take place and the character's individual perceptions of them. Indeed, at times the reader can only discern events by comparing information from various narrators. The reader learns about the assumptions and peculiarities of the different narrators, as well as their social and religious environment. As a result, Faulkner constructs not only a rendition of events but also a series of interconnected psychological studies.

Stream of Consciousness

"Stream of consciousness" is a literary technique that reproduces the thought processes of certain characters. These thoughts appear as if they are immediate, unedited responses. Faulkner does not use this technique in all of his chapters, restricting it primarily to the Bundrens, especially Darl and Vardaman.

The stream-of-consciousness passages reveal character and allow for complicated philosophical questioning. They also imply a character's confusion or distress. A key



example occurs when Addie's coffin falls into the river and Vardaman reacts hysterically: "I ran down into the water to help 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."

Although Faulkner employs paragraph breaks and, in one paragraph, italics, he does not use punctuation until Vardaman speaks to Darl at the end of the chapter. This moment and others in the novel involve the reader in the sometimes perplexing but always engaging world of the characters.

Humor

One of the most obvious features of the novel is its humor. One might expect a bleak tone from a story featuring death, a burial procession, abortion, and familial hardship, but Faulkner defies expectation by utilizing comedy, albeit dark comedy.

Faulkner employs a variety of means to achieve this effect. The family journey to bury Addie is absurd in itself, and the dogged determination of the Bundrens often evokes a humorous reaction. Faulkner also uses the characters' perceptions and faults to generate humor, such as when Anse slithers out of his responsibility for Cash's broken leg: "'It's a trial,' he says. 'But I don't begrudge her [Addie] it.'" Cash's own understatement can create humor, as well, whether it is his stoic refrain on his leg, "It don't bother me none," or his recollection of the distance he fell off of a roof: "'Twentyeight foot, four and half inches, about.'"

Perhaps the most glaring and outrageous comic moment is the ending. After all the family has endured and the losses they have suffered, the selfish, resilient Anse appears with a set of new teeth and a "duckshaped" woman as his new wife. Such episodes make the novel difficult to categorize and greatly enrich its texture and effects.

Modernism

Critics often associate Faulkner with literary modernism, a movement that began before World War I and gained prominence during the 1920s. In fact, Faulkner was greatly influenced by two of the most celebrated modernists, T. S. Eliot and James Joyce. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* explored, in both form and content, the dehumanizing effects of industrialization. Joyce's landmark novel *Ulysses* featured the use of "stream of consciousness," which Faulkner employs in *As I Lay Dying*.

Modernist writers experimented with language and literary form and were concerned with the limits of expression. Most modernist authors depicted characters grappling with the loss of traditional beliefs after the destructiveness of World War I. These characters are alienated from their past and from others characters, and often suffer from an inability to communicate. Faulkner's interest in these practices and themes is obvious, especially in his experiments with narrative perspective, his focus on language and its

failures, and his themes of alienation and the destruction of community, including families.



Historical Context

Farm Life in the South

Despite efforts to improve technology and farming methods, a farmer's life during the 1920s involved a constant struggle for survival. The farming life was restrictive and demanding on both men and women. In fact, farmers often lived on an income of little over one hundred dollars a year. Therefore, even families who owned their land relied almost exclusively on themselves to supply both farm labor and basic necessities. Some would hire additional help during harvesting season, yet this expense could prove burdensome as well.

One can see, then, that Darl and Jewel earning three dollars to haul wood was a good job, and the purchases of luxuries like false teeth and bananas were a big deal. In essence, a farm family's land, labor, livestock, and equipment were its only assets. To lose any of them could prove disastrous, a fact which underscores the impact of Darl's decision to burn Gillespie's barn.

According to many scholars of Southern culture, two belief systems provided many Southerners with pride and a sense of purpose: religious conviction and racism. Religion in this community was a potent emotional and psychological force, and a person's relationship with God provided one with a set of values, activities, and friends. Many critics contend that poor whites used religious beliefs as a means of coping with economic deprivation, social inferiority, and political weakness.

White supremacist beliefs also served these ends for some white citizens, providing poor white laborers with a sense of personal worth and group solidarity against a perceived menace. The economic conditions, religious beliefs, and racial views of white farmers became important factors in Southern politics in the early twentieth century.

Economics and Politics in the Rural South

On October 24, 1929, the day before Faulkner began writing *As I Lay Dying*, the American stock market crashed. This financial disaster ended a period of post-World War I economic expansion and marked the beginning of the Great Depression of the 1930s.

In the rural South, however, economic hardship had been a way of life for years, especially for poor farmers. Three factors, in particular, affected Mississippi cotton farmers. One, farmers operated under a lien system, whereby they pledged future crops to merchants in return for necessary supplies. Thus, they were in continuous debt. Second, a longstanding depression in the cotton market forced farmers to go further into debt until they could barely manage to sustain their farms or their families. Third, heavy rains and floods in the late 1920s nearly ruined production. These elements combined with outdated farming methods to make already difficult conditions even worse.



Such tensions were a staple element of Southern life in the early decades of the century. The exploitation of the working class generated populist movements that impacted Mississippi politics in the early 1900s. Sometimes termed "the revolt of the rednecks," these reforms ushered in a new breed of politician.

One of the most prominent of these men, James K. Vardaman, serves as a representative example (especially since Faulkner's family supported him and Faulkner named the youngest Bundren son after him). As Mississippi governor from 1904 to 1908 and a United States Senator from 1912 to 1918, Vardaman was a flamboyant orator and advocate of white laborers. Coming from a poor background, he called for greater regulation of corporations and supported such progressive causes as a graduated income tax, child labor laws, and women's suffrage.

One of his most potent appeals, however, was his strident racism. His views and manner earned him both the nickname "The White Chief " and a reputation as a demagogue who used racial hatred to further his own ambitions. By 1918, Vardaman had lost his once-formidable influence because he opposed American involvement in World War I. "Vardamanism," as his brand of politics was termed, had faded by the late 1920s, but populist loyalties still existed among farmers, as did the white supremacist ideals that provided poor whites with a false sense of superiority and power.



Critical Overview

After its publication in 1930, *As I Lay Dying* garnered several positive critical reviews in America and Britain. The American reviews were generally more favorable than the British, but this early critical commentary touched on issues that were to become pronounced in later, more substantial critiques of the book.

In those early reviews, critics recognized Faulkner's talent but remained suspicious of *As I Lay Dying*. Many commentators questioned the novel's controversial subject matter—such as abortion—and its emphasis on the grotesque and violent. Some critics derided *As I Lay Dying* as tasteless and immoral. Faulkner's style and narrative method, of course, received much critical attention. In general, his use of the vernacular was praised, but his more complicated and elusive passages were deemed confusing. Social-minded critics condemned Faulkner for his lack of overt social commentary.

Most of the early reviewers questioned both Faulkner's tone toward his characters and the genre of the work, issues that recur in later critical commentary. French critics provided Faulkner with his most enthusiastic early notices, although the novel was not translated and published in France until 1934.

After 1940, more substantive critiques of the novel began to appear. A major reason for the renewed interest in *As I Lay Dying* was the publication of *The Portable Faulkner* in 1946. The editor of the volume, Malcolm Cowley, was a seasoned literary editor who contended that Faulkner had successfully developed a distinctive Southern mythology based on his fiction set in and around Yoknapatawpha County. In his influential introduction to the book, Cowley advocated reading all of Faulkner's works as a collective project or, in his words, "part of the same living pattern." Cowley's opinions influenced Faulkner criticism in the following decades.

