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THE BURDEN OF BEING A BUNDREN IN FAULKNER'S *AS I LAY DYING*

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Abstract

William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, first published in 1930, is widely regarded as one of the most innovative works of modernist American fiction. Set in the rural South, the novel tells the story of the Bundren family's journey to bury their deceased mother, Addie Bundren, in her hometown of Jefferson. Told through multiple voices and fragmented perspectives, the novel explores themes of death, duty, and human isolation with psychological and emotional depth.This research paper explores the complex relationships within the Bundren family by focusing on how personal motives often conflict with the appearance of duty, how individual identities are shaped and strained by imposed family roles, and how emotional disconnection leads to psychological collapse. It examines how each character's actions, though outwardly guided by loyalty or tradition, are driven by hidden desires, personal struggles, or repressed emotions. The analysis also considers how the lack of open communication and understanding within the family results in a breakdown of both individual stability and familial unity. Through these concerns, the paper reflects on Faulkner's critique of the family as a site not of harmony, but of silence, conflict, and emotional fragmentation.

Keywords: *Faulkner, family dynamics, obligation, identity, emotional dysfunction, Southern literature*

As I Lay Dying stands as one of the most significant achievements of modernist American fiction. Known for its experimental narrative structure and stream-of-consciousness technique, the novel presents a powerful psychological portrait of a poor Southern family grappling with death, familial disconnection, and the weight of obligation. Faulkner's fragmented storytelling, with fifteen different narrators, allows for a deeply layered exploration of individual consciousness and the fractured nature of human relationships, especially within the boundaries of family.

The novel tells the story of the Bundren family's journey to bury their deceased mother, Addie Bundren, in her hometown of Jefferson. What begins as an act of fulfilling her final wish gradually unfolds into a complex and emotionally charged odyssey marked by physical hardship, personal conflict, and moral ambiguity. The paper explores the deeper emotional and psychological landscape of the Bundren family, focusing on the tension between obligation and self-interest, the shaping of identity through family roles, and the emotional dysfunction that defines their interactions. Through this layered and unsettling narrative, Faulkner questions the very nature of familial duty and exposes the hidden fractures that lie beneath the surface of outward loyalty.

Obligation vs. Self-Interest

In *As I Lay Dying*, the Bundren family's decision to transport Addie's corpse forty miles to Jefferson appears, on the surface, to be an act of familial loyalty and moral obligation. Anse Bundren declares repeatedly that it is his wife's dying wish to be buried among her people, and he insists on honoring that wish despite the physical, emotional, and social costs. This mission is presented by various characters, particularly Anse, as a noble undertaking grounded in traditional Southern ideals of duty, familial piety, and moral rectitude. However, as Faulkner slowly dismantles the motivations behind each character's participation in the journey, what initially

appears as obligation begins to reveal itself as an elaborate facade, a socially acceptable cover for deep-seated self-interest, personal guilt, and emotional avoidance.

Anse is the most obvious representation of this duality. He cloaks his inaction, laziness, and opportunism in the rhetoric of duty. He repeats with monotonous devotion that he had promised Addie that she would be buried in Jefferson, yet it becomes increasingly clear that this promise serves his interests more than it honors her memory. Anse's true motivation is exposed at the novel's conclusion where, having carried out the burial as promised, he promptly acquires a new set of teeth and remarries. This suggests that the journey was less a solemn vow to honor Addie's final wish and more a convenient opportunity for Anse to reach town, where he could finally obtain the set of false teeth he had long desired and seek a new wife to replace Addie, fulfilling his need for both practical domestic support and emotional companionship. His version of duty is hollow, performative, and fundamentally self-serving. In Anse's case, Faulkner lays bare the ways in which the language of morality can be misused to disguise self-interest, especially within societal structures that demand public shows of loyalty without requiring inner sincerity.

