

The semblance of
selflessness: the
ingenuity of kindness
in as i lay dying



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

On the surface, the county of Yoknapatawpha seems to be a close-knit community that provides a support system for the Bundrens in the aftermath of Addie Bundren's death. While this is technically true, it is not as rosy a picture as Blackman makes it seem. Blackman's comment that the goodwill displayed in the novel is "reflective of some faith in humanity" implies that their goodwill is genuine. This is simply not the case. Almost every character in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* gains some physical or emotional reward by assisting others. This incentive, in combination with a strong sense of duty, propels them to lend a helping hand, not a sense of community.

The Bundrens are in desperate state throughout the novel. They hardly have any money, and are travelling down a long and unfamiliar road in order to bring matriarch Addie Bundren to Jefferson for burial. Due to the pure foolishness of the quest, Anse's poor leadership as a father, and division amongst the various family members, they are in constant need. Because of this, the people they meet along the way tend to feel pressured to what they can to make the journey smoother for them. However, it is not purely out of the good of their hearts, but because they feel a responsibility—as Christians and as southerners—to do what they can to help. One person that exemplifies this mindset is Armstid, a neighbor who offers the Bundrens food and shelter after their disastrous ordeal crossing the river. Armstid, like Samson's family earlier in the novel, would actually prefer not to offer the Bundrens the help they desire—in this case the use of his mules—but is obligated to do so by the rules of southern hospitality and Christian duty. When at first, Anse mentions that he is in need of a team and implies, in his usual self-centered fashion, that Armstid should allow him use of his mules in

response, Armstid is hesitant. Then Anse, when considering a trade with Snopes says, " He's a close man to trade with...But I reckon I can talk him around...A man'll always help a fellow in a tight, if he's got ere a drop of Christian blood in him" (185). Anse shamelessly uses the tenants of Christianity to manipulate the already-generous man into lending him even more. He knows that this is a trump card that will surely get him what he wants when all else fails. Armstid is aware of this as well, demonstrated by the fact that immediately after Anse' remark, he offers his team of mules: "' Of course you're welcome to the use of mine,' I said, me knowing how much he believed that was the reason" (185). Any generosity shown out of pure obligation cannot be considered genuine, and therefore is less indicative of a strong sense of community and more to what extent traditional values dominate southern life.

Similarly, Cora only lends aid to the Bundreds to reaffirm her own piety and moral character. She does not, in actuality, care about the Bundrens or their plight, and never hesitates to disparage them. Despite this, she does not hesitate to come to their aid once she suspects that Addie has died, even though Tull wants to wait until someone sends for them. " It's my Christian duty," she says on p. 69, " Will you [Tull] stand between me and my Christian duty?" She wants everyone to know that she has attempted " to live right in the sight of God and man" (23) by always being the first to help the Bundrens when they need it. This allows her to play the role of the archetypical good Samaritan in her eyes, her neighbors' eyes, and God's eyes (or so she seems to think). For Tull, on the other hand, this has simply become a habit, and one that is hard to break. He says on p. 33, " Like most

folks around here, I done holp [sic] him so much already I cant [sic] quit now". While he too, at times criticizes his strange neighbors (especially Anse), he does not feel required to assist them by the laws of Christianity, and has no qualms about refusing to do so when he feels they are asking for too much. This is exemplified by the fact that he does not let Anse use his mules to cross the river, knowing that trying to cross the river is a foolish endeavor in the first place. Tull is perhaps the only person in the novel who acts out of pure decency. Characters in *As I Lay Dying* only serve others in order to somehow fulfill themselves; they want to feel or seem better or more 'Christian'.

The Bundrens themselves are no exception to the selfish-altruism phenomenon, and in fact, their attitudes aren't nearly so dignified. Even when carrying out the dying wishes of their own wife/mother, each Bundren's true reason for going is to gain something for themselves. Ralph Waldo Emerson stated in his essay "Compensation" that, "It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself....". The Bundrens are classic examples of this theory. Except for Jewel, each member of the Bundren family has ulterior motives for going to Jefferson. Cash is looking for a gramophone, Anse wants to buy false teeth (and is possibly already planning to get remarried), Dewey-Dell is looking to get an abortion, and Vardaman wants bananas and a toy train. Outwardly each pretends that they are embarking on this quest because Addie wanted it, but it is obvious that they are only doing it in order to benefit themselves. The most egregious example of this is Anse's reaction to Addie's death on p. 52: "'God will be done,' he [Anse] says. 'Now I can

get them teeth’”. Immediately his mind is set on his own selfish desires instead of on his wife’s death, or his children’s emotional well-being. Most of the children have a similar attitude, and this is the real impetus for their journey to Jefferson. Darl is the only one that sees the trip as foolish, and expresses his discontent by messing with his siblings’ heads throughout the novel. Since the motivation behind the trip is inherently selfish, conflict between the siblings builds up as they get further and further into the trip. Even though the Bundrens are supposed to be a family unit, they lack cohesion, as each member has a vastly different personality from the rest. This, along with their varying goals put many members of the family at odds with each other.

Darl in particular is a divisive figure. His jealousy of Jewel’s position as their mother’s favorite child leads him to purposely antagonize him. One example of this is how he drags Jewel along on the wood-delivering trip, so that he will miss Addie’s death. Dewey-Dell possesses a vitriolic hatred for Darl due to his ability to read her mind and know her every thought and action. She feels violated by this mental probing and is bitter over the fact that she can keep no secrets from him; she even imagines killing him one day. Meanwhile Vardaman, who is already a disturbed child to begin with, is constantly led astray by the foolishness Darl plants in his head. Darl, perhaps simply in an attempt to mess with his little brother (as older brothers are wont to do), or perhaps because he is at this point becoming unhinged, leads Vardaman to believe that Jewel’s mother is actually a horse, and that if they listen closely enough, they can hear Addie in her coffin. Cash is so straightforward and stoic that he is unable to form truly close bonds with any member of the

family, and none of the children seem to hold any love for Anse. Cohesion and unity are the things that bind communities, and especially families, together. If the family on which the novel centers lack these traits, how then, can one agree with Blackman's contention that *As I Lay Dying* "is a study of community"? In view of how much assistance the Bundrens receive along their journey, it is understandable how one could come to the conclusion that *As I Lay Dying* is a case-study in community ties. However, almost every character in the novel, with the exception of Vernon, show altruism only in an attempt to fulfill some need of theirs.

Considering initial reluctance of characters such as Armstid, Tull, and Samson's to help the Bundrens, it is clear that the only reason they do so is because they are bound by the moral obligation of Christianity, and traditional southern hospitality. While much of the reasoning behind the character's motives and actions is indeed complex, the "heroes" in *As I Lay Dying* obviously continue the themes of alienation and division that are present in many of Faulkner's other novels. If anything, the novel demonstrates that true generosity and goodwill are rare, and that in general, people aid others because of the pressure placed on them by societal constructs, or as a mask to hide their own selfishness. In either case, the only purpose of carrying on the façade is to make the person seem more pious or loyal in the eyes of others.