



Thematic Concerns in WILLIAM FAULKNER's *As I Lay Dying* and *Light in August*

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Introduction:

As I Lay Dying, one of the finest examples of William Faulkner's distinctive writing style, was first published in 1930. The novel is the first to introduce Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha County, which serves as the setting for many of his novels and short stories. As in his other works, *As I Lay Dying* showcases Faulkner's ability to reveal the intricacy of the human psyche. Told from multiple perspectives, the novel has 59 sections written mostly in stream-of-consciousness—a literary style marked by a character's uninterrupted flow of thoughts. Also, Faulkner uniquely employs symbols throughout his work. For example, he substitutes a coffin symbol in place of the actual word and uses a blank space when one of his characters is unable to express her thoughts.

As I Lay Dying tells the story of the Bundrens—a poor family from the Deep South—that faces trials and tragedy on their journey to bury their dead wife and mother in the town of Jefferson. Throughout the story, the reader is introduced to the family members and discovers that each has his or her own reason for traveling to Jefferson. For instance, Anse Bundren, husband and father, sets off for Jefferson to buy a new set of teeth and to remarry, while his daughter, Dewey Dell, goes to town to get an abortion.

Each character shares his or her perspective on the journey, with the exception of Jewel Bundren, the only character who does not have his own section. Through the Bundrens' expedition, Faulkner discusses such themes as family, death, individual and society, religion, and suffering. *As I Lay Dying* is a complex story that causes the reader to question the characters' motives in their actions and interpretations of events. Most of all, it is a story that explores the complexities of human nature.

Family in *As I Lay Dying*: - William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* centers on the Bundrens—a poor southern family that embarks on a journey to the town of Jefferson to bury the dead wife



and mother. Throughout the novel, the Bundrens exhibit their dysfunctional relationships with one another as each family member offers his or her own perspective on the other characters and their actions. In *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner demonstrates how a group of people can band together in times of adversity and tragedy yet can criticize and even abandon each other in pursuit of their own selfish exploits—all in the name of “family.”

From the beginning of the novel, members of the Bundren family display their complex relationships with one another. While Addie Bundren lies dying, her son Cash builds a coffin outside of her window. He insists on finishing the coffin because he values his carpentry work more than spending time with his ailing mother. However, Cash also believes that he is helping her more by building her coffin than he could if he were sitting with her inside of the house. Surprisingly, Addie does not seem offended by her son building the coffin right in front of her. When Addie dies, her husband, Anse, insists upon the family traveling to Jefferson to bury his wife, at any cost. He maintains that she must be buried in Jefferson because that had been Addie’s only request. Seemingly, all of the children agree to travel to Jefferson in order to fulfill their mother’s wish.

However, each family member—with the exception of Jewel—reveals his or her own reasons for going into town. For example, Anse admits that he wants a new set of teeth. Cash wants to display his carpentry work and look for a gramophone. Throughout their journey, the Bundrens face multiple obstacles. For example, Vardaman, who does not fully comprehend his mother’s death, drills into Addie’s face while trying to create air holes in the coffin so that the corpse can “breathe.” Also, when the family discovers that a bridge has collapsed, they ford a river, dragging Addie’s coffin under water. Cash breaks his leg while trying to rescue the coffin. Then, when the family stops at Gillespie’s, a local farm, the barn burns down—almost destroying the coffin.

Although the family seems to work together in its struggle to get Addie to Jefferson, each family member works to fulfill his or her own desires. For instance, the Bundrens could have spent the evening at a neighbour’s home instead of dragging Addie’s coffin through the river. Further, Addie admits that she wants to be buried in Jefferson because she wants to spend eternity as far away from the Bundrens as possible.

Throughout the expedition, Darl—the son whom most people refer to as “queer” because of his alleged telepathic ability—is the only Bundren who questions the family’s motives. After eight days, Darl tires of the spectacle of dragging his mother’s corpse through the county and sets



fire to Gillespie's barn in an attempt to burn the coffin and Addie's putrefied body. Out of respect for his mother and a belief that she should have been buried earlier, Darl tries to burn the coffin in one of the most selfless acts in the novel. Ironically, the rest of the Bundren family deems Darl insane and has workers from a sanatorium take him away from the middle of town shortly after Addie's burial.

