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Booknotes for As I Lay Dying

Authorial Background:

William Faulkner was born in New Albany, Mississippi, on September 25, 1897. He published his first book in 1924--The Marble Faun, a collection of poems. He is most highly regarded as a literary chronicler of life in the Deep South, particularly in the fictional Yoknapatawpha County, the setting for several of his novels. He explored the full range of post-Civil War Southern life, focusing on both the personal histories of his characters and on the moral uncertainties of an increasingly dissolute society in such novels as Sanctuary (1931), The Hamlet (1940), The Town (1957), and The Mansion (1959). He “set out deliberately to write a tour-de-force. . . Before I ever put pen to paper and set down the first words, I knew what the last word would be. . . Before I began I said, I am going to write a book by which, at a pinch, I can stand or fall if I never touch ink again,” he said, describing his motivation for writing As I Lay Dying in 1930 (264). He wrote it while he was working at the University of Mississippi power plant, employed as a fireman and nightwatchman. When asked how he came up with his title, Faulkner would “sometimes quote from memory the speech of Agamemnon to Odysseus in the *Odyssey*, Book XI: ‘As I lay dying the woman with the dog’s eyes would not close my eyes for me as I descended into Hades’ ” (266). His other novels include The Sound and the Fury (1929), Light in August (1932), Absalom, Absalom! (1936), The Unvanquished (1938), Intruder in the Dust (1948), Requiem for a Nun (1951), A Fable (1954), and The Reivers (1962). For the latter two books, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. He also wrote collections of poems, essays, and several volumes of short stories. In 1949 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature by creating a new approach to the writing of fiction, combining the use of symbolism with a stream-of-consciousness technique. Faulkner died in Byhalia, Mississippi, on July, 1962.

Literary Period / Country:

Contemporary, 1930’s America.

Setting:

The story takes place in Yoknapatawpha County in Mississippi, of the Deep South. At the Bundren family’s farmstead, the wife and mother Addie Bundren dies and she has to be transported to Jefferson to be buried.

Characters:

Anse Bundren: He is the father of four sons and a daughter. “The shirt across [his] hump is faded lighter than the rest of it (17). “He tells people that if he ever sweats, he will die. . . he believes it” (17). “[He] keeps on rubbing his knees. His overalls are faded; on one knee a serge patch cut out of a pair of Sunday pants, wore iron-slick” (29). At first, when his wife Addie dies, everyone in his family except himself feels grief. He is quick to rush her coffin’s building, quick to bury her in Jefferson with his own hands, but it is not truly out of respect or love for her. He wanted to go to Jefferson to get some new teeth, so he “could eat God’s own victuals as a man

should" (37). It appears he may have had an affair or other with a townlady, who is introduced as Mrs. Bundren at the conclusion of the story.

Addie Bundren: Anse's wife. She is frail, a "handful of rotten bones," sick, and close to death (49). When she dies, she is nailed inside a coffin and taken to Jefferson to be buried after ten days. She is an enigmatic character, seemingly innocent as she is dying at the story's beginning, but she later reveals that she felt heartless toward Anse and her children. Cora "prayed for [her] because she believed [she] was blind to sin, wanting [her] to kneel and pray too" (176). Her personality is cold and unsympathetic.

Cash: He is the first and oldest son. A family carpenter, he broke his leg once falling off a church and breaks it again while crossing a swollen river. His body is thin and spindly, and after breaking his leg again, he has cement poured over it to hold it in place. Later, after he loses skin from the removal of the cement block about his knee, he has to see Peabody, the family friend and doctor.

Darl: He is the second oldest son, and, for a reason, Addie's favorite. Cora had "always said that Darl was different from those others. . . he was the only one of [her children] that had his mother's nature" (21). He appears to be a sincere, caring, ideal son, but later on, he sets fire to a barn. Throughout the story there are references to how strange, different, or alone he is; these references seem to foreshadow Darl's eventual dementia. He becomes oversensitized to the events arising after Addie's death, and goes crazy. He then has to spend the rest of his life in an insane hospital.

Jewel: He is the third oldest son, and Addie's least favorite. Cora described him as the "one [Addie] labored to bear and coddled and petted so and him flinging into tantrums or sulking spells, inventing devilment to devil her" (21). Throughout the story he curses and exhibits rather unruly behavior, but proves to be one of the good sons of the family. He trades standards of sanity and compassion with Darl after having his back seared from trying to rescue his mother's coffin from the burning barn (which Darl had set on fire).

