

Good example of
faulkner studies as i
lay dying a character
study of cash
bundren...

[Family](#), [Parents](#)



Faulkner remains one of America's iconic writers still studied in higher education today for his style of writing engaging the reader in his characters. His characters in "As I Lay Dying" are no different in their challenge to the reader placing their symbolic meaning in the themes Faulkner incorporates in this story of a sequence of tragedies. "As I Lay Dying" exhibits an almost textbook example of a dysfunctional family of poor white Southerners on a farcical journey where the reader becomes familiar with the characters through Faulkner's use of them several of them as the narrator of this tale. Faulkner's story surrounds the eldest son Cash Bundren with a cast of siblings, a father whose only strength seems a gift of speech, and a dying mother whose ultimate demise begins the funeral march where their lives like the death of Addie Bundren changes them forever. The following academic analysis and discourse explores and examines the character of Cash. With the character, analysis a revelation of an innate and unappreciated strength, and sense of self the other characters in "As I Lay Dying" neither understand nor possess, and a generous spirit that sees the basic good in humans even when a person shows no such quality underpins the makeup of Cash Bundren.

Baker explains Faulkner incorporating his writing style in "As I Lay Dying" focusing on the Cash Bundren character correlates to the author's narrative techniques and their connection to his drive as a post war writer struggling with understanding and reconciling loss. Cash along with his siblings and father dealing with the impending death of Addie as wife and mother supports this view in general. However, Baker posits it is Faulkner's obsessive focus on the rites of death rather than death itself, and the act of

mourning over actual loss arising from death proving this substantially true. As Baker further espouses it is Faulkner's focus on rites and mourning that serve as "the poetics of elegy and its symbolic rituals shed light on its life-serving, rather than life negating, function" (89). Connected to this view therefore, the Cash character provides the vehicle expressing this idea substantially clearer over all the other characters in the story.

Faulkner's intentional placement of Cash Bundren remaining in the background as the story unfolds provides a subtle insight to his character as the reader finds him prodded with urgency as he diligently constructs his mother Addie's coffin outside the window where she lay dying in her bed. Driven by the impending death of his mother at any time, along with the prospect of carrying her within his finished product for the burial trek through Yoknapatawpha County, Cash's effort is "a testament to the precise execution of design that Cash deeply values as a result of his strong work ethic and dedication to craftsmanship" (Atkinson 15). At the same time, this relays the substance of his fundamental character make up. "Cash is concerned about doing a perfect bevel on her coffin," (Chan 118).

The underlying message Faulkner develops at this point in the story uses Cash as a "metaphor for the production of the novel with formulating Faulkner's concern with form and function as a means of exploring relations between art and social reality and, in turn, of laying bare the ideological dimensions of artistic autonomy" (Atkinson 15). Faulkner does this by connecting the pall covering Cash's labors with the truth of how his "production gives way to reception and the object (of his labor) enters into the traffic of the world" (Atkinson 15).

The connection between Cash and Addie also provides speculation underpinning, driven energy Cash focuses on constructing and finishing his mother's coffin. Faulkner creates a particular bond between Addie and Cash developing prior to his birth, but particularly after. " When he was born I knew that motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that had the children didn't care whether there was a word for it or not" (115).

Atkinson explores Faulkner's use of Cash in constructing the coffin as symbolically representative of an object of value from the contextual viewpoint of the Bundren family and their position in the community they live. It is, therefore, " Cash's carpentry both the skilled labor of an artisan and a show of filial devotion-a rare fusion of sweat, toil, and raw natural and emotional material that elevates (that puts) Cash's work beyond the mechanistic ennui of reification" (15).

Faulkner's use of the other characters in the story narrative process adds another depth to the Cash character as posited in this academic analysis. Darl, second born after Cash views Cash's labor of love constructing the coffin as signaling the type of union resultant between machine and human and makes his point of view derived from either wanting such a union or as something feared. Adding to this rendering, Darl notes, " the air smells like sulphur," before describing how Cash works with " one thigh and one pole-thin arm braced, his face sloped into the light with a rapt, dynamic immobility above his tireless elbow (Faulkner 76 qtd. in Atkinson 15).

Darl comments as he further observes, " The saw has not faltered, the running gleam of its piston edge unbroken." With the scene bringing in the

downpour of rain, Cash remains unconcerned and " takes up the saw again; again it moves up and down, in and out of that unhurried imperviousness as a piston moves in the oil " (Faulkner 77 qtd . in Atkinson 15).

Cash's other younger brother Jewel looks at his carpentry efforts and the construction project of the coffin as nothing " but an extension of his lifelong devotion to a transparent exchange between what people want from him and what he is then compelled to produce" (Atkinson 15). His lifelong determination for fulfilling the wishes of those around him provides the backdrop for Faulkner's integration of characters using Cash as the springboard.