After facing the difficulties of the journey to Jefferson, the Bundrens remain unified at the end of the novel. When Anse gets his new teeth, he immediately remarries and introduces his children to the new Mrs. Bundren. Perhaps from their own understanding of selfishness, the children are able to accept their father's actions. Through the Bundrens in *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner explores the complexities of human beings and their relationships with one another and demonstrates that each member of a family is, after all, only human.

Grief in *As I Lay Dying*: -

Within the confines of the narrative in *As I Lay Dying*, grief clouds the day-to-day existence at the Bundren household. While Addie Bundren lies on her deathbed, her children and husband negotiate their way through her imminent but uncertain death, the urgency to prepare a coffin for her, arranging for her burial far away in another town, as Addie so desires, and the need for the family to not let go of the opportunity to earn a few more dollars. Life among the southern American poor must be lived on a daily basis. Faulkner accords grief a palpable presence in the novella. We share the burden of grief that envelops the Bundrens as well as those it touches incidentally, such as the neighbours. Faulkner also allows us a glimpse into the minds of characters through a series of monologues, which is the narrative strategy of the novella. The Bundrens articulate their anguish, which arises from a death in the family as much as from life's larger context in which death is only one of life's many preoccupations. Faulkner's remarkable plotting lets us discover their secret sorrows— as opposed to their public distress couched in the death of a mother and wife—after we have fully absorbed their settled grief resulting from Addie's death and the family's struggle to reach Jefferson for her burial in extremely inclement weather that thwarts their intentions in more ways than one.

As they confront their grief and deal with their grief-stricken lives, the Bundrens may appear passive and helpless. But they establish an inescapable truth of the human condition when they accept that life must go on. If their grief appears to have no sting, that is how it appears on the surface. Their sorrows are, much like uninvited guests, both a distressing burden as well as an unavoidable component of existence. Addie had been laid in her coffin "head to foot so it



won't crush her dress. It was her wedding dress and it had a flare-out bottom, and they had laid her head to foot in it so the dress could be spread out, . . ." No conflicts mar their homogeneity as a family and a group. They seem bound to stay committed to each other. The neighbours and others who are close to them must participate, as members of the community, in such common occurrences of life as Addie's death and Sunday rituals.

Such being the case, Faulkner's treatment of grief takes the form of a living rendering of the fate of a community rather than a scrutiny of the grief-stricken heart of an individual. "Doom" and "defeat" are words often used to describe Faulkner's characters. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said in another context, "There are people who have an appetite for grief." But the Bundrens counter grief with strategies of survival as well as their ability to withstand pressure. Above all, they endure. Addie's monologue points to deeper meanings in human existence and suggests a pragmatic view of life. Life is important. Living is important. Whether one lives in joy or in sorrow is of little consequence. Addie breaks open the cocoon of inherited familiarities when she says: "One day I was talking to Cora. She prayed for me because she believed I was blind to sin, wanting me to kneel and pray too, because to people to whom sin is just a matter of words, to them salvation is words too." She thus offers testimony to the truth of her father's words— ". . . the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead for a long time"—as well as to the inevitability of grief and anguish as the defining values of human existence.

At the centre of William Faulkner's novel *Light in August* is the story of Joe Christmas. He is a loner who knows he is part-black and part-white, but cannot identify with either of the racially divided communities. The novel traces Christmas's life, from his time as a young child in an orphanage to when he is adopted by a cold, Christian man and his feeble-minded wife, to his arrival in Jefferson, Mississippi. He works in a sawmill there before quitting to sell moonshine. Eventually he is accused by the town of murdering a white woman, Joanna Burden.

Intertwined with Christmas's story is Lena Grove's story. The two characters never meet, but are connected by their relationship with other characters in the book, including Byron Bunch, Joe Brown, and the Reverend Gail Hightower. Lena is a poor young girl who is pregnant and intent on finding the father of her child—a man whom she calls Lucas Burch but everyone else knows as Joe Brown. Lena, who has nothing but her baby, serves as a foil to Christmas's repudiation of the community. She is repudiated by some members in the community for being



an unwed mother, but embraced by others because of her needy situation. Faulkner explains that Lena represents “the basic possibility for happiness and goodness.”

Light in August can be read as a powerful commentary on race and racial matters in the United States, particularly in the Deep South in the 1930s. Religion functions in the book as an elitist set of principles, meant to exclude people like Christmas. Christmas and Lena are each example of the individual who moves through a society that judges and spurns them. Society, in *Light in August*, functions as a gossiping mob, rejecting those who do not conform to its standards of propriety or respectability.

