

## 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* is 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, *Sanctuary* (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-Snopceps 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

redemption.... Because they are simpler in mind and live more remotely from the Snopes world than the younger Sartoris and Compsons, the Bundrens are able to carry a genuine act of traditional morality through to its end. They are infected with amorality; but it is the amorality of physical nature, not the artificial, self-interested amorality of the Snopeses. More heroism is possible among them than among the inhabitants of Jefferson.”

George Marion O'Donnell  
“Faulkner's Mythology”  
*The Kenyon Review* 1.3 (1939)

“Addie Bundren lies dying, and her children prepare to fulfill her desire to be buried in her native Jefferson (Miss.), far from the crude back-country surroundings of her married life. Cash, one of her sons, makes her coffin, and when she is dead the family unites to carry out the one wish of hers it has ever respected. Another son, Vardaman, still a child, in shock confuses the excitement of catching a big fish with his mother's death so that he says ‘my mother is a fish,’ just as, remembering how he was stifled in a shut corn crib, he bores holes through the coffin so that she can breathe. Led by their mean, simple-minded, whining father, Anse, the family sets off in a mule-drawn wagon.

Floods have washed out a bridge, and while fording a river they lose their team. Jewel, Addie's illegitimate son, also nearly loses his beloved horse as it too is plunged in the river, and as Cash is dragged out, he breaks his leg. But although the horse is saved from the river, it is lost to Jewel when Anse trades it for a new team. During the gruesome ten-day trek, although the body begins to decay, Cash rests on the coffin, his leg in a homemade cast that permanently cripples him. One night Darl, the most imaginative and intense of the sons, sets fire to a barn where the coffin is lying so as to cremate his mother and end the horrid pilgrimage, and Jewel, helping to rescue the animals, is badly burned. Arrived in Jefferson, Darl is seized by the authorities and sent to the insane asylum, and Cash is taken to a doctor. Dewey Dell, their sister, buys a ‘cure’ for her pregnancy, paying the drug clerk by giving herself to him. Having fulfilled his duty to Addie, Anse ‘borrows’ money from Dewey Dell, buys a set of false teeth, and, ‘kind of hangdog and proud, too,’ returns with a strange woman, saying, ‘Meet Mrs. Bundren’.”

James D. Hart  
*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83) 39

“The book most fully about the poor white, *As I Lay Dying*, is charged with sympathy and poetry. There are a hundred touches like that in Cash's soliloquy about the phonograph.... The whole of *As I Lay Dying* is based on the heroic effort of the Bundren family to fulfill the promise to the dead mother to take her body to Jefferson; and the fact that Anse Bundren, after the effort is completed, immediately gets him a new wife, ‘the duck-shaped woman,’ does not negate the heroism of the effort or the poetry in which it is clothed. We are told by one critic that ‘what should have been the drama of the Bundrens thus becomes in the end a sort of brutal farce,’ and that we are ‘unable to feel the tragedy because the author has refused to accept the Bundrens, as he did accept the Compsons, as tragic.’ Rather, I should say, the Bundrens come off a little better than the latter-day Compsons, the whining, self-deluded mother, the promiscuous Caddy, the ineffectual Quentin, and the rest, including the vile Jason. The Bundrens at least are capable of the heroic effort. What the conclusion indicates is that even such a fellow as Anse Bundren, in the grip of an idea, in terms of promise or code, can rise above his ordinary level; Anse falls back at the end, but only after the prop of the obligation has been removed.”

Robert Penn Warren  
“William Faulkner”  
*Selected Essays*  
(Random House 1946)

“*As I Lay Dying*...is a comic fable about piety towards the dead and the sacredness of promises to the dead... The theme of the strenuous journey and the quest...give it meaning. The quest involves the search for identity, and Darl being the intellectual of the family—rustic and waif though he is—reflects this. It involves the discovery of kinship, of one's common humanity, and this is best illustrated, if only in muted tones, by the newly released compassion and genial emotions of the hitherto rigidly secretive Cash. Above all it involves the rediscovery of the self by breaking out of the circle of selfhood.”

Richard Chase  
*The American Novel and Its Tradition*  
(Doubleday/Anchor 1957) 207, 209

“*As I Lay Dying* (1930) relates the death of Addie Bundren, a farmer’s wife in Yoknapatawpha County, and the efforts of her family to carry out her dying wish to be buried in the family plot in Jefferson. As in *The Sound and the Fury*, the story is seen through the eyes of various characters in succession, in this case Addie herself, Addie’s husband Anse, her daughter Dewey Dell, and her sons Cash, Darl, Jewel, and Vardaman. As Addie dies she supervises Cash in the construction of her coffin; the doggedly precise Cash explains carefully in his section why he built the coffin as he did.

The family are burdened with a staggering set of obstacles in their efforts to carry Addie’s body to Jefferson. A flood wipes out a bridge, the mules are almost drowned in the river. Cash’s leg is broken in a wagon accident, Darl, losing his wits, sets fire to a barn and is packed off to the insane asylum, and Dewey Dell, seeking a ‘remedy’ for her illegitimate pregnancy, is seduced by a cynical town druggist. As the journey proceeds it assumes the proportions of a saga. When the mother is finally buried, Anse buys himself a set of store teeth and suddenly marries ‘a duck-shaped woman with pop eyes’ he encounters in the town. His obligation to his dead wife is fulfilled, and he now looks only to the future.”

Donald Heiney  
*Recent American Literature 4*  
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 214

“There are some sixty short sections apportioned among fifteen characters.... The need to cooperate during the journey merely disguises the essential isolation of each of the Bundrens and postpones the inevitable conflict between them. For the Bundrens, no less than the Compsons, are living each in a private world whose nature is gauged in relation to Addie and to the actual events of the journey to Jefferson. The larger frame of reference, provided in *The Sound and the Fury* by the impersonal, third person narration of the fourth section, is here conveyed dramatically through eight different characters who comment on some aspect of the funeral in which they themselves are not immediately involved. Their diverse reactions to and judgments of the Bundrens chart the range of social responses, passing from friendliness to indifference to outraged indignation....

Anse, for example, is always the bystander, contemplating events and reducing the richness of experience to a few threadbare clichés. In contrast, Darl, the most complex of the characters, owes his complexity and his madness to the fact that he encompasses all possible modes of response and awareness without being able to effect their integration. It is Cash, the oldest brother, who ultimately achieves maturity and understanding by integrating these modes into one distinctively human response which fuses words and action, reason and intuition. In short, the Bundren family provides a locus for the exploration of the human psyche in all its complexity without in the least impairing the immediate reality of a character and action. The different levels of consciousness are rendered by Faulkner through variations in style ranging from the dialect of actual speech to the intricate imagery and poetic rhythms of the unconscious. When the characters are engaged in conversation or concerned with concrete objects, the vocabulary used is limited and repetitious and the style is realistic and colloquial.

Making its appeal to emotion and imagination, the language of the unconscious relies heavily on symbols with their power to evoke rather than to define reality. Thus, Faulkner is able to indicate the particular combination of sensation, reason, and intuition possessed by each of his characters as well as their range of awareness through a subtle manipulation of language and style. Quite naturally, the three modes of response to experience—words, action, and contemplation—are implemented not by the style but by the series of events with which the characters are confronted.... Obsessed by their own relationships to Addie, they can resolve that tension only when they have come to terms with her as a person and with what she signifies in their own consciousness....

Anse thoroughly enjoys the situation since as chief mourner he is, for once in his life, a person of importance. It is not, however, that simple for Addie’s sons, who find that the conventions of mourning and burial can neither channel nor contain their grief. Thus, Cora Tull, the self-appointed champion and

arbiter of propriety, finds that each of them fails, at some point, to behave in a fitting manner.... The journey from beginning to end is a travesty of the ritual of interment.... It is the individual who must give meaning and life to ritual by recognizing its symbolic function. But the spirit that should give meaning to Addie's funeral is either absent, as in Anse and Dewey Dell, or in conflict with it, as in Cash and Darl. As this becomes clear, the series of catastrophes that befall the Bundrens becomes a source of macabre humor, for it is only when the ritual is disengaged from its symbolic function that the comic aspect becomes apparent.

Awareness of the difference between empty and significant ritual, framed in terms of the word and the act, dominate Addie Bundren's dying thoughts. She concludes that any experience—love, marriage, motherhood, bereavement—can be either an intensely felt reality or a mere conventional form of speech and behavior. The ritual of the word attempts to impose an order and a significance on experience, while the ritual of the act allows them to emerge from it. While Anse talks about his trials and his grief, Cash, Darl, and Jewel, each in his own way, express the meaning of love and bereavement through their actions which frequently come in conflict with accepted and acceptable forms of behavior....

