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AP Literature and Composition

30 April 2012

The I in Family: An Analysis of Psychological Collectivism in *As I Lay Dying*

**Introduction**

Published in 1930, William Faulkner’s novel *As I Lay Dying* established a new style of literature that deviated from the previous traditions of Romantic and Victorian artistic eras. Rather, the novel breaks through the mold to create what is now considered one of the most sophisticated novels of the Modernist literature period. Abandoning the typical feature of earlier styles that focused on centralized sentiments, the novel was combined with a Southern Gothic tinge that utilized dark irony and character flaws to depict “actual” reality: unadulterated by ethereal, idyllic clouds of emotion. The origin of the title *As I Lay Dying* comes from Homer’s narration in *The Odyssey* about Agamemnon, a Mycenaean prince. According to mythology, Agamemnon was a warrior in the Trojan War who was responsible for blowing his entire fleet off course on their way home. In addition to being socially castigated by his fellow soldiers, he is murdered upon his arrival home by his wife’s affair lover. The burden and apparent toxicity of familial and collective action is portrayed through the progression of the Bundren family’s journey to bury the body of Addie Bundren, the mother and wife of the household. The novel is set in Yoknapatawpha County, a seemingly large and unending county in Mississippi with a small number of people. The limited number of people in such a large space heightens the importance of events and outside characters that appear throughout the novel. The apparent unlimited length of the county fuels the isolation that each character faces even amongst their own kin while simultaneously forcing the characters to cope and relate with the incompatible natures of their own family members. Even though it seems as if the characters will never connect and will forever remain in their own spheres of misunderstanding and misinterpretation, the struggle of the journey and the isolation of the family makes connections between the family members extremely crucial if the family is to survive. To aid the narration of the family’s tale, Faulkner employs the use of stream of consciousness, a style of narration that shines the spotlight on individual character’s thoughts and internal processing. The use of the stream of consciousness narration emphasizes each character’s thought processes and allows Faulkner to depict the passage of events through the eyes and minds of different characters. Faulkner also overlaps different narrations to provide the novel with a defined structure that allows the reader to focus exclusively on the events that occur in the novel and the perspectives that come along with them. The combined application of both the stream of consciousness narrative style with the isolation that each character faces lends to the major theme of the novel: the idea of familial collectivism. While themes pertaining to family seem rather obvious in the novel, Faulkner’s deliberate and ingenious use of the family’s different perspectives, qualities, and narrations has a profoundly deeper psychological meaning. In the novel, Faulkner displays the idea that the family is a collective unit, one with individual parts that maintain a uniqueness that is slowly lost if one observes it as a big picture. On a more psychological note, each character in the family embodies a distinct personal quality that any normal, realistic person would possess: both benevolent and sinister. In other words, the family represents a single person with different personal aspects. As the novel progresses, the reader observes how the family’s struggle parallels a practical human being’s battle with the misery, strife, and disappointment of what is reality.

**Scholarly Article Analysis**

In Warwick Wadlington’s article titled “I Would Be I: Fragments of Collective Action,” Wadlington discusses the how the use of action or inaction as a collective group emphasizes the conflict that characterizes the novel’s nature. In the beginning of the article, Wadlington analyzes the seemingly impractical and idealistic views of Addie Bundren. The article’s author explains the significance and meaning behind Addie’s almost unjustifiable actions as a mother and a wife. While reading the novel, I had a difficult time understanding the motives behind Addie’s non-maternal attributes and infidelity. At first, I disliked Addie and thought her actions were a manifestation of her true evil. In the article, however, the author asserts that much of her behavior results when her “individual desire [is] frustrated by social convention” (Wadlington 54). Using an analogy about bridges, Wadlington asserts that Mrs. Bundren viewed social customs and conventions as a façade, covering up authentic, mystic human connection. She “feels that these bridges separate more than they connect” (54) and fears that the sweeping tide “wild blood” (Faulkner 162) will wash away her human existence. The conflict is further complicated by her desire to live genuinely connected with others without losing what she treasures the most: that “private ‘I’ with its specific experience, identity, [and] self-sufficiency” (Wadlington 54). While reading this part of the article, I began to define my own understanding of the meaning behind Addie’s almost communally existential actions. However, it came to my understanding that Wadlington appeared to be justifying her actions, which I don’t agree with regardless of the isolation she felt as a mother and wife. Wadlington further entrenches my dislike for Addie Bundren when he begins talking about the secrecy that she uses to cover up her tracks as an unfaithful wife. He discusses that the only way that she can barely live the life she wants with others without losing her individual uniqueness is through “privacy” (54), claiming that her “revenge would be that [Anse] would never know [she] was taking revenge” (Faulkner 159).

