



As I Lay Dying

by William Faulkner

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Talk to the Labradoodle... She's in Charge.

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Introduction

In a Nutshell

[William Faulkner](#) wrote his fifth novel, *As I Lay Dying*, in only six weeks in 1929. It was published after very little editing in 1930. The novel tells the story of the Bundren family traveling to bury their dead mother. The novel is famous for its experimental narrative technique, which Faulkner began in his earlier novel [Sound and the Fury](#): fifteen characters take turns narrating the story in streams of consciousness over the course of fifty-nine, sometimes overlapping sections. At the time, Faulkner's novel contributed substantially to the growing Modernist movement. He was no doubt influenced by the work of [Sigmund Freud](#), whose theories about the subconscious were made increasingly popular in the 1920s. Faulkner's novel regards subconscious thought as more important than conscious action or speech; long passages of italicized text within the novel would seem to reflect these inner workings of the mind. Faulkner's prolific career in writing is marked by his 1949 [Nobel Prize in Literature](#) and two [Pulitzer Prizes](#), one in 1955 and the other in 1962.

Why Should I Care?

As I Lay Dying might be one of the most important works in American Literature, but it just sounds to us like the greatest of all childhood games: [The Oregon Trail](#). But let us demonstrate:

- Rations are low.
- You have set your pace to grueling and your prose to convoluted.
- Someone has died (though not of dysentery).
- Ford the river, or caulk the wagon and float it?
- Bad choice. You lost 2 mules, a leg, clarity of plot, some farm tools, and all the optimism you had left.

Chuckle. We knew this book would be easy.

- Wait a minute.
- You are crazy, according to one member of your party.
- You are the most logical guy around, according to you.
- You're a threat, according to another member of your party.
- Someone is pregnant (and unmarried).

Whoops! That reminds us to tell you that *As I Lay Dying* features no fewer than fifteen different narrators, which can complicate the heck out of any trail you're traveling, Oregon or not. Even the most basic of stories – a journey from location A to location B – is actually a patchwork of perspectives, opinions, and points of view. There isn't a whole lot of objective fact.

Summary

Book Summary

As I Lay Dying is told by fifteen different narrators over the course of fifty-nine narrative sections. The first section belongs to Darl Bundren, who introduces us to his brothers Cash and Jewel and his dying mother, Addie. The Bundrens live on a rural farm in Mississippi in the 1920s. Jewel is reserved and introverted; Cash, a skilled carpenter, is obsessively building his mother the most perfect coffin ever.

In the first few sections of the novel, we hear narration from all three brothers as well as Anse, their father; Vardaman, their youngest brother; Dewey Dell, their only sister; and Vernon and Cora Tull, their wealthy neighbors. As Addie lays dying, Jewel and Darl embark on a trip for Vernon for which they will earn three dollars. They hope to return before she dies; they do not. Oddly enough, Darl narrates the scene of Addie's death, though he is not present at the time.

After Addie's death, the family embarks on a long and difficult journey to Jefferson, the county's central town. The journey is made more difficult by the fact that the Bundrens are poverty-stricken, Cash has a broken leg from a former injury, Anse is a jerk who can't wait to get a new set of teeth, Dewey Dell is unmarried and pregnant, and bad weather has devastated the bridge they need to cross. When they try to ford the river, the mules drown, the coffin is almost lost, and Cash re-breaks his leg. In the meantime, the young Vardaman, traumatized by his mother's death, has decided she is just like the fish he caught and killed just before her death (in the sense that both were living, and now both are dead).

Meanwhile, we get a narrative section from Addie, who, yes, is still dead. Through her narration comes a bit of back-story: she doesn't really like her husband, life, or children, except for Jewel, who is the illegitimate child of the minister, Whitfield. Jewel has always been a special bird, especially that time when he moonlighted for a month working a neighbor's fields to buy himself a horse. Jewel has a thing for horses, but particularly the one that belongs to him and him alone.

Back to the journey to Jefferson. Anse decides that pouring cement all over Cash's leg will help the break. He then mortgages everything he owns and sells Jewel's special horse to buy a new team of mules. Jewel is not pleased. When the family rests for the night at the farm of a man named Gillespie, Darl burns the barn down in an attempt to cremate his mother. Jewel rescues the coffin before this can happen.

