

# Perspectives of Ethical and Moral Decline on Dysfunctional Family of Bundrens: An Interpretative Study of “As I Lay Dying” by William Faulkner

Md. Selim Akhtar\*

Ph.D. Research Scholar, University Department of English, T. M. Bhagalpur University, Malda, West Bengal, India

**Abstract** – William Faulkner’s novel “As I Lay Dying” recounts the theme of decline especially, regarding ethical and moral decline in the American South. Faulkner himself was a victim of that particular decline which he artistically shows through the tale of the Bundren family. The Bundrens pass through a series of shocking and dreadful events throughout the novel. In the ongoing process of the events ethical and moral decline of the Bundrens and of society are largely presented through the physical decline of bodies and nature. What is striking in the novel, the development of it only occurs with a corpse, rather the dead body of the matriarch of the family. The dead body itself reminds the members of the family of acrid taste of death. All the major characters of “As I Lay Dying” are devoid of any religious value or sentiment, causing moral decline among them. This paper aims at demonstrating how man is losing his ethical and moral sense and his action gives rise to perversion, thus, cutting him from the main stream of the society. Through this article I have ventured to prove that man is made of stern stuff and even though temporarily he may experience psychological perversion he cannot remain disjointed and can find a solution through ethics and morality.

**Keywords:** Decline; Ethics; Faulkner; Morality

-----X-----

## I. INTRODUCTION:

William Faulkner’s novel “As I Lay Dying” recounts the theme of decline especially, regarding ethical and moral decline in the American South. Faulkner himself was a victim of that particular decline which he artistically shows through the tale of the Bundren family. The Bundrens pass through a series of shocking and dreadful events throughout the novel. In the ongoing process of the events of the novel the physical decay of bodies and nature clearly indicates the ethical and moral loss of the family and of the society as well. What is striking in the novel, the development of it only occurs with a corpse, rather the dead body of the matriarch of the family. The dead body itself reminds the members of the family of acrid taste of death. All the major characters of “As I Lay Dying” are devoid of any religious value or sentiment, causing moral decline among them. This paper aims at demonstrating how man is losing his moral sense and his action gives rise to perversion, thus, cutting him from the main stream of the society. Through this article I have ventured to prove that man is made of stern stuff and even though temporarily he may experience psychological

perversion he cannot remain disjointed and can find a solution through ethics and morality.

In twentieth century America was in grip of facing the realities of life; a sharp departure from the sentiments and melodramas of the previous century. The First World War considerably diminished the elements of romance in the novels and consequently led to a realistic portrayal of life. Beyond peradventure this gave rise to certain questions, that is, the ethics that should govern men, since now there was a change in the attitude of writers towards human nature. America and Americans faced a situation which was almost anarchic. It is, in this light, that William Faulkner appeared with a moral approach to life. His novels reveal murder, rape, incest, tribal violence, guilt and suicide that existed in American life, but William Faulkner advocated a moral view where he seems to advocate the “Second Coming”. Thus, here the stress will be to demonstrate and reveal his moral approach to life through his writings.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

To accomplish my work in the finest way I have read some major Southern Gothic works of contemporary authors like Flannery O' Connor, Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote and Carson McCullers. O' Connor in her novels portrays the poor American South and its alienation, loss of faith, etc. In his plays, Williams, largely, discusses the themes of human frustration, sex and violence in a greater context of the world. Capote, in his works, demonstrates the Southern Gothic tradition in more realistic way. Like Capote McCullers also writes about the Gothic tradition with some addition of the theme of alienation and human frustration as well. Besides, these I must mention some critical works, which demand discussions regarding it. Cleanth Brooks in his "William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha County" considers 'Yoknapatawpha' as an imagined community whose genealogical history becomes the subjects of the novels. I have enriched my knowledge of the Southern history to a great extent after the reading of "William Faulkner and Southern History" by Joel Williamson. And one book I should mention in this respect "William Faulkner: A Biography" by Joseph Blotner. This one helps me much to get the information about the personal history of William Faulkner and the contemporary age as well. Moreover, the reading of some scholarly papers and online sources has also enriched me by providing some useful information which has immensely helped me to write this paper.