Addie and Anse themselves represent the two polar opposites of action and words which must be meshed if their relationship is to be meaningful. The word by itself leads to a paralysis of the ability to feel and act; the act by itself results in excessive and uncontrolled responses to various stimuli both internal and external. Addie and Anse, however, are not able to effect this fusion of word and act. Because they are 'husband' and 'wife,' Anse feels no need to establish a personal relationship which would give significance to those words and to the ritual of marriage. He is completely blind to Addie's intense desire for life and to her conviction that language is a grotesque tautology which prevents any real communication.

The birth of Cash confirms her feeling that words are irrelevant and that only physical experience has reality and significance. Through the act of giving birth she becomes part of the endless cycle of creation and destruction, discovering that, for the first time, her 'aloneness had been violated and then made whole again by the violation.' Yet accepting Cash as the sign of her own passionate involvement in experience implies a total rejection of Anse who is now father as well as husband in name only. Because Addie accepts the fact that she and Anse live in different worlds, her second child, Darl, comes as the ultimate and unforgivable outrage. Addie, however, quickly disowns the thought of Anse as the deliberate agent of her betrayal; they have both been 'tricked by words older than Anse or love.' Precisely what these words are is not clear, but what they signify for Addie is quite apparent. Primarily, she realizes that the ritual of the word does have its repercussions in the world of experience, and on this basis she is able to distinguish between the empty words of Anse and the words which are deeds.

Her sudden and brief affair with Whitfield constitutes Addie's attempt to explore this new relationship between words and acts, for it encompasses even as it differentiates between two quite distinct conceptions of sin. As a word, sin is the opposite of virtue and leads inevitably to damnation. It is this aspect which Addie stresses when she thinks of sin as garments which she and Whitfield wear in the face of the world and which they remove... But as an act, sin may be a step toward salvation. Accordingly, Whitfield becomes 'the instrument ordained by God who created the sin, to sanctify that sin He had created.' The adultery that becomes a moral act, not, of course, in the sense of 'good' or 'virtuous,' but in the sense that it re-establishes the reality of moral conduct and of the relationship between God and man.... Significantly, Addie sees in Jewel, the child of her sin, a sign of grace: 'He is my cross and he will be my salvation. He will save me from the water and from the fire. Even though I have laid down my life, he will save me.' Through sin Addie seeks to find and enact her own humanity, and if her solution seems extreme, so is her provocation. For the alternative, as she sees it, is the moral myopia of those who live by words 'because people to whom sin is just a matter of words, to them salvation is just words too.'

After her desperate effort to explore and encompass the potentialities of life in one intensely felt act, she is ready to set her house in order. She consciously and deliberately gives Anse Dewey Dell to 'negative' Jewel and Vardaman to replace him. Yet in a deep and profound sense, Anse can never claim or share in the lives of any of his children and this gives her a moment of exhilarated realization: 'My children were of me alone, of the wild blood boiling along the earth, of me and of all that lived; of none and of all.' Through her, life itself has effected its own continuance and in that process the mother-child relationship

has its roots. Two of the children, however, are hers in an additional sense, for she has chosen them for a relationship that is personal as well as maternal. There is an unspoken understanding between herself and Cash. The same understanding, though no longer peaceful, exists between her and Jewel. In both cases the relationship is simple and direct, uninterrupted by conventional expressions of sentiments.

The circumstances of the birth of her children establish the level of their awareness of Addie and the mode of their response to and participation in her burial. Through an unconscious identification with her, they faithfully reproduce, though in varying degree, her very moods as well as her attitude to the external world. Jewel comes closer to recreating one aspect of her character, while Dewey Dell and Vardaman, the children reserved for Anse, seem least directly involved with her as a person. The structure of *As I Lay Dying* in which the progression is centrifugal as well as linear implements this pattern. Centrifugally, each section establishes the relationship between Addie and the character whose thoughts and observations are being recorded. Linearly, each section contributes to the sequence of actions and events which constitutes the plot. Furthermore, the separation of word and deed which Addie has recounted is dramatized in the journey to Jefferson. Anse undertakes a moral pilgrimage but solely on the verbal level. Inarticulate except when he is cursing, it is Jewel who rushes into action each time there is a new barrier to be overcome or a new catastrophe to be countered. The rest of the family move between these two extremes.

Because Anse lives by words alone, Addie has no influence over him except when she ironically exacts a promise which is a word but which will compel him to act. All that saves him from equating the deed with the word and the intention with the achievement of it is his own desire for new teeth and Jewel's savage determination to perform the promised act. At the first sign of difficulty he falls back on his inexhaustible stock of moral platitudes to isolate himself effectively from the horrors of the journey, to avoid any exertion on his part, and to maneuver others into acting for him. Incapable of formulating any plan or initiating any action, he depends on his sons to overcome each new obstacle. If they fail, there are always the neighbors to come to his rescue. Certainly the neighbors can do nothing but help when confronted by his covert pleas couched in the language of forbearance: 'I ain't asking you to risk your mule. It ain't your dead; I am not blaming you.' His words create an image of himself as the meek and magnanimous victim forgiving a cruel and heartless world. To refuse him help after this is to admit the validity of his remarks and therefore, by implication, their own hardheartedness. They see through his verbal camouflage, but since it is based on emotional and moral clichés to which the response is predetermined, they are helpless before it.

From the beginning the distance between what Anse says and what he does is ironically and humorously emphasized. The irony is, however, most apparent in the scene of Addie's burial. Having had his promise to her fulfilled for him, he makes a short funeral oration. His words and his sentiments as he expresses his grief, though a trifle marred by self-pity, are appropriate to the occasion and to his role as chief mourner... But it is simply a verbal sincerity, unrelated to the act and therefore to the kind of truth that arises out of and touches the heart directly and immediately. Lacking these, his words, like his expression, constitute 'a monstrous burlesque of all bereavement.' The lament for Addie is followed by his unwillingness to buy a shovel for digging her grave; and even before her body has been placed in it, he has found a new wife to reassure him in his old age. These ironic incongruities are profoundly in keeping with Anse's character. Cushioned by words and conventional sentiments against the harsh impact of reality, he is the only one of the Bundrens completely unchanged by Addie's death or by the funeral journey. The horrors which drive Darl into insanity and leave their mark on the others pass him by so that he avoids agony and insight alike.

In contrast to his father, Cash undergoes certain very clear and definite changes as a result of Addie's death and funeral. Apparently reflecting Addie's rejection of words at the time of his birth, Cash begins by being silent, absorbed in his work, and curiously remote from the tensions and violence of the rest of the family. It is only after something concrete has been accomplished that he speaks. As a carpenter, Cash is concerned with working with his hands and building well; as Addie's son, he uses those hands and that skill to express what she means to him. Thus, the construction of the coffin becomes an act of love, understood as such by Addie, in which emotion tempered by reason is manifested in a concrete form. The sense of proportion which guides his hands also distinguishes his behavior and makes him the inevitable peacemaker in the family. Yet admirable as these characteristics are, Cash is, at the outset, a curiously stiff and one-sided figure. By devoting all his energy to and expressing his emotions through his work, he

leaves no room for the cultivation of imaginative or linguistic potentialities. If Anse represents words without action, Cash is action in search of a word. Accordingly, a whole realm of human awareness and response is closed to him.

Cash does, however, develop a more comprehensive understanding of himself and his world. His exclusive preoccupation with concrete tangible objects yields to a more flexible, imaginative vision. The violence he suffers is, if not the cause, then the means of this profound transformation. The twice broken leg and the pain which he accepts without protest, as Addie has accepted the violence of his birth, pave the way for the extension of his range of awareness and for his increased sensitivity both to events and to people. The process is accelerated by the fact that his traditional mode of response, constructive action, is suddenly denied him. Lying helplessly on the coffin, his leg encased in cement and jarred by every turn of the wheel, he is forced to seek new forms of expression.

The increasing range of Cash's awareness is suggested by his growing sympathy with Darl. Facing the flooded river...Cash begins to realize that the prolonged journey is, in effect, destroying the significance it should affirm. During their stay at the Gillespies', Cash and Darl share once more share the same revulsion and repudiation of the family's obsession with fulfilling the letter of the promise to Addie. Although it is Darl who sets fire to the barn, Cash accepts the responsibility as his own because he is the elder and because he too had contemplated the same violent act. Accepting this responsibility is one more step in his recognition of the complexity of those moral and emotional qualities which inhere in men's actions. Accordingly, he alone comprehends that the judgment of Darl's attempt to destroy the coffin and of Jewel's grim effort to save it must depend upon whether the body is viewed realistically or symbolically. Darl's action issues from his conviction that the corpse has long since become an offense to God and man, Jewel's from the equally strong emotional conviction that the coffin contains his mother. Combined with his own firm foundation in action and the concrete details of his trade, this increase of sensitivity and imaginative perception makes Cash the one character in the novel who achieves his full humanity in which reason and intuition, words and action merge into a single though complex response.