When the family finally arrives in Jefferson, Dewey Dell tries to get an abortion and is instead coerced into sex by a young guy pretending to be a doctor. Then her father takes the money she needs to use to get a real abortion and buys himself his new set of teeth. The town doctor explains that Cash's leg was hopelessly destroyed by the cement cast. Vardaman realizes he

can't have pretty toys like the town boys because he's poor. Darl is shipped off to an insane asylum when it becomes clear that he is responsible for burning down the Gillespie farm. Anse borrows shovels to bury Addie's body and flirts with the woman who lends them. He then introduces her to his children as the new Mrs. Bundren.

Section One, narrated by Darl

- Darl returns with his brother Jewel from the fields. Darl is a full head shorter, which might be an age tip-off. They approach a cottonhouse.
- Jewel walks rigidly, walking through the cottonhouse windows while Darl circles the path.
- Darl notes Tull's wagon as they pass it, and can hear his brother Cash's saw at the top of the hill.
- Cash, a "good carpenter," is fitting together a coffin for Addie. Darl narrates that she couldn't want a better one, that this will give her comfort.
- As Darl goes home, the sound of Cash's adze follows him.

Section Two, narrated by Cora

- Cora, the picture of domesticity, baked some cakes yesterday using the eggs from their chickens. She worries because they've lost some of their chickens, especially since it was her call to buy the better and more expensive breed.
- Although she keeps calling him "Mr. Tull," it soon becomes clear that Cora is referring to her husband.
- She's baked the cakes in question in order to sell them to Miss Lawington, who unfortunately cancelled her order after the cakes were done.
- Cora, disappointed, recalls a verse from the Bible: "riches is nothing in the face of the Lord, for He can see into the heart." She hopes she can sell the cakes to someone else.
- Kate, Cora's daughter, criticizes Miss Lawington for going against her word. Instead of denouncing Miss Lawington, Cora leaves the judgment for the Lord.
- Then, mysteriously, we hear a description of a woman who at this point we can only assume is Addie. She lies bedridden, dying, where she can hear Cash working on her coffin on the other side of the wall.
- And now back to the cakes. (How's that for contrast, eh?) We learn that Addie was a fantastic baker, and that she has a family of "four men and a tom-boy girl" (2.11). The girl, who we find out later is Dewey Dell, is at the moment fanning her dying mother, who seems asleep but is "watching" Cash.
- Cora's other daughter, Eula, is watching Dewey Dell and Addie. Darl walks by and Eula does the Southern Gothic equivalent of flipping her hair. When she sees that Cora is watching her, "her eyes go blank."

Section Three, narrated by Darl

- Pa (Anse Bundren) and his neighbor Vernon Tull are sitting on the porch together chewing tobacco. Darl approaches and takes a drink of water from the bucket.
- Pa asks where Jewel is. Before answering, Darl reminisces internally about his love for water from a wood bucket. When he was younger, he used to sneak out to the porch at midnight and watch the stars in the water bucket. After puberty struck, he enjoyed the simple pleasure of self-awareness of certain body parts.
- Darl returns to reality and marvels over how beaten up his father's working boots are, and how his toes are essentially destroyed from working so hard in poorly made shoes his whole life.
- Only now does he answer pa's question: Jewel is down at the barn, harnessing the team.
- Darl imagines Jewel struggling with one particularly difficult horse, attributing great prowess to his brother in the process.
- We hear Jewel speaking to the horse, either through Darl's imaginings or recollection. He crassly orders the animal to eat the hay he's offering it.

Section Four, narrated by Jewel

- Jewel's not so into his younger brother Cash. In fact you could say that he thinks Cash is a naïve show-off. Jewel is the only character so far to take offense to the fact that Cash is making a show out of building Addie's coffin – with Addie in the front row.
- Jewel disapproves of the way the family is treating his mother Addie. He thinks he should be alone with her up in the hills, so she can spend her last days on earth in peace.
- Faulkner suggests that Jewel doubts the existence (or at least use/power) of God.
- Jewel resents Cash for being the performer that neighbors are coming to see and praise.
- We also hear of Dewey Dell for the first time by name, confirming that she is "the girl" in the room with Addie.

