

# Critical history of "as i lay dying" assignment

Literature



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Many of William Faulkner's books, especially 'As I Lay Dying' focused on the South in the aftermath of the Civil War. The themes of his and other Southern authors included: a common Southern history, the significance of family, a sense of community and one's role within it, the Church and its burdens and rewards, racial tension, land and the promise it brings, one's social class and place, and, sometimes, the use of the Southern dialect.

The criticism of the novel has changed over the years with critics using everything from Psychoanalytic theory to Marxist theory to explain the importance of language and the historical content behind the novel. In his article, "Voice in Narrative Texts: The Example of As I Lay Dying," Stephen M. Ross investigates the use of voice through the perspective of the fifteen first person narratives in As I Lay Dying. Ross highlights the use of two distinct types of voice: mimetic and textual. Ross goes on to examine mimetic on three levels of discourse, the first being dialogue.

Dialogue represents the narrative voice that is heard, so to speak, by other characters. Ross also concedes that dialogue can never completely be represented as it is being portrayed in an entirely new medium, the written, as opposed to the spoken, word. The second mimetic discourse examined by Ross is the use of narrative. However, Ross argues that the narrative discourse is inconsistent and implausible, and aids in the breaking down of the actual voice of the narrator. There is a disconnect between what the narrator could portray as a person versus as a narrator.

The third and final mimetic discourse is authorial discourse. This authorial discourse disturbs and confuses the relationship between creator and speaker. In these ways, Ross argues that *As I Lay Dying* both enhances and challenges mimetic voice. The second part of Ross's article investigates textual voice. This voice carries out a function analogous to that of voice in speech. With textual voice there is no need for imagined speakers. Overall, Ross argues that voice is the significant aspect of linguistic portrayal.

In Constance Pierce's article, "Being, Knowing, and Saying...", This essay attempts to identify the nature of Addie Bundren's preoccupation with her own existence, her "Being" in other words, not being able to be articulated with mere words. The deconstructionist theory presented here, in the simplest terms, is: "a person's Being, or what Addie seems to be longing for as Being, is what he is before he begins to think about, or objectify, it (Addie Bundren before she is aware of being Addie Bundren). In this way it is physically impossible to be conscious of one's own being because being cannot be objectified. At the same time, however, it can be argued that what is not perceived does not exist. So therefore, "Being" does not exist in any state, perceived or not. Addie runs into these complications and comes to the conclusion that there is no place for her to simply exist as herself. Addie's problem with words is that they never, being simply symbols, adequately describe experience, and since thoughts depend on the existence of words, thoughts are invalidated here as well.

Addie longs for a place where she can be conscious of herself without beings spoiled by language, where thoughts and feelings can coexist, but those are lost in the moments and by their nature are impossible to notice.

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Adamowski's article "Meet Mrs. Bundren: As I Lay Dying-Gentility, Tact, and Psychoanalysis", provides a detailed psychoanalysis of the novel, and discusses the prevalence of Oedipus complexes and preoedipal phases. The novel progresses as a series of monologues without a narrator and centers around each character's motives. The corpse becomes the only unifying object.

Adamowski then goes on to examine the theme of privacy and violation, centering on Addie and her desire for intense privacy with moments of intimacy. Her aloneness is first violated by the birth of Cash, but is also restored through the nonverbal intimacy she develops with Cash; however, Anse promptly violates this by forcing her to conceive Darl. Darl is thus established as an outsider, as he is an unwanted child, and contributes to his unsureness of selfhood. Adamowski cites Fairbairn's theory on constant oscillation and the desire for independence and fear of abandonment.

Darl only experiences the isolation side and this choice is made for him. Adamowski points out parallels between Dewey Dell and Addie as she is pregnant and trying to violate the violation through an abortion. This contributes to the incestual undertones that Adamowski illustrates between Jewel and Addie, and Darl and Dewey Dell. Adamowski believes that there are Oedipal complexes present in both Jewel and Darl who displace their love on his horse and Dewey Dell, respectively. Addie is portrayed as a callused and irreverent character, but Adamowski believes that he triumphs.

Also Anse is portrayed as a stranger/outsider and this contributes to Addie's role as a father/phallic symbol, instead of just as a maternal figure. Carolyn

Norma Slaughter's article addresses the idea of language and meaning in the novel, with particular focus on Addie's view of these themes. She points out that the story revolves around Addie, whose death is the reason for the novel, and to whom the central chapter of the book is given. Because of this, it's important to note her ideas about words and what they mean.