This proves exemplary with Jewel remembering his childhood and a younger, Cash determined to satisfy one of his mother's demands. Jewel remembers his mother describing, " It's like when he was a little boy and she says if she had some fertilizer she would try to raise some flowers and he taken the bread pan and brought it back from the barn full of dung" (Faulkner 14 qtd. in Atkinson 15).

Acknowledging this urgent need of Cash motivating her brother as she watches him construct the coffin, Jewel observes with much dismay doubling as he realizes Cash works beneath Addie's window " where she can see him saying see. See what a good one I am making for you" (Faulkner 14 qtd. in Atkinson 15). Faulkner's uses the Jewel character recognition of how his brother's carpentry creates material objects directly relates to his social identity. Jewel's concern emerges as rather ironic in connection to the devotion of thought and care in executing the singular design of the coffin. In doing so, he achieves the perfect accord between form and function.

The first section narrated by Cash is, in fact, a testament to this facet of his aesthetic vision. In reference to the coffin, Cash tries to justify why ‘ I made it on the bevel’ by submitting a variation on the geometric proof (82). Each of the numbered points supports the form as a functional necessity, citing as grounds the added ‘ gripping-surface,’ the runoff patterns of water, key stress points, and the inevitable slanting pattern brought by a dead body's ‘ animal magnetism’”. (Faulkner 82-83 qtd. in Atkinson 15)

Understanding the Southern poor white world of the Bundrens Faulkner creates his characters providing the framework of where Cash Bundren fits in, or rather quietly stand out in this story, requires examining Faulkner’s view of their place in poverty. Primarily, “ Faulkner's poor whites are never divorced from the worldly conditions of their existence, but these conditions are not—as in so many of the poor white novels of the twenties—the substance nor even the most influential shaper of their lives” (Cook 40).

Cook further explains, how Faulkner’s “ poor whites exist in a more comprehensive setting than any of their forebears; yet they continue to defy any wholly rational explanation” (40) that comes through as Cash Bundren exists alongside these unlikely other characters of the story “ as are the Bundren family in the variety of their absurdity” (40).

Cook further explains Faulkner’s use of other writing facets of this novel with the macabre and comic folklore so expressive of Southern culture providing the means he classifies the Bundrens’ station as the lowest social status yet retains and affirms their humanity. In Cook’s perception of this family where Cash emerges as least dysfunctional, holds the paradox Faulkner creates with the Bundrens’ “ gruesome fascination with the rites of death” (42)

existing when their actions (except for Cash) show a clear view of the cheapness of life among the living (42).

Initially, reading the story Cash Bundren's character quietly and consistently comes across to the reader as an unobtrusive backseat player in what emerges as a tragic drone of characters wallowing in angst, identity crisis, and failed, practice as any representation of idealistic examples of humanity. Faulkner's treatment of poverty through his characters including Cash in this story outlines his different approach as clearly exemplified in "As I Lay Dying":

The paradoxical attributes of his (Faulkner's) poverty represented a complex moral, aesthetic, and political challenge to writers in an age when polemical certainty might easily have become the rule. Instead, the poor white became a tool for exploring the past mistakes of the country (most vividly represented in the savage history and rapid industrialization of the South); he became the means for a more profound scrutiny of the role of its artists than ever before; and finally, he became the agency for questioning revered traditions of independence, self-sufficiency, and stoicism to see if they were any longer worth preserving. (Cook 188)

It is with this explanation that clearly shows that Faulkner's intention with the Cash Bundren character surfacing in the story shows a preservation of the traditions of "independence, self-sufficiency, and stoicism" (Cook 1888) providing a character as unselfish albeit a rigorously limited moralist without the guile other members of the Bundren clan so readily exhibit in the story. Yet, even though first impressions juxtaposes the readers' minds to the assumption Cash is indeed a clownish bumpkin, actually what evolves in the

story about the Cash character is the farthest thing from the truth as one soon realizes his selfless depth free of judging anyone.

Merrill's view of the series of tragic realities different individuals in the family confront creates an unlikely balance in comparison to the more absurdly laughable reactions of the different characters to what life continuously doles out before and during their journey to bury their matriarch in her hometown. Cash fares no less as a victim of unwanted hardship but his reaction remains steadfast as a rock of patience (403).

This continues as the now dead Addie, laid backwards in the coffin by well-intentioned women preparing her body in her wedding dress hoping to keep it from being crushed inadvertently make the coffin unbalanced. This well-intentioned act but nonetheless traumatic error causes unexpected drama for the family brings trouble and woe to the members of funeral march including Cash who never bemoans the ill that falls upon him along the way with a grave injury to his leg. It is this ongoing activity of people around Cash where the reader begins to understand his backbone of patience.