## 3. ETHICAL AND MORAL DECLINE:

In "As I Lay Dying" William Faulkner narrates a story of the members of a poor white southern family namely, the Bundren the members of which always keep themselves busy in some self-seeking works and, thus, having no affections for others. The journey of the decline of the Bundrens starts from their physical decay, and the moral decline, mostly, evolves into the novel. Almost all the characters of the Bundren family are victims of this decline in different stages and ways of the novel. As a matter of fact, Faulkner deals with the theme of loss: ethically and morally, incest, adultery, deprivation, deterioration, etc. of the southern America in full swing. While doing this, he shows defective social relationships and demoralized individuality to his characters' physical wounds and injuries.

The experimental narrative technique, used in this novel "As I Lay Dying" shows a great challenge for the readers. The fifteen characters of this work narrate their perspectives in stream of consciousness techniques. All this occurs in a series of fifty-nine chapters of which only Darl tells nineteen chapters. The writing style of Faulkner's novels largely contributed to the field of modernism, especially in twenties and thirties and it gave inspiration to the authors of the disillusioned era of the World War I. The conventional aspects of this

tour de force like exposition, plot, and character advancement are thrown away so as to feature the story structure that could speak to the substances of mental turmoil, the smoothness of time and memory, and the difficult joining of independent selves in family life. Faulkner's materials may seem so unfledged as to be scarcely containable inside language by any means. The novel achieves statures and profundities of articulation that are genuinely stunning: it is a remarkable work that luxuriously compensates the readers' endeavors.

In this narrative Faulkner presents the poor, white Bundren family as dysfunctional one. The corpse of the matriarch Addie seems to be a part of the self (Bundren family). Wherever they go, whatever they do, they always carry the corpse with them. Even when they rest, they do not want to get far away from it. Although they want to get away from the burden of it, they accept it as a part of the body, as if it is another living member of the family. In the gradual development of this novel, it becomes harder to differentiate the subject and abject from each other. Before becoming an abject for her family, Addie Bundren was a mother of five children. Throughout the novel she is dead, but the readers can face the realities Addie confronts in her life by the help of the chapters she narrates. Addie does not live a happy life because of her husband. Until the end of her life, she endures him. Yet, there is an exception which changes her life drastically. She commits adultery with a local minister, Whitfield, and consequently gives birth to a natural baby as Jewel. This adultery, therefore, strengthens her being of an abject, and causes the decay of Addie until the very end of her burial. Yet, in this very moment it is important to focus on her mental decay to a great extent. As she does not respect Anse, she becomes numb to the other parts of the family. Furthermore, she is considered not to be an ideal mother and wife: "Don't tell me," I said. "A woman's place is with her husband and children, alive or dead. Would you expect me to want to go back to Alabama and leave you and the girls when my time comes, that I left of my own will to cast my lot with yours for better and worse, until death and after?" [...] "When I lay me down in the consciousness of my duty and reward I will be surrounded by loving faces, carrying the farewell kiss of each of my loved ones into my reward" (Faulkner, 1990:14). Not being able to become a suitable wife to Anse drags her to committing adultery. That turning point of her not only brings joy to her life, but also the true meaning of love. The virulent taste of adultery and the juicy taste of love form an ambiguous cocktail for Addie.