Slaughter discusses Addie's view of the discrepancy between saying and doing and the fact that she finds more value in doing things, instead of simply saying words. She sees words as arbitrary and empty, particularly in the case of names for her children, because they don't make her think of any actual meaning. Because of this, Addie believes that many words have lost their connection with action or life, which makes them useless. However, this is not what her community believes and teaches, so in order to connect with people, her children in particular, she needs words.

Slaughter concludes that with the erasure of Addie and Darl, the two active, "doing" people in the novel, the center and action of the story are also lost by the end. Cheryl Hale's article discusses Faulkner's use of form throughout his novel *As I Lay Dying*. The "problem" with *As I Lay Dying* is that although the novel overtly appears to be an attempt at realism by using a stream of consciousness form in which the reader is thought to be subjected to direct mental quotations of each character, at times Faulkner utilizes diction and language either unexpected or unknown from the character.

For example, in one of Dewey Dell's chapters, a likely illiterate farm girl, incorporates the word "stertorous." Hale argues, however, that Faulkner is indeed aware of these "mistakes" and intentionally includes them to create

a hybrid literary form that is not in fact mimetic realism. Instead it is a form that utilizes language not as an agent for transparent communication but instead as a medium for distinguishing the realms of the private and public selves of the characters.

Hale describes similar instances in Faulkner's *Soldier's Pay* and *Mosquitoes* in which his characters' speaking voices are mimetically appropriate yet their internal voices are in a stylized, non-mimetic form thereby distinguishing the private self from the public self. In *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner utilizes the mimetic stream of consciousness to represent what a character could say in the public sphere and nonmimetic vocabulary and tone to represent the unspeakable inner thoughts of the character. The fact that characters think in words they cannot know shows that they know things they cannot say.

The degree to which a character's internal language resembles his public dialogue establishes the degree to which the character has sacrificed his private self to the public realm. Hale continues by examining Anse, Addie, Darl and Cash's use of these different forms of language and what they truly reveal about each of the characters individually. In this article, Bergman uses feminist theory to delve into the minds of southern women, specifically Addie, in the 1920s and 1930s and examines their thoughts on sexuality, maternity and birth control.

Referencing historical figures such as Margaret Sanger, Emma Goldman, and Mary Dennet, who promoted the widespread education of women about effective birth control, the critic discusses how it was illegal to discuss birth

control methods during this time period. However, the irony lies in the fact that doctors told women, who were content with the number of children they had birthed, it would be unhealthy to have any more children, but they would not give them education about contraception. Through the character of Addie, Faulkner comments on how hard motherhood was for rural lower class women.

Paradoxically, child rearing has stripped them of their sexual freedom leaving the mother as an icon for chastity and sex for the sole purpose of procreation. Addie looked for sexual gratification through her affair with Whitfield, but in return only received another child. And in penance to Anse, she gave him more children, only further suppressing her sexual desires. Bergman concludes that in the end, Addie was happier to die because an actual death to her was better than the death of her sexual freedom.

In this article, Marc Hewson argues that the role of Addie Bundren in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* is positive rather than negative. Even in death, she is the impetus for the journey to Jefferson has an active influence on her children. Addie's lack of direct speech only emphasizes her believe in the inadequacy of language to express her love as a mother. Hewson draws a male and female dichotomy and believes Addie to be leader in contesting the concept of patriarchy in the novel. Unlike Anse, she is a woman of action rather than words.

Whereas Anse lives a stagnant life based only on preparing himself for death, Addie makes connections with each of children to escape Anse's attitude towards their existences. Hewson continues to discuss the specific

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role Addie plays in the life of each of her sons. While Vardaman shares with his mother the inability to command language, Jewel shares with her the idea that love is shown through doing rather than saying. Jewel shares the same "gruff, almost abusive" love with Addie as he does with his horse, conveying that his love is true although unconventional.

Similarly, Cash's carpentry is a "silent testament of his love" for Addie. Darl, on the other hand, is the most expressive speaker of the novel and is thus separated from his mother by her mistrust in language. However, Hewson notes that Darl is also bonded to Addie in his connection with nature and the land; his connection leads Darl away from his father's patriarchic teachings and brings him closer to Addie's. Hewson concludes the article by saying that Addie is "lives on through the figures of her children" (567).