Consequently, I began to wonder where the idea of collective action played into the article aside from Addie Bundren’s idealistic view of life. What about the other characters? Wadlington transitions to an analysis of collective action by subtly chastising Addie Bundren for having such unrealistic and impractical views on how life should be lived. What Addie does not notice is that the “secrecy that frustrates her desire for connection with others is a shared and conflicting desire of her own” (Wadlington 55). This description of the frustration that each character encounters when it comes to communication, interaction, convention, and desire as “general” (56) was one of the strongest points established in this article. Wadlington therefore silences any possible justifications for Addie’s actions while simultaneously introducing the idea of each of the family member’s struggle as individual pieces in a collective whole.

Despite being a great argumentative point, my favorite part of the scholarly article is his discussion of the novel’s title. Based on instances of cooperation in the novel like the river-crossing and the treatment of Cash’s broken legs, Wadlington lightly states that the novel should be titled “*As We Acted Together for a Shared Purpose*” (58) rather than *As I Lay Dying.* However, “instead of ‘we’ there is usually a lonely ‘I,’ and instead of a sufficiently vital collective action there is something in between, neither fully life nor death, neither fully collective nor noncollective” (58). Out of the myriad of points he brings up, this one is my favorite and applies directly to my theme. The discrepancy between the “I” and the “we” in the novel comes from the fact that the family represents one individual. Their personalities and qualities are so distinct from one another that a failure to cooperate as a synchronized whole, or individual, causes conflicts between individuality and collaborative purpose. In essence, each character struggles with whether they should describe themselves as “I”- a unique individual - or “we” – a more efficient whole.

**Style Passage**

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

How often have I lain beneath the rain on a strange roof, thinking of home” (Faulkner 80-81)

**Discussion of the Author’s Style**

The following passage comes from one of Darl Bundren’s many chapters; this one specifically comes after Cash finally drives the final nail into Addie’s coffin. Out of the many excerpts that could have been chosen, this is probably one of the most complex and defining that contains elements that are prevalent throughout the entire novel. The three most significant aspects of this passage involve the short sentence structure, use of italics, and the utilization of specific logic.

While reading this novel, one of the most noticeable literary elements is the relatively short and terse syntax. Often there are sentences that remain incomplete, often lacking adequate punctuation and key grammatical components. While this may be disregarded as something pertaining to a character’s development or education, it must be noted that characters as educated as Dr. Peabody, as complex in thought as Darl Bundren, and as well-versed as Whitfield use relatively brief sentences occasionally throughout their own chapters. The use of short syntax is a clever move on Faulkner’s part. At first, it does seem that the sentences are immature and undeveloped and lack any true literary merit. However, Faulkner uses short syntax to represent a gradual progression of thought and contemplation. When one thinks without regulation, it is usually in short bursts of content and logic and not in long, profound, well-developed, and fluent sentences. Worth noting is the fact that the sentences get longer as more connections are made. For example, some of the sentences at the beginning of the paragraph are shorter than half a line. However, sentences in the middle are three lines long with more than four different independent or dependent clauses. All of a sudden, the sentences shorten to less than a line to signify another tangent of thought. The use of jagged syntax provides the passage with an authentic and natural progression of thought. Combined with the dialect of the readers, the text is immediate with the reader – leaving no room for change in thought from mind to mouth. This hearkens back to the stream of consciousness narration that is characteristic throughout the novel. Rather than proofread the novel to the exact specifications of grammar, Faulkner leaves the text as an unadulterated version of what is directly happening in Darl’s mind. In relation to the novel as a whole, the use of short syntax parallels the theme of individualism versus collectivism. While each family member represents a different quality of a normal, spirited individual, the use of thoughts as the main means of communication with the reader and the other characters is similar to communication between different parts of the brain. The fact that the family members use thoughts as their only real communication with other characters demonstrates the crushing weight that secrecy plays on the collectivity of the family.