Individual and Society in *Light in August*:-

“Man knows so little about his fellows” observes the unnamed narrator in William Faulkner’s *Light in August*. This line seems to summarize what is true throughout the novel: Neither the community of Jefferson nor the book’s major characters who move on the community’s margins know much about each other. Everyone depends upon gossip to speculate why anyone acts or speaks in a particular way. Unless individuals conform to certain norms and values, they may be judged or condemned by society, rather than supported and empowered by it. The lack of open, honest communication between the individual and society often has negative results.

Perhaps the character in the book most condemned by society is Joe Christmas. His mother dies in childbirth and from that point he moves through the world as an individual without home, family, or community, living on the fringes of society. Faulkner describes Joe as “a phantom, a spirit, straight out of its own world, and lost.” When Joe Brown comes forward and accuses Christmas of the murder and supports his accusation by revealing that Christmas is part-black, the town quickly convinces itself of Christmas’s guilt: ‘He don’t look any more like a nigger than I do,’ says one townspeople. ‘But it must have been the nigger blood in him’ that made him commit such an awful crime. No one knows for sure if Christmas murdered Joanna, but they need a murderer. Christmas—a man who has shunned their society—perfectly fits their profile.

Like Christmas, Joanna Burden lives on the outskirts of Jefferson. She associates not with the respectable white folks in town, but with black families who live nearby. The town regards her with “astonishment and outrage,” and will never “forgive her and let her be dead in peace and quiet.” Further, her death provides the townspeople with “an emotional barbecue, a Roman holiday” in which they can gossip about her private life and speculate about the “Negro” they



believe ravished her before killing her. The town thinks she deserved to die this way because of her sympathetic dealings with black people. Nonetheless, because she is a white woman, her murder must be avenged. It is an excuse for the town to form a posse and find a suitable black suspect.

The Reverend Gail Hightower is also shunned and gossiped about by Jefferson society. He is burdened and obsessed by his family's Confederate past, which contributes to his alienation from society. The town believes he caused his wife to "go bad" and that he "was not a natural husband, a natural man." Byron recognizes the insidiousness of this small-town gossip, where an "idea, a single idle word blown from mind to mind" can be driven out of proportion. Hightower refuses to leave Jefferson after his wife's death because the family ghosts reside in Jefferson; the burden of the past is too strong. He lives alone, spurning the town just as the town spurns him. It is only when he delivers Lena Grove's baby, and tries to protect Joe Christmas from the angry mob, that he can heal his troubled relationship with the past and, in effect, feel comfortable about his place in society.

But Lena carries tremendous faith that everything will work out. She accepts her situation without struggling against it, and can journey through southern towns thanks to the "folks taking good care of her." Society, as this novel shows, can be cruel and heartless, particularly toward individuals who do not conform. But, as seen with Lena, that is not entirely true. Ultimately, the human heart has enough compassion so that society will not destroy itself. Faulkner puts it best in his 1951 Nobel Prize speech: "I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal . . . because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance."

Race in Light in August: -

Perhaps no subject in American culture is more controversial than race. Throughout his work, William Faulkner examines how race divides individuals, families, and entire communities. Light in August is no exception. At the centre of this story is the shadowy figure of Joe Christmas, whose mother was white and father most likely black. As an adult, Joe shifts between white and black worlds, failing to find comfort in either one. When he briefly lives in a black community in Chicago, he shuns whites and attempts to become fully "Negro," "trying to breathe into himself" their essence, "the dark and inscrutable thinking and being" of black people, but fails. One of the tragedies about Joe Christmas is that it is impossible for him to be



either all black or all white; he is both, in a society that refuses to accept someone who is not “pure.”

Prejudice and racism against those who are different prevent people from accepting Joe. Part of the problem are the negative and untruthful stereotypes that white people perpetuate against blacks, such as laziness and dishonesty. Joe Brown insists that the only black people who work hard must be slaves. But Christmas disproves the stereotype: He works hard and solidly, first on his adoptive father’s farm, then at the mill in Jefferson. When Brown quits the job at the mill for the easier and more lucrative job of selling moonshine for Christmas, he is seen around town “idle, destinationless, and constant . . . lolling behind the wheel” of a new car. Faulkner’s intent here, which can be found throughout his body of work, is to confront the white hypocrisy embedded in negative stereotypes of blacks. Joe Brown’s repeated assertion of his whiteness after the murder of Joanna Burden is a good example of how important it is to be white in this southern community. The townspeople believe only a black man is capable of such a grisly murder; their sense of community is linked in part by this accusation and their shared racism and prejudice. Hightower puts the situation best when he learns Joe Christmas has “negro blood” and is accused of the crime: “Think Byron; what it will mean when the people—if they catch . . . Poor man. Poor mankind.” Hightower knows that, if given the chance, some people would lynch Christmas.