Chan describes how Cash remains "the paragon of patience and selflessness, almost to the point of absurdity" (118) as he continually refuses any protests about "his broken, festering leg, allowing the injury to degenerate to the point that he may never walk again" (118). Consequently, at this point in the novel the reader certainly understands with or without any comparison to the dysfunctional attributes of his father and siblings that "Cash emerges as one of the novel's few consistently stable characters" (118).

His focus as a carpenter meant completing construction of his mother's

coffin, as with anything put before him during the journey to her burial site regardless of floods or personal injuries. Baker's perspective on the subject looks at the toolbox Cash prizes more than anything and the process of making the coffin a process Cash fixates as a psychological necessity in coping with the loss of his mother even before she dies (89).

Fully appreciating this academic character analysis of Cash now requires in this examination reminding that any revelation of his innate and unappreciated strength as well as sense of self relies on the perceptions of two of his brothers Darl and Jewel. Among the other siblings in the novel operating outside the realm of normalcy as compared to the rest of those, living in the world they live, a closer examination of Darl ensues in order to justify the rationale of the character description of Cash leading this academic analysis of his character.

Darl's reaction to the death of his mother vexes his usually controlled intellectually driven nature. His lack of conviction honouring his mother's wishes for burial in far off Jackson becomes a central focus his actions early in the journey he believes a fool's task. The reader already knows Darl recognizes Cash as a self-sacrificing human being from his narrative describing the depth of Cash during his almost obsessive attention to constructing his mother's coffin. The depth of Darl's lack of support for the journey to Jackson reveals itself when during the ruined river crossing he abandons his mother's coffin. Still later that evening of this first day of their journey, he sets fire to the barn of one of their neighbor's where the family beds for the night with the 8-day-old corpse of his mother. All of this has a final consequence in relation to the character analysis of Cash.

As the drama of this family's funeral journey to Jackson evolves coming to a head with the arrest of Darl for the arson and subsequent commitment to an insane asylum draws the surest attention to Cash since his almost possessed energy in building the coffin. Cash accepts when guards capture Darl while acknowledging how sanity remains little more than a construct of society as he expounds, " it aint so much what a fellow does, but it's the way the majority of folks is looking at him when he does it" (Faulkner 233 qtd. in Tebbetts 69). This statement culminates in Cash philosophising how any man unable to agree with other people surely must be crazy (Faulkner 234).

Tebbetts explains how Cash provides a final thought on sanity suggesting there exists a contradictory idea allowing how every person has another living alongside within his/her substance. This other person exists outside society's definitions of sanity as well as insanity. Therefore, this otherness inside each person watches both the sane and insane actions of another with both equal parts of astonishment and horror (238).

This more in depth look at Faulkner's creation of the character of Cash adds another layer, when he looks at the incarceration of his brother Darl as an imprisonment he agrees because it really has nothing to do with Darl as much as it has to do with social constructions Darl came up against (Tebbetts 238). This aspect of Cash's character rebounds back to the initial impression of him as an unintelligent rube yet, this kind of thinking aligns to his peaceful nature and his reconciliation that anyone disrupting those things ordained by society keeping the peace then must reap what they sow. In the case of Darl and Cash belief of this otherness inside of each person, therefore puts the blame on both society's rule and the other person inside

of Darl breaking them.

It is Jacobi's contention that Cash by Faulkner's design possesses both emotional intensity and facility with language. However, he posits the great distance between the two leaves Cash lacking in skills allowing blending the two so he functions by alternate use between the two thus, exhibiting either inactivity or aloneness (61). Cash exhibits his view on how words determine a person's sanity as well. He says, " 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 that-a-way" (Faulkner 225 qtd. in Jacobi 61).

Atkinson explains, " Cash's interpretation of the barn burning is but one panel in a broader fictional tapestry whose patterns take shape in tangible ways from the material of social reality. Another one is the thematic motif drawn from the vagaries of investing in a free-market economy with very little guarantee of return" (15). This brings the intent of Faulkner's interpretation of a post war America through his characters weaving in and out of the lives he creates as part of the synthesis of his emotional, psychological, social, and political process as a writer.

One of the last lines in the end of this novel brings full circle the thesis posited in the introduction of this academic analysis of the character of Cash Bundren, it is a final revelation of his innate and unappreciated strength, his sense of self the other characters in this novel neither understand or possess. The generous spirit of Cash seeing the basic good in humans even though nothing of the sort is evident when Cash attempts justifying Darl's incarceration, 'This world is not his world; this life his life'" (Faulkner 250 as qtd. by Merrill 403).

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