"violent love” and other notions of dysfunctional relationships in faulkner’s as ...

In typical modernist fashion, William Faulkner experiments in his work with a number of nontraditional stylistic and thematic characteristics, including brokenness, fragmentation, despair, pessimism, perception distortion, and the rejection of societal norms. In his novel As I Lay Dying, he focuses on a sense of alienation and separation, particularly within the Bundren family. Members of the Bundren family exhibit various dysfunctional relationships with one another, with their lovers, and even with God. Examples of these relationships include husband and wife, parent to child and sibling to sibling; in many of these cases, the Bundrens display seemingly violent affection toward each other. Addie and Anse, the heads of the Bundren household, do not provide an example of the ideal marriage. In fact, this duo is the epitome of a broken communion. Each treats the other as more of a burden than someone to rely on; both may even prefer independence to the company of their spouse. Their indifference toward one another begins as soon as they are engaged, and for good reason. Addie's decision to marry Anse occurs without much consideration. Upon realizing that he owns a small piece of property, falsely believing that he is a hard worker with a " good honest name," Addie decides to take him up on his offer; as she nonchalantly puts it: " So I took Anse" (Faulkner 171). Soon thereafter, however, misery sets in. After giving birth to Cash, Addie claims that her " aloneness" has been violated. Addie detests motherhood almost as much as she comes to despise her lazy, useless husband. After discovering that she was pregnant with Darl, Addie " believed that [she] would kill Anse," she was so upset (172). Addie believed that Anse had tricked her into having another child by his use of words. The use of the word " love" was nothing more than a tool of manipulation in Addie's eyes. From that point forward, he is dead to her.

Anse's " love" for Addie results in the unhappiness that derives from sleepless motherhood. Even as a schoolteacher, Addie hates the children; in fact, she enjoys hating the children and loves having the privilege to whip them. Addie's hatred for her husband grows to the point that she lay awake at night, alone in her self-pity, thinking, " Anse. Why Anse. Why are you Anse" (173). She longs to be rid of him and misses her innocence, along with the shape of her virgin body, both of which were intact before meeting him. At this juncture, once Anse had " died" to her, Addie makes the conscious decision to sin against God and her husband. Driven by her misery, Addie finds herself sinning in the arms of the ordained priest, Whitfield. Addie falls deeply in love, for the first time in her life, with Whitfield. But the affair ends as suddenly as it began. The only remaining fragment of Addie's broken heart comes in the form of a third baby boy, appropriately named Jewel. Though Addie decidedly mistreats her husband, Anse's regard for his wife is not much better. He views his marriage more as a well thought-out business deal instead of a committed acknowledgement of love and devotion. Anse seeks out Addie for her looks and perhaps a salary that would pay to his advantage. His proposal to Addie occurs without any additional knowledge of who she is as a person; therefore, clearly, adoration and respect never had the opportunity to develop. Once Addie gets sick, Anse waits until it is too late before calling Doctor Peabody, more concerned with saving money than his dying wife. Confused and outraged, Peabody asks, " Why didn't you send for me sooner?" and, upon hearing Anse's explanation, exclaims, " Damn the money. Did you ever hear of me worrying a fellow before he was ready to pay?" (44). Author of the article " As I Lay Dying: Faulkner's All in the Family," Linda W. Wagner narrows in on Anse's " non-action" as " parasitic