Darl, the second son and the most complicated of the Bundrens, faithfully reflects and dramatizes Addie's attitude at the time of his birth. She had believed, a belief later qualified, that reality lay only in physical experience and that the word and the act were polar opposites. Feeling Darl to be an outrage, she had denied him a place in her affections and in her world. Consequently, Darl's is a world of consciousness exclusively, and this, of course, renders his connection with the external world increasingly precarious and insecure. He exists in a kind of limbo where the firm, defining shape of objects and of people is continually dissolving. Only by a painful process of reasoning can he establish the physical existence of himself, his mother, and the loaded wagon: '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.' This attempt to define objective reality is an index of Darl's separation from it.

But the same absence of defining and limiting outline permits Darl to penetrate the minds of others and to intuit those secret thoughts of which they themselves are scarcely aware. Twice, while he himself is absent, he apprehends the actions of Cash, Anse, and Dewey Dell as they cluster around the dying Addie and describes them with startling vividness. And at every moment he is able to expose, with merciless accuracy, the secret thoughts and motives of others. He knows that Jewel is the son of Addie's sin, a fact with which he repeatedly taunts the latter by asking, 'Who is your father, Jewel?' More important, he knows that the horse Jewel caresses and curses is a surrogate for Addie. Similarly, he is aware of Dewey Dell's pregnancy. In both cases his knowledge forces them to face certain facts about themselves and their world. Unwilling to do so, Jewel relieves his mounting frustration in the violence of curses, while Dewey Dell finds temporary release in a fantasy of murder. Both join in the vicious physical attack on Darl when they arrive in Jefferson. Addie's rejection of him is thus repeated with the exception of Vardaman, who is too young to know what is happening, each of the Bundrens contributes to the decision to send Darl to Jackson. As Cash's final, unacrimonious assessment suggests, the rejection is inevitable: 'This world is not his world; this life his life.'

As Darl loses contact with the external world and with objective reality, his resemblance to Vardaman becomes more pronounced. When the wagon reaches the Gillespies', their sections are juxtaposed five times. The two of them have reached an understanding which is beyond logic and reason. Just before the fire their attitudes toward Addie become identical: as Vardaman states in one scene and Darl repeats in the next, Addie is stirring in her coffin. Darl's own intention becomes clear as he informs Vardaman that she is asking God 'to hide her away from the sight of man.... So she can lay down her life.' Their shared delusion suggests that for both of them the world of fantasy has become as real as the concrete facts which we call reality.

Yet Darl's delusion is grounded in the conviction that the funeral has become an unbearable travesty of filial piety. Addie's imagined but not unreasonable request prompts him to abandon his usual role as spectator. Thought and action are fused, though in a particularly violent way. Depending on one's point of view, his action becomes a sign either of a deranged mind or of an acute moral sensibility, an ambiguity recognized by Cash who reflects: 'Sometimes I ain't so sure who's got ere a right to say when a man is crazy and when he ain't. Sometimes I think it ain't none of us pure crazy and ain't none of us pure sane until the balance of us talks him that-a-way'.... Hence, though Cash understands and is sympathetic to Darl's gesture of protest, he is forced to conclude that society's judgment is the only possible one.

Although Jewel is the most closely connected with Addie and the most active during the journey, only one section is devoted to his stream of consciousness. The reason for this is that his world is least accessible to public scrutiny since it consists of a welter of emotions, centering on Addie, which cannot be communicated. These emotions are not subjected to the control of reason but are translated immediately into actions which, unlike Cash's carefully planned moves, are the products of spontaneous reflexes. Whether the results of such actions are destructive or constructive in any given instance is a matter of chance. Thus, his is the blame for perpetuating the horrors of the journey and his the credit for forcing it to a successful conclusion. It is significant that when the stimulus to action is removed, when Addie's corpse is buried and Darl committed to an insane asylum, Jewel's fury subsides except for brief spasms of irritation caused by some word or gesture of Anse's.

Because Jewel is himself largely unconscious of his own motives and emotional compulsions, it is Darl who expresses them. As Darl keeps reiterating, Jewel has no father. Addie, then, becomes the sole center of his emotional life. There is, however, no way in which Jewel's violent feelings can be channeled into socially acceptable rituals. Seeing, as usual, only the surface meaning of actions, Cora Tull mistakes his despair for indifference. But when Jewel's own thoughts are revealed, they are seen to be devoted entirely to Addie. He imagines the two of them defiantly and violently isolated from the world and its interference. Most of Jewel's subsequent actions are, in effect, attempts to make this fantasy a reality and so to claim exclusive possession of Addie. Dewey Dell, Vardaman, and Anse, he simply ignores; but each time he meets Cash it is to override the latter's caution with his own impetuous activity. As for the neighbors, they are kept at a distance by his coldness and his deliberate insults. Even the genuinely helpful and sympathetic Tull is repulsed. Only Darl cannot be excluded from his private world and he is finally eliminated by being sent to Jackson.

This process of exclusion merely intensifies Jewel's emotional attachment to Addie without providing a release for it. The latter he finds in the wild horse which he tames and on which he can lavish his love and inflict his hatred. Because the horse is actually his possession, he can and does isolate himself and it from all contact with others. No one except himself is permitted to feed, care for, or even touch it. In a sense, the horse perpetuates Addie's emotional relationship with Jewel. Because of this identification, Jewel insists on bringing the horse with him despite Anse's protests and Darl's oblique taunts. And when he finally sells it to pay for a new team, the full intensity of his feeling reverts to Addie. This explains why he is almost prevented by his concern for the horse from rescuing Addie's coffin out of the river, whereas during the fire all his energies are directed solely toward saving it.

In sharp contrast to Jewel, Dewey Dell seems the least concerned with Addie's death and funeral. Addie, however, had revealed the same impersonal and unemotional attitude toward Dewey Dell when she stated that she had given Dewey Dell to Anse in order to 'negative' Jewel. In a way, Dewey Dell has no need of Addie because she herself is recreating Addie's past and discovering that pregnancy is both a state

of mind and a physical fact, but a word and an action. But unlike Addie, she is determined, if possible, to effect their separation. Thus, she will not name her condition even to herself because to do so would be to transfer her pregnancy from her private world of awareness to the public world of fact.

Yet it is only by admitting the physical reality of her pregnancy and by making it, at least to some extent, public that she can do anything to terminate it. The problem is focussed for her by the presence of Peabody. By destroying the physical evidence of her pregnancy, Peabody would become a witness to its reality, a reality which would be perpetuated in his consciousness. She avoids telling Peabody, but Darl, unfortunately, already knows. Her desire to destroy Darl and with him his knowledge is first expressed in fantasy: 'I rose and took the knife from the steaming fish still hissing and I killed Darl.' This is followed by her savage physical attack on him and by her determination to have him sent to Jackson. Darl's departure does not, of course, solve anything for Dewey Dell, but it does postpone the need for immediate decision and action. Because there is no one present who knows of her pregnancy, she can act, for the time being, as if did not exist. As she sits on the wagon, placidly munching a banana, her mind relapses into its normal state, that of the minimal level of conscious thought.

The limitations of Vardaman's mind are of a different order, they are those of the youngest child, who is bewildered by a phenomenon completely new to him. Out of the various sensations that he experiences and the facts that he observes while Addie is dying, he attempts to define for himself the meaning of death. He can do this only by constructing analogies to what he already knows or remembers. But because Vardaman is limited largely to sensations, he is not able to pass from the concrete to the general and abstract. What begins as an analogy ends as an identification. Addie and the fish are linked by death and therefore, according to his own particular logic, what happens to one happens to the other: 'Then it wasn't and she was, and now it is and she wasn't. And tomorrow it will be cooked and it and she will be him and pa and Cash and Dewey Dell and there won't be anything in the box and so she can breathe.' Eventually the dead fish and the dead mother fuse into a single thought: 'My mother is a fish.' Knowing that he himself is the cause and instrument of the fish's death, Vardaman seeks to find the agent responsible for Addie's death. Selecting Doctor Peabody, he gains his revenge by mistreating the doctor's horses.

Still arguing from analogy, Vardaman remembers the lack of air in the corn crib and assumes that his mother, now confined in the coffin, must feel a similar lack. Drilling holes in the coffin thus becomes a reasonable and humane act, an expression of his concern for his mother. Though certain of Vardaman's acts seem to border on the insane, he himself is not. He is a child, sensitive and even intelligent, who is exposed to a tremendous shock. And in meeting it, he has neither precedent nor advice to guide him. It is, therefore, almost inevitable that he should arrive at a distorted conception of death and that his actions, having their source in that concept should appear grotesque and incongruous. Certainly Vardaman suffers from a delusion but an understandable one since it permits him to dissociate his mother from the horrors of physical death and decay: '*My mother is not in the box. My mother does not smell like that. My mother is a fish.*'

Through the interaction of the characters the complexity of the central situation is evoked, and through an understanding of those complexities, the motivation and hence the credibility of the characters is established. At the end, we see them in terms of their relationship to Addie and to each other, 'sitting bolt upright in [their] nakedness, staring at one another and saying 'Now is the truth.' The private world of each of the Bundrens has been exposed, partly by their own actions and partly by Darl's constant probing. With his departure and the burial of Addie's corpse, the period of tension ends. The new wife, the gramophone, the memory of the toy trains, and the bananas do not replace Addie, but they do indicate a shift in the family's focus of consciousness. It is through the inception of such new patterns that the characters seek to avoid too close, protracted, and painful scrutiny of the meaning of life and death.