In addition to the short sentence structure, the use of italics is highly prevalent in this passage and throughout the novel. At first glance, the heavy use of italics stands out as a peculiar element in the novel. In this passage, Faulkner uses italics to distinguish the verbs he uses such as “is” and “was” from the predicate’s verbs in the sentence. In the case of this passage, when Darl speaks of something as being “was” or “is,” he is referring to it as existing as something or fitting a certain prototype. Darl is speaking about his existence in the passage both in relation to his mother and in a vicarious sense. One of Darl’s most prominent character qualities is that he is obsessively observant of Jewel because there is something about Jewel’s character that he finds so fascinating. As a result of keeping extremely close eyes on Jewel, Darl develops the idea that Jewel’s predisposition to impulsivity and action places Jewel at equal footing when it comes to existence. Even though Darl prefers thinking and Jewel is inclined toward action, Darl lives vicariously through Jewel to establish a solid grounded existence, because thought alone is inadequate to determine one’s own existence. In relation to the novel, the use of italics appears throughout the novel as sections in which the content of the text that is italicized carries more meaning and profoundness than the surrounding area. Much of the text that encompasses the novel is superficial and vapid, discussing the meager and unnecessary details of life. When something is italicized, it represents the narrator’s true thought, which is often too controversial or revealing to be said. This is analogous to Wadlington’s assertion that the element of privacy and secrecy is one of the aspects that degrade the family’s connections and made it difficult to cooperate as a whole. In regards to the theme, the miscommunication between the different parts of the unit’s personalities explains why the family’s stability withers as it encounters a barrier.

Not surprisingly, the complex nature of this passage lends it to be most concentrated in this paragraph than it is throughout the novel. In this passage, the main types of logic employed involve the use of paradoxes and syllogisms. Specifically, Darl use of logic is reminiscent of stepping-stones of thought. Combined with the short syntax, Darl’s thought process is revealed as one that employs the use of syllogisms to reach a main conclusion – one that jumps between already established thoughts. However, this can be dangerous, considering that most syllogistic comparisons are not always accurate and can lead to even more confusion. In reference to the novel as a whole, logic and thought processes are the main means of communication between the characters, narrator, and other characters. Also, because Darl’s superior logic, in comparison with the rest of the family, he is considered the most stable narrator. However, as Darl’s logical structure begins to degrade near the end of the novel, the family’s unitary structure fails as the only character starts to fall apart.

**Explication of the Theme**

The novel *As I Lay Dying* traces the lives of seven family members on their journey to fulfill the request of Addie Bundren, the wife and mother. As stated previously, one of the most significant themes of the novel pertains to the idea surrounding familial collectivism. In the novel, the family represents an individual person with conflicting desires, different personalities, and complicated relations with those outside it. Each character or family member embodies a different characteristic that is somewhat exclusive to his or her own circumstances. Addie represents the confused and lost aspects of an individual’s nature; that part is always trying to find a meaning to existence. Her “aloneness” (Faulkner 158) and her struggle to find balance between her desire for identity and connection acts as the instigator for the rest of the family’s quest for identity as well. Anse represents the manipulative nature of one’s personality – the side that usually is exposed when in contact with other people – “the public face” (Wadlington 57). Cash embodies the latent strong-willed and rational that never falters even in the face of pain. With almost anything, “he feels fine” (Faulkner 215) and never complains. This side of a personality is extremely rare and that is revealed in the fact that Cash takes control of narration at the end. Darl represents the contemplative facet of any normal human being. When left alone in privacy, thoughts spontaneously evolve and lead one to become observant and analytical. On the other hand, Jewel represents the frequently impulsive essence of any normal being. The biggest contrast is here between Darl and Jewel. Usually, a person acts on impulse if they skipped careful thought, which is Darl in this case. The conflict between impulsivity and thought is personified through the uneasiness and fascination between the two brothers. Dewey Dell represents the part of one’s personality that struggles to reach out and communicate with the outside world and is always stifled by the rationality and externality. She “[is] alone” (58) and struggles to “be different” (59), so that she can fit into society and get help for the rest of the family. Similar to any individual, there is a segment of our personality that yearns to connect with others to aid the rest but is always stopped by the other components of the individual. Finally, Vardamon represents the subconscious section of any persona. This part is highly immature and cannot fully understand certain concepts as seen with Vardamon’s inability to comprehend the idea of death and describes his mother as “a fish” (84).