Dewey Dell: She is the Bundrens' only daughter and Addie's caretaker, fanning her all day until the time she died. At seventeen, she had gotten pregnant with a townboy named Lafe, and wanted to get rid of her baby. Darl had said to her, "You want [Addie] to die so you can to town (to receive the abortion), is that it? She wouldn't say what we both knew" (39-40). When she finally gets to town, she uncovers ten dollars wrapped in a newspaper package and asks a doctor for an abortion. He gives her a placebo and rapes her instead, and Anse, her father, takes her ten dollars and buys a pair of teeth.

Vardaman: He is the youngest family member, having not reached maturity yet. When his mother Addie dies, he cowers behind his father's leg and later runs off, returning home with the belief that "My mother is a fish" (84). His view of reality is somewhat distorted by his childishness, believing that his mother is a fish and Jewel's mother is a horse, although they both are brothers and they have the same mother. He is mostly an observer of the story's events, describing what he sees simply, as when he secretly sees Darl setting the barn on fire and when Cash breaks his leg. His outcome at the end was to receive some long-awaited bananas from Dewey Dell.

Cora Tull: She is a family friend and a highly religious person, animating most of her conversations with references to God. She reveals most about Addie's character. She plays no large role in the story as her husband Vernon does, and exits the plot even before the Bundrens arrive in Jefferson.

Vernon Tull: Cora's husband and family friend. He helps the Bundrens across the swollen river and seems to possess more care and logic than any of the Bundrens. He is willing to be their friend and offers his services to help them throughout the story.

Theme:

There seems to be many possible themes in As I Lay Dying. One of them is the nature of man. Each of Faulkner's characters represent a different way of mind, and each character goes through changes to test their frames of mind. Anse, the authoritative father figure, does not travel to Jefferson only because he wants to respect his wife's wishes. He also wants a new pair of dentures and a chance to visit his new wife. Addie, the presumed-innocent mother before her death, was proven to be a disloyal, apathetic, unrepentant wife who believed "that the only reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time" (169). Darl was the ideal child, caring and compassionate, but he gradually transforms into the exact opposite, becoming demented and sent off to an insane asylum.

Also corresponding with the nature of man is the distinction between country people and townspeople. Dewey Dell became pregnant by a townboy, but he left her because she was a country girl. When Dewey Dell later goes to the doctor to have an abortion, the doctor immediately takes advantage of her, thinking that she is uneducated--an easy target. "Country woman. . . she looks pretty good for a country girl. . . Wait. . . Is she young, you say?. . . She looks like a pretty hot mamma, for a country girl" (242). Vardaman, the youngest boy, recognizes the distinction between countrymen and townspeople. "Pa said flour and sugar and coffee costs so much. Because I am a country boy because boys in town. Bicycles. Why do flour and sugar cost so much when he is a country boy. . . 'Why aint I a town boy, pa?' I said. God made me. I did not said to God to made me in the country" (66).

Another possible theme is how people cope with death. Ignoring underlying information about the characters' ulterior motives, each character expresses grief in his own way. Whereas Anse "ignores" his wife's death and becomes focused on burying her, Vardaman brings other thoughts into his mind, associating his mother with the fish he was forced to cut and clean. Darl undergoes a complete personality change and becomes crazy. Addie, before she died, somewhat anticipated her death, and Jewel, having never told or shared his feelings of grief with anyone, expresses his loyalty to his mother by saving her body from both the swollen river and the burning barn.

Plot Summary:

In Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, the Bundren family anticipates the death of their wife and mother, Addie. After she dies, she is placed in a coffin built by her eldest son Cash, and the family begins an odyssey across the Mississippi countryside to bury Addie in Jefferson.

Vardaman reacts violently to his mother's death; Dewey Dell grieves, and their father has little or no reaction. Vardaman soon associates his mother's death with the death of a fish he cut

and cleaned; he begins to think his mother is a fish. The Bundren family worked for a while, mostly Cash, to build Addie's coffin and place her inside. Then, they put the coffin on a wagon to head for Jefferson. Anse was determined to bury her in town; he wanted to respect her by getting her in the ground as soon as he could. After crossing a swollen river where the bridge had fallen, the wagon overturns and washes down the river. Darl abandons his mother's body as Cash tries to save it; he breaks his leg again. Afterwards, after recovering their items, they go to Mottson to see the doctor.