It is her motivation to teach them to "outwit and outlast" (567) the suppressing and unmoving patriarchic identity which keeps her alive. In his article Pettey, examines influences in Faulkner's life, and how those can be seen in the actions of characters in *As I Lay Dying*. Particularly Pettey focuses on the modernist perceptual theories that Faulkner expressed his affection for in letters to friends and family. One theory which seems to have particular relevance to the novel argues that the mind tries to construct one's reality based upon the perceptions and desired expectations one has about the world around him.

Pettey builds on this theory to point out that one character in particular, Darl, seems to want to make his perceptions about his family and the world a reality. However, as much as he tries to connect the two, a gap exists



between his wants and the world, which leads to his spiral towards a madness or mental instability. Further examples given by Pettey show how in several instances with his family, including Addie and Dewey Dell, Darl subconsciously must dehumanize them to be able to reconcile the differences that exist between his mind and reality.

Of course, this is a blurred line for him, and his actions as a result draw confused and disapproving reactions from several of those around him, particularly Dewey Dell. By revealing an influence in Faulkner's life that can be seen in his novel, readers receive a greater understanding of what the author is trying to accomplish with his work. In his article, "The Ideology of Autonomy: Form and Function in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*," Ted Atkinson makes the argument that Cash Bundren's coffin is an overall metaphor for the novel itself.

Atkinson begins his article by stating that Faulkner wrote the novel during a time of financial and national instability, and that this economic backdrop is what provoked Faulkner to use authorial autonomy in his writing style. Atkinson then notes that although Faulkner used modernist techniques, he still recognized that there still exists a relationship between literary autonomy and social reality, and this relationship is what Faulkner sees as a division between the novel's form and its function. Atkinson then notes that the parallel with Cash's coffin and the novel itself is this concept of form and function.

Atkinson believes that Faulkner emphasized the importance of the shape and structure of the coffin but also stressed the coffin's use value to symbolize

the use of artistic autonomy that Faulkner employed in his writing style but also his awareness of the function that the novel must ultimately serve. Just as the coffin was built uniquely but had to effectively serve its purpose, Faulkner wrote the novel in a nontraditional manner to suggest the ideology of autonomy but still did not make the novel too abstract, or avant-garde, so as to ignore its ultimate purpose.

Another way that Atkinson states that the coffin is a metaphor for the novel itself is that in both cases, the final production of the works demonstrate "a moment of truth for the carpenter: the time when production gives way to reception and the object enters the traffic of the world." Both Cash and Faulkner unveil their hard work at the risk of receiving judgment from the public.

In this article, Cheryl Lester discusses how William Faulkner demonstrates the historical phenomenon of social-spatial dislocation of rural, white southerners in the Bundren family's journey to bury the matriarch Addie, in the novel, *As I Lay Dying*. An important aspect of this journey is articulated with the concept of "structure of feeling" or something that is a lived and felt effect in all aspects of one's life; and in the case of the Bundren's it is resistance to change. Their journey from the country to Jefferson to bury Addie represents their transition from country to town, and thus their own changing social identities.

However, the Bundren's have a difficult time of accepting their new social identity as the inferior, poor, white, uneducated country Southerner and the fact they are often looked down upon with disdain by the townsfolk instead

of receiving help, which was the make-up of their old, rural relationships. The river crossing is an exemplary example because it symbolizes a structure of upheaval, and the sacrifices that the Bundren family had to make in order to complete the transition from country to town, as shown by the death of the mules, and the injuring of Cash's leg.

In addition, another part of their changing social identity is their increasing relations to the blacks and how both poor white and the blacks in their shared inferiority to the white bourgeois elite, which Faulkner was a member of, and their continual conflict in the attempt to ascend up the social ladder. At the close of the novel, the Bundren family tries to return to their old lifestyle by dismissing all reminders of their social inferiority, by shipping off Darl to a mental institution and burying Addie.

However, they are unable to escape their new level of social inferiority because in order to settle his debts and acquire his new teeth, Anse marries a woman from town. Thus, in the end the Bundren family reluctantly accepts their new place within the social scheme. Works Cited Adamowski, T. H. " "Meet Mrs. Bundren': As I Lay Dying-Gentility, Tact, and Psychoanalysis. " University of Toronto Quarterly 49. 3 (1980): 205-227. Atkinson, Ted. " The Ideology of Autonomy: Form and Function in As I Lay Dying. " The Faulkner Journal. 21. 1/2 (2005/2006): 28-50.

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