

# Subjectivity in as i lay dying



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One of the central thematic elements of *As I Lay Dying* is the distinction between fact and interpretation of fact. Clearly, any objective fact can result in a multitude of subjective interpretations because the characters all have individual points of view. Their perspectives of any empirical truth depends upon their prejudices and perceptions; as a result, nothing that is said can be fully trusted or assumed to be pure in its objective truth. Though the novel is structured on the basis of the fact that each character experiences the same events, they all differ in their interpretations and perspectives. Since each character possesses a point of view that the reader cannot know for sure is entirely accurate and truthful, the theme of *As I Lay Dying* may be that there is no such thing as objective truth. To raise this question of reality, William Faulkner introduces two literary techniques in *As I Lay Dying* that draw into question the validity of the information being provided. Faulkner not only engages in the use of a wide variety of narrators, but he also utilizes stream-of-consciousness to heighten the inability to distinguish between fact and interpretation. The technique of stream-of-consciousness allows for narration to be introduced as if the thoughts are being read as the characters are thinking them; ideas and memories arise without premeditation and as such bear the mark of immediacy. In addition, because it is the character's thoughts rather than dialogue with another, the first instinct is to believe them, since thoughts are usually unfiltered. The use of stream-of-consciousness also serves to obscure the journey toward finding an objective truth. For instance, Cora Tull's perspective on the relationship between Addie and Darl or Addie and Jewel is significantly dissimilar than the perspectives of those characters, themselves. Thus, any supposedly objective truth that exists in any circumstance cannot necessarily be found in just one particular

point of view. Another instance of this shifting perspective is in how Jewel and Peabody consider Addy in terms of being victimized, whereas Anse clings to his reality that places him as a victim. Another technique that Faulkner uses is to structure the novel in the form of disconnected monologues. For example, consider the difficulty of constructing an accurate timeline of events from the monologue in which Dewey Dell faces off with Vardaman in the shed. Faulkner writes: ““ You durn little sneak!” My hands shake him, hard. Maybe I couldn’t stop them. I didn’t know they could shake so hard. They shake both of us, shaking. “ I never done it,” he says. “ I never touched them””(Faulkner 383). Both characters insist and believe in their own innocence, but clearly both cannot be innocent. In addition, they are each so wrapped up in insisting upon their version of the story that the sequence of the actual circumstances is confused within their own consciousness. Dewey Dell believed that Vardaman was covertly watching her, whereas Vardaman labored under the impression that Dewey Dell was going to tell him off. The result is a blending of the past and the present and the inability to come to anything even close to an objective reality. In another instance, the reality of exactly what was taking place between Cora and Darl remains forever locked in mystery because the perspectives presented are contradictory. As Faulkner writes, “ He did not answer. He just stood and looked at his dying mother, his heart too full for words” (Faulkner 355). Cora views Darl through the rosy lens of being a loving mother; she also thinks he is Addie’s favorite. From Darl’s perspective, however, he seems to be completely unresponsive to his mother and the three dollar load. Furthermore, most of the others believe that it is Jewel who is the favorite. This utter disconnect serves to call into question the reliability of

the narrators. What the characters think and which words they speak, meanwhile, create a foundation upon which to build yet another subjective reality: the reader's. Faulkner also builds the reader's sense of his or her own, individual perspective by making use of figurative language in describing scenery and characters. Characters often resort to using metaphors and similes as well as other stylistic turns of phrase. For example, when Darl seeks to incite Dewey Dell, his attempt is not explicit. Rather, it is accomplished through the use of double entendres. The double entendre is a microcosm of the shifting realities of the story: The phrases have factual meaning, but can be interpreted in various ways. For example, Darl remarks, "Those cakes will be in fine shape by the time we get to Jefferson" (Faulkner 483). "Cakes" serves as a metaphor for Dewey's pregnancy. It is Darl, in particular, who employs these descriptive flourishes in his narrative; his talent causes some to consider him strange. Thus, Faulkner employs word choice not only to allude to the shifting realities of the novel, but, also, to delineate the differences between the characters. The unique language used by characters in the novel often is a revelation more profound than the textual content of their narratives. Indeed, the words that each character speaks provide the only real insights into the objective reality of the novel. For example, there are Tull's multiple references to religion and scripture. It is important in understanding her to pay attention not only to the fact that she is referencing religious iconography, but to how she makes those references. Her manner is to voice them almost like a child would repeat a catechism he does not fully understand. It becomes obvious that Tull herself does not fully comprehend the profundity of the religion she clings to. Neither does she seem to fully understand what is taking place among her

family. In contrast, Jewel regularly uses obscene language and speaks quite insensitively, and his quick temper is mirrored by the violence of his language. The Bundren family cannot agree on an objective reality because they make little attempt at arriving at any genuine understanding of each other. Just as the novel is a collection of individual narratives and memories, the Bundren family refuses to be a cohesive unit; they are simply a set of disconnected individuals who happen to share a common ancestry. The great irony is that what seems to at last bring about their unity is not a celebration of life, but an occasion of death. Yet even this attempt at a final reconciliation is only tenuous, as each family member has their own personal and private motivations that they refuse to share with each other. Usually, in fact, they seem to be callously disregarding the fact that Addy is simply a rotting corpse. In perhaps the most perverse reversal of subjective truth, some of them are repulsed by the stench of death—yet the buzzards flying overhead are drawn to the scene exactly for that stench. Objective truth is merely the result of intensely personal subjectivity; what is appalling to one person will be appealing to another. Thus, *As I Lay Dying* presents even the dead member of its cast of characters in a subjective light by questioning whether objective truth can exist. Addie's true qualities as a human being remain a mystery; some may view her as a character treading in the icy waters of evil, while others may arrive at the conclusion that she is the only character worthy of any admiration. The multiple viewpoints and the stream-of-consciousness technique all create a work that is purposely subject to interpretation. There is no objective truth to the novel any more than there is any objective truth to the events that take place within it. Faulkner's engagement of multiple narratives also serves to become a filter that is

necessary for sorting out lies and opinions from factual events. The result is naturally unsettling and confusing—but, as Faulkner desires to make people ask tough questions about the nature of reality and the search for an objective truth, that is exactly his intent.