Critics began to take a more universalistic approach to Faulkner's fiction, viewing his Southern world as representative of the modern world and as a means of exploring timeless human dilemmas. Many commentators began to read *As I Lay Dying* as affirmative and even moral.

Irving Howe, in his 1952 work *William Faulkner: A Critical Study*, clearly articulates this stance: "Of all Faulkner's novels, *As I Lay Dying* is the warmest, the kindest and most affectionate. In no other work is he so receptive to people, so ready to take and love them, to hear them out and record their turns of idiom, their melodies of speech."

Other prominent critics, such as Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks, focused on the family's heroism in the face of many obstacles. Brooks's *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (1963) was, in fact, the most influential critical work on Faulkner for many years. It still holds a prominent place in Faulkner studies today.

These favorable views of the Bundrens did not go unchallenged, however. In her chapter "The Dimensions of Consciousness: *As I Lay Dying*," from *The Novels of*



William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation (1959), Olga Vickery contends that the Bundren family's journey is not heroic. She focuses attention on the character of Addie and her relationship with her children. For Vickery, Cash becomes the most ethically reliable character since he matures during the journey.

Vickery's views proved highly influential. Other critics followed her lead and continued to debate the tone of the novel. Many rejected the notions that Faulkner is sympathetic to his characters, the Bundrens heroic, and the novel essentially moral. These commentators focused attention on Faulkner's comedic elements and satiric stance. Even the critics who explored Faulkner's journey motif and its connections to myth, Christian symbolism, or existential philosophy disputed the tone of Faulkner's treatment of these issues.

Questions surrounding Faulkner's technique, style, form, and use of genre continued to garner comment. Many commentators discussed his relationship to modernist writing and experimental painting, particularly cubism. In a 1967 essay, "Narrative Management in *As I Lay Dying*," R. W. Franklin criticized Faulkner's stylistic technique for its inconsistencies in tense and strategy. Franklin's reading has since been effectively challenged by more careful treatments, such as Catherine Patten's "The Narrative Design of *As I Lay Dying*." Various critics have viewed the novel as epic, tragic, comedic, farcical, or absurd.

André Bleikasten investigates these issues in the first book-length study of the novel, *Faulkner's As I Lay Dying* (1973). Like some critics before him and many after, Bleikasten contends that *As I Lay Dying* defies genre distinctions because it fuses multiple approaches to its subject. In summary, Bleikasten asserts, "*As I Lay Dying* offers us at once a comedy and the reverse of comedy, a tragedy and the derision of tragedy, an epic and the parody of an epic."

Recent critics have expanded on earlier treatments by integrating new theories in psychology, linguistics, gender relations, and cultural studies. Some scholars, for instance, examine the novel in light of Freud's psychological concepts, such as the Oedipal theory. Scholarship in gender construction has placed important emphasis on the female characters in the book. A few critics investigate Faulkner's linguistic constructs, such as Stephen M. Ross in *Fiction's Inexhaustible Voice: Speech and Writing in Faulkner* (1989). In addition, sociological critiques have recently been revived in more complex forms.

Critics have detailed the effects of economics, politics, religion, and technology in the novel. Warwick Wadlington's 1992 book *As I Lay Dying: Stories out of Stories* is the most comprehensive of these studies. Almost all of the recent treatments view the work favorably, appreciating, if not always celebrating, Faulkner's ability to make the misadventures of the haggard, unfortunate Bundrens such a potent subject for critical scrutiny.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3



Critical Essay #1

Jeffrey M. Lilburn is a graduate student at McGill University and the author of a study guide on Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman as well as numerous educational essays. In the following essay, he explores the comic and tragic aspects of William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying.

As I Lay Dying, Faulkner's first published novel after *The Sound and the Fury*, is comprised of fifty-nine sections or monologues told from the perspective of fifteen different speakers. Every member of the Bundren family narrates at least one section, in addition to various members of the community and onlookers who witness the journey from a more objective position. Because there is no central, omniscient narrator to make easy transitions from section to section, the variety of narrative voices provide the reader with multiple, sometimes conflicting perspectives. The result is a novel that can, at times, leave the reader a bit confused.

The novel is outrageously funny, yet contains certain scenes that evoke feelings of disgust, sadness, and sympathy. This unsettling combination of humorous and tragic elements has been the focus of much of the criticism of the novel, with some critics arguing that Faulkner's tale is a tragedy, others perceiving it as a comedy. However, this debate just shows how the novel has defied and resisted any attempt to impose reductive explanations or categorizations.

The basic plot of the novel is, without question, tragic. A dying mother, lying on her deathbed, watches as her eldest son builds her coffin just outside her bedroom window. After she dies, her husband and five children load her corpse onto a mule-driven wagon. They travel in the summer heat for nine days, hoping to bury her in her family's burial ground. Along the way, the mules drown, one son breaks a leg, one goes mad, the daughter is taken advantage of by a lecherous drugstore clerk, and the widowed husband - having stolen his children's money and traded his son's horse - buys himself a new set of teeth, remarries, and obtains a record player. Despite these tragic elements, the story exhibits traces of humor as well as pathos.

One critic to downplay the humorous elements of the novel is Robert Merrill. He asserts that to read *As I Lay Dying* as tragic is "to experience the novel as Faulkner conceived and wrote it." The comic moments in the book are, Merrill concedes, "genuinely amusing," but they almost always "merge with events of a truly compelling terribleness." In short, he describes *As I Lay Dying* as "Faulknerian tragedy in its most radical and original form."

On the other hand, Patricia R. Schroeder emphasizes the novel's humorous elements, contending that Faulkner's grotesque and black humor contribute to a comic framework that celebrates "the indefatigable in man." Schroeder views the novel as comedy that is the "inverse of tragedy: it celebrates community survival, applauds the status quo and affirms life in the face of death."



Schroeder also discusses the novel in relation to the "frustrated funeral," a type of Southwestern story that used humor to reduce death to comic and manageable proportions. The end of the novel is a modern example of the comic vision: "a vision capable of presenting the necessary darkness of human travail and then celebrating man's ability to overcome it." When the Bundrens begin their journey home, they do so with a new team of mules, a new set of teeth for Anse, a new wife and mother, and Dewey Dell's yet unborn child - evidence, Schroeder suggests, that "even when confronted with the death of an individual, life will prevail."

Although Merrill underscores the novel's tragic aspects, he does acknowledge that *As I Lay Dying* contains many memorable comic moments. He also observes that many of these humorous moments result from the removed position of the "non- Bundren narrators who think the Bundren odyssey a bizarre joke or a tawdry sacrilege."

Indeed, many of the novel's funniest moments are found within the sections told by Samson, Moseley and Peabody. When Moseley describes the arrival of the family in Mottson, for example, his "version" of the journey reveals what the Bundrens themselves refuse to admit: "It had been dead eight days," he says. "It must have been like a piece of rotten cheese coming into an ant-hill."

Peabody's opinions of Anse are equally amusing. Examining Cash's broken and badly infected leg, he says: "I be damned if the man that'd let Anse Bundren treat him with raw cement ain't got more spare legs than I have." "God Almighty," he continues, "why didn't Anse carry you to the nearest sawmill and stick your leg in the saw? That would have cured it. Then you all could have stuck his head into the saw and cured a whole family."