Section Five, narrated by Darl

- Darl and Jewel prepare to leave home to do a job for their neighbor Tull, for which they will receive three dollars.
- Pa is against them going, because he expects Addie to die any moment and wants the whole family to be there when she does.
- Through dialogue, Faulkner slowly reveals that the plan is to place Addie in Cash's handcrafted coffin and travel with her dead body to Jefferson, where her maiden family lies in the ground.

- Jewel, in denial about his mother's imminent death, shuts up anyone who speaks morbidly.
- Darl argues that the three dollars will be helpful for their journey to Jefferson.
- Anse tells Jewel that Addie is glad to watch Cash make the coffin, because she can die knowing that her own family built it and that she's not beholden to a stranger.
- He also believes they are doing the right thing by respecting Addie's wishes to be buried in Jefferson. After all the debate, he finally lets his sons leave on the three-dollar journey, as long as they can get back by sundown the next day.

Section Six, narrated by Cora

- Cora raves about Darl and how he, not Jewel, is the son most like Addie, the son who has her "natural affections."
- Cora looks down on Jewel and Anse; she sees them as money-hungry heathens who would rather earn three bucks than allow their loved one a decent Christian death. She abhors the Bundrens' moral code, suggesting that they'll do anything for a dollar.
- Cora also thinks it's a disgrace that they're forcing Addie to live on a separate plot from their (the Bundren) family name. She declares that that shall never happen to her, for she will have loved ones surrounding her when she lies on her deathbed.
- It is confirmed that "Mr. Tull," a.k.a. Vernon, is her husband.
- She again recounts the sweet moment when Darl came to take one last look at his mother before death, and how he was too full of emotion to speak as he gazed at her.

Section Seven, narrated by Dewey Dell

- Dewey Dell recalls a time when she and a worker, Lafe, went cotton-picking by the woods.
- Now, by cotton-picking, she means cotton-picking and sex.
- It went like this: she said that, if by the time they got to the woods her sack was full with cotton, she would do it because she couldn't help it. On the other hand, if her sack was partly empty by the time they reached the woods, it was God's way of telling her that she wasn't supposed to have sex.
- So Lafe put all his cotton into her sack to ensure it would be full. (If only she had had a coin to toss...)
- Reflecting on that afternoon, Dewey Dell doesn't think that her brothers and dad will care about her having sex, since they never pay attention to her anyway.
- Unfortunately, now her sack really *is* full. (She's pregnant.)
- And Darl knows, in this tacit way that Dewey Dell describes as "without the words" (7.3).
- Dewey Dell's narrative provides more of the dialogue that we heard in the last section – but this version is a bit different. Darl admits to his sister that Addie is going to die before

they get back, and that he's bringing Jewel with him "to help [him] load" the wagon.

Section Eight, narrated by Tull

- Vernon Tull tries to mollify Anse's concerns, assuring him that Jewel and Darl will be back in time and that he's worrying for nothing. Anse only says that Addie is set on dying.
- Tull muses that women are different, and that their lives are difficult. He remembers his own mother's death as a weary decision to finally rest after a lifetime of hard work.
- Vardaman, the youngest Bundren son, comes back from fishing with a giant fish he's caught. He's about to go into the house to show Addie when his father calls him back, ordering him to clean the fish.
- Vardaman argues that Dewey Dell can do it, but Anse is persistent. Cursing, the boy takes the fish away.
- Vernon, as others before him, comments that Anse never sweats.
- It is five o'clock. Cora comes out and she and Tull's family prepares to head home for the evening.
- Anse goes inside to look at his dying wife.
- On the way out, they pass Cash, who's trimming boards. Vernon notices that Cash doesn't work so hard when he's working at his barn.
- As the Tulls ride away in a wagon, the women note how Darl and Cash will be up for marriage soon...and Jewel, too, though Kate remarks that "there's more gals than one around here that don't want to see Jewel tied down."
- And Kate goes back to talking about the cakes.