mockery." Wagner points out that Anse is, ironically, able to endure — outlasting the more active and ambitious — despite his laziness, indifference, and even negligence (Wagner 73). Anse goes as far as selfishly claiming that his wife's misfortune is simply the consequence of " bad luck," seemingly lacking any sort of sympathy. Anse seems to believe this bad luck of his comes from living by a road " where bad luck prowling can find it and come straight to my door, charging me taxes on top of it" (Faulkner 36). Upon Addie's deathbed, Anse cannot even find it within himself to shed a tear, or show any sort of sadness for that matter. After awkwardly staring at his dead wife for a brief moment, he apathetically remarks, " God's will be done. Now I can get them teeth" (52). Even the neighbors' daughter, Kate Tull, recognizes Anse's lack of appreciation for his wife and predicts that once Addie dies, " he'll get another one before cotton-picking" (34). Though Anse may not outwardly detest Addie as she does him, he does clearly lack any sort of affection for his wife — dead or alive. The Bundren adults are not the only dysfunctional members of this family, however; the Bundren children also exhibit displays of abnormal affinities with each other. Instead of having bonded compassion for their siblings, they each demonstrate a form of hostility toward one or more other members of their family. Darl and Jewel, for instance, quite obviously dislike each other. Darl's distaste for his brother derives from the evident understanding that Jewel is their mother's most beloved accomplishment. Darl's jealously causes him to treat Jewel with distain. Fully aware that his mother will die in their absence, Darl more or less forces Jewel to accompany him on a mission for three dollars because, " I want him to help me load," he says (28). Darl furthers his brother's pain by callously repeating, " Jewel, do you know that Addie Bundren is going to die?

Addie Bundren is going to die?" (40). Wagner explains that, " For Darl, his mother's preference for Jewel is continual torment [...] Jewel's misery is Darl's delight, cut off as he has been from Addie's affection by the taciturn younger boy. Darl lives in Jewel's emotions" (Wagner 75). Addie's poor moral characteristics have been passed on and affect her children in more ways than one. Perhaps if Addie had given all of her children more attention and equality, they would not have grown to treat each other with such resentment. Addie's maladjusted nature trickles down to her naïve, adolescent daughter, Dewey Dell, whose relationship with Darl has its flaws as well. Darl, with his uncannily clairvoyant abilities, is particularly in tune with Dewey Dell. After she sleeps with Lafe and becomes pregnant, Darl makes a point to somehow silently inform Dewey Dell that he knows what occurred and is not happy about it. In her own words, " I saw Darl and he knew. He said he knew without the words like he told me that ma is going to die without words [...] and I said ' Are you going to kill him?' [...] and that's why I can talk to him with knowing with hating because he knows" (Faulkner 27). Darl's knowledge of his sister's circumstances causes her to abhor him. She is embarrassed and ashamed of having conceived out of wedlock, especially considering the era, therefore Darl's knowledge is an additional burden for her to bear. She would rather endure this problem unaccompanied; she even refuses to tell Lafe. Darl's comprehension leaves Dewey Dell feeling exposed, naked even. She feels him watching her, his eyes " swim[ming] to pin points. They begin at my feet and rise along my body to my face, and then my dress is gone." Dewey Dell becomes inflicted by her brother's understanding to the point of having nightmares about him. She once dreams that she " rose and took the knife from the streaming fish

still hissing and [she] killed Darl" (121). Clearly, Dewey Dell is so distraught by this twist of fate that she would prefer her own brother's death to his realization of her mistake. Darl is not the only person Dewey Dell seems to have an impractical relationship with, however. The dynamic between Dewey Dell and her lover, Lafe, is also very uncomfortable and atypical. First, take into consideration the manner in which Dewey Dell conceives. The act of sleeping with Lafe occurs impulsively and without confirmation of his love. Especially for this time period, losing her virginity without notions of love and under unwed circumstances was unheard of. The decision, to her, seems liked the next unavoidable aspect of her day on the farm. She leaves the fate of this life-changing decision up to the current state of her daily chore in the manner of a little girl playing " he loves me, he loves me not." She says, " if it don't mean for me to do it the sack will not be full and I will turn up the next row but if the sack is full, I cannot help it" (27). Therefore, once the sack was full, her decision was made for her. Her attitude toward the situation after the fact further demonstrates the immature quality of their relationship. The pair lacks any sort of closeness or bond that allows Dewey Dell to be comfortable with Lafe and the unfortunate outcome of events. She does not even want to tell Lafe about the baby and repeatedly remarks, " He could fix it all right, if he just would. And he don't even know it. He could do everything for me if he just knowed it" (63). This quote confirms that she wants nothing to do with Lafe's baby, and yet she refuses to mention this consequence to him even though she needs his help taking care of the situation. The fact that she is not only willing but also desperate to be rid of the child inside of her further proves that she does not love Lafe; what happened between them was just an inevitable incident. Perhaps, as she has