However, considered from the perspective of the individuals undergoing the long and trying journey, putting up with intense heat and discomfort as well as with the scorn of passersby as they travel, the humorous scenes are suddenly less amusing. Moreover, while the scenes cited above intend to undermine the suffering of the family, other passages suggest that humor and laughter are not appropriate responses given the less than festive events that befall the Bundren family.

Just prior to the beginning of Whitfield's funeral service, for example, Tull, Armstid, Quick, Uncle Billy, and Peabody discuss the bridge that was washed away by the heavy rains. When Peabody makes a joke, the men "laugh, suddenly loud, then suddenly quiet again. [They then] look a little aside one another," realizing their slip. Suddenly, it seems as if the men realize the inappropriateness of their behavior.

Darl provides another example of a scene of inappropriate laughter. Moments after Addie is buried, Darl is ambushed by his sister and Jewel and handed over to two officials waiting to take him to a mental institution in Jackson. Initially surprised and hurt that Cash did not warn him about the ambush, Darl begins to laugh uncontrollably. To Cash, there is nothing funny about the scene: "I be durn if I could see anything to laugh at." Darl, on the other hand, sees plenty of humor in the situation. Of the Bundren children, only Darl sees the sheer absurdity of their journey; only he attempts to rescue



his mother from the outrageous and disrespectful spectacles along the way. For this, he is considered mad by the rest of the family.

Darl has a privileged position among the novel's narrators: he has more sections than any other narrator and at times appears to possess an inexplicable gift of knowing things that he should not know. For instance, he knows that his mother has died even though he and Jewel are miles away in the wagon; in addition, he also seems to know, or at least suspect, that Anse is not Jewel's father.

Moreover, Darl's narrative role is special because he is the frequent subject of other people's narratives. Other characters notice that there is something different about Darl. As Andre Bleikasten has noted, there is little evidence in the early sections to suggest insanity and in the later sections his actions appear "rather more reasonable than those of the rest of the family." Even Cora and Vernon Tull agree that Darl simply needs a wife "to straighten him out" - evidence that not all who know him and watch him and talk about him agree that he is mad.

Consequently, Darl's capture and subsequent incarceration raise questions of the reliability of the novel's narrative. To Bleikasten, Darl's laughter at the novel's end makes it "hard to tell on which side lies sanity and on which side madness." To Cash, who for a moment thinks his brother did the right thing by trying to burn their mother's coffin, there "ain't none of us pure crazy and ain't none of us pure sane until the balance of us talks him that-away." He questions the right of one man to call another man crazy and concludes: "It's like it ain't so much what a fellow does, but it's the way the majority of folks is looking at him when he does it."

Darl is sent away to Jackson because a majority of people think him queer and because his family does not want to risk being sued by Gillespie. His feelings are never considered. Darl's disturbing laughter thus adds to the novel's unsettling ambiguity because it conflates further the comic and the tragic and makes us question the appropriateness of our own laughter.

By the end of the novel, however, laughter seems to be the only response. After nine days spent defying all kinds of adversities in order to bring Addie's corpse to its final resting place, the funeral procession climaxes in a scene that is described in less than two lines. All we hear of the actual burial is: "we got it filled and covered" The same sentence then describes how Darl is betrayed by his family and sent away to Jackson. The few remaining sections focus not the family's loss or on their sadness on burying the family matriarch, but on the individual motives that were the real driving force behind the journey.

The final section in particular - when Anse introduces the new Mrs. Bundren to his children - utilizes humor to underscore the outrageous nature of the situation. Underlying this humor is the pain and unsettling knowledge of what occurred in the sections leading up to this absurd ending: the brutal betrayal of Darl, news of Cash's serious injury, Dewey Dell's physical abuse, and Addie's final, humiliating journey. The introduction of the new Mrs. Bundren provides one of the biggest laughs in the novel -

yet somehow such an ending hardly seems like a celebration of life's victory over death. Instead, this scene, like almost all of the novel's funny moments, produces an awkward laughter that is tinged with anguish and remorse.



Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Bleikasten discusses the complexities he has identified within *As I Lay Dying*.

Addie Bundren, a farmer's wife from the backwoods hills of Mississippi, has just died, and in order to respect her last wish her family undertakes a long and perilous journey to carry her coffin to a distant graveyard at Jefferson. That is the story of *As I Lay Dying*. It appears simple. But such a summary of the tale leaves everything to be said about the novel. For what strikes us immediately is less the story itself than the way it is told, or rather the contrast between the tale and the telling, between the simplicity of the anecdote and the sophistication of the narrative method. To make something of the pathetic, macabre, or comic potential of his subject, Faulkner could simply have relied on the proven recipes of traditional narrative. He chose, however, a more adventurous and more difficult path, experimenting again - as he had already done in *The Sound and the Fury* and, more timidly, in his early novels - with new techniques. If, by its subject matter, *As I Lay Dying* belongs to the oral and literary tradition of folktales and tall stories, the novelist's approach to his art is definitely modern. As in *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner uses here James Joyce's "stream-of-consciousness" method: *As I Lay Dying* is presented as a series of interior monologues, and each one of these, as well as relating a moment in the action, shows us its refraction through an individual consciousness.

But instead of arranging the monologues in large, compact sections as he had done in his previous novel, Faulkner fragments them with seeming arbitrariness. *As I Lay Dying* surprises one straightaway by its utterly disjointed composition. In fact, only in the epistolary novel could one find precedents for such extreme segmentation, and the brevity of the sections calls to mind the scenes of a play rather than the chapters of a work of fiction. Hence an impression of discontinuity, which is increased on reading by the almost kaleidoscopic rotation of the viewpoints. In each section the perspective shifts, the lighting changes, so that each time the reader is caught off balance and forced to make constant readjustments if he wants to follow the narrative through all its twists and turns.

To these breaks in the storytelling are added the equally puzzling switches in tone and style. They also derive to a large extent from the mobility of the point of view, since whenever that changes, the story assumes the voice of a different narrator. Almost all the characters of the novel, it is true, speak the same rural idiom, and their monologues often have the familiar ring of a straightforward oral tale. But Faulkner is not content simply to exploit the stylistic resources of this vernacular for humorous effects, by playing on the naive vigor of its diction and on the drollery of its unorthodox grammar. Nor does he merely vary its use according to the personality and mood of the speaker. On the earthy base of this rustic colloquial prose, he continually traces the startling arabesques of his own rhetoric. The author's presence is particularly obvious in the lyrical outbursts and metaphysical reveries of Darl, whose style is virtually indistinguishable from the writer's own. It is also to be felt in Addie Bundren's terse,



impassioned eloquence in section 40. Yet this richer, denser, more freely inventive style is not restricted to any one character: even in those whose linguistic capacities seem severely limited - in Vardaman, for example, or Dewey Dell - language sometimes takes flight, and from the most halting prose suddenly springs, by virtue of an unexpected metaphor, a poetic vision which transfigures it.

Small wonder, then, that *As I Lay Dying* embarrasses critics who are hard put to define its genre. In its style as well as in its structure and significance, this will-o'-the-wisp novel seems to elude all attempts at classification.

