

As I Lay Dying Analysis

ANALYSIS

As I Lay Dying (1930)

William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

"That was in the summer of 1929. I got a job in the power plant (in Oxford), on the night shift, from 6 pm to 6 am, as a coal passer. I shoveled coal from the bunker into a wheelbarrow and wheeled it in and dumped it where the fireman could put it into the boiler. About 11 o'clock the people would be going to bed, and so it did not take so much steam. Then we could rest, the fireman and I. He would sit in a chair and doze. I had invented a table out of a wheelbarrow in the coal bunker, just beyond a wall from where a dynamo ran. It made a deep, constant humming noise. There was not more work to do until about 4 am, when we could have to clean the firs and get up steam again. On these nights, between 12 and 4, I wrote *As I Lay Dying* in six weeks, without changing a word. I sent it to Smith [his publisher] and wrote him that by it I would stand or fall."

William Faulkner
Preface, *Sonnetary* (1932)

"In...*As I Lay Dying*, the story is told in separate snatches by fifteen different people, representing so many different facets of this lurid gem. It has to do with the much delayed burial of a woman by the members of her family. They are poor farmer folk, ignorant, shiftless, 'misfortunate' creatures, terribly warped by poverty and privation, in whom the primary traits of human nature appear in their essential starkness. What redeems this horrible story is its extraordinary truthfulness and the extraordinary skill in the telling. These bits of narrative are really soliloquy, narrative recited by the character to himself as audience. The language itself is a marvel in the reproduction of a local idiom.

But what is more remarkable than the language is the psychology—the reflection in these naïve records of the way the mind works for largely instinctive beings, sunk deep as they are in the decaying humus of an ancient culture. It is the author's desire to keep his hands off, not to smooth down these sharp, lifelike contours, which produces the frequent effect of incoherence, or disorder, in these partial records, suggesting the stream-of-consciousness technique.

Here again, it is in the childlike or the disordered mind that the effect is most marked. One of these characters is a very young boy, with curious ideas of death and of what has become of his confined mother; and another is a man touched by insanity and dowered with something like second sight. It is mainly in the pieces ascribed to these two brothers that the author resorts to his device of using italics to indicate abrupt departures from the present time or the immediate subject. If a technique is to be judged by its results, then one cannot question the rightness of this technique in this novel."

Joseph Warren Beach
The Twentieth-Century Novel: Studies in Technique
(Appleton-Century-Crofts 1932) 521-22

"*As I Lay Dying* stands a little apart from the rest of Mr. Faulkner's novels, but it is based upon the philosophical essence of his Sartoris-Snoopes theme—the struggle between humanism and naturalism. The naïve hill folk who appear in the book are poor and ungraceful, certainly; they are of low mentality; sexually, they are almost animalistic. But when Anse Bundren promises his dying wife that he will bury her in Jefferson, he sets up for himself an ethical duty which he recognizes as such—though not in these terms. It is the fulfillment of this obligation, in spite of constant temptation to abandon it, and in spite of multiplied difficulties put in his way by nature itself, that makes up the action of the novel.

Fundamentally, *As I Lay Dying* is a legend; and the procession of ragged, depraved hillmen, carrying Addie Bundren's body through water and through fire to the cemetery in Jefferson, while people flee from the smell and buzzards circle overhead—this progress is not unlike that of the medieval soul toward

As I Lay Dying is a novel written by William Faulkner, first published in 1930. It is a deeply layered piece of literature that explores themes of family, identity, and the human condition through the eyes of its diverse cast of characters. The book follows the Bundren family as they embark on a journey to fulfill the dying wish of their matriarch, Addie Bundren, to be buried in her hometown of Jefferson, Mississippi. This analysis will delve into the novel's structure, themes, character development, and its unique narrative style, providing a comprehensive understanding of Faulkner's work.

Overview of the Novel

As I Lay Dying is renowned for its innovative narrative technique and complex structure.

The story is narrated through a series of monologues from 15 different characters, each providing their perspective on the events that unfold. This multiplicity of voices creates a rich tapestry of thoughts, emotions, and motivations, allowing readers to engage with the characters on a deeper level.

Plot Summary

The plot centers around the Bundren family's journey to transport Addie Bundren's body to Jefferson for burial. The family's trek is fraught with difficulties, including:

1. Natural obstacles such as flooding and rough terrain
2. Interpersonal conflicts among family members
3. Confrontations with the local community

Throughout their journey, Faulkner explores the complexities of human relationships and the impact of death on those left behind. Each character's distinct voice sheds light on their inner struggles, desires, and regrets, creating a multifaceted narrative that captivates readers.

Thematic Analysis

As I Lay Dying delves into several profound themes that resonate throughout the novel. The following sections will highlight some of the most significant themes:

1. The Nature of Death

Death looms large in the narrative, with Addie's impending demise serving as the catalyst for the journey. Faulkner examines various perspectives on death through the eyes of different characters:

- Addie Bundren: Her thoughts on life and death reveal a deep-seated bitterness and a desire for autonomy.
- Darl Bundren: Darl's existential musings and acute sensitivity to the suffering of others provide insight into the psychological effects of death.
- Jewel Bundren: Jewel's fierce devotion to his mother contrasts with the other family members' more complicated feelings, illustrating the diverse ways people cope with loss.

The journey to Jefferson becomes a metaphor for the struggle to confront and make sense of mortality, highlighting the inevitability of death and its profound impact on the living.