As the family journeys to carry the coffin to Jefferson, the personalities that they represent are clearly seen through their cooperation with each other. As the time it takes to get the coffin to Jefferson increases, the more the family begins to degrade and fall apart. Even though they are cooperative, they seem to grow farther apart at every step of friction. This is reminiscent of a normal person’s journey through difficulty. When travesty strikes an individual person, they begin to allocate their skills and personalities to adjust to a similar situation in the future. By allocating those skills, the person begins to subvert some qualities and promote others. This eventually leads to a division in the mind that causes the eventual degradation of the person. Like a normal person, the Bundren family degrades as each family member specializes to the brink of absolute division.

The collective nature of the family is also revealed when the family interacts with characters outside the household. The family’s interaction with other characters like the Tull’s, Peabody, Armstid, and other characters also demonstrates how their characteristics embody the psychological nature of a human being. When an individual family member is in contact with another character, the circumstance of the family teeters on that member’s ability to communicate with the outside world. As is said in the scholarly article, the main “public face” (Wadlington 57) of the family is Anse. Because he is inherently manipulative and good with words, he represents the charisma of an individual person; he must use his skills to “do for [him] and [his] own” (Faulkner 124). In addition, Anse’s pride also provides a significant barrier to communication with other people. When crossing the river, Anse asks Vernon Tull to use his mules. When Tull refuses, Anse takes it as an attack against him and backlashes. Speaking of which, he also does not take into account the members of his family and the sacrifices they must make as individuals. For example, without Jewel’s consent, he sells his horse. Also, while crossing the river with the wagon and the coffin, “Anse…wasn’t with them” (153). This demonstrates how some internal qualities must be suppressed when it comes to interacting with someone that is foreign to the individual entity. All of these aspects put together synthesize to demonstrate the idea that the each family represents a different quality that must cooperate or face the spotlight at different points on their journey to Jefferson.

**Conclusion**

The main theme that characterizes the novel is that each of the Bundren family members embodies a certain characteristic that is widely available in the human psyche. By representing each family member by a quality that is exposed during inter- and intra-familial connections, Faulkner demonstrates that families are collective units that can never realistically function all at once. Rather, some qualities are repressed and some are brought out when the circumstance demands it. The family-individual comparison also illustrates the gradual atrophy of an individual after repeated afflictions affect the allocation of different skills and qualities. *As I Lay Dying* can also be seen as a parallel of the effects of the Great Depression, considering this book was published only one year after the stock market crashed in 1929. After the stock market fell apart, families, partnerships, and relationships began to disintegrate, and it was all about individual survival. This must have influenced Faulkner’s writing, considering the novel depicts the slow degradation of the human individual. Also, the economic turmoil that resulted from the Great Depression is the type of material that Modernist authors focused on – the harsh truth about reality and how an individual copes with those changes.

In regards to style, Faulkner employs the use of direct thoughts and logic to put forth a direct and pure relay of perspective or opinion. Using the stream of consciousness narrative style, Faulkner portrays characters with an exclusively unique quality that comes together with other characters’ qualities to create a typical human persona. The stream of consciousness narration also emphasizes the degradation of the human individual if the changes in narrative style are closely observed. Periodically, the burden of the most credible narration falls on certain characters like Darl and Cash when the others are seen as unreliable and biased. Improvement in the quality and cohesiveness in the narration signifies advancement in a collective direction. Conversely, a deterioration in the narrative style parallels the stability of the family.

The novel’s relatable and universal nature reaches the reader in deep places. Because Modernist literature such as *As I Lay Dying* focuses on the true features of reality, the novel is filled with dark irony and depictions of character flaws to underscore the actual misery of real life. Rather than focus on cloying aspects of life like courtship, the novel emphasizes the ephemeral complexion of life.

This novel is a complex look inside the human mind and the human condition. The convoluted nature of *As I Lay Dying* is really beautiful and eerily applicable to life in the twenty-first century. The relations between the characters and their qualities and one’s own personal qualities impel the reader to find balance between the different parts of their personality. Whenever one encounters a period of strife and hardship, it is best to allocate your personalities appropriately without losing the identity of entire sections. Faulkner was spot on when he called this novel “tour-de-force,” because his ingenious use of narration, literary elements, and character relations relates with the reader on all spectrums of their own being.

**Poem**

“A Ballad of Burial”

By: Rudyard Kipling

If down here I chance to die,

Solemnly I beg you take

All that is left of "I"

  To the Hills for old sake's sake,

*5* Pack me very thoroughly

In the ice that used to slake

Pegs I drank when I was dry--

This observe for old sake's sake.