grown up witnessing her parents' lack of affection toward one another, this notion of " settling" has been portrayed as acceptable to her. Additionally, since Addie has proved to be an insufficient mother to her children, including Dewey Dell, her daughter has not been exposed to typical motherly nature. Therefore, Dewey Dell has no desire to raise a family of her own because of her mother's own dislike for her given role. The negative effect of Addie's disposition on all of her children is apparent; her indifference (toward all but Jewel) leaves them feeling just as alone as she does even as they pine for her affection. The repercussions of her favoring of Jewel are most noticeable in Darl. The silent bond that Jewel and Addie share causes Darl to jealously treat Jewel poorly. Wagner claims that " the character of Darl himself — in all his mockery, hurt perception — is only further evidence of the power of Addie's acts" (Wagner 75). Vardaman, as the youngest, is also deeply devastated by his mother's death — mostly likely because he was never given the opportunity to be loved by her. Now that she's gone, he feels like he has failed in earning her attention and will not be able to try any longer. After her death, his speech and actions drift toward insanity; Wagner explains, " The grief-crazed child parallels Jewel in that he can bear his mother's death only through action [...] In despair at this mother's absence, Vardaman runs Peabody's team, hides, walks four miles to the Tulls' house, opens his mother's window so that she can feel the rain, and finally augurs holes into her coffin (and face) for the same purpose" (Wagner 77). Throughout the novel, he confusingly denies his mother's death, and at one point believes that she is a fish and her death was his responsibility. Obviously, if Addie is dead then she has no need to " feel the rain," but Vardaman rejects this possibility. After she passes, he says, " Then I begin to

cry. I can feel where the fish was in the dust. It is cut up into pieces of not-fish now, not blood on my hands and overalls. Then it wasn't so" (Faulkner 52). His confusion for what he has done to the fish and what has happened to his mother is great. As time passes, the two incidents mesh completely into one, and a complete section of Vardaman's only says, " My mother is a fish" (84). As the youngest child, Vardaman's reaction to his mother's death is the most drastic and dramatic. The remaining children react more subtly. The relationship between Dewey Dell and Addie is so insignificant that she barely takes time to mourn her mother's passing, consumed as she is by her own problem. Jewel, on the other hand, taken by his mother's exclusive affection, grows to resemble her characteristics most closely — particularly her subtle and silent temperament. Darl comments, " That's why she named him Jewel"; he was her most cherished object, comparable to a precious gem (18). Both are violent, quiet, and have an unspoken and deep love for the other. The devastation, grief and psychological damage Addie has caused her children in her wake are direct consequences of the way she treated them individually while alive. Addie is acutely aware of the effects of her actions and even remarks, " Cora Tull would tell me I was not a true mother," and yet she does nothing to change this truth. Her favoring of Jewel and neglect of the others creates a cycle of insecurity and hostility among her children, but Addie remains indifferent. Various characters in the novel also have interesting perceptions of their relationship with God. Many of these relationships are egocentric and self-righteous while being judgmental of others. Take Addie, for instance. Unlike most women of this era, she believes that her infidelity with Whitfield is worth the sins she commits. In fact, she shows no remorse at all for her actions; Addie feels that she deserves this