Addie's death and her funeral are construed in terms of the family's varied levels and modes of consciousness, but they also possess a wider frame of reference, for the actions of the Bundrens project both death and funeral onto the public world. It is in his capacity of responding to the Bundrens and their funeral procession that Faulkner introduces his eight reverberators. Mosely and MacGowan reveal two contrasting attitudes to Dewey Dell's pregnancy. The former responds to her request for pills with self-righteous moral indignation; the latter unhesitatingly takes advantage of what he conceives to be an



essentially comic situation. Between them they indicate the range of possible social reactions to and judgments of her condition. Quite obviously, neither Mosely nor MacGowan is concerned with Dewey Dell as a person; they respond only to the fact that she is clearly stupid, pregnant, and unmarried.

In Samson, Armstid, and Tull, the purely social and moral judgment is tempered by personal knowledge of the Bundrens. They are, in fact, themselves implicated to some extent in the funeral. There is a kind of humorous despair in their frustrating knowledge that Anse has and will continue to take advantage of their neighborliness. Tull, for example, remarks: 'Like most folks around here, I done help him so much already I can't quit now.' Each of these men describes a stage in the journey to Jefferson in terms of his contribution to it. Significantly, as individuals, they are appalled by the horrifying physical aspect of Addie's decaying body; but as neighbors, they feel obligated to offer their help in continuing the journey. With the burning of Gillespie's barn, however, the limits of neighborliness are reached.

In contrast to the three men, Cora Tull and Whitfield see the Bundrens solely in terms of their own ethical systems. It is fitting, therefore, that Addie's soliloquy, with its emphasis on the separation of the word and the act, should be flanked by their moralizing and empty rhetoric. Fearing that he will be forced at last to face Anse, Whitfield is intent upon finding the right words for framing his confession. Yet the moment he learns that Addie has not betrayed their secret, all thoughts of confession leave his mind. He is once more free to act as if he had never violated the moral code of his community since the public world is still unaware of his guilt. As for the sin against God, a verbal apology is sufficient: 'He will accept the will for the deed, Who knew that when I framed the words of my confession it was to Anse I spoke them, even though he was not there.' Confession, repentance, and even penance are carried out in his mind, thereby obviating any necessity of embracing them in an act. Anse's own formula of verbal evasion is thus, ironically, turned against him.

Whitfield's account of his relationship with Addie is rendered wholly in terms of ethical and religious cliches from which all human passion and meaning has been carefully deleted. Similarly, everything about Addie, her family, and her death is but another moral lesson to be interpreted by Cora Tull as she elbows her way to heaven. Having learned her ethics by rote, Cora has no difficulty in affixing praise and blame or in predicting salvation or damnation for all whom she meets. Though she consigns Addie and her family to the latter category, she is consistently and determinedly helpful. Her help, however, is offered in the name of duty not love, and it is meant, whether she realizes it or not, to be one more step in establishing her own virtue and her own right to salvation. Kindness such as Cora's is essentially selfish, debasing both the giver and the recipient and destroying the possibility of any personal relationship between them. In her eyes even family ties are moral rather than emotional. As a result, Cora is totally unaware, in any real sense, of those agonizing and exulting human experiences which stand outside her rigid system of ethics, resisting and disrupting its smooth simplification of existence.

Of all the characters who observe and comment on the actions of the Bundrens, Doctor Peabody is the most judicious. Although Tull's remarks often contain shrewd assessments of specific events, it is Peabody who grasps their broader significance. His insight is the result of long and varied experience with people compelled to face the realities of pain, suffering, and death. Thus, when he makes separate evaluations of life, love, and death, the statements serve as a general guide for interpreting the actions of the family. His is the compassionate but detached vision of the country doctor-cum-philosopher. Yet when he is suddenly confronted with the Bundrens in Jefferson, he loses his philosophical objectivity. Overwhelmed by the massing of concrete horrors and sensations, he reacts with bitter indignation.

While acting as reverberator for the actions of the Bundrens, these eight characters offer release from the tension through humorous or ironic remarks. Because only the actions of the Bundrens and not their thoughts and emotions are perceived, they become grotesques. What is horror and pain for the family becomes farce for those who are not themselves involved and who merely observe with the physical eye. For the Bundrens, the journey seethes with unresolved tensions; for the townspeople of Mottson, it is only a ridiculous or macabre spectacle. The intermingling of humor and horror, which is part of the very texture of *As I Lay Dying*, issues out of the Bundrens' conviction that their actions are eminently reasonable and out of the spectators' conviction that the Bundrens and their coffin have long since passed beyond the realm of reason, logic, or even common sense. The juxtaposition of the two views gives rise to a complicated and

ambivalent feeling of hilarity and despair. Confronted with the irrational, the rational mind finds itself bewildered and uneasy, indignant and outraged, or simply wryly amused. As the funeral journey is prolonged, all these attitudes are exhibited.

The interplay of seriousness which reaches toward tragedy and of humor which is practically farce is part of the complete success of *As I Lay Dying*. In a sense, it reinforces the theme of the separation of words and acts by insisting on at least these two modes of response to the same set of characters and events. At the same time, it precludes any easy generalizations about the funeral journey itself. Any event or series of events elicits various and, at times, contradictory responses. The meaning of an experience as distinct from a word exists in the consciousness of the individual observer. Accordingly, it is only when one becomes conscious of the mingling of humor and pathos, of the relation of the Bundrens to Addie, and of the observers to the action that the full complexity of *As I Lay Dying* is plumbed and Faulkner's easy mastery of it recognized."

Olga W. Vickery

"The Dimensions of Consciousness in *As I Lay Dying*"  
*The Novels of William Faulkner* (Louisiana State 1959) 50-65  
reprinted in *William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism*  
eds. Vickery and Frederick J. Hoffman  
(Harcourt/Harbinger 1963) 232-47

"Written in only six weeks, *As I Lay Dying* is Faulkner's favorite and certainly one of his finest novels. The story unfolds in some sixty short sections, each labeled with the name of the character who narrates his thoughts and perceptions; as in *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner uses the stream-of-consciousness technique. As the story opens Addie Bundren, a Mississippi farm woman, is dying; each of the members of her family—her husband, Anse; four sons, Cash, Darl, Jewel, and Vardaman, and a daughter Dewey Dell—as well as some of her neighbors, reveals his relationship to her in words and actions. She has made Anse promise to take her to Jefferson to be buried and the major part of the book concerns the Bundrens' journey with the coffin to the burying ground.

A series of mishaps besets the family en route: in crossing a flooding river, the mules are drowned, Cash's leg is broken, and the coffin is upset and rescued by Jewel at the risk of his life. On the other side the family rests at a farmhouse, where Darl sets fire to the barn in an attempt to destroy the now-putrescent corpse; again the coffin is rescued by Jewel, who is badly burned. The family finally reaches Jefferson, where Addie is buried. Darl is taken without warning to the insane asylum, and Anse acquires a new wife, 'duck-shaped' and pop-eyed.

In the course of the narrative it is revealed that Jewel was born of Addie's affair with Whitfield, a local preacher. Her relationship to Anse had been spiritually and emotionally barren, based on words that were just 'shape[s] to fill a lack.' Jewel, the child of Addie's relationship in which no words were necessary, is significantly silent; a passionate, active man, he lives intuitively and impulsively. Darl, the extreme opposite of Jewel, is extraordinarily sensitive and perceptive, but lives in the private world of his mind, several removes from reality and from human contact. Cash is concerned with balance—both in terms of his trade as a carpenter and in his growing ability to balance thought and action, word and fact."

Max J. Herzberg & staff

*The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962) 43

"*As I Lay Dying* further illustrates Faulkner's striking development, for it is scarcely less complex than its predecessor, and yet was written at night, in six weeks... Fourteen characters of varying intelligence and sensitivity, seven of them members of the Bundren family, reveal themselves in fifty-nine episodes as they attempt to fulfill Addie Bundren's dying wish to be buried among her own kin in the town of Jefferson. Madness, the discovery of illegitimacy, and the effects of divided parental love also operate in this bizarre account of Anse Bundren and his children's journey through flood and fire to buy the decaying corpse of the mother. *As I Lay Dying* is often outrageously humorous and often moving; but the central concept of

involvement and suffering is not sufficiently supported by the action and the Bundrens' varying relationships to Addie Bundren."

