

Examinations of philosophy and identity in Faulkner's as I Lay Dying



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The story of a dysfunctional family and its epic journey across the South, William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* is famous for its use of multiple narrators who interpret and recount the journey of the Bundren clan from their own unique perspectives. All of the characters, whether members of the family or outsiders who encounter them on the way to Jefferson, have their own agendas and specific views of the world around them, with each of these perspectives in some small way contributing to the larger themes and ideas of Faulkner's novel. This paper will examine the philosophies of three of these characters in particular — Anse, Cash, and Darl Bundren — in order to analyze how their differing voices, opinions, and styles of narration allow Faulkner to explore multiple themes and create a more complex novel than would be possible with a single unified narrator. As the father and ostensible leader of the Bundren clan, Anse is the character who seemingly appears to be the most intent on getting his wife to Jefferson and burying her with her family. He seems committed to honoring Addie's final wishes, saying multiple times that " I give her my promise" because her " mind was set on it," as well as being the one who insists that the journey must be completed as soon as possible even though that entails making a dangerous river crossing that kills his wagon team and injures Cash (114-15, 125-26). However, Anse's lazy, hypocritical, and self-interested streak is revealed well before the novel's shock ending: he claims that " he was sick once from working in the sun when he was twenty-two years old" and that if " he ever sweats, he will die," although that does not stop him from berating Jewel for being tired and unproductive (17, 130). A firm believer in the sedentary lifestyle, he also places the blame for his misfortunes and those of his relations on the presence of the road, which he sees as an enabler of trouble: Durn that

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road... a-laying there, right to my door, where every bad luck that comes and goes is bound to find it... when He [God] aims for something to be always a-moving, He makes it long ways, like a road or a horse or a wagon, but when He aims for something to stay put, He makes it up-and-down ways, like a tree or a man... because if He aimed for man to be always a-moving and going somewhere else, wouldn't He a put him longways on his belly, like a snake? It stands to reason He would (35-6). To Anse, life is a series of tasks that must be completed before a man can finally achieve his ultimate dream of becoming completely stationary, whether that be working hard as a child so that he can earn the right to enjoy a relaxed lifestyle in adulthood or traveling down the very same road he denounces in order to find a wife and settle down (11, 171). Anything that conflicts with his personal comfort, whether it is the death of his wife or the actions of his children, will cause him to take action to rectify the situation, even at the expense of those he supposedly loves. For example, in order to pay for the wagon trip, he steals the money Cash was going to use to purchase a graphophone (190), agrees (without permission) to trade Jewel's horse in exchange for a new team of mules (191), and tries to guilt Dewey Dell into making her give him the ten dollars for her abortion, saying: It's just a loan. God knows, I hate for my blooden children to oppose me. But I give them what was mine without stint. Cheerful, I give them without stint. And now they deny me. Addie. It was lucky you died, Addie (246). As Deborah Chappel notes, this quote contains multiple blatant lies: " Anse won't repay the money, he never gave anything unstintingly in his life, and... he doesn't at all mind being reproached" (Chappel, 277). In effect, he is so successful in achieving his goals in the novel precisely because he is a master manipulator, one who possesses the

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capability to control the other characters around him. The continued repetition of the two phrases “ would you begrudge her?” and “ wouldn’t want us beholden” also indicate his willingness to use the memory of his dead wife as an excuse for his actions, whether it is claiming that Jewel had “ no affection or gentleness for her,” convincing Tull to let him loan out his mule, or not leaving the injured Cash in the care of Armstid because he wants to do the burial first (19, 140, 195). He is even willing to address the ultimate inconvenience, the lack of a wife, by remarrying immediately after the burial, thus negating the entire emotional impact of the trip to inter Addie (261). By employing the petty and languid Anse as a narrator, Faulkner allows the reader to better understand the mindset of a uniquely Southern archetype, the poor white farmer. Anse is the author’s attack on the type of provincial bumpkin whose close-mindedness and stupidity had maintained the South’s status as a region disconnected from the greater United States and whose unwillingness to reintegrate into the national fabric would keep it that way unless and until there was a dramatic change in attitude. The character’s emphasis on inactivity and selfishness represents a region-wide malaise and reluctance to break with the identity the South had fashioned for itself from the post-Civil War period up until the time of Faulkner’s writing in the late 1920s. Anse Bundren is the South at its very worst, with him and his family representing the staleness and stagnation that beset the region as a result of its self-imposed isolation. Unlike Anse, Cash is the hardest worker in the family, as well as the only one who has managed to learn a trade beyond mere sustenance farming. However, his narratives in the first half of the book do not deal with the emotional trauma of losing his mother or even give a linear account of the events going on around him;