Is it to be considered as a naturalistic novel, as a commentary on the economic deprivation and cultural illiteracy of poor whites? Faulkner's Mississippi hill-country farmers have been compared to Caldwell's Georgia sharecroppers; the odyssey of the Bundrens has been likened to the exodus of the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Yet even though Faulkner gives realism its due, nothing was further from his intentions than offering his readers an objective portrait of a family of poor whites: "it does sort of amuse me when I hear 'em talking about the sociological picture that I present in something like *As I Lay Dying*, for instance." Is it more relevant, then, to define the book as a philosophical novel? There is no doubt that moral and metaphysical concerns occupy - as in most of Faulkner's novels - a central place, but such a label, apart from recalling the lengthy arguments of the novel of ideas, tends to overlook the fact that the language of *As I Lay Dying* is the language of fiction, and it tells us nothing of the specific nature of the work.

If one tries to classify it according to mood rather than content, the same difficulties arise, and only at the cost of oversimplification can one manage to fit it into a recognized category. While allowing provisos, some have emphasized its comic elements, others its tragic aspects, and still others would make an epic of it. Does *As I Lay Dying* express Faulkner's "comic vision"? None would disagree that the novel lacks the sustained tension of *The Sound and the Fury*: there is humor in abundance, from the most innocent to the most macabre, and in all sorts of ways - in the grotesqueness of several characters as well as the extravagance of many an episode - it could be taken for a country farce. But there is too much grimness in the farce for the book to be considered as essentially comic, and the features relating it to tragedy are surely as significant: the story of the Bundrens, like that of the Compsons or the Sutpens, is the story of a family adrift, with all its tensions and conflicts; it begins with the account of a last agony, ends with scenes of hatred, violence, and madness, and the two most remarkable characters in the novel - Addie and Darl - are both, because of their tortured awareness of their destiny, purely tragic figures. Lastly, *As I Lay Dying* also has unmistakable affinities with the epic: the terrible ordeals undergone by the Bundrens in the course of their journey and their valiant struggle against the unbridled elements inevitably bring to mind the heroic exploits of myth and legend. And the very idea which, according to Faulkner, gave rise to the novel appears, in its sheer simplicity, as an epic idea: "I took this family and subjected them to the two greatest catastrophes which man can suffer - flood and fire, that's all."



Epic, tragedy, comedy? This is obviously not the right question to ask. To force the novel into the genres of traditional poetics is to ignore the dissonances from which it derives its originality. The distinctive aesthetic quality of *As I Lay Dying* is precisely that it is not an epic or a tragedy or a comedy, but, as it were, a gamble on being all three at once. It would perhaps be more worthwhile, therefore, to try another approach and see the novel through its narrative. What Faulkner is telling is the story of a journey. Now the journey is one of the narrative archetypes: from Homer's *Odyssey* to Joyce's, from the adventurous navigators of mythology and folklore to the restless wandering heroes of the modern novel and cinema, it has held its place through countless variations as one of the basic patterns of narration. On reading *As I Lay Dying*, one might almost think that the novelist sought to bring into play the different forms that travelers' tales have taken over the centuries, or at least to make echoes of them reverberate throughout. In the humble state of its protagonists, in the pithy vigor of its realism and the earthy tang of its humor, the novel - a story about people on the road - recalls the picaresque tradition (Anse would easily qualify for the role of the rogue). In the weirdness of its atmosphere and the often wildly implausible nature of the reported events, it makes one think of the marvelous or fantastic journeys of folktale, epic, and myth. Behind this polarity of the real and the imaginary, the distinction between "novel" and "romance" established by Simms and Hawthorne, and taken up by Richard Chase, will be easily recognized. On the face of it, *As I Lay Dying* may be taken for a rustic novel, but it is primarily a "romance" in the great symbolist tradition of American literature. If only in the motif of the strenuous journey, with all its wealth of connotations, it continues the exploration and illustration of a theme which, from the novels of James Fenimore Cooper through *Moby Dick* and *Huckleberry Finn*, has been central to American fiction.

The baffling diversity of tones and moods which characterizes the novel goes some way towards explaining the variety of interpretations it has provoked. *As I Lay Dying* offers us at once a comedy and the reverse of comedy, a tragedy and the derision of tragedy, an epic and the parody of epic. Is this simply the wry dialectic of humor, or is it not rather that the ruling force is irony? By thus forcing different genres to swallow each other, does one not end by clearing the way for absurdity? Judging by the closing pages, one might indeed think that absurdity wins the day. When Darl bursts out laughing at the monkey-like spectacle of his banana-munching family, it is hard to tell on which side lies reason and on which side madness. And in the final scene - which rings like a mocking echo of the recognition scenes one finds in the sentimental novels of the eighteenth century - when Anse, "kind of hangdog and proud too," introduces the new, duck-shaped and popeyed Mrs. Bundren to his perplexed children, the whole novel seems to tumble into sheer grotesqueness. As for the journey itself, it may seem quite as preposterous as this farcical ending. The stubbornness of the Bundrens in pursuing their funeral task reminds one at times of the blind obstinacy of burying beetles, and the result of their undertaking is perhaps less a victory of willpower than the triumph of inertia.

Are we then to conclude that all the values traditionally associated with the perilous journey are here reversed for the purpose of travesty, and that the epic overtones of the tale are only intended to point up the utter incongruity of this funeral steeplechase? Or is the burlesque not aimed rather at masking the praise of that eminently Faulknerian



virtue, endurance? That irony informs the whole design of *As I Lay Dying* is beyond dispute. The point is that it may be read in more than one way. There is little justification therefore in singling out one pattern of meaning and imposing it on the novel as the only valid interpretation. As a matter of fact, all attempts to date at explaining its metaphysics or codifying its ethics have been more or less arbitrary oversimplifications. As one critic very rightly notes: "The novel has a wonderful immunity to schematization; it is innocent of both a moral and a morality, and it seems to breathe out rather than posit a world view."

Faulkner here describes a world both absurd and living. He does not tell us whether we should reject the living as absurd, or accept the absurd as living. *As I Lay Dying* leaves its readers in a state of enthralled perplexity very similar to the stupor of the novel's characters in the face of what happens to them. This is not to say that the book cannot be discussed. To be satisfied with a single meaning, however, would be to misunderstand the subtle interplay of its ambiguities.

When Faulkner was questioned on *As I Lay Dying*, he invariably replied that it was a *tour de force*. As much by the speed with which it was written as by the audacity of its technique and the superb virtuosity of its art, the novel is precisely that. It charms like a brilliant impromptu, dazzles like a perfectly executed trapeze exercise. Of all Faulkner's novels, it is perhaps the most agile, the most adroit, the one in which the writer's mastery of his craft and the versatility of his gifts reveal themselves in the most spectacular way. It is also, beneath its guise of an improvisation, one of his most complex and most intriguing works. Faulkner no doubt wrote more ambitious and more deeply moving books: *As I Lay Dying* does not achieve the grandeur of *The Sound and the Fury*, the novelist's most "splendid failure"; it does not hold us under the same dark spell as *Absalom, Absalom!* nor does it offer the imaginative scope of *Go Down, Moses*. But only slightly below these peaks, it holds its place as a masterpiece.

Source: Andre Bleikasten, Introduction to *Faulkner's As I Lay Dying*, Indiana University Press, 1973, pp. 3-9.



Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Howe praises Faulkner for his ability to "blend extreme and incongruous effects - the sublime and the trivial, anguish and absurdity, a wretched journey through the sun and a pathetic journey toward kinship" in As I Lay Dying.