But Anse is not alone in this moral gray zone. Each Bundren child, in their own way, participates in the journey while simultaneously pursuing individual goals. Dewey Dell, for example, accompanies the family with apparent concern for her mother's burial, but her real aim is to use the trip to seek an abortion. Her internal monologue reveals a sense of desperation and secrecy, not devotion to her mother or the familial duty of honoring Addie's burial wish. Her sense of obligation is entangled with guilt and the urgent need to restore control over her body and future. Similarly, Vardaman, the youngest child of Anse and Addie, is too psychologically fragmented

by Addie's death to comprehend the meaning of obligation. His grief becomes displaced onto metaphors, as he expresses his confusion by saying that his mother is a fish, and his role in the journey is more passive than purposeful. His presence does little to affirm any clear sense of familial duty.

Jewel, Addie's illegitimate son and the one she loved most, offers perhaps the most complex case. Jewel's actions, such as saving the coffin from the flood and from fire, suggest loyalty and love, but his emotional isolation and violent temperament undermine the notion that he is fulfilling a clear moral obligation. His devotion to Addie seems personal and unspoken, a private bond that distances him from the rest of the family. Yet even Jewel's fierce protectiveness can be read as self-interest in that his acts serve not the family but the memory of the only person who made him feel seen and valued. He is indifferent to the others 'suffering, and his resentment of the family's collective dysfunction surfaces repeatedly.

Darl, the novel's most introspective and articulate character, arguably sees through the absurdity of the entire journey. He recognizes the hollow motivations of the others and eventually attempts to destroy the coffin and thus end the farce by burning the barn. For this, he is branded mad and institutionalized, punished for confronting the lie that binds them together, the illusion that their journey is a noble act of familial devotion when in reality it is driven by selfish motives and emotional dysfunction. His act is, in a way, the most ethically grounded, as he tries to rescue the family from the grotesque consequences of their delusion. However, he, too, is not free from complexity. His motivations remain ambiguous, tinged with jealousy, confusion, and a desire to assert moral superiority.

What Faulkner masterfully reveals is that obligation, especially within a dysfunctional family structure, is never pure. The Bundrens are a family tied together not by shared love or emotional openness, but by a burdensome sense of

what they owe each other, a duty that is suffocating, performative and hollow. This tension between duty and desire, between the outward performance of familial obligation and the inner pull of personal motives, lies at the heart of the novel's moral complexity. In the Southern rural context, where family reputation and appearances are paramount, the idea of "doing right by the dead" is socially sacred, and Faulkner dissects this sacredness with ruthless irony.

In *As I Lay Dying*, then, obligation becomes not a virtue but a burden, a ritualized performance that leads to troubles and suffering. Beneath every act of apparent self-sacrifice lies a kernel of self-interest. The novel asks whether such duty is even meaningful if it causes more harm than healing, if it conceals truth rather than expressing it. Faulkner's answer is not simple, but by exposing the dissonance between what the Bundrens claim to do and why they actually do it, he suggests that familial obligation, in the absence of empathy and honesty, may become a mechanism of delusion rather than a path to dignity.

Identity and Role within the Family

In *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner portrays the Bundren family as a group of individuals whose identities and roles are shaped, or rather distorted, by family expectations, social norms, and personal insecurities. Each member of the family has a specific role that is defined by their position within the family hierarchy, but those roles are often contested, misunderstood, or rejected. The family structure is one of misalignment, where what each person is expected to be often does not align with who they truly are, and these tensions are a driving force throughout the novel.

At the center of the family is Addie Bundren, whose identity is interwoven with the roles of wife and mother. Yet, Addie is deeply ambivalent about these roles. She resents motherhood, feeling that it was thrust upon her by societal expectation rather

than a personal choice. In her final monologue, Addie reflects on the emptiness of the roles imposed upon her. She speaks of her marriage to Anse as a transactional relationship, a forced union that lacked true emotional connection. Her own sense of self was dissolved by these roles, and the only part of her that truly seemed to belong to her was Jewel, her son, whom she claims as her own. In this way, Addie's identity is deeply fragmented. Outwardly, she fulfills the role of mother and wife, but internally, she rejects everything those roles are meant to signify.