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rather, they are discourses about the engineering principles that went into creating the coffin. This unique philosophy makes him the most analytical and level-headed member of the Bundren clan, but it also indicates that he lacks the emotional ability to address his mother's death directly — and that it is only by focusing his grief into his carpentry that he can truly express himself. When Anse calls him into the house to inform him of Addie's death, Cash doesn't know to respond: Cash does not look at him... Cash does not answer... Cash looks down at her face. He is not listening to pa at all. He does not approach the bed. He stops in the middle of the floor, the saw against his leg, his sweating arms powdered lightly with sawdust, his face composed... After a while he turns without looking at pa and leaves the room. Then the saw begins to snore again (50). That he enters the room caked in sawdust and carrying a saw indicates the centrality of his profession to Cash's identity, that even when faced with personal tragedy he must perceive it through the lens of his job in order to truly comprehend it. In effect, he can only empathize with Addie's passing by turning it into a job involving wood, nails, and tools, which is why immediately after viewing her corpse he resumes sawing the planks for the creation of the coffin. As a result, this coffin becomes a physical manifestation of his grief and emotionality, thus explaining why he becomes so obsessed about making everything about it as perfect as possible. Extra time is invested in beveling it despite the torrential downpour he must work through (79), while he also frets about the fact that Addie was laid in the coffin in the opposite direction from which he intended, saying " I made it to balance with her. I made it to her measure and weight" (90). His constant repetition of the admonition that " it is not on a balance" is more than a logistical concern; instead, it is him

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expressing a fear about the safety of his beloved mother and the wooden tribute he has made to her life. Another interesting element of Cash's personality is his need for the tools of his trade: when the family wagon is hit by a log and capsizes in the middle of the river, he is knocked unconscious at precisely the same time as he loses them. According to Tim Poland, "with the near loss of his tools comes the near loss of Cash's identity, the tenuous, relative identity that is the chief commodity in which the Bundren family trades" (Poland, 118). Without his tools, Cash loses his defining feature and the items that make him an active part of the narrative, the result of which relegates him to the status of a secondary character who can only lie in the back of the wagon alongside the rotting corpse in the coffin he himself created. It is only when they are retrieved from the water that he returns to consciousness, but with a "newfound awareness of the relativity of that identity and how deeply it is rooted in his function as a carpenter" that causes him to "reassess his own identity... and the fragile reality of all identity" (Poland, 119). This new Cash is a more balanced and descriptive storyteller, capable of recounting events with a more advanced level of perception than the formulaic lists he provided in his early chapters. He also takes over the role of most competent narrator from Darl, who seems to descend into lunacy at exactly the same moment that Cash reappears with his (literally) retooled understanding of the world. Although his chapters lack the profound insight that Darl's provide, Cash's later accounts are more level-headed and reasonable than any other family member's up to that point, which is why Faulkner has him recount the ultimate ironic shock of his father's hasty remarriage. By having the most sensible character describe these final events, the sense of anti-climax is magnified and further