A story of a journey, an account of adventures on the road - this may be the outward form of the novel, but the journey proves exceedingly curious and the adventures disconcert. Having died while a son sawed her coffin beneath her window, Addie Bundren is carted away in the family wagon through the back roads of Yoknapatawpha. The family thereby honors her reiterated wish that she be buried in the Jefferson cemetery. Unwilling adventurers, the Bundrens can do nothing well; their journey, like their spiritual life, is erratic and confused. Prompted by awe for the dead, and by a cluster of private motives, they plod through mishaps both comic and terrible - fire and flood, suffering and stupidity - until, at last, they reach the town. The putrescent corpse is buried, the daughter fails in her effort to get an abortion, one son is badly injured, another has gone mad, and at the very end, the father suddenly remarries.

Crossing farce with anguish, *As I Lay Dying* is a story of misfortune: the father Anse is certainly right, though hardly for the reasons he supposes, when he declares himself a "misfortunate man." There is a kind of story, like Leskov's "The Enchanted Wanderer," which heaps so many troubles on the back of its hero that the final effect is perversely comic; to this family of fiction *As I Lay Dying* is distantly related. Recalling the Dostoevskian novel in its coarse mixture of emotions, the book stumbles from catastrophe to catastrophe - a bewildering marathon of troubles. Suspense is maintained by the likelihood that still greater troubles are to come, while the ability of some characters to survive with equanimity becomes a wry celebration of mankind.

That *As I Lay Dying* is something more than a record of peregrine disaster we soon discover. As it circles over a journey in space, the novel also plunges into the secret life of the journeyers. Each of them conducts the action a little way while reciting the burden of his mind; the novel resembles a cantata in which a theme is developed and varied through a succession of voices. In *As I Lay Dying* the theme is death, death as it shapes life. The outer action, never to be neglected and always fearsomely spectacular, is a journey in a wagon; the inner action is the attempt of the Bundrens to define themselves as members of a family at the moment the family is perishing.

Neither fire nor flood is the crux of the novel, nor any physical action at all; it is Addie Bundren's soliloquy, her thoughts as she lay dying. Until that moment in the book, Faulkner lightly traces the tangled relationships among the Bundrens - the father, the daughter Dewey Dell, the sons Cash, Darl, Jewel, and Vardaman. It seems at first that Darl, the most introspective of the sons, is the cause and catalyst of family tensions. He guesses Dewey Dell's pregnancy and silently taunts her with his knowledge; he hovers over Jewel with eager attentiveness and broods upon the rivalry between them. But Addie's soliloquy makes clear that the conflicts among the children are rooted in the lives of their parents, in the failure of a marriage. It is Addie who dominates the book,



thrusting her sons against each other as if they were warring elements of her own character. From her soliloquy until the end of the novel, the action is a physical resolution of the Bundrens' emotional troubles, a resolution which must be achieved if the body is to be buried in peace.

Dying, Addie remembers her youth. Always she had searched for a relation with people by which to impress her will; her energy had never found full release. As a schoolteacher she "would look forward to the times when they faulted, so I could whip them. When the switch fell I could feel it upon my flesh; when it welted and ridged it was my blood that ran, and I would think with each blow of the switch: Now you are aware of me! Now I am something in your secret and selfish life." But when she married Anse she learned that, for all her fierce willfulness, she would never penetrate to his secret and selfish life.

First came Cash and then "I knew that living was terrible. That was when I learned that words are no good; that words don't ever fit even what they are trying to say at ... Love, [Anse] called it. But I had been used to words for a long time. I knew that word was like the others: a shape to fill a lack." Cash she cherished, for through his birth she reached understanding, both of Anse and herself. But when Darl came, "At first I would not believe it. Then I believed I would kill Anse. It was as though he had tricked me, hidden within a word like within a paper screen and struck me in the back through it." After Darl's birth, Anse seemed to die for her, though "He did not know he was dead, then. Sometimes I would lie by him in the dark, hearing the land that was now of my blood and flesh, and I would think: Anse. Why Anse. Why are you Anse." And then her moment of ecstasy: "I believed I had found it - that the reason was the duty to be alive, to the terrible blood." Sinning with preacher Whitfield, she bore Jewel. What came after that seemed unimportant: "I gave Anse Dewey Dell to negative Jewel - Vardaman to replace the child I had robbed him of. And now he had three children that are his and not mine. And then I could get ready to die."

The way in which the Bundren children are born, remarks Olga Vickery in a suggestive study of *As I Lay Dying*, establishes the "level of their awareness of [Addie] and the mode of their participation in her burial." Cash, the earnest and admirable carpenter, is the moral head of the family; reflecting Addie's strength and self-possession at the moment she first realizes that "living was terrible," he is free of the furies that torment his brothers. Too free, perhaps; his imagination limps behind his conscience, and he is so absorbed in the coffin that he does not notice a family crisis darkening about him.

Unlike Cash, Darl is capable of projecting himself into the feelings of his brothers; but he cannot establish a firm and distinct personality, one with which they can come to secure terms. Curious though the comparison may seem, this poor-white farm boy resembles one of those characters who prowl through Henry James's late novels, all prying awareness and no core of self. His eyes continually lighting on the family wounds, Darl speaks more frequently and in many more scenes than the other Bundrens. He senses that Jewel is the truly beloved son despite the fact that he, Darl, proffers and receives the gestures of love; and he knows, too, that the horse on which Jewel bestows such



fierce care is a surrogate for Addie. Darl even hints that he has discovered the reason for Addie's violent love of Jewel:

She would fix him special things to eat and hide them for him. And that may have been when I first found it out, that Addie Bundren should be hiding anything she did, who had tried to teach us that deceit was such that, in a world where it was, nothing else could be very bad or very important, not even poverty. And at times when I went in to go to bed she would be sitting in the dark by Jewel where he was asleep. And I knew that she was hating herself for that deceit and hating Jewel because she had to love him so that she had to act the deceit.

It now becomes clear what Darl meant when he said, somewhat earlier, "I cannot love my mother because I have no mother. Jewel's mother is a horse." The motherless Darl must acknowledge, "I don't know what I am."

Jewel speaks only once, and then in a fantasy which aligns mother and himself against the Bundrens: "It would just be me and her on a high hill and me rolling the rocks down the hill at their faces ... by God until she was quiet." Dewey Dell and Vardaman, both the issue of Addie's indifference, are vegetable and idiot, the one concerned only with her ease and the other pure in feeling but unable to distinguish between dead mother and the fish he carries in his hand. The ineffectual Anse declaims in self-pity: "It's a trial. But I don't begrudge her it. No man can say I begrudge her it." Addie is right; in some deep sense her husband is dead.

Softened and dulled, Addie's emotional yearnings reappear among her children, as indeed they suffuse the entire novel. In their struggle for self-definition, her sons discover that to answer the question, *Who am I?* they must first consider, *What was my mother and how did she shape me?* The rivalry between Darl and Jewel, which recurs through the book like an underground tremor, is a rivalry in sonship, and it is Darl's sense of being unwanted which drives him to his obsessive questioning and finally his fall into madness. As the children try, each in his fumbling or inarticulate way, to discover the meaning of being a son or brother, Addie's authority persists and increases. And in this search for identity they demonstrate their mother's conviction that language is vanity which action is the test of life: "I would think how words go straight up in a thin line, quick and harmless, and how terribly doing goes along the earth, clinging to it." This sentence prefigures the Bundren history and announces the theme of the book.