transgression. God and man owe her the right to be happy with another man. Her notion of sin is explained by the following: " I would think of sin as I would think of the clothes we both wore in the world's face, of the circumspection necessary because he was he and I was I [...] I would think of him as thinking of me as dressed also in sin, he the more beautiful since the garment he had exchanged for sin was sanctified" (174-175). Sin was something that had to occur in order for her to make it through another day; sin was a beautiful escape. " Sin is just a matter of words," she says, " to [people] salvation is just words too" (168). She also recognizes that the sin they commit together is intensified by the fact that he is an ordained minister; however, instead of feeling bad about this fact, Addie sees it as a turn-on. To her, this makes him all the more beautiful because he is sacrificing his vows and lifestyle for her company. The fact that Whitfield consents to these relations is proof that he too has an unsettling relationship with the God he purports to serve. Anse, like his wife, makes no religious effort and does not hide this fact. He too thinks that the world owes him something, despite his laziness and apathy, and believes that the God should take care of him — especially since He placed him by the bad luck of a road. He considers himself to be a good man, commenting: I have heard men cuss their luck and right, for they were sinful men. But I do not say it's a curse on me, because I have done no wrong to be cussed by. I am not religious, I reckon. But peace is in my heart: I know it is. I have done things but neither better nor worse than them that pretend otherlike, and I know that Old Marster will care for me as for ere a sparrow that falls. But it seems hard that a man in his need could be so flouted by a road (28). His quote is filled with contradictions, first claiming he is not a sinful man then claiming he is a

sinful man but he is no worse than other sinful men that pretend they are not. Obviously, his ideas of right and wrong, good and bad have become obscured throughout his lifetime. The final, most interesting aspect of the dysfunctional relationships within As I Lay Dying derives from Faulkner's experimental blurring of the lines between what is considered normal or not. Faulkner meshes the connotations of affectionate love and violent hatred to create some sort of violent affection. Violence is present in some of the less loving relationships as well. The relationship between Addie and her beloved Jewel involves this twisted paradox. Darl, always observant, understands his mother's bias for Jewel and notes " that's why ma always whipped him and petted him more" (18). It would seem that if a mother adored one child more than the rest, then that child would not receive as much reprimanding, but that does not hold true here. Action of any kind was for the Bundrens an expression of their affection for one another. Jewel at one point silently wishes that " it would just be me and her on a high hill and me rolling rocks down the hill at their faces, picking them up and throwing them down the hill faces and teeth and all by God" (15). Jewel believes that sharing this violent act with his mother would be enjoyable and advantageous for the two, almost as one would consider going to the park or getting ice cream with their parents: just something that should occur to take everyone — and their misery — out of the picture. Faulkner also demonstrates " violent love" through characters who may not even realize it. Vardaman sincerely believes that he is sweetly helping his mother by drilling holes in her coffin; however, the audience is left with a gory vision of a dead women's face being unknowingly destroyed. The imagery of dead Addie and Vardaman's dead, bloody fish becomes entangled together by the boy's grief, expressing

contradictions of love for his deceased mother and the violent, confused destruction of his fish. Lastly, Dewey Dell’s situation presents contradictions as well. An act typically performed out of love and happiness leads to intense pain and suffering for Dewey Dell, both physically and emotionally. She is so wrapped up in her worry that she has little time to think of anything or anyone else. Her baby, a symbol of unconditional love and adoration to most, is her leading source of strife; therefore, she plans to take care of this problem by having an abortion: “ That’s what they mean by the womb of time: the agony and the despair of spreading bones, the hard girdle in which lie the outraged entrails of events” (121). William Faulkner, experimental and groundbreaking as a modernist writer, plays with the notion of brokenness and fragmentation by confronting the family system. Each member of the Bundren family has his or her own set of vices — particularly against one another — within his novel As I Lay Dying. He characterizes notions of dysfunctional relationships between husband and wife, parent and child, sibling and sibling, and even God and man. In a number of these relationships, violence and sadism become very prominent as means of destruction and, paradoxically, affection. Works CitedFaulkner, William. As I Lay Dying: The Corrected Text. New York: Vintage, 1990. Print. Wagner, Linda W. “ As I Lay Dying: Faulkner’s All in the Family.” Galileo. JSTOR: College Literature. 1974