As her mother does, Dewey Dell Bundren also experiences some struggles women of that particular period would go through. She tries to resist Lave with whom she is promised to make some entertainments by doing some activities of adultery. But it is Lave, who is determined to do incest with her, and causing her pregnancy at an

early stage. Thus, with a failure in freedom to the male domination she becomes a victim of the society. What she sees later in herself, loneliness, disappointments, pile of vexations, frustrations and, especially a moral decline within herself. Although Dewey Dell and Addie have not a strong relationship, the similarity in their conditions is undeniable. Both of them are unhappy with the circumstances they have. Moreover, they commit adultery and become impregnated. Dewey Dell's difference from her mother is her rejection of the infant. She condemns her situation contrary to Addie. On the other hand, Addie gives birth to Jewel and tries to make him only happiness of her life. Dewey Dell searches for the ways of getting rid of the baby, because her baby becomes an abject for her. Abject and the object share the same body; yet the former is not wanted and tried to be excluded from the shared space. Presumably, the most abominable and attention-grabbing part is where the people around the coffin are disturbed by the smell spreading from the corpse of Addie. On the abjection of woman and decomposing corpse Menninghaus asserts: "As the disgusting old woman of classical aesthetics can be read as an emblem of the abject mother, Kristeva reformulates the primary figures of the abject in the construction of the aesthetic—the disgusting woman and the decomposing corpse—as elements of every subject-formation in the field of the paternal symbolic order" (2003:374).

Anse Bundren, the patriarch of the family draws a low profile all through the novel. The offspring do not respect him; as he is always absorbed in himself and rather selfishness governs his lifestyle. Apart from that, it is barely said that he loves his wife. The couple's coming together is a kind of involuntary marriage. None of them shows a sign of love against each other. Their relationship is based on a mutual agreement which is consisted of silence mostly. Despite the hatred of them, they do not speak of it explicitly. On the other hand, the last wish of Addie is an important signal. She chooses to be buried in Jefferson. She plans it just to be in peace without having to be near to her husband anymore. At that point, Addie sees Anse as an abject. She wants to get away from him. Anse's being an abject for Addie makes her disgusted; yet at the same time she enjoys her hidden love affair with Whitfield. That also makes her another abject in the novel. She does not respect the borders and cheats on her husband. Addie's transgression changes her position from a domestic, silent and unhappy woman to sneaky but a happy woman who can cross the borders when it is necessary for her. Notwithstanding, the common sin of Addie and Whitfield brings them a big surprise: Jewel, the bastard child. Although the novel does not share the feelings of Whitfield about Jewel, it certainly informs that Addie keeps him as her only precious being. Jewel also feels closer to her, loves her, takes care for her and always wants to prove as her favorite one. On behalf of Addie, she seems to accept her lack of love towards her other children but

Jewel. She shows some affection to him, though he can also be seen as an abject for her because of Jewel's being as a sin. However, Addie chooses to direct her detestation to her other children instead of Jewel. Jewel also carries some signs of selfishness like her mother Addie, as he does not work for the family, but himself. He also does not seem any respect to the rest of the family. He saves money to buy a horse. It seems that he is aware of being an outsider of the family. Jewel does not feel the communal spirit. However, in the course of the travelling he risks his life for the sake of his mother's dead body.

Unquestionably the decay in the family also represents the physical world of the novel, too. The physical part of the decay corresponds to the mental and behavioral part as well. One of the most striking scenes of "As I Lay Dying" is, undoubtedly, Vardaman's drilling the face of his mother: "And the next morning they found him in his shirt-tail lying asleep on the floor like a felled steer, and the top of the box bored clean full of holes and Cash's new auger broke off in the last one. When they taken the lid off her they found that two of them had bored on into her face" (Faulkner, 1990: 56). As a silly, traumatized, young boy he thinks that his mother may lack air. So, to provide air he tries to make some holes on the coffin. Yet, he ends up with rending Addie's dead face. The horrible and abominable state of not burying Addie Bundren's body and letting it sink is already beyond the perception of an ordinary man. Another important action in "As I Lay Dying" is the breaking of Cash's leg. He breaks his leg after the horse kicks him. In this terrible situation Anse does not care for the emergency of Cash's broken leg. Instead, he proposes to use cement to keep the bones together. Moreover, Cash is put on his mother's coffin till the end of the way. Ironically, he lies on the coffin he built. An examination from the lenses of a third person it is always seen that the condition of the Bundren family is purely miserable. The members of the family are the ones who are not suitable for the standards of ordinary people. This causes their inclination towards the abject object. Cash's broken leg and its cement-supported poor treatment stand for this. He is no more useful and he becomes a burden who is now wanted by the object (the rest of the family). In that sense there is a similarity between the condition of his mother's abject corpse and his useless body. "Pollution of the beautiful, self-mutilation, and aesthetic practices of the informe all terminate in an affirmative relation to death in its material existence: corpse and decay" (Menninghaus, 2003:347). Both of them are seen as the things to get rid of immediately. That is why Anse does not want to spend money and time for a suitable treatment of his leg. Rather than doing this, Anse chooses to mutilate his son forever.