Tyrannical in its edict of love and rejection, the will of the mother triumphs through the fate of her children. Cash, the accepted son, endures a preposterous excess of pain largely because of his own inattention and the stupidity of the others. Thereby he learns the meaning of kinship, his brothers impinging on him through the torment they cause him; and at the end he takes his place as the mature witness of the wreckage of the family. Jewel, by breaking from his violent obsession, fulfills his mother's prophecy: "He is my cross and he will be my salvation. He will save me from the water and the fire." Literally, that is what Jewel does, and when he parts from his horse in order to speed Addie's burial he achieves a direct expression of filial love. Dewey Dell, munching her banana, continues to move in an orbit of egoism; Vardaman, pathetic and troubled, is



locked in his idiocy; and Anse gets himself another wife, "duck-shaped" and with "hard-looking pop eyes."

Darl is the family sacrifice. An unwanted son, he seeks continually to find a place in the family. The pressures of his secret knowledge, the pain of observing the journey, the realization that he can never act upon what he knows - these drive Darl to madness. Now he dares taunt Jewel: "Whose son are you? Your mother was a horse; but who was your father, Jewel?" From the sobriety of Cash he moves to the derangement of Vardaman; in a brilliant passage he and Vardaman "listen" to their mother in the coffin:

She was under the apple tree and Darl and I go across the moon and the cat jumps down and runs and we can hear her inside the wood. "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's 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 to hide her away from the sight of man, Darl?" "So she can lay down her life," Darl says.

Betrayed by Dewey Dell and assaulted by Jewel, Darl is taken away to the asylum. Only Cash understands him; only Cash and Vardaman pity him. Referring to himself in the third person, a sign of extreme self-estrangement, Darl says: "Darl is our brother, our brother Darl. Our brother Darl is in a cage in Jackson where, his grimed hands lying light in the quiet interstices, looking out he foams. 'Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes'." To the end it is a search for kinship that obsesses Darl, and his cryptic row of affirmatives may signify a last, pathetic effort to proclaim his brotherhood.

Upon this investigation of a family's inner history, Faulkner has lavished a dazzling virtuosity. Like *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying* stakes everything on the awareness of its characters. There is neither omniscient narrator nor disinterested observer at the rim of the story; nothing being told, all must be shown. But where *The Sound and the Fury* is divided into four long sections, of which three convey distinct and sustained points of view, *As I Lay Dying* is broken into sixty fragments in which fifteen characters speak or reflect at various turns of the action and on numerous levels of consciousness. The prolonged surrender to a few memories in *The Sound and the Fury* permits a full dramatic recall; the nervous transitions in *As I Lay Dying* encourage a sensitive recording of character change. It would be difficult to exaggerate the complexity of *As I Lay Dying*, or the skill with which Faulkner manipulates its diverse points of view. So remarkable is this skill, the critic runs a danger of regarding the novel merely as a fascinating exercise in dexterity.

Once it is agreed that in a final estimate the critical emphasis belongs elsewhere, this dexterity is a thing to enjoy and admire - particularly the way each Bundren, speaking in his own behalf, comes to illuminate the others. The first word of the book, uttered by Darl, is "Jewel," and it announces a major theme: Darl's fitful preoccupation with his brother. On the same page Darl quickly sketches Jewel: "Still staring straight ahead, his pale eyes like wood set into his wooden face, he crosses the floor in four strides with the rigid gravity of a cigar store Indian dressed in patched overalls and endued with life



from the hips down." Several pages later Darl speaks again, describing Jewel as the latter caresses his horse with obscene ferocity. After these introductory glimpses, Jewel comes forward for one page, a page of fantasy concerning his frozen love for his mother. The perspective shifts to Cora Tull, a comically righteous neighbor who sees much yet not enough, and from her we learn that Jewel has been favored by years of Addie's "selfdenial and downright perversity." Speaking for the first time, Dewey Dell remarks that "Jewel don't care about anything he is not kin to us in caring, not carekin." When Darl learns his mother is dead, he thinks immediately of Jewel: "*I say, she is dead, Jewel, Addie Bundren is dead.*"

Jewel has now been seen from several points of view, each different yet complementary to the other, and he has spoken once; but he is to be fully understood only when we reach the Addie section and discover the condition of his birth. "With Jewel - I lay by the lamp, holding up my own head, watching him cap and suture it before he breathed - the wild blood boiled away and the sound of it ceased." We can now surmise why it is he, and none of his brothers, who saves Addie from water and fire, why he consents to sell his horse, why he pummels Darl when they reach Jefferson. From a multitude of slanted impressions and remarks, an image of Jewel is slowly composed; but any final interpretation must be our own for there is no detached observer who speaks for Faulkner, not even to the extent that Dilsey does in *The Sound and the Fury*. The secondary characters surrounding the Bundrens as a chorus of comment and comedy never achieve more than a partial understanding. Faulkner presents; the reader must conclude.

The method of *As I Lay Dying* brings with it the danger that the frequent breaks in point of view will interfere with the flow of narrative. In a few scenes this does happen, particularly in those of Darl's reflections which become so densely "poetic" they claim more attention than they warrant. But once Addie's soliloquy is reached, the physical journey in the wagon and the psychological journey through the family closely parallel each other; and the first gains dramatic relevance and lucidity from the second.

Each character provides a line of action and impression, but not, of course, with the same sureness and plausibility. Picturesque as they may be, Dewey Dell and Vardaman are hardly bold originals; they serve well enough as foils and accessories, but they seem to have been borrowed from the common store of Southern fiction rather than created in their own right. One minds less their being measured from a ready-made pattern than the neatness and predictability of the measure - their very idiosyncrasies prove neat and predictable. Still, a distinction is to be made even among stereotypes; Vardaman has a kind of stock vividness, while Dewey Dell is the one Bundren who fails to emerge clearly.

Similar strictures might be made against the father but not, I think, with equal justice. Faulkner's critics have been very hard on Anse, cracking the whips of morality over his frail back. Poor Anse, he is hardly the man to support judgment; he is merely a figure to be watched, resourceful in exploiting his laziness, gifted at proclaiming the proper generalities at not quite the proper time, and in his shuffling sort of way, diffident and almost humble. In drawing Anse, Faulkner may have had in mind one or another



important moral lesson; more probably, he had struck upon a universal comic type, the tyrannically inept *schlemiehl* whose bumbling is so unrelieved and sloth so unalloyed that he ends by evoking only an impatient, irritated sympathy.

But Darl raises problems. Because we quickly identify with him, and eagerly respond to his restless search for self-knowledge, Darl's sudden breakdown comes as a jolt; and while Faulkner's motives for introducing it may easily be inferred, I doubt that he has sufficiently prepared for it in the immediately preceding text. Darl's part of the novel is an instance of the "misplaced middle"; the introductory presentation bulks so large that there remains little space in which to prepare and justify the denouement. Given the large demands made on his vision, Darl's later collapse could be accepted only if Faulkner devoted more attention than he does to showing the boy's movement from sanity to madness. There are hints, of course: for the first time Darl dares taunt Jewel openly and Vardaman alludes to his knowledge that it is Darl who has fired the barn. But these intimations span a gap that needs to be filled. Darl's madness does not follow "inevitably" from what has preceded it; and, if only because our identification with him has been too sharply punctured, we are left with a surplus of unused sympathy.