Section Nine, narrated by Anse

- Anse laments that it's going to rain soon.
- He remembers telling Addie that bad luck goes right up to his door, via the new road that was put in by his house. Addie challenged him to change houses, but he countered that if God had intended men to be on the move, he would have made them long and flat, like a road or snake.
- He remembers suggesting to Addie that she lie down just to rest, that neither of them thought she was sick, and that the next thing he knew, the doctor, Peabody, was over. He clearly remembers that he never asked the doctor to come.
- Anse complains that now he is the one who has to pay (for the doctor), even though he is in need of help himself since he has no teeth and cannot really eat food.
- Anse claims that he is not a sinful man, therefore he will not curse his bad luck (just complain about it a whole lot instead).
- Vardaman returns from butchering the fish, covered in blood. Anse figures he might have

thrown the fish away from shame of doing a bad job of cleaning it up.

- Vardaman asks him if mom has gotten sicker. All Anse answers is, "Go wash your hands."
- Anse notes that he can no longer put his heart into anything, even ordering his sons to work.

Section Ten, narrated by Darl

- Darl and Jewel are in the wagon and on the road, hot in pursuit of that three dollars. Darl notes that Jewel has gotten a haircut in town this week.
- Darl keeps asking Jewel whether or not he knows that Addie Bundren is going to die.
- Darl recounts a conversation he had with Dewey Dell, regarding the unspoken pregnancy and whether she wants their mom to die so she can go to town (presumably to get an abortion).
- He is disgusted when he thinks of how Peabody is so obese that he will need help getting up the hill to their house.

Section Eleven, narrated by Peabody

- Peabody, the doctor, has been called by Anse and is making his way to the Bundrens'. At first he wondered if Tull had called him on behalf of the Bundrens, but he realizes that only Anse is unlucky enough to have summoned a doctor when a cyclone was building. He also knows that, if Anse finally decided to call him, it's probably too late to do anything useful.
- Peabody is 225 pounds and seventy years old. Since Jewel is not there to control the difficult horse, Peabody must be pulled up the mountain with a rope.
- When he arrives, Peabody goes to the room where Addie lays. He thinks of death as a mental process, and notes that, in this sense, Addie's been dead for ten days.
- Addie looks at the doctor and at "the boy" (Vardaman), but it is only her eyes that move.
- The doctor sends Anse and Vardaman out, but we are not told what he does while alone with Addie.
- When Peabody goes out to the porch to talk to Anse, he asks why they didn't call for him sooner. Anse gives excuses: the corn crop wasn't working out so well, people have been looking after Addie...besides, he says, her mind is set on dying, so what good would a doctor be anyway?
- Dewey Dell calls her father in, and they all enter together.
- Addie stares at Peabody. Dewey Dell claims that this is her way of saying she wants the doctor to leave. He acquiesces, musing that it's typical for a dying woman to reject empathizers and cling to those who really haven't helped her at all.
- "She" (presumably Addie) calls out for Cash.

Section Twelve, narrated by Darl

- (Since Darl is still on his journey with Jewel, he's either envisioning this, or narrating it from a later time, or he has all the ESP of a real, omniscient narrator.)
- Dewey Dell says that Addie wants Jewel, and Anse confesses that they left for a loading job to earn three dollars.
- Looking out of the window, Addie calls for Cash. Through the window, he shows her what the coffin will look like once complete by holding up the individual planks of wood.
- Addie lies back in bed, looks at Vardaman, and "the flame in her eyes is blown out." (Or, she dies, for those of you who don't speak Faulkner.)
- Dewey Dell keens, throwing her body onto her mother's bones.
- Vardaman hides behind his father, and then leaves the room.
- Anse curses the boys (Darl and Jewel) for leaving, as they have now missed the moment of their mother's death.
- In an italicized portion, Darl updates us on his three-dollar quest: a wheel has broken, and he and Jewel are thick in mud.
- Back at the house, Cash enters the room, saw in hand. Anse asks that he speed up the coffin-making, adding that Christians will help him if necessary.
- Anse orders Dewey Dell to make supper. She pulls the quilt over her mother's hands and up to her chin.
- Italicized: Darl envisions a conversation between Peabody and Dewey Dell. Peabody consoles and convinces her that Addie is in a better place. By speaking in abstractions, Dewey Dell hints about wanting to abort her pregnancy.
- Anse, in a lovely final moment, hovers over Addie and wrinkles the quilt while attempting to smooth it out. Then he remarks that he can finally get those teeth he wanted. (Nice.)
- Italicized: Jewel struggles to free the wagon from the ditch. Darl continues to call for him (as