The obsession of the Bundrens of reaching the target makes their senses ineffective and thus they do not seem affected by the smell of death like other townspeople. In contrast, they try to supply their needs and continue their way. That scene shows that the members of the family are not aware of the reality: "The Bundren children's obsession with their mother continues even as her increasingly repulsive corpse rots more each day. Despite this repulsiveness, they appear unable to separate themselves from her either physically or psychologically" (Blaine, 1994: 419). They lose their connections with the real-world. Being focused on the aim of burying their mother, the Bundrens cannot notice the unbearable odor coming from the coffin. The rotting corpse which has been also drilled by Vardaman starts to become like another living member of the family. So, it can be said that the dead body calls the people around it to the unbearable face of death. As the body is in homeostasis, in other words lifelessness, the instincts of Thanatos and Eros of Freud can be helpful to understand the situation. If we assume that living things came later than animate ones and arose from them, then the death instinct fits in with the formula we have proposed to the effect that instincts tend towards a return to an earlier state.

#### 4. CONCLUSION:

Anse's selfishness shows itself in several parts of the novel. He does not care about the needs or wishes of anyone with just one exception: Addie's last wish. While making the wish of Addie true, he makes his family suffer as much as possible by his own drives. On the other hand, probably the most striking action of Anse is getting new teeth and a wife just after the burial of Addie. Anse makes the situation harder to bear for his children. As it was stated before, coming of an abject requires noncompliance with hidden rules and touching the untouchable areas. Both physically (with new teeth) and morally (having a new wife), Anse accomplishes to become another abject himself. The inequality between the masculine and feminine roles in the novel, the characters have difficulty in finding their new positions after the death of Addie. As the mother's role is much more than just being a mother because of Anse's inadequate role in fatherhood, the new era turns the characters adrift.

#### REFERENCES

1. Bloom, Harold, ed. (1986). *Modern Critical Views: William Faulkner*. New York: New Haven, Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.
2. Blotner, Joseph (1974). *Faulkner: A Biography*. 2 vols. New York: Random, 1974. Print.
3. Brooks, Cleanth (1963). *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha County*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1963. Print.
4. Faulkner, William (1994). *As I Lay Dying*. London: Vintage Books, 1994.
5. Jehlen, Myra (1976). *Class and Character in Faulkner's South*. New York: Columbia U.P., 1976.
6. Kerr, Elizabeth M. (1979). *William Faulkner's Gothic Domain*. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1979.
7. Wadlington, Warwick (1992). *As I Lay Dying: Stories out of Stories*. New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992.
8. Williamson, Joel (1993). *William Faulkner and Southern History*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993. Print.
9. <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/asilay/>
10. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/As\\_I\\_Lay\\_Dying](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/As_I_Lay_Dying)
11. <https://www.shmoop.com/as-i-lay-dying/>
12. <https://www.gradesaver.com/as-i-lay-dying>
13. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/As-I-Lay-Dying>
14. <https://www.bachelorandmaster.com/britishandamericanfiction/narrative-technique-in-as-i-lay-dying.html>
15. <https://brightkite.com/essay-on/the-themes-of-william-faulkner-s-as-i-lay-dying>

#### Corresponding Author

Md. Selim Akhtar\*

Ph.D. Research Scholar, University Department of English, T. M. Bhagalpur University, Malda, West Bengal, India

[selim.in@rediffmail.com](mailto:selim.in@rediffmail.com)