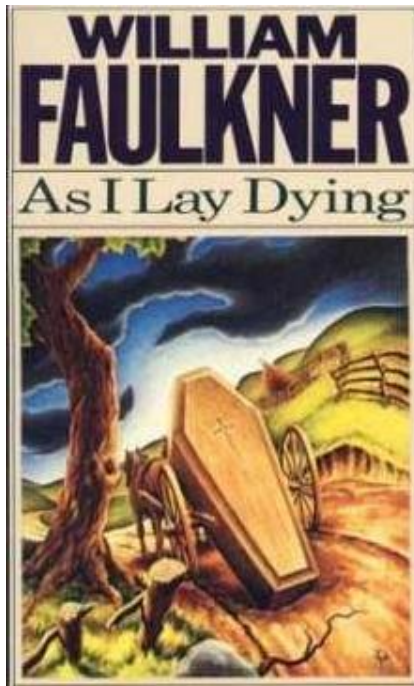


Teaching William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*

An Online Professional Development Seminar



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from the National Humanities Center

FROM THE FORUM

- Is Darl suffering from PTSD?
- How do others approach Addie's chapter and existentialism in general?
- How can we get students to focus on and appreciate Faulkner's writing style, diction and purpose?
- How can we engage struggling readers in this difficult novel?
- What are some new interpretations of the novel?



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*American Obscurantism: History and the Visual in American Literature
and Film*

Oxford University Press (under contract).

Co-editor, *Faulkner and Film: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha*

University Press of Mississippi, 2010

Vision's Immanence: Faulkner, Film, and the Popular Imagination

The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004

Introduction

Two main approaches to or understandings of *As I Lay Dying*:

- novel as indirect social/historical commentary on the plight of poor-white farmer in early Twentieth century, rural South
- novel as readerly “experience” with language, formal complexity, character psychology (the stream of consciousness; the immersing into the “river” of the Bundrens’ interior monologues, strange alterity, River crossing)

Introduction

Two critical/scholarly approaches (Signal; Vickery):

- Faulkner as burgeoning Modernist writer, late (or post-) Victorian author, sensibility, interested in overcoming cultural binaries (Signal): divine/human; female/male; white/black (race); human/animal; spirit/body; life/death
- Faulkner as experimental novelist, modernist author, explorer of characters' (and readers') psyches and of radically "other," separateness of consciousness, identity; "cubist" approach to narrative literature

The Opening: Darl

Jewel and I come up from the field, following the path in single file. Although I am fifteen feet ahead of him, anyone watching us from the cottonhouse can see Jewel's frayed and broken straw hat a full head above my own.

The path runs straight as a plumb-line, worn smooth by feet and baked brick-hard by July, between the green rows of laid-by cotton, to the cottonhouse in the center of the field, where it turns and circles the cottonhouse at four soft right angles and goes on across the field again, worn so by feet in fading precision.

The cottonhouse is of rough logs, from between which the chinking has long fallen. Square, with a broken roof set at a single pitch, it leans in empty and shimmering dilapidation in the sunlight, a single broad window in two opposite walls giving onto the approaches of the path. **When we reach it I turn and follow the path which circles the house. Jewel, fifteen feet behind me, looking straight ahead, steps in a single stride through the window. Still staring straight ahead, his pale eyes like wood set into his wooden face, he crosses the floor in four strides with the rigid gravity of a cigar store Indian dressed in patched overalls and endued with life from the hips down, and steps in a single stride through the opposite window and into the path again just as I come around the corner.** In single file and five feet apart and Jewel now in front, we go on up the path toward the foot of the bluff. Tull's wagon stands beside the spring, hitched to the rail, the reins wrapped about the seat stanchion. In the wagon bed are two chairs. Jewel stops at the spring and takes the gourd from the willow branch and drinks. I pass him and mount the path, beginning to hear Cash's saw. When I reach the top he has quit sawing. Standing in a litter of chips, he is fitting two of the boards together.

It was the sweetest thing I ever saw. It was like he knew he would never see her again, that Anse Bundren was driving him from his mother's death bed, never to see her in this world again. I always said Darl was different from those others. I always said he was the only one of them that had his mother's nature, had any natural affection.

Discussion Question

- What is different about how Cora sees or narrates this moment from the way Darl himself narrates it?

It's a hard life on women, for a fact. Some women. I mind my mammy lived to be seventy and more. Worked every day, rain or shine; never a sick day since her last chap was born until one day she kind of looked around her and then she went and taken that lace-trimmed night gown she had had forty-five years and never wore out of the chest and put it on and laid down on the bed and pulled the covers up and shut her eyes. "You all will have to look out for pa the best you can," she said. "I'm tired."

Discussion Question

- How might this brief account of Tull's mother's death relate to Addie's?