Dewey Dell tries to ask the doctor for an abortion; Anse pours cement over Cash's broken leg to stabilize it. Later, Darl's behavior begins to change. He asks his brother Jewel "whose son are you," then sets a barn belonging to a man named Gillespie on fire (212). In trying to save his mother's body from the fire, Jewel burns his back. Vardaman sees Darl torch the barn, but Dewey Dell told him not to tell anyone; however, Mr. Gillespie had a feeling who it was. After they arrive at Jefferson, the townspeople begin to revolt at the smell of Addie's rotting body in the wagon; it had been there for ten days. Cash, Jewel, and Anse found out that Gillespie knew about who burned down his barn, and thought about what they were going to do with Darl. Then, when the "fellows" came to take Darl to the insane asylum, the Bundrens had already buried Addie. Dewey Dell attempts to get an abortion at Jefferson but is raped instead; Anse takes her ten dollars to buy his long-awaited dentures. Now that Addie's business had been taken care of, he then introduced his children to his new wife.

Author's Unique Style:

Faulkner uses a combination of symbolism with a stream-of-consciousness technique, a new approach to the writing of fiction. The narrative is occasionally interrupted by the thoughts of a character, which effectively serve to reveal the person's personality and their perception of events; for example, "*When I used to sleep with Vardaman I had a nightmare once I thought I was awake but I couldn't see and couldn't feel I couldn't feel the bed under me and I couldn't think what I was I couldn't think of my name I couldn't even think I am a girl. . .*" (121).

The diction he uses is representative of Southern dialect, serving to add realism to the story. Words such as "pussel-gutted," "frailed," and "victuals" are all traditionally words of Southern dialect (13, 21, 191). Commas are used expressively to suggest the movements of voice sometimes, creating natural pauses in the narrative. Also, capitals are sometimes used to give significances to a word beyond those it might have in its uncapitalized form; "[Darl goes] on to the house, followed by the Chuck. Chuck. Chuck. of the adze (5). Here, the capitalization identifies these words as words of sound imagery.

Quotes:

1. "My mother is a fish" (84). This quote represents Vardaman's personality and state of mind; it represents his childishness but also the way he views his mother's death.
2. "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" (169). Here, the basis for Addie's apathy is finally explained, and why she seemed to not fear her death. Rather, she anticipated it.
3. "It takes two people to make you, and one people to die. That's how the world is going to end" (39). This quote shows the simplistic, morose type of thinking that foreshadows early Darl's downfall into dementia.
4. "When He 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. And so He never aimed for folks to live on a road, because which gets there first, I says, the road or the house” (36)? This quote explains Anse’s frustration with having a road in front of their house and having to have visitors interfering with his daily introverted lifestyle.

5. “‘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” (261). The final sentence serves as an effective conclusion because it resolves the mystery of the Bundrens’ life: Anse had probably met this woman before and had married her, making her the new mother of his four children, thereby showing that he felt no lasting grief over Addie’s death and that their journey across the Mississippi had been almost for nothing.

Glossary:

1. Repetition: the recurrence of a word or phrase; repetition may also signal parallel structure. The words “too soon” are repeated in “It is because in the wild and outrageous earth to soon too soon too soon. It’s not that I wouldn’t and will not it’s that it is too soon too soon too soon too soon” (120).

2. Stream-of-consciousness technique: a pattern of writing in which the speaker’s thoughts are written down as they occur; stream-of-consciousness can also give insight into a character’s personality. “Suppose I tell him to turn. He will do what I say. Dont you know he will do what I say?. . . When I used to sleep with Vardaman I had a nightmare once I thought I was awake but I couldn’t see and couldn’t feel I couldn’t feel the bed under me and I couldn’t think what I was I couldn’t think of my name I couldn’t even think I am a girl. . .” (121).

3. Dialect: A version of a language with subtle changes that are particular of a social class, group, or geographical region. In the story, the dialect is Southern-- “It’s bad that a fellow must earn the reward of his right-doing by flouting hisself and his dead. . . But now I can get them teeth” (111).

4. Alliteration: The repetition of first consonant letters. Here, the t’s, p’s, w’s, and s’s are repeated: “. . . like two round peas in two thimbles: perhaps in Peabody’s back two of those worms which work surreptitious and steady through you. . .” (103).

5. Diction: Word choice. Diction is chosen according to the tone the author wishes to convey; diction can be formal or informal, powerful or flaccid. The tone and imagery of Jewel and Vernon Tull in the river are described by the diction: “As though the clotting which is you had dissolved into the myriad original motion. . . fury in itself quiet with stagnation . . . mammalian ludicrosities which are the horizons and the valleys of the earth” (163-164).