William M. Gibson & George Arms, eds.  
*Twelve American Writers*  
(Macmillan 1962) 727

"A contrast and companion-piece to *The Sound and the Fury* is *As I Lay Dying*, a tragi-comic story, at once both grotesque and tender, about the blundering efforts of the poor-white Bundrens to bring the body of their dead mother back to Jefferson for burial. The book explores in subtle detail the inner workings and relationships of the family, and as such—but this is true of all Faulkner's books—it has values and implications that cannot be appreciated merely by placing it in the context of the Yoknapatawpha saga. To the extent, however, that it may be so limited, *As I Lay Dying* seems to be saying that even the Bundrens can come together for a brief act of humanity in a way the once proud and aristocratic Compsons no longer can.... *As I Lay Dying*, his most astonishing piece of virtuosity, is composed somewhat like a cantata in which a theme is pursued through a succession of voices: fifteen characters speak through sixty narrative and reflective fragments. Nothing being explained, everything must be shown. The danger is that the frequent breaks in point of view will impede the flow of narrative—a danger Faulkner overcomes with great skill."

Irving Howe  
*Major Writers of America II*  
(Harcourt 1962) 832, 838

"Having died while a son sawed her coffin beneath her window, Addie Bundren is carted away in the family wagon through the back roads of Yoknapatawpha. The family thereby honors, with an absurd literalness, her reiterated wish that she be buried in the Jefferson cemetery. Unwilling adventurers, the Bundrens can do nothing well; their journey, like their life, is wasteful and erratic. Prompted by awe for the dead, but also by a cluster of private motives, they plod through mishaps both terrible and comic: fire and flood, suffering and stupidity. When they reach the town, the putrescent corpse is buried, the daughter fails in her effort to get an abortion, one son is badly injured, another has gone mad, and at the very end, in a stroke of harsh comedy, the father suddenly remarries.

Crossing farce with anguish, *As I Lay Dying* is a story of misfortunes fabulously multiplied. Anse is certainly right, though hardly for the reasons he supposes, when he declares himself a 'misfortunate man.' All the Bundrens are 'misfortunate'; it is their special talent.... Suspense is maintained by the likelihood that still greater troubles are to come, while the ability of some characters to survive with equanimity becomes both an assurance of the comic tone and a wry celebration of mankind....

As it circles over a journey in space, the novel also plunges into the secret life of the journeyers. Each of them conducts the action a little way while reciting the burden of his mind; the novel resembles a cantata in which a theme is developed and varied through a succession of voices. In *As I Lay Dying* the theme is death, death as it shapes life. The outer action, never to be neglected and always fearsomely and absurdly spectacular, is a journey in a wagon; the inner action is the attempt of the Bundrens to define themselves as members of a family at the moment the family is perishing.

Neither fire nor flood is the crux of the novel, nor any physical action at all; it is Addie Bundren's soliloquy, her thoughts as she lay dying. This soliloquy is one of Faulkner's most brilliant rhetorical set-pieces, placed about two-thirds of the way through the novel and establishing an intense moment of stillness which overpowers, so to speak, the noise of the Bundren journey. Until that moment in the book, Faulkner lightly traces the tangled relationships among the Bundrens—the father, the daughter, Dewey Dell, the sons, Cash, Darl, Jewel, and Vardaman. It seems at first that Darl, the most introspective of the sons, is the cause and catalyst of family tensions. He guesses Dewey Dell's pregnancy and silently taunts her with his knowledge; he hovers over Jewel with eager attentiveness and broods upon the rivalry between them. But Addie's soliloquy makes clear that the conflicts among the children are rooted in the lives of their parents, in the failure of a marriage. It is Addie who dominates the book, thrusting her sons against each other as if they were warring elements of her own character. From her soliloquy until the end of the

novel, the action is a physical resolution of the Bundrens' inner troubles, a resolution which must be achieved if the body is to be buried in some sort of peace.

Dying, Addie remembers her youth. Always she had searched for a relation with people by which to impress her will; at no point did her energy find full release. The search for meaning was for her a search for impact, a fierce desire that not all her desires be dissipated in words. Hard, single-minded, intolerant, Addie is one of these Faulknerian characters concerning whom one finds little to admire except their utter insistence upon taking and struggling with life until the end. As a schoolteacher she '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....' But when she married Anse she learned that, for all her fierce willfulness, she would never penetrate to his secret and selfish life....

Cash she cherished, for through his birth she reached understanding, both of Anse and herself. But when Darl came... 'Then I believed I would kill Anse. It was as though he had tricked me, hidden within a word like within a paper screen and struck me in the back through it.' After Darl's birth, Anse seemed to die for her... And then her moment of ecstasy: 'I believed that I had found it...that the reason was the duty to the alive, to the terrible blood....' Sinning with preacher Whitfield, she bore Jewel. What came after that seemed unimportant: 'I gave Anse Dewey Dell to negative Jewel...Vardaman to replace the child I had robbed him of. And now he had three children that are his and not mine. And then I could get ready to die'...

Cash, the earnest and admirable carpenter, is—or is to become—the moral head of the family.... His eyes lighting constantly on the family wounds, Darl speaks more frequently and in many more scenes than the other Bundrens; the wanderings of his mind become an important means for moving the narrative.... He senses that Jewel is the truly beloved son despite the fact that he, Darl, proffers and receives the gestures of love; and he knows, too, that the horse on which Jewel bestows such fierce care serves as a surrogate for Addie.... The motherless Darl must acknowledge, 'I don't know what I am.' Jewel speaks only once, and then in a fantasy which aligns mother and himself against the Bundrens... Dewey Dell and Vardaman, both the issue of Addie's indifference, are female vegetable and frightened, perhaps deranged child.... Addie is right: in some fundamental sense her husband is dead, though proper sentiments still come out of him, like hair from a corpse....

Softened and dulled, Addie's emotional yearnings reappear among her children, as indeed they suffuse the entire novel.... Not the least of Faulkner's achievements is that he locates the striving for a fine consciousness in a family like the Bundrens... Addie's sons, in their struggle toward self-definition, discover that to answer the question, *Who am I?*, they must first consider, *What was my mother and how did she shape me?* The rivalry between Darl and Jewel, which recurs through the book like an underground tremor, is a rivalry in sonship, and it is Darl's sense of being unwanted which drives him to his obsessive questionings and finally his collapse.... The Bundrens realize how thoroughly the dead live on, tyrants from the past. In their search for selfhood the Bundrens demonstrate their mother's conviction that language is vanity while action is the test of life... At the end Cash is able to reach toward that harmonious relation between word and action which none of the Bundrens, not even Addie, sees enough to desire....

Darl is the family sacrifice. An unwanted son, he seeks continually to find a place in the family. The pressures of his secret knowledge, the pain of observing the journey, the realization that he can never act upon what he knows—these will drive Darl to madness.... To the end it is a search for kinship that obsesses Darl, and his cryptic row of affirmatives may signify a last, pathetic effort to proclaim his brotherhood. Upon this investigation of a family's inner history, Faulkner has lavished his most dazzling virtuosity.... The nervous and jumpy transitions in *As I Lay Dying* encourage a sensitive recording of character change. It would be difficult to exaggerate the complexity of *As I Lay Dying*, or the skill with which Faulkner manipulates its diverse points of view. So remarkable is this skill, the critic runs a danger of regarding the novel mainly as a fascinating exercise in dexterity.... Once Addie's soliloquy is reached, the physical journey in the wagon and the psychological journey through the family closely parallel each other; and each gains dramatic relevance and lucidity from the other.... Long before we reach Addie's soliloquy, we see her overbearing effect upon the children; and when she does speak, it comes as an

explosion of ecstasy—a piece of writing that for emotional intensity may justly be compared with the great forest scenes of *The Scarlet Letter*....

But surely the final emphasis belongs not to the novel's subject or technique; its claim to our affection rests more than its study of family relations or its brilliance in handling points of view. Such things matter only insofar as they bring us closer to the book's essential insight or vision, its moral tone. Of all Faulkner's novels, *As I Lay Dying* is the warmest, the kindest and most affectionate. The notion that Faulkner is a misanthrope wallowing in horrors is possible only to those who have not read the book or have read it with willful obtuseness. In no other work is he so receptive to people, so ready to take and love them, to hear them out and record their turns of idiom, their melodies of speech....a superb sympathy for the lowly and incoherent, an implicit belief that the spiritual life of a Darl Bundren can be as important as the spiritual life of a Lambert Strether, a readiness on Faulkner's part to immerse himself in people radically unlike himself. Look—he seems to be saying—look at the capacity for suffering and dignity which human beings have, even the most absurdly wretched of them! The book is a triumph of fraternal feeling...

No finer example of American lyricism, that indigenous style stemming from *Huckleberry Finn*, could be found in twentieth-century writing... Because he writes of the Bundrens with a comely and tactful gravity, a deep underlying respect, Faulkner is able to blend extreme and incongruous effects—the sublime and the trivial, anguish and absurdity, a wretched journey through the sun and a pathetic journey toward kinship. An American epic, *As I Lay Dying* is human tragedy and country farce. The marvel is, that to be one it had to be the other."