The opportunity does arise when Christmas escapes from prison and Grimm chases after him on a bicycle. Grimm tracks him to Hightower’s house where Christmas takes refuge. In this grisly scene, Grimm castrates and then murders Christmas. Faulkner’s liberal use of the words “Negro” and “nigger” in his work has caused some readers to label him a racist, or at least consider the possibility. Most Faulkner scholars disagree with this assessment. These words were commonly used in the United States in the early 20th century. “Nigger” was used pejoratively by some whites to refer to blacks, and “Negro” was commonly used by blacks and whites

Religion in *Light in August*:-

In William Faulkner’s novel, *Light in August*, the use and abuse of the Christian religion is a significant theme. Simon McEachern and Joanna Burden are two characters who rely on biblical texts and Christian orthodoxy to justify their hypocritical views and destructive behaviour. In various ways, they believe a God-given knowledge exists “out there,” independent of human thought or invention. Only certain, chosen people are privy to this



knowledge, a knowledge that often gives them the sense they are superior to everyone else. Joe Christmas is one whom the chosen consider to be among the unchosen.

Simon McEachern uses religion as an excuse for abusing another human being. When he adopts Christmas, he vows to raise him to “grow up to fear God and abhor idleness and vanity despite his origin.” McEachern’s disdain for Christmas’s origin— that is, a child likely conceived in sin rather than in a marriage bed (he does not know about Christmas’s racial background)—indicates his view that Christmas is not, unlike himself, among God’s chosen. It is because of McEachern that Christmas’s distaste for religion develops early on, and he refuses to learn the Presbyterian catechism that McEachern forces upon him. In response, McEachern whips Christmas and deprives him of food, using religion as justification for this abuse. Later, McEachern uses religion as his justification to condemn Christmas’s act of dating the waitress, Bobbie. When McEachern discovers them together at a dance, he perceives himself as “just and rocklike” and as an “actual representative of the wrathful and retributive Throne” before he attacks Christmas. But Christmas sees only the “face of Satan” and kills McEachern with a chair. Like McEachern, Joanna Burden believes she is among the chosen to interpret God’s word and share it with others such as Joe Christmas. Christmas has awakened the sexual appetite of a starved woman described as a “New England glacier exposed suddenly to the fire of the New England biblical hell.”

The pleasure she experiences with Christmas seems to be as much derived from her knowledge that he is a black man (miscegenation is taboo) as the idea of her living “not alone in sin but in filth” too. Joanna’s gleeful rejection of religion exposes how deeply repressive religious beliefs can be on basic human desires. The relationship, however, quickly becomes one in which Christmas feels Joanna is attempting to dominate him. She offers to send him to law school for blacks and insists on bearing his child; Christmas refuses to comply. He does not want her to determine the course of his life. Her sense of superiority over him is most concretely exposed when, after the passion in the relationship is nearly extinct, she asks Christmas to kneel with her and pray: ‘It is not I who ask it. Kneel with me.’ Her statement implies her belief that she has a direct connection with God and he does not. Christmas does not believe in this bond, and refuses to pray with her, even when she points an old revolver at him. Once again, because of an individual acting upon an elitist interpretation of Christian belief, Christmas believes he has no choice but to kill. The serious and troubled conflict about who he is and what he is aligns him with Christian martyrs, ascetics, and Christ himself. Indeed, contrary to what McEachern and Burden believe, understanding God and being a spiritual being is no easy task. The path to



enlightenment is difficult and treacherous and the journey itself may be as important as the goal. This difficult journey makes us human. Christmas's struggle in a world bent on destroying him humanizes him in a way that Christ's struggles in a hostile world put a human face on Christianity. McEachern and Burden's elitist, inhuman brand of Christianity is the kind that hurts and destroys others as well as themselves—precisely not the kind taught by Christ.

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