2. Family Dynamics

The Bundren family's relationships are central to the novel, showcasing both the bonds and tensions that exist within families. Faulkner presents a microcosm of family life, characterized by:

- Conflict and Rivalry: The siblings often clash over their differing views and motivations, particularly regarding their mother's wishes.
- Loyalty and Betrayal: Characters like Darl and Jewel exhibit strong loyalty to Addie, while others, such as Anse, seem more self-serving.
- Isolation and Connection: Despite their shared goal, each family member grapples with their own isolation, highlighting the complexities of familial love.

These dynamics reflect broader themes of identity and belonging, as each character seeks to define themselves within the family unit.

3. The Search for Identity

Identity is a recurring theme throughout the novel, with characters struggling to understand their place in the world. The journey to bury Addie becomes a physical and metaphorical quest for self-discovery:

- Darl: His introspection and philosophical outlook set him apart from the others, highlighting his existential crisis.
- Vardaman: The youngest son grapples with his understanding of death and identity, struggling to reconcile his feelings of loss with his youthful innocence.
- Anse: His selfishness and desire for a new wife reveal his struggle with identity and purpose, ultimately reflecting the overarching theme of human yearning.

As the characters confront their circumstances, they are forced to confront their identities, revealing the complexities of self-perception and societal roles.

Narrative Structure and Style

One of the most distinctive features of *As I Lay Dying* is its narrative structure. Faulkner employs a stream-of-consciousness technique, allowing readers to experience the characters' thoughts in real-time. This approach creates an intimate connection between the reader and the characters, providing insight into their motivations and emotions.

1. Multiple Perspectives

The use of multiple narrators serves several purposes:

- Subjectivity: Each character provides a unique lens through which to view the story,

emphasizing the subjectivity of truth and experience.

- Complexity: The differing voices and perspectives create a rich, multifaceted narrative that challenges readers to piece together the story from various angles.
- Characterization: The monologues reveal the characters' inner thoughts and feelings, allowing for deeper characterization and emotional resonance.

2. Symbolism and Imagery

Faulkner's use of symbolism and imagery further enhances the narrative. Key symbols include:

- The Journey: The physical journey to Jefferson symbolizes the characters' emotional and psychological struggles, representing the burdens they carry.
- Addie's Coffin: The coffin serves as a powerful symbol of mortality, the weight of family expectations, and the inevitability of death.
- The River: The river represents both a barrier and a passage, highlighting the challenges the family faces and the fluidity of life and death.

Through these symbols, Faulkner deepens the thematic exploration of the novel, enriching the reader's understanding of the characters' experiences.

Critical Reception and Legacy

Upon its publication, *As I Lay Dying* received mixed reviews but has since come to be regarded as one of Faulkner's masterpieces. It is praised for its innovative narrative style, depth of character development, and exploration of existential themes. The novel has influenced countless writers and remains a staple in American literature courses.

1. Influence on Literature

Faulkner's experimental techniques have inspired various literary movements, including:

- Modernism: The novel's stream-of-consciousness style aligns with modernist principles, challenging traditional narrative forms.
- Southern Gothic: Faulkner's focus on the grotesque and the flawed nature of humanity places him firmly within the Southern Gothic tradition.

2. Adaptations

The novel has inspired several adaptations, including a 2013 film directed by James Franco, which aims to capture the essence of Faulkner's narrative style and thematic depth.

Conclusion

As I Lay Dying is a profound exploration of the human experience, masterfully crafted by William Faulkner. Through its intricate narrative structure, rich thematic content, and complex characterizations, the novel invites readers to reflect on the nature of death, the dynamics of family, and the search for identity. Its enduring legacy in American literature speaks to its relevance and resonance, making it a timeless work worthy of study and appreciation.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the main themes explored in 'As I Lay Dying'?

The novel explores themes of death, family dynamics, existentialism, and the struggle for identity, as each character grapples with their own perceptions of life and loss.

How does Faulkner use stream of consciousness in 'As I Lay Dying'?

Faulkner employs stream of consciousness to provide deep psychological insights into the characters, allowing readers to experience their internal thoughts and feelings in a fragmented, non-linear manner.

What role does the setting play in 'As I Lay Dying'?

The setting, primarily the rural South during the Great Depression, serves as a backdrop that reflects the characters' struggles and influences their journeys, symbolizing both physical and emotional desolation.

Who is the most complex character in 'As I Lay Dying' and why?

Darl Bundren is often seen as the most complex character due to his acute perception and introspective nature, which leads him to question reality and ultimately face alienation from his family.

What narrative techniques does Faulkner use in 'As I Lay Dying'?

Faulkner uses multiple narrators, each providing their own perspective, which creates a polyphonic narrative that highlights the subjective nature of truth and memory.

How does 'As I Lay Dying' address the concept of family?

The novel presents family as both a source of support and conflict, exploring how loyalty, resentment, and differing motivations impact the Bundren family's journey and

relationships.

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As I Lay Dying Analysis

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□Don't lay the glass on the corner of the table.□□□□□□□□□□ □Mother laid the baby gently on the bed.
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lie, lie (lied, lying), lay □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

□□□ Lay (“to put, place, or prepare”) and lie (“to recline or be situated”) are frequently confused. Lay is a transitive verb and takes an object. Lay and its principal parts (laid, laying) are correctly used in the following examples: Lay □“□□□□□□”□□ lie □“□□□□□□”□□□□□□□□□□

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Sep 20, 2024 · "lie down" "lay down"
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