The consequences of this dissonance ripple through the entire family. Each of her children reflects a different response to the burdens of familial identity. Cash, the eldest, defines himself through work, through precision, through competence. His identity is tied to usefulness and order, which he expresses in the methodical construction of Addie's coffin. He rarely speaks, and when he does, it is to provide explanations or logic. Cash seems to find some stability in his role, but it also renders him emotionally limited. He cannot offer comfort to his siblings, nor can he process grief beyond the physical act of building and enduring. His identity, while more stable than others, is also emotionally stunted, confined by practicality and silence.

Jewel, on the other hand, embodies intensity, isolation, and unspoken loyalty. He resents his siblings, keeps his emotions locked within himself, and expresses love only through action. His attachment to Addie is visceral, not verbal, and he repeatedly risks himself to protect her coffin. He seems to carry the heaviest burden of familial expectation in silence. Jewel's devotion to his mother, unlike the others, is personal and unspoken, making him the most emotionally complex of the Bundrens. Yet Jewel's identity, like Addie's, is also conflicted. He is the product of an extramarital affair, a fact never openly discussed by the family. Though he is unaware of it, his identity is shaped by both secrecy and favoritism. Addie loved him above all others, and that love, born of defiance, becomes both a burden and a curse.

He cannot articulate his grief, nor can he truly connect with the rest of the family. His role as the fiercely loyal son isolates him from everyone else, and the strength of his identity comes at the cost of emotional alienation.

Darl, often seen as the most introspective and perceptive of the Bundrens, occupies a unique and tragic position. His identity seems to be built on insight and sensitivity, yet that very sensitivity leads to his psychological collapse. Darl sees through the facades the other members of the family maintain. He recognizes the emptiness of their journey, the contradictions in their motives, and the emotional void at the heart of the family. His identity becomes that of the truth-teller, the one who speaks what others refuse to acknowledge. However, in a family that survives through denial and routine, such insight becomes intolerable. His attempt to destroy Addie's coffin can be read as an effort to end the pretense, to free the family from a delusion they cannot confront. But this act leads to his institutionalization. His identity is recast not as visionary, but as mad. Faulkner thus presents a character whose role within the family is unstable and ultimately unsustainable — someone whose clarity cannot be integrated into a structure built on emotional avoidance.

Dewey Dell, the only daughter, suffers under the weight of a different kind of familial role — that of the silent, suffering woman. She is burdened with a pregnancy she cannot speak of, forced to care for the family while seeking help in secret. Her identity is defined by gendered expectations of service, silence, and shame. No one in the family acknowledges her distress, and she is denied a voice in the larger narrative. Her internal monologues are fragmented and repetitive, mirroring her emotional confusion and the suffocating limits of her role. She is not allowed to define herself beyond the domestic and the sacrificial, and this erasure of agency becomes a powerful commentary on the social constraints placed on women in rural families.

Finally, Vardaman, the youngest, is too emotionally and cognitively underdeveloped to fully grasp his role within the family. He processes his mother's death through metaphor and sensory confusion. His repeated claim that his mother is a fish reveals both his inability to articulate grief and his need to find meaning in the incomprehensible. His identity is still in formation, shaped by trauma and by the emotional chaos around him.

Overall, *As I Lay Dying* portrays a family structure that is fractured, not just physically but also emotionally and psychologically. Each member is trapped by the role they are expected to play, whether it is the dutiful son, the silent mother, the absent father, or the abandoned daughter. Faulkner reveals how family roles can stifle individual identity, and how the expectations of society and the family can create a crushing burden that prevents personal growth, emotional expression, and the ability to find true connection with others. In the Bundren household, each member's role is incomplete, misunderstood, and ultimately damaging, highlighting the impossibility of fulfilling the idealized roles imposed by both family and society.

Family Dysfunction and Emotional Breakdown

The Bundren family is held together not by warmth, affection, or mutual understanding, but by a fragile sense of obligation and tradition. From the beginning of the novel, it is clear that the emotional bonds within the family are either strained or entirely absent. Their dysfunction is not expressed through explosive conflict, but rather through silence, miscommunication, and emotional disconnection. Each character retreats into his or her own interior world, unable to engage in honest or supportive dialogue with the others. What passes for unity in the family is, in truth, a shared isolation.