Irving Howe

*William Faulkner: A Critical Study*  
(Random House/Vintage 1962) 175-84, 187, 188-91

"Annoyance over *As I Lay Dying* seems to have been motivated in two ways—the obscurity of the method and the unpleasantness of the content. A grudging admission of Faulkner's 'talent' usually accompanied these complaints, but the remark in the *New York Times* (October 19, 1930) was characteristic of the general reaction: 'Content compels us to put this book in a high place in an inferior category.' In short, the novel was called an 'uncommonly forceful book, though not a pleasant one' (*The New Republic*, November 19, 1930). Admiration of Faulkner's talent was combined with horror over his 'pageant of degeneracy.' Clifton Fadiman (beginning a series of 'clever' disparagements) found it difficult to acknowledge Faulkner as an important writer. He is clever, said Fadiman, but tedious and morbid; he does have an interesting mind, 'untouched by the major intellectual platitudes of our day.' Only Maurice le Breton found the novel 'relatively simple' (*Revue Anglo-Americaine*, June, 1936), the writing 'precise and vivid'."

Frederick J. Hoffman, Introduction

*William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism*  
eds. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery  
(Harcourt/Harbinger 1963) 17

"*As I Lay Dying* is constructed out of the thoughts and feelings of fifteen characters—the seven Bundrens and eight 'outsiders' (both neighbors and strangers)—each of whom narrates one or more short sections describing Addie's death or funeral journey:

## CHARACTERS

Anse Bundren

Addie Bundren, *his wife*

Cash, *their eldest son, aged about thirty*

Darl, *their second son, aged twenty-eight*

Jewel, *Addie's son by Whitfield, aged eighteen*

Dewey Dell, *Addie's and Anse's daughter, aged seventeen*

Vardaman, *their youngest child, aged nine*

Whitfield, *a preacher and the father of Jewel*  
Vernon Tull, *the Bundrens' nearest neighbor*  
Cora Tull, *his wife*  
Lucius Peabody, *the doctor*  
Samson, *a neighbor*  
Henry Armstid, *a neighbor*  
Moseley, *a druggist in Mottson*  
MacGowan, *a drugstore clerk in Jefferson*

#### PLOT

Addie, once a schoolteacher near Frenchman's Bend, married Anse Bundren, a country man with a small farm near the Yoknapatawpha River. After she had borne him two children, she asked him to promise to take her to Jefferson to be buried with her kin when she died—this in revenge for what she considered to be Anse's trickery of her with words about love, which, she comes to realize, he can neither understand nor feel. Believing that the only reason for living was to experience the violation of one's aloneness, and knowing that Anse could never break through their separate cells of individuality, she had an affair with Whitfield, the preacher. After their relationship was over, Addie found that she was pregnant with Jewel, whom Anse accepted as his own child. She then gave Anse another child, Dewey Dell, to 'negative' Jewel, and still another, Vardaman, to 'replace the child [she] had robbed him of.'

Nine years after the youngest child was born, Addie lay dying, while outside the window Cash hammered on her coffin and neighbors came to visit. Darl persuaded Jewel to go with him to pick up a load of lumber, knowing in his preternatural way that Addie would die before they returned and that Jewel, her favorite son, would be absent from her bedside. Just after Addie's death a violent storm broke, the lumber-loaded wagon lost a wheel in a ditch, and what with one thing and another it was three days before the coffin was loaded in the wagon and the family set off on the twenty-odd mile journey to Jefferson and the cemetery. Since their bridge was out because of the storm and high water, they traveled eight miles to Samson's, but found the bridge out there as well. They backtracked to Tull's and crossed at his ford, but the river was so treacherous that the mules were drowned and Cash's leg was badly broken, and the wagon and coffin would have been lost but for Jewel.

Across the river, they stopped at Armstid's, and Anse went into Frenchman's Bend to barter for another span of mules, finally throwing in the eight dollars Cash had saved to buy a phonograph and Jewel's beloved horse to conclude the bargain. Since the main road from Frenchman's Bend to Jefferson was washed out, the Bundrens went around by way of Mottson, where they bought some cement to make a cast for Cash's broken leg and Dewey Dell tried unsuccessfully to buy some abortion pills. When they stopped to spend the night at Gillespie's place, halfway between Mottson and Jefferson, Darl set fire to Gillespie's barn in order to destroy Addie's body, a week dead and attracting buzzards, but Jewel rescued the coffin from the fire. Vardaman saw Darl set the fire and told Dewey Dell, who hated Darl because he knew she was pregnant.

Nine days after Addie's death, the family arrived in Jefferson. Anse borrowed some shovels with which to dig the grave, and Addie was at last out of the sight of man. Cash was taken to the doctor and Darl was sent off to the insane asylum in Jackson; the family had either to commit him or be sued by Gillespie, who learned from Dewey Dell that Darl had fired his barn. Dewey Dell tried again to get her abortion medicine and was taken advantage of by an unscrupulous drugstore clerk. Finally, Anse, having taken the money Dewey Dell's sweetheart had given her to pay for the pills, bought a new set of teeth and acquired a wife, a pop-eyed, duck-shaped woman who owned a phonograph....

#### ANALYSIS

This technique of multiple perspectives results in a gradual unfolding of meaning in which an action described by one character is given further significance when the scene is passed through the imagination of another person and another perspective... The action is seen through Darl's eyes nearly a third of the time; the object of his thoughts is frequently Jewel, the most silent member of the family.... Not until

Addie speaks, two-thirds of the way through the book, do we understand the reason for the rivalry between Darl and Jewel, or the real reason for the funeral journey, or the character of Addie, the motivating force behind the family. By withholding the meaning, by supplying hints and pieces before we have seen the pattern into which we must fit them, Faulkner withdraws himself from the author's accustomed position as mediator between the reader and the action; the author's voice is almost entirely lacking. We are not told about the characters, but set down in the midst of them and left to find out for ourselves what they are like, while Faulkner—like Joyce's God of Creation—sits back and pares his fingernails....

The unfortunate Bundrens encounter a series of disasters that makes their progress one of alternating—and sometimes mixed—farce and horror. In the course of the novel the Bundrens face death and flood and fire, the most elemental obstacles to man's mastery of the environment, and those over which he has least control.... Anse, with his hunchback, his whining, and his complete ineptitude, is almost a stock comic figure.... When Addie dies, Anse says with genuine feeling, 'God's will be done.... Now I can get them teeth.' Cash, enduring immense and largely unnecessary pain, maintains that his leg doesn't hurt—'not to speak of,' anyway. The comic action is usually...a distortion of what is expected. Pushed to a further extreme...the comic often becomes grotesque. Vardaman, believing his mother will suffocate in the closed coffin, drills holes in the lid and accidentally bores into her face....

Anse and Dewey Dell, who have the least depth of character and are most nearly stock figures, are least affected by Addie's death and are for all practical purposes unchanged at the end of the novel. Anse has replaced his wife, and one suspects that he will find life with the new Mrs. Bundren indistinguishable from life with Addie. Dewey Dell is still pregnant. To the other members of the family, however, Addie's death is an event of deep significance, her loss something with which each must cope according to his own resources.... Vardaman, the youngest, reacts to Addie's death the most directly. Too young to maintain his identity independent of his mother, he must keep her alive in some physical and concrete way that his child's mind can comprehend. To this end, he takes refuge in a primitive type of reasoning that draws logical and satisfying conclusions from the most implausible of premises....

Reacting to Addie's emotional rejection of him, Darl forces an awareness of himself on others in an attempt to assert the reality of his self. With extraordinary perception, he is able to divine the secrets of the other members of the family.... Thus Dewey Dell is forced to recognize Darl because his knowledge intrudes between her and her secret sweetheart Lefe. As a result, she hates Darl and is finally responsible for having him shipped off to Jackson.... Similarly, Darl divines Jewel's illegitimacy because of Addie's favoritism, and Darl's knowledge hammers at Jewel's being, creating the rivalry and tension between them. Sensing that Jewel lavishes his violent love for his mother on his horse, Darl jibes that Jewel's mother is a horse; but Darl knows that he himself has no mother.... Separated from these family responses, Darl's self is fragmented—an 'are' rather than an 'is'—and on the verge of collapse into insanity....

The child of Addie's passionate experience with Whitfield, Jewel is most like Addie in his directness and strength, though apparently without her ability to verbalize experience. Her love and faith in him...gives him the psychic strength to exist independently of her, even to part with his horse—a symbol of his mother which in some ways, like Vardaman's fish, became equated with her—in order that her coffin could be taken to Jefferson. Like Jewel, Cash was accepted by Addie, and the love between them, though unspoken, was strong; as a result, Cash is secure in himself and can accept Addie's death. Less intense than Jewel, Cash is almost too well balanced. Having no need to assert himself, he allows the other members of the family to intrude themselves upon him, and stoically suffers unnecessary pain rather than...complaining....