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emphasizes just how irrelevant the family's epic journey really was. In contrast to the rest of the Bundrens, Darl is in some way disconnected from the others both in terms of identity and geography, having actually left the South to serve in France during World War I. As a result, his narrations are the most complex and intellectually rich, and he even possesses the ability to describe events, such as Cash constructing the coffin, that are transpiring while he is physically in another location (75-81). This intangible distinction he possesses, which in some way separates him from his other family members, tends to unsettle people like Vernon Tull, who describes him as "queer": He is looking at me. He don't say nothing; just looks at me with them queer eyes of his that makes folks talk. I always say it aint never been what he done so much or said anything so much as how he looks at you. It's like he has got inside of you, someway" (125). As a result of his unique ability to peer into people's minds and witness proceedings that he is not tangibly a part of, Darl's philosophy is highly intertwined with concepts of identity and self-perception, both his own and others. When Vardaman asks him where his mother is, Darl replies, " I haven't got ere one... Because if I had one, it is was. And if it is was, it can't be is. Can it?" (101). The use of the past and present forms of " is" suggests that Darl defines existence based on a more advanced level than the rest of his family, who still refer to Addie's corpse as " her" even though she has already died. He is aware of the divide that death creates between being and not-being that renders Addie's identity into something different from what it once was, just as he is more perceptive than the other Bundrens in his own self-characterizations. His alternate uses of the first and third persons to describe himself are representative of Darl's innate knowledge about things he really should not be privy to, whether that

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be Dewey Dell's tryst, Jewel's illegitimate status, or even his own existence. Darl somehow knows that he is being observed and followed by some outside source (the reader), and that this switching of perspective between his own personal "I" and the outsider's "He" indicates his awareness of this situation. He is cognizant of the fact that he is a participant in a story and that this knowledge separates him both from the other characters — who consider him "queer" because of the special information he possesses — but also from the audience, of whom he is in some part conscious even though he cannot fully reach them; he knows that he still belongs in the world of the narrative. This idea is corroborated by the lack of any real relationships he has with other figures in the novel, be it within the family or in the wider circle of the Bundrens' neighbors and acquaintances. Jewel curses him frequently, Anse becomes upset over his decision to make an extra \$3 while Addie is dying, Dewey Dell notifies the police about his barn arson, and even Cash has no problem with sending him to a mental institution, saying that it would be a "better" situation for him (17, 237-38). In this sense, Darl is a representation of Faulkner himself: his profound statements, narrative voice, and consciousness of the world around him all belong to the author who is broadcasting them through a source within the story itself. By analyzing the differing philosophies present in the chapters described by Anse, Cash, and Darl Bundren, three of the primary narrators in the novel, it is possible to trace how these differing voices make it possible for Faulkner to fully emphasize several different facets and themes in the novel. With his steadfast belief in remaining sedentary and his exploitative personality, Anse represents the zealously backward Southerners who embrace their region's status as a backwater and who refuse to reintegrate into the rest of the

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country with an almost inbred sense of stodginess. In contrast, the workmanlike and analytical Cash sees the world through the lens of his profession, even to the point where he is incapable of expressing emotion unless he manifests it in his carpentry. However, the shock of losing his tools — and by extension his identity — forces him to undergo an emotional and intellectual transformation that turns him into a more balanced, likeable chronicler, making him the ideal choice to deliver the ultimate ironic twist that ends the story. Finally, the most prominent figure in the book is Darl, who, with his special ability to peer into the psyches of others and observe events far away from his present location, is more aware of the gradations of identity that exist than are the other figures in the book, even to the point where he is capable of recognizing the multiple viewpoints from which his own life is being viewed. His ideology is reminiscent of Faulkner himself, and by employing it in tandem with Anse and Cash (as well as every other speaker in the book), the author has modified the form of the novel to give it greater complexity as well the ability to explore more ideas and themes than would be possible with just one narrator. By emphasizing these multiple philosophies and the way in which they influence the way in which the characters who adhere to them view the world, Faulkner is reflecting on the fundamental lack of an objective truth at the heart of the novel. Every one of his characters is an unreliable narrator with his or her own individually twisted and skewed take on life. The result of those perspectives ultimately leads readers to question what they really do and do not know about the events taking place in the story. Sources: Faulkner, William. *As I Lay Dying: The Corrected Text*. Modern Library Edition. Modern Library, 2008. Print.