It is dark in the barn, warm, smelling, silent. I can cry quietly, watching the top of the hill. Cash comes to the hill, limping where he fell off of the church. He looks down at the spring, then up the road and back toward the barn. He comes down the path stiffly and looks at the broken hitch-rein and at the dust in the road and then up the road, where the dust is gone. "I hope they've got clean past Tull's by now. I so hope hit." Cash turns and limps up the path. "Durn him. I showed him. Durn him." I am not crying now. I am not anything. Dewey Dell comes to the hill and calls me. Vardaman. I am not anything. I am quiet. You, Vardaman. I can cry quiet now, feeling and hearing my tears. "Then hit want. Hit hadn't happened then. Hit was a-layin right there on the ground. And now she's gittin ready to cook hit." **It is dark. I can hear wood, silence: I know them. But not living sounds, not even him. It is as though the dark were resolving him out of his integrity, into an unrelated scattering of components--snuffings and stampings; smells of cooling flesh and ammoniac hair; an illusion of a co-ordinated whole of splotched hide and strong bones within which, detached and secret and familiar, an is different from my is. I see him dissolve--legs, a rolling eye, a gaudy splotching like cold flames and float upon the dark in fading solution; all one yet neither; all either yet none. I can see hearing coil toward him, caressing, shaping his hard shape--fetlock, hip, shoulder and head; smell and sound. I am not afraid.**

"Cooked and et. Cooked and et."

It was not her. I was there, looking. I saw. I thought it was her, but it was not. It was not my mother. She went away when the other one laid down in her bed and drew the quilt up. She went away. “Did she go as far as town?” “She went further than town.” “Did all those rabbits and possums go further than town?” God made the rabbits and possums. He made the train. Why must He make a different place for them to go if she is just like the rabbit.

Pa walks around. His shadow does. The saw sounds like it is asleep.

And so if Cash nails the box up, she is not a rabbit. And so if she is not a rabbit I couldn't breathe in the crib and Cash is going to nail it up. And so if she lets him it is not her. I know. I was there. I saw when it did not be her. I saw. They think it is and Cash is going to nail it up.

Discussion Questions

- What is Vardaman trying to understand here?
- Who or What is “it”?

I be durn if it didn't give me the creeps. Now and then a fellow gets to thinking. About all the sorrow and afflictions in this world; how it's liable to strike anywhere, like lightning. **I reckon it does take a powerful trust in the Lord to guard a fellow, though sometimes I think that Cora's a mite overcautious, like she was trying to crowd the other folks away and get in closer than anybody else.** But then, when something like this happens, I reckon she is right and you got to keep after it and I reckon I am blessed in having a wife that ever strives for sanctify and well-doing like she says I am.

In a strange room you must empty yourself for sleep. And before you are emptied for sleep, what are you. And when you are emptied for sleep, you are not. And when you are filled with sleep, you never were. I dont know what I am. I dont know if I am or not. Jewel knows he is, because he does not know that he does not know whether he is or not. He cannot empty himself for sleep because he is not what he is and he is what he is not. Beyond the unlamped wall I can hear the rain shaping the wagon that is ours, the load that is no longer theirs that felled and sawed it nor yet theirs that bought it and which is not ours either, lie on our wagon though it does, since only the wind and the rain shape it only to Jewel and me, that are not asleep. And since sleep is is-not and rain and wind are was, it is not. Yet the wagon is, because when the wagon is was, Addie Bundren will not be. And Jewel is, so Addie Bundren must be. And then I must be, or I could not empty myself for sleep in a strange room. And so if I am not emptied yet, I am is.

How often have I **lain** beneath **rain** on a **strange** roof, thinking of home.

I made it on the bevel.

1. There is more surface for the nails to grip.
2. There is twice the gripping-surface to each seam.
3. The water will have to seep into it on a slant. Water moves easiest up and down or straight across.
4. In a house people are upright two thirds of the time. So the seams and joints are made up-and-down. Because the stress is up-and-down.
5. In a bed where people lie down all the time, the joints and seams are made sideways, because the stress is sideways.
6. Except.
7. A body is not square like a crosstie.
8. Animal magnetism.
9. The animal magnetism of a dead body makes the stress come slanting, so the seams and joints of a coffin are made on the bevel.
10. You can see by an old grave that the earth sinks down on the bevel.
11. While in a natural hole it sinks by the center, the stress being up and down.
12. So I made it on the bevel.
13. It makes a neater job.

My mother is a fish.

