

William Faulkner, as I lay dying study questions



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The delivery of the story is not straightforward at all. It is a novel with a complex structure, although the story itself is simple. Each chapter's name is the name of one character, and in each chapter the one character's take on events are all that are presented to the reader. There is no formal introduction to the characters, no setting of context by an external narrator. The characters themselves do not provide introductions to the story, so that the structure of the story must usually be gleaned from context clues.

With each chapter the reader is moved into a slightly new context—that of the mindset of the currently speaking character. This has the effect of delivering different, and even conflicting, interpretations from the different characters. The many conflicting emotions and interpretations serve to enliven the story. Each character is shown as being differentiated and actually utterly alone in his thoughts and interpretations of the events.

Whatever a character is thinking is what is encountered by the reader. Incomplete thoughts and hard-to-decipher dialect compound the initial problem that the reader encounters. Since the reader is obliged to follow the mental meanderings and preoccupations of each character, one at a time, it is inevitable that the reader will become confused.

The reason for the family's obstinacy in getting Addie's request fulfilled is left to the reader to decipher from the family's behavior and thoughts. Aside from the unfolding of events (the story itself), what holds the interest of the reader is the challenge, or at least the wait, of being able to piece this puzzle together.

The presence of characters not part of the Bundren family allows the reader feel that he can make a more objective judgment, and these outside characters show us that what the Bundren family is doing is not 'normal'.

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In the early parts of the book, I expected that there would be quite a lot of confusion. Faulkner gives only small glimpses of the plot, and slowly, so that the picture becomes clearer as the story goes on.

The structure of the novel began to feel simpler as I progressed through it. Even if something could be comprehended immediately, I found that I just had to read on to make sense of whatever confused me at first. Oftentimes a passage will clarify something that was encountered a few chapters earlier; and I even found it necessary to go back a few times in a compulsive urge to ascertain connections between events. Eventually I found that all I could do was trust that things will be clarified as the novel went on.

It is a refreshing style, where we can see events from different perspectives. Thus with these multiple perspectives we see the priorities of each character, and exactly what concerns each character most is clearly identifiable.

The style is effective in its own right. The reader is able to (actually, is obliged) to participate in the story, because there is no straight narrative, and the nature of the relationships is up to the reader to determine.