Addie's death is the catalyst that exposes the family's emotional fragility. Instead of bringing the Bundrens together in mourning, her death sets off a journey that reveals

their inability to cope with loss in any healthy or cohesive way. While outwardly they claim to honor her last wish to be buried in Jefferson, their actions are driven more by habit, obligation, or personal motives than by grief. No one in the family speaks openly about her death in emotional terms. There are no shared moments of sorrow, no comforting gestures, no communal processing of the loss. Each character grieves in isolation, and often not at all. The absence of collective mourning becomes one of the clearest indicators of their dysfunction.

This emotional detachment leads to a gradual breakdown, not only of the family's unity but of the individual psyches of its members. Darl's sensitivity and insight, rather than making him stronger, alienate him from the rest of the family. He sees through their pretenses and understands the hollowness of their supposed duty. His internal monologues reveal a consciousness that is overburdened with awareness, caught between clarity and despair. When he burns the barn containing Addie's coffin, it is a desperate act of emotional truth. He is trying to stop the charade, to end a journey that has become grotesque. But the family cannot accept this disruption. Instead of engaging with his anguish, they condemn him. He is institutionalized, not because he is mad in any objective sense, but because he can no longer contain the emotional contradictions that the others refuse to confront.

Dewey Dell's silence is another expression of the family's dysfunction. She is suffering from a secret pregnancy, the result of an encounter she cannot speak about. Her attempt to find help is cloaked in shame and confusion. No one in the family acknowledges her distress. She is reduced to a caretaker, expected to fulfill her role without question, even as she quietly crumbles under the weight of her own fear and isolation. Her emotional breakdown is not dramatic or visible like Darl's, but it is no less real. Her fragmented thoughts reflect the chaos within her, a chaos the family structure neither recognizes nor relieves.

Cash and Jewel also embody forms of dysfunction, though more quietly. Cash expresses himself through work. His way of grieving is to build Addie's coffin with meticulous care. He suppresses his emotions in favor of action, but this repression comes at a cost. He is injured, stoic, and emotionally numb. His loyalty is unquestionable, yet he is incapable of offering comfort or expressing vulnerability. Jewel, in contrast, internalises his feelings through aggression and stubbornness. He does not speak of love but acts it out physically. His devotion to Addie is shown through reckless efforts to protect her coffin, to preserve her body, even when it endangers himself. Both sons reveal how emotional expression in the Bundren family has been replaced by silence, labor, and sacrifice.

Vardaman, the youngest, suffers in a different way. Lacking the cognitive or emotional maturity to process his mother's death, he copes through surreal metaphors and childlike logic. His belief that his mother has become a fish is not simply a bizarre statement. It is a reflection of the emotional environment around him, one where death is not explained, grief is not named, and reality must be reconstructed through imagination. Vardaman's confusion is not his own fault. It is the product of a family that cannot or will not help him understand the loss he has experienced.

Anse, as the father and nominal head of the family, is perhaps the clearest embodiment of dysfunction. He is passive, self-serving, and emotionally vacant. He rarely expresses grief for his wife and instead focuses on his own discomfort and desires. His role as leader is empty, and his decisions often worsen the family's suffering. Yet he insists on his righteousness and moral obligation, clinging to duty as a justification for his inaction.

Under his guidance, the family drifts not toward healing but toward further disintegration.

In *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner does not present family dysfunction as a dramatic spectacle. Rather, he shows it unfolding quietly and relentlessly, through silence, avoidance, and the gradual collapse of communication. The emotional breakdown of the Bundrens is not an accident. It is the inevitable result of a family that lacks the tools, the language, and the empathy to face suffering together. In this world, love is rarely spoken, grief is rarely shared, and truth is often punished. What remains is a group of individuals traveling together, yet ultimately alone.

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