In the afternoon when school was out and the last one had left with his little dirty snuffling nose, instead of going home I would go down the hill to the spring where I could be quiet and hate them. It would be quiet there then, with the water bubbling up and away and the sun slanting quiet in the trees and the quiet smelling of damp and rotting leaves and new earth; especially in the early spring, for it was worst then. I could just remember how my father used to say that the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time And when I would have to look at them day after day, "each with his and her secret and selfish thought, and blood strange to each other blood and strange to mine, and think that this seemed to be the only way I could get ready to stay dead, I would hate my father for having ever planted me. I would look forward to the times when they faulted, so I could whip them. **When the switch fell I could feel it upon my flesh; when it welted and ridged it was my blood that ran, and I would think with each blow of the switch: Now you are aware of me Now I am something in your secret and selfish life, who have marked your blood with my own for ever and ever.** And so I took Anse. I saw him pass the school house three or four times before I learned that he was driving four miles out of his way to do it. I noticed then how he was beginning to hump--a tall man and young --so that he looked already like a tall bird hunched in the cold weather, on the wagon seat.

“They might listen,” I said. “But they'll be hard to talk to.” He was watching my face.

“They're in the cemetery.”

“But your living kin,” he said. “They'll be different.”

“Will they?” I said. ‘I don’t know. I never had any other kind.”

So I took Anse. And when I knew that I had Cash, I knew that living was terrible and that this was the answer to it. **That was when I learned that words are no good; that words dont ever fit even what they are trying to say at. When he was born I knew that motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that had the children didn't care whether there was a word for it or not. I knew that fear was invented by someone that had never had the fear; pride, who never had the pride.** I knew that it had been, not that they had dirty noses, but that we had had to use one another by words like spiders dangling by their mouths from a beam, swinging and twisting and never touching, and that only through the blows of die switch could my blood and their blood flow as one stream. I knew that it had. been, not that my aloneness had to be violated over and over each day, but that it had never been violated until Cash came. Not even by Anse in the nights.

He had a word, too. Love, he called it. But I had been used to words for a long time. I knew that that word was like the others: just a shape to fill a lack; that when the right time Came, you wouldn't need a word for that anymore than for pride or fear. Cash did not need to say it to me nor I to him, and I would say Let Anse use it, if he wants to. So that it was Anse or love; love or Anse: it didn't matter. I would think that even while I lay with him in the dark and Cash asleep in the cradle within the swing of my hand. I would think that if he were to wake and cry, I would suckle him, too. Anse or love: it didn't matter. My aloneness had been violated and then made whole again by the violation: time, Anse, love, what you will, outside the circle.

She would tell me what I owed to my children and to Anse and to God. I gave Anse the children. I did not ask for them. I did not even ask him for what he could have given me: not-Anse. That was my duty to him, to not ask that, and that duty I fulfilled. **I would be I**; I would let him be the shape and echo of his word.

The breeze was setting up from the barn, so we put her under the apple tree, where the moonlight can **dapple the apple** tree upon the long slumbering flanks within which now and then she talks in little trickling bursts of secret and murmurous bubbling. I took Vardaman to listen. When we came up the cat leaped down from it and flicked away with silver claw and silver eye into the shadow.

This time Jewel is riding upon it, clinging to it, until it crashes down and flings him forward and clear and Mack leaps forward into a thin smell of scorching meat and slaps at the widening **crimson-edged holes that bloom like flowers in his undershirt.**

Sometimes I aint so sho who's got ere a right to say when a man is crazy and when he aint. Sometimes I think it aint none of us pure crazy and aint none of us pure sane until the balance of us talks him that-a-Way. It's like it aint so much what a fellow does, but it's the way the majority of folks is looking at him when he does it.

“Better,” he said. He begun to laugh again. “Better,” he said. He couldn't hardly say it for laughing. He sat on the ground and us watching him, laughing and laughing. It was bad. It was bad so. I be durn if I could see anything to laugh at. Because there just aint nothing justifies the deliberate destruction of what a man has built with his own sweat and stored the fruit of his sweat into.

But I aint so sho that ere a man has the right to say what is crazy and what aint. It's like there was a fellow in every man that's done a-past the sanity or the insanity, that watches the sane and the insane doings of that man with the same horror and the same astonishment.

It was a fact. It made him look a foot taller, kind of holding his head up, hangdog and proud too, and then we see her behind him, carrying the other grip--a kind of duck-shaped woman all dressed up, with them kind of hard-looking pop eyes like she was daring ere a man to say nothing. And there we set watching them, with Dewey Dell's and Vardaman's mouth half open and half-et bananas in their hands and her coming around from behind pa, looking at us like she dared ere a man. And then I see that the grip she was carrying was one of them little graphophones. It was for a fact, all shut up as pretty as a picture, and everytime a new record would come from the mail order and us setting in the house in the winter, listening to it, I would think what a shame Darl couldn't be to enjoy it too. But it is better so for him. This world is not his world; this life his life.

“It's Cash and Jewel and Vardaman and Dewey Dell,” pa says, kind of hangdog and proud too, with his teeth and all, even if he wouldn't look at us. **“Meet Mrs Bundren,” he says.**

Final Slide

Thank you