Quite as excessive as Darl's fate is the burden of language Faulkner thrusts upon him. Between author and character there seems to be an unfortunate personal entanglement, certainly a lack of ironic distance - and in a way that recalls Faulkner's relation to Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*. When Darl is used merely to observe the other Bundrens, as in the splendid scene in which he remembers Jewel's sacrifice to buy his horse, the closeness between author and protagonist does not disturb, for then Darl is largely removed from our vision. But when he turns in upon himself, exploring his muddled consciousness, he is assigned reflections violently out of character. That he occasionally abandons Southern idiom for poetic reverie is in itself unexceptionable, a heightened style being as good a way as any to simulate the life of the inner mind. Nor is the difficulty merely that these reflections do not seem cognate to Darl; they would be as dubious from a philosopher as from a farm boy:

The river itself is not a hundred yards across, and pa and Vernon and Vardaman and Dewey Dell are the only things in sight not of that single monotony of desolation leaning with that terrific quality a little from right to left, as though we had reached the place where the motion of the wasted world accelerates just before the final precipice. Yet they appear dwarfed. It is as though the space between us were time: an irrevocable quality. It is as though time, no longer running straight before us in a diminishing line, now runs parallel between us like a looping string, the distance being the doubling accretion of the thread and not the interval between.

About the remaining Bundrens there can be no qualms. Jewel is done with harsh, rapid strokes, seldom brushed as delicately as in the portrait of Darl; but for a figure whose behavior forms a ballet of turbulence the harshness and rapidity are exactly right. Addie Bundren is a remarkable image of a passionate woman who, except for an illicit interval, has known only barrenness. Driven dark into herself, unable to express her love for her favorite son, and ending with a realism of attitude more stringent than her husband can imagine, Addie spends her years in loneliness and can bequeath her sons nothing but



unfulfilled passion. In her desperation to preserve her family and to raise her children properly, she seems classically American. This harassed, angular and fervent woman - have we not met her in Willa Cather's novels of pioneer life and Sherwood Anderson's memoirs of his childhood? Long before we reach Addie's soliloquy we see her overbearing effect upon the children; and when she does speak, it comes as an explosion of ecstasy - a piece of writing that for emotional intensity may justly be compared with the great forest scenes of *The Scarlet Letter*.

It is on Cash, however, that Faulkner bestows his most admirable touches. Lacking the intensity of Jewel or the moody restlessness of Darl, he comes through with greater resonance and richness than the other Bundrens; he alone among the brothers is neither delusional nor obsessed; and he is one of the few Faulkner characters who are not merely revealed but also grow as a consequence of their experience. At the beginning he is lightly sketched into the story, with an affectionate mockery that hardly suggests his later importance. How far did you fall, Cash, that time you slipped off the church roof? "Twenty eight foot, four and a half inches, about," he solemnly replies. And when he speaks directly for the first time, it is to explain in thirteen marvelously adduced reasons why "I made [the coffin] on the bevel. 1. There is more surface for the nails to grip ... 13. It makes a neater job."

Throughout the journey Cash says very little and suffers in quiet; but he is now watching the drama within his family, almost as if he were seeing it for the first time. Thereby he gains an understanding of the journey, implicitly taking it as a test of character and integrity. He matures in his feelings and in his power to express them. Sometimes, he says about Darl,

... I ain't so sho who's got ere a right to say when a man is crazy and when he ain't. Sometimes I think it ain't none of us pure crazy and ain't none of us pure sane until the balance of us talks him thata- way. It's like it ain't so much what a fellow does, but it's the way the majority of folks is looking at him when he does it.

This growth from unimaginative self-containment to humane concern appears again in Cash's musings over a phonograph:

I reckon it's a good thing we ain't got ere a one of them. I reckon I wouldn't never get no work done a-tall for listening to it. I don't know if a little music ain't the nicest thing a fellow can have. Seems like when he comes in tired of a night, it ain't nothing could rest him like having a little music played and him resting.

But surely the final emphasis belongs not to the novel's matter or technique; its claim to our affection rests on more than its study of family relations or its brilliance in handling points of view. Such things matter only insofar as they bring us closer to the book's essential insight or vision, its moral tone. Of all Faulkner's novels, *As I Lay Dying* is the warmest, the kindest and most affectionate. The notion that Faulkner is a misanthrope wallowing in horrors is possible only to those who have not read the book or have read it with willful obtuseness. In no other work is he so receptive to people, so ready to take and love them, to hear them out and record their turns of idiom, their melodies of



speech. Smaller in scope than Faulkner's other important novels, *As I Lay Dying* lacks the tragic consistency of *The Sound and the Fury*, the grandeur of *Absalom, Absalom!*, the power of *Light in August*. But it shines with virtues distinctly its own: a superb sympathy for the lowly and incoherent, an implicit belief that the spiritual life of a Darl Bundren can be as important as the spiritual life of a Lambert Strether, a readiness on Faulkner's part to immerse himself in people radically unlike himself. Look - he seems to be saying - look at the capacity for suffering and dignity which human beings have, even the most absurdly wretched of them! The book is a triumph of fraternal feeling, and because it is that, a triumph, as well, in the use of idiom. No finer example of American lyricism, that indigenous style stemming from *Huckleberry Finn*, could be found in twentieth-century writing than this passage in which Darl remembers....

When I was a boy I first learned how much better water tastes when it has set a while in a cedar bucket. Warmish-cool, with a faint taste like the hot July wind in cedar trees smells. It has to set at least six hours, and be drunk from a gourd. Water should never be drunk from metal. And at night it is better still. I used to lie on the pallet in the hall, waiting until I could hear them all asleep, so I could get up and go back to the bucket. It would be black, the shelf black, the still surface of the water a round orifice in nothingness, where before I stirred it awake with the dipper I could see maybe a star or two in the bucket, and maybe in the dipper a star or two before I drank. After that I was bigger, older. Then I would wait until they all went to sleep so I could lie with my shirt-tail up, hearing them asleep, feeling myself without touching myself, feeling the cool silence blowing upon my parts and wondering if Cash was yonder in the darkness doing it too, had been doing it perhaps for the last two years before I could have wanted to or could have.

Or consider this passage in which Darl describes Addie's coffin being carried into the house:

It is light, yet they move slowly; empty, yet they carry it carefully; lifeless, yet they move with hushed precautionary words to one another, speaking of it as though, complete, it now slumbered lightly alive, waiting to come awake. On the dark floor their feet clump awkwardly, as though for a long time they have not walked on floors.

Almost as vivid is Jewel thinking of his mother as she dies:

... her hands laying on the quilt like two of them roots dug up and tried to wash and you couldn't get them clean. I can see the fan and Dewey Dell's arm. I said if you'd just let her alone. Sawing and knocking, and keeping the air always moving so fast on her face that when you're tired you can't breathe it, and that goddamn adze going One lick less. One lick less ...

Because he writes of the Bundrens with a comely and tactful gravity, a deep underlying respect, Faulkner is able to blend extreme and incongruous effects - the sublime and the trivial, anguish and absurdity, a wretched journey through the sun and a pathetic journey toward kinship. An American epic, *As I Lay Dying* is country farce and human tragedy. The marvel is that to be one it had to be the other.

Source: Irving Howe, "As I Lay Dying," in *William Faulker: A Critical Study*, Random House, 1951, pp. 127-42.