Addie, at first unaware of the intrinsic superficiality of contact even between husband and wife, discovers with a shock, when her aloneness is violated by the birth of Cash, that Anse has never touched her, that he had interposed empty words between them without ever knowing the reality of the things for which the words stand. Darl, the most sensitive of her children, feels his isolation perhaps the most deeply, but uses his perception as a weapon to intrude upon other consciousnesses, as a means—to borrow a phrase from Hawthorne—of violating the sanctity of the heart. This type of violation is intellectual rather than emotional, and thus deadly. Darl learns not to give but to probe, not to touch but to threaten.

Related to the idea of human isolation is the failure of almost all of the characters to live except at second hand, according to a verbal formula. Cora Tull is the most extreme example. Conventional and righteous, as devoid of brains as her chickens...she is a comic figure... Her speech is full of the phrases and rhythms of rural Southern religion, her life is largely shaped according to its verbal formulas, and her response to both individuals and situations is automatically dictated by it. She sees life only in terms of words like 'sin' and 'pride' and 'repentance' and 'duty' and other pious phrases which are the more appalling because she implicitly believes in what she is saying without having the least understanding of it. Addie reveals both her pity and contempt for Cora, whose life is composed only of words, without any significant action, when she speaks of her as 'Cora, who could never even cook.'

As opposed to Cora, Addie has an intense commitment to the non-verbal reality of experience, and meets life directly and violently. To her, the only reason for living is the 'duty to the alive, to the terrible blood, the red bitter flood boiling through the land.' The most vital character in the novel, she recognizes the ever-widening and unbridgeable gap between doing and saying, and abjures words as being only shapes to fill a lack. Hence she rejects and ultimately destroys Darl, simply because he was born as a result of Anse's trickery of her with words about love.... In one sense, Addie is *life* in so far as she is an earth-mother, a symbol of the earth, of fecundity, and of the violence and blood of birth; she is identified with a fish (fertility), and with a horse (sexuality).

Like the road that crosses the land, like the acts that cleave to the earth and do not rise up like words, Addie is permanently horizontal, wearing her wedding dress as a symbol of her perpetual bridehood, the repeatedly ravished and ever-virgin Mother. And, in her capacity as earth-mother and giver of life, she is also, and of necessity, connected with death, for the Mother is also the Destroyer, the earth that is the womb of life is also the grave in which the corpse is buried. Similarly, though death is present throughout the story and though death motivates the action, it is life—and the various ways of living, or failing to live—which is the subject of the book."

Dorothy Tuck  
*Crowell's Handbook of Faulkner*  
(Crowell 1964) 34-39

"*As I Lay Dying* (1930) is the story of a family on a six-day funeral journey through heat, flood, and fire...one of Faulkner's easiest books to read, but it is also one of his most profound. It is highly poetic and probes deeply into the meaning of human existence in a ludicrous world.... The nihilistic mood is expressed in Shakespeare's lines—life 'is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing'—that shapes *The Sound and the Fury* is also the mood of this novel, but here the meaninglessness of existence is viewed as a macabre joke. In an absurd world, who is to say what is sane and what insane? Surely, no reader of *As I Lay Dying* can unequivocally declare the Bundrens either heroic or idiotic, their funeral journey an epic or a burlesque.... Of the fifty-nine monologues, sixteen are by neighbors or strangers, spaced throughout the novel to provide a different perspective on the activities being recorded in the thoughts of the Bundrens....

The subject of the novel is death; its central image the human corpse... At the center of motion is stasis. From this central paradox, a series of paradoxes proliferate, and before the novel ends, the distinctions between tragedy and comedy, being and non-being, reality and illusion, sanity and insanity have almost vanished. Faulkner's remarkable success in this novel is achieved by an accumulation of incongruities. But these incongruities are apparent only to a detached observer. The reader remains detached because the fifty-nine short interior monologues that are used to tell the story permit him to identify with no single character; he is forced to view the individual characters in broad perspective. Reader detachment is also created by Faulkner's choice and handling of rural characters. The doings of the Bundren family are of a piece with the avaricious enterprises of Flem and his relatives in the Snopes stories and novels. Many of their activities violate the generally accepted mores, but here their perpetrators are so blithely unconcerned with the proprieties that moral indignation is wasted upon them....

Reading about the Bundrens is somewhat like watching monkeys; we identify with the lower primates in the zoo enough to make us simultaneously amused and uncomfortable. This comparison does not detract from Faulkner's very skillful and sympathetic rendering of the Bundrens as human beings, but shows how



he achieves the detachment necessary to make the reader aware of incongruities. Because the Bundren journey is a solemn, universal ritual of interment which reflects man's sense of his own dignity and his belief in a favored place in the hierarchy of creation, the absurd journey symbolizes the absurdity of human aspirations....

Three levels of diction are used in the monologues. A realistic dialect records actual speech; a more formal diction records conscious thought, and a poetic imagistic language indicates uncontrolled thought.... There is no author's voice in the novel. No single character can be designated as a spokesman for the author, and no single character can be considered an objective recorder of events.... [Anse is] a self-centered, callous person, but we have no reason to doubt the sincerity of his feeling as he tenderly touches the face of his dead wife and clumsily attempts to smooth the quilt covering her body. We know that he depends upon his neighbors for help, but we also see him refusing the loan of a wagon and mules to bring Addie's body to the graveyard in Jefferson as he promised he would....

Cora Tull...solicitously sits by the bedside of the dying woman. Though she is acting the role of sympathetic friend, Cora has no thoughts but for her own petty problem.... The self-righteous Cora is not amenable to any view of herself as less than perfect and her failure with the cakes has made her vulnerable. No sympathy for Addie is registered in Cora's monologues; she is certain that the 'eternal and the everlasting salvation and grace is not upon her,' because Addie has not lived according to Cora's own moral code. In her three monologues, Cora's pietism makes the reader doubt very much her chances of the salvation she is so certain she has within her grasp.... The important point is that Cora's certainties about herself and about life seem to the reader rather hollow manifestations of her ego, and we are amused by the difference between her view of herself and our own view of her....

Opposed to death [and to Cora] is Addie's intense sex drive, the symbol not only of human continuity through the bearing of children, but of total absorption in life itself. Only through sex does Addie achieve the fulfillment and the feeling of being vitally alive that she craves. As a young schoolteacher, she feels life slipping by her. Her sexual frustration manifests itself as a need to achieve a sense of identity, feel the reality of being alive, by a total immersion of her identity in the identity of another person. She feels the separation between herself and the children whom she teaches, and she welcomes the opportunity to whip them.... Because her frustration is sexual, she suffers most in the springtime.... Anse takes the lure, and Addie gets a man. Anse, apparently, provides some sort of immediate relief, but when Addie becomes pregnant with Cash, she realizes that sex—with Anse at least—is not what it should have been: it has not violated her aloneness and therefore has failed to make her feel her own identity....

This region of words and those who exist in it, Addie identifies with the air; her own region of reality, with the earth. And 'the two lines are too far apart for the same person to straddle from one to the other.' Anse belongs to this limbo of words, and when Addie realizes that he can never exist on her level, she knows only contempt for him; he is, for her, dead.... With Whitfield she knows the violation of her aloneness through sex that Anse failed to provide. Her experience achieves the intensity it does because Whitfield is a minister of God who talks about God's love and God's sin. Though this passage, too, is ambiguous, it seems to me that Addie is not discovering the reality of sin by committing adultery so much as she is discovering the emptiness of the word 'sin.' She describes the word as similar to garments she wears to cover her nakedness. When she and her lover are together, they shed the garment and the word 'sin' is dead....

It is in Addie's response not to the codes or words that govern man but to the instinctual forces within her that gives her a vital sense of being alive. It is her nature as a woman that is fulfilled, which explains her emphasis on her children and the earth.... In her monologue are concentrated all the paradoxes that flow from the central image of stasis at the center of motion: death and sex, non-being and being, illusion and reality. The irony of death creating life...the corpse generating motion, is the symbol of life's absurd paradox. The exploration of the meaning of being alive in Addie's monologue is counterpointed by an exploration of the meaning of death in the rest of the novel.... Addie is a realistic, earthy woman who exists, unlike Cora, in the here and now....

The importance of this theme of being and non-being, life and death, is indicated in the monologues of Darl and Vardaman, whose nineteen and ten sections, respectively, constitute about half of *As I Lay Dying*. Through the monologues of Darl, our perspective is sufficiently broadened to make of the funeral journey a symbol of all human activity. Darl encompasses both the immediate and universal. Because his perception of realistic detail is so extraordinary, and because he is able to penetrate the secret thoughts of those around him, we tend to accept Darl's observations about life as valid.... Away on the wood-hauling trip when Addie dies, he describes her death. Thus Darl's mind functions, in a sense, free of the limitations imposed by his body. He is beyond time. In Darl's monologues, Faulkner develops the image of stasis at the center of motion, giving it general significance. As in Addie's monologue, death and sex, non-being and being dominate Darl's thoughts....