To the railway station hie,

*10* There a single ticket take

For Umballa--goods-train—

I Shall not mind delay or shake.

I shall rest contentedly

Spite of clamor coolies make;

*15* Thus in state and dignity

Send me up for old sake's sake.

Next the sleepy Babu wake,

Book a Kalka van "for four."

Few, I think, will care to make

*20* Journeys with me any more

As they used to do of yore.

I shall need a "special" break--

Thing I never took before--

Get me one for old sake's sake.

*25* After that--arrangements make.

No hotel will take me in,

And a bullock's back would break

'Neath the teak and leaden skin

Tonga ropes are frail and thin,

*30* Or, did I a back-seat take,

In a tonga I might spin,--

Do your best for old sake's sake.

After that--your work is done.

Recollect a Padre must

*35* Mourn the dear departed one--

Throw the ashes and the dust.

Don't go down at once. I trust

You will find excuse to "snake

Three days' casual on the bust."

*40* Get your fun for old sake's sake.

I could never stand the Plains.

Think of blazing June and May

Think of those September rains

Yearly till the Judgment Day!

*45* I should never rest in peace,

I should sweat and lie awake.

Rail me then, on my decease,

To the Hills for old sake's sake.

**Poetry Analysis**

From the most affluent rulers of Ancient Egypt to some of the most popular rock singers of the early eighties, burial is an important ritual to signify the puny nature of mortality. In the poem “A Ballad of Burial,” Rudyard Kipling cynically depicts the process of burial by dictating what is to happen to his body upon his death. To achieve this, Kipling employs the use of an ironic rhyme scheme, the future tense, and a direct tone to the reader.

For a significant majority of the poem, the rhyme scheme used follows the ABAB rhyme scheme – which makes the poem easy to read, and it flows off the tongue really fluently. The rhyme scheme is reminiscent of children’s rhymes, which use a similar rhyme scheme to make it easier to memorize. The use of this rhyme scheme can entail one or more of three things: irony, a cautionary tale, or for memorization. Firstly, the poem’s rhyme scheme is ironic and antithetical. Usually poems that deal with death or mortality are morbid and staunchly serious. This poem, however, makes the concept of death and burial as one of a jovial nature – to be treated lightly and without any care whatsoever. This could indicate the Kipling thinks of mortality as something that is easily avoidable and not of importance. This poem can also be used as a cautionary tale about the treatment of those who are mortal after they die. Another reason is to ensure his proper and desired burial. The poem’s inclination to easy memorization reflects the fact that Kipling wants the reader to remember his requests for his burial. A poem that is easy to memorize and is catchy to some degree is difficult to forget, so the blame would be on the burier for not following such simple directions.

In addition to the rhyme scheme, the use of the future tense, as in “I shall” (Kipling 13), provides the poem with a light and pleasant view about death. As stated previously, poems that deal with death and loneliness usually speak in the past tense – which signifies the transient and ephemeral nature of existence. In this poem, the tense is in the future tense, which places death far away from the poet “if down here [he] chance[s] to die” (1). This makes death seem like an issue that can be put off for later times and does not really bear any weight to anyone’s mortality. Through this poem, the reader can see that Kipling enjoys a nonchalant attitude towards death.

Throughout the poem, Kipling uses a direct tone that addresses the reader in particular. By addressing a nondescript “you,” the poet decreases the magnitude of mortality by listing the details of his burial to no one. Also, by speaking generally, Kipling enhances the appeal of his message making death seem trivial in comparison to life.

In *As I Lay Dying*, one of the most fascinating things about the plot is the fact that Addie’s influence carries on to her family even after death. Because she specifically requests to be buried in Jefferson, the family must endure battle after battle just to satisfy their mother’s request. It is amazing to see the extent of the family’s journey to get to Jefferson – whether for pure intentions or guided by ulterior motives. In the poem, the speaker makes many specific requests for the desired method for which his body is to be buried – including where to stop on the way there and what do there. Also, he directs the reader or desired person even after the burial is complete. As in the poem, Addie, the dead person, directs her entire family from beyond her deathbed. Even though she is dead, she tears the family apart what with her ill-timed death, the distance the family must travel, and the conflicts that arise between the family members. She runs the family into the ground (no pun intended) for “violating” (Faulkner 158) her “aloneness” (58). In the poem, the speaker even foreshadows that the burier will rejoice the death of the speaker. Also, after burying Addie, Anse immediately is liberated and gets a new set of teeth and a new wife.

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