Adaptations

Initially *As I Lay Dying* was adapted for the stage by Jean-Louis Barrault. The 1935 production was performed in Paris and featured extensive pantomime, surrealistic settings and costumes, and only Addie's monologues.

Peter Gill adapted the novel for a 1985 production at London's National Theatre. Gill also directed the play, employing sparse staging and effects.

Frank Galati adapted and directed the work for Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company in 1995. Galati previously had adapted John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The Threshold Theatre Company of Kingston, Ontario performed the work in Toronto in August, 1995. Mark Cassidy adapted and directed the play. The company performed the play outside, and the audience walked with the actors on their funeral journey.

Edward Kemp adapted the play in 1998 for London's Young Vic theatre company. The play was directed by Tim Supple.



Topics for Further Study

Examine and discuss the possible meanings of Faulkner's title. How do you interpret it?

Research economic conditions for Southern farmers during the early decades of the twentieth century. How did these conditions impact class relations? Provide examples from Faulkner's novel.

Compare and contrast the lives of Southern farmers and unskilled laborers in the early twentieth century with the lives of farmers and laborers today. Offer statistical information from reference sources to illustrate how the situation has changed.

Explore the lives of women in Southern society at the time of Faulkner's novel. How have women's activities, opportunities, and expectations changed?

Research Sigmund Freud's theories on the Oedipal complex and relate what you've learned to Addie Bundren's relationships with her children, using examples from the novel.

Compare the journey of the Bundren family to famous journeys in myth, religion, or famous epics. What are the defining characteristics of these journeys?

Construct a contemporary version of the Bundrens' journey, factoring in modern social conditions. How are Faulkner's version and your version similar? In what ways do they differ, and what does that say about how society has changed?



Compare and Contrast

1920s: The Democratic party dominates Southern politics. Women are granted voting rights in 1920, but African Americans are disenfranchised and discouraged from participating in the democratic process.

Today: Since the 1960s, the Republican party has gained power and influence in the South. African American citizens are more politically active, usually providing support for the Democratic party.

1920s: Cotton is the dominant crop in Mississippi. Outdated farming methods, a lack of technology, the lien system, and a depressed cotton market keep most small farmers in debt.

Today: Cotton is still a major crop in the South, but it is no longer the dominant source of agricultural income. Production is dependent on technology and corporate ownership. Industrial employment now exceeds agricultural employment in the state.

1920s: African Americans are the majority population in Mississippi, followed by whites, Native Americans (primarily Choctaw), and Chinese immigrants who lived in the Delta region.

Today: Because of migrations out of state after 1940, African Americans comprise about a third of the population with whites in the majority. Native American and Asian-American residents still remain in minority status.

1920s: Laws prohibiting abortion exist in most states since the late 1800s. Drugs that supposedly induced abortion had been on the market since the mid-nineteenth century. Abortion is considered a medical, moral, and religious issue.

Today: With its 1973 decision in the *Roe v. Wade* case, the Supreme Court legalized abortion during the first six months of pregnancy. Age restrictions apply in many areas. Abortion is considered a medical, moral, and religious issue.

What Do I Read Next?

The Sound and the Fury (1929) is Faulkner's first extended attempt at the stream-of-consciousness narrative techniques that he successfully employs in *As I Lay Dying*. Both novels also concern familial relationships and include penetrating psychological portraits. Many critics note similarities between Quentin Compson and Darl as well as the idiot Benjy Compson and young Vardaman.

Faulkner's *The Hamlet* (1940) is the first in a trilogy of novels that chronicle the rise of the "poor white" Snopes family.

Tobacco Road (1932), a novel by Erskine Caldwell, depicts a poor family that overcomes extreme hardship in order to survive. Caldwell's characters are noted for their ignorance and often primitive reactions to situations.

George Washington Harris's Sut Lovingood stories, published in periodicals from 1843 until 1869 and collected in *Sut Lovingood's Yarns* (1966), are comedies in the tall tale tradition, featuring an incorrigible narrator and outlandish escapades. Faulkner professed to be a fan of these stories.

The Nigger of the "Narcissus" (1897), a novel by Joseph Conrad, depicts a ship journey that is fraught with peril. The story revolves around James Wait, a dying, black sailor who becomes the center of the crew's attention. Many critics have noted the similarities of this novel to *As I Lay Dying*.

C. Vann Woodward's influential historical study, *Origins of the New South: 1877-1913* (1951), offers a detailed account of Southern life and politics.

The Mind of the South (1941), a book written by W. J. Cash, is a controversial study of Southern race relations, class systems, religion, and philosophies. The book has elicited both praise and condemnation.



Further Study

Carvel Collins, "The Pairing of *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*," *Princeton University Library Chronicle*, Vol. 18, 1957, pp. 114-23.

Carvel's influential early study details myth patterns in the book, particularly Greek myth.

Dianne L. Cox, editor, *William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying: A Critical Casebook*, Garland Publishing, Inc., 1985.

This important collection includes many valuable essays examining such topics as Faulkner's narrative design, language, characterization, and major themes.

Philip Hanson, "Rewriting Poor White Myth in *As I Lay Dying*," *Arkansas Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 1993, pp. 308-24.

Employing the economic, cultural, and political environment of the Bundrens, Hanson explores Faulkner's treatment of beast imagery in relation to poor white Southerners.

Elizabeth Hayes, "Tension Between Darl and Jewel," *Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 2, Spring, 1992, pp. 49-61.

Hayes analyzes the centrality of Darl and Jewel's relationship to the novel. In contrast to many critics, she denies that Darl hates Jewel, contending that he sees Jewel as a means to verifying his own identity.

Robert Hemenway, "Enigmas of Being in *As I Lay Dying*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 19, Summer, 1970, pp. 133-46.

Hemenway analyzes Darl's most important philosophical monologues and conversations.

Lynn Gartrell Levins, *Faulkner's Heroic Design: The Yoknapatawpha Novels*, University of Georgia Press, 1976.

In her study of the novel, Levins finds similarities in the Bundrens' trip and epic and Christian journeys.

Robert Merrill, "Faulknerian Tragedy: The Example of *As I Lay Dying*," *Mississippi Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 3, Summer, 1994, pp. 403-18.

Merrill contends that Faulkner blends comedy and tragedy in the novel, but that tragedy ultimately prevails.

Michael Millgate, *The Achievement of William Faulkner*, Random House, 1966.

Millgate provides a general introduction to Faulkner's novel.



Stephen M. Ross, *Fiction's Inexhaustible Voice: Speech and Writing in Faulkner*, University of Georgia Press, 1989.

Ross examines Faulkner's narrative techniques.

Patricia R. Schroeder, "The Comic World of *As I Lay Dying*," in *Faulkner and Humor*, edited by Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie, University Press of Mississippi, 1986, pp. 34-46.

Schroeder surveys the variety of humor in the novel as well as Faulkner's overall comic vision.

John K. Simon, "What Are You Laughing At, Darl?: Madness and Humor in *As I Lay Dying*," *College English*, Vol. 25, November, 1963, pp. 104-11.

In his respected study of Darl, Simon closely analyzes the character's madness and final speech.

Hyatt Waggoner, *William Faulkner: From Jefferson to the World*, University of Kentucky Press, 1959.

Waggoner offers a Christian interpretation of the text, examining many of its elements from this perspective.



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Warwick Wadlington, *As I Lay Dying: Stories out of Stories*, Twayne Publishers, 1992.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's □For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels



frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes "The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature," a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

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Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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