Darl, who ends up in an insane asylum, is, ironically, the most practical member of the family. It is he who restrains Jewel from attacking the man with the knife, who insists that Cash's leg be attended to immediately, and who cannot stand the intolerable indignity of his mother's unburied corpse. As Cash observes, there is much sanity in Darl's setting fire to the barn. 'Insanity' for Darl is inevitable: He sees too much... And that is precisely Darl's predicament. He sees too much; he perceives the ultimate absurdity of existence, the incredible incongruities that make up life.... Darl expresses the paradoxes of life which have driven him mad in his image of the two-faced coin with 'a woman on one side and a buffalo on the other; two faces and no back.' Mad, Darl can finally laugh at the macabre joke that is life, and at the greatest joke of all: man's capacity to bear anything.

To the reader, the devotion of so much anguish and physical effort to keeping above ground a mass of decaying matter for the purpose of fulfilling a meaningless promise to a dead woman becomes painfully absurd.... The family has gone through the most hazardous day of the journey, the activity generated by the corpse is at its most furious, the suffering produced by Anse's promise to Addie as at its most intense. It is at this point that Faulkner has Addie reveal the fact that the promise she exacts from Anse is meaningless to her. Her motive is revenge. She believes that Anse is incapable of responding to her real being, her reality, during her life, and she vindictively forces him to cope with the reality of her dead body.

The ending of the story provides the most shocking incongruity of all. As soon as Addie is in the ground none of the family—except the insane Darl—devotes a single thought to her. After the expenditure of so much effort and passion, Jewel sits placidly on the wagon. There is no objection to the new Mrs. Bundren. Vardaman, who has probably suffered more psychological disturbance than anyone but Darl, seems in his final monologue to have forgotten everything that occurred. In less than twenty-four hours after the burial, Anse has wooed and won a new wife."

Edmond L. Volpe  
*A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner*  
(Farrar, Straus/Noonday 1964) 126-40

"With a few hardly perceptible exceptions, the unity of action is respected from start to finish and the whole tale is perfectly circumscribed in space and time.... At the center of *As I Lay Dying*, of its structure and of its themes, lies the figure, at once present and absent, of Addie Bundren, the 'I' of the book's title. If the *narrative* apparently follows the linear progression appropriate to a journey, the *novel* is ordered according to a circular scheme focused on this figure.... As for the circle, it is made up of all those still alive who gather around the body, suddenly brought face to face with the enigma of death....

*Soldier's Pay* was conceived as a sort of last vigil turning on Donald Mahon, the dying hero; *The Sound and the Fury* revolved around the absent-present figure of Caddy Compson, the 'lost girl.' *As I Lay Dying* turns likewise around Addie and her death, and the rapid shift of viewpoint, with its recurrences and reverberations, introduces this gyration into the very structure of the novel.... The circle also appears in the imagery of the novel. The whole story of the journey is punctuated by the repeated evocation of the circles traced in the sky by the buzzards which follow the funeral cortege, and the circling vultures ceaselessly intersecting the straight line of the Bundrens' progression could almost be seen as an emblem of the book's structure. In addition, it is significant that Darl associates his dead mother with a wheel: 'the road lies like the spoke of which Addie Bundren is the rim.' In her soliloquy Addie herself refers to the circle of her

solitude; by Cash's birth, she remarks, her 'aloneness had been violated and then made whole again by the violation: time, Anse, love, what you will, outside the circle'....

If the pattern of *As I Lay Dying* suggests first of all a moving circle whose center is Addie, it could also be described as a series of waves and eddies: it is as if a handful of pebbles were thrown into still water, rippling its surface, making concentric circles which overlap and interact in unexpected ways as they expand.... Although linear in its basic development, the story seems nonetheless to describe a double loop. The first of these loops is Addie's journey, a return journey which takes the dead woman back to the place of her birth. The second comes full circle at the very end of the novel, when Anse introduces his new wife to his children.... The substitution is like a usurpation; the pop-eyed, duck-shaped new Mrs. Bundren is only Addie's grotesque understudy. And the whole journey suggests a process of degradation, best symbolized by the increasingly repulsive smell of the rotting corpse....

Perhaps it is the figure of the spiral which best indicates the repetition-with-a-difference. *As I Lay Dying* carries us along in a helical movement or, more exactly, down in a spinning dive. The end of the narrative draws near its starting point and at that very moment veers away. Everything starts again and nothing is the same. The end of the novel is a restoration (just as Anse's new teeth are false), a ludicrous denouement echoing with Darl's mad laughter: ambiguity is given a final twist and irony is raised to its highest pitch....

The first fifteen sections (with the exception of the sixth) present an almost unbroken sequence despite the frequent changes of viewpoint.... At no point does the thread of the narrative break, and by the very switching of viewpoints the narration unquestionably makes up in vividness and variety what it may lose in clarity.... The narrative makes the slowest progress in the first nineteen sections; they correspond to the first of the ten days recounted in the novel, to the hours before and after Addie's death. Thus the first day alone occupies almost a third of the book.... Out of the fifty-nine sections, only twenty-four are written in the present, and there are many in which past and present are interspersed (the shifts being marked, as in *The Sound and the Fury*, by the use of italics), and some twenty may be counted where the past clearly predominates....

The distribution [of sections] is as follows: Darl 19, Vardaman 10, Vernon Tull 6, Cash 5, Dewey Dell 4, Cora Tull 3, Anse 3, Peabody 2, Addie 1, Jewel 1, Whitfield 1, Samson 1, Armstid 1, Moseley 1, MacGowan 1. Seven of the narrators belong to the Bundren family.... Yet if the two categories of narrators are numerically almost equal, the share of sections given to the Bundrens (43) is far in excess of that of the outsiders (16). It is noteworthy, too, that Darl, with nineteen sections, takes on single-handed one-third of the narrative and thus occupies a highly privileged position as narrator....The broken construction of the novel keeps the reader at a distance and puts him in the position of a spectator rather than of a participant, thus preventing the emotional involvement generally associated with the interior monologue....

The novel includes a number of *anticipations* for which there is no justification unless the narrators are credited with the faculty of foretelling the future. Thus whereas Addie's death occurs in section 12 and the journey does not begin until section 22, Cora refers to her neighbor's dying moments in section 6 and reflects that Addie 'was not cold in the coffin before they were carting her forty miles to bury her.' Similarly, Tull (sect. 16, 20, 36), Moseley (sect. 45), and MacGowan (sect. 55) recapitulate events before they actually happen, and Cash twice mentions the second 'Mrs. Bundren' at a time when nobody other than Anse knows she is to become his wife. These inconsistencies and anachronisms may be partially explained by the speed with which *As I Lay Dying* was written....[or by belief in the paranormal]

He endows Darl, one of his principal narrators, with the gift of preternatural clairvoyance, which allows him to report two scenes at the same time. In section 3, for example, Darl describes what Jewel is doing with his horse in the pasture behind the barn although Darl is near the porch talking with his father. This weird ubiquity is even more striking in section 12, where Darl gives a circumstantial account of Addie's death, or in section 17, where he imagines Cash working on the coffin during the rainstorm, both scenes being reported while he is on the road with Jewel, miles from home.... Darl's mind is seen working in four

registers—perception, reflection, memory, and second sight—and passing from one to another with no other logic than the unpredictable one of mental association....

Faulkner...does not restrict himself to colloquial realism. It is not unusual for his characters to start thinking and speaking beyond their means, to express themselves in a style incompatible with their level of consciousness as well as with their social status. Is the novelist to be censured for these fits of ventriloquy?... In fact, the author's voice *augments* those of the narrators more than it obliterates them.... Faulkner most often hides behind his characters, and pretends to listen to them and let them tell the tale instead. Yet how could anyone without uncommon power of divination transport himself into the minds of fifteen different characters? Is the extreme multiplicity of points of view not, in the end, omniscience in disguise? The technique used in *As I Lay Dying* conceals the novelist so that he can operate more freely in the wings.... Far from encroaching upon the novelist's prerogatives, it makes him all powerful by making him invisible."

Andre Bleikasten  
*Faulkner's As I Lay Dying*, trans. Roger Little  
(Indiana U 1973) 44, 46-57, 61, 63-64

"In *The Sound and the Fury* he discovered and unleashed the genius for innovative construction that would result in the three masterpieces of the 1930s: *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932), and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936).... *As I Lay Dying* is the story of country people, similar to the Snopeses but without their rapacity. In it fifteen voices—seven of them Bundrens, including the dead Addie—alternately present the story, which in its ramifications proved almost as difficult for readers to grasp as *The Sound and the Fury*. This book also sold poorly; and Faulkner, having bought Rowan Oaks, the house that thereafter was to be his home, was in need of funds. To add to his income he had been forced to write *As I Lay Dying* while working night shifts at the university's power plant, and he had also begun trying to sell some of his accumulated short pieces to magazines."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.  
*Twentieth-Century Southern Literature*  
(U Kentucky 1997) 81-82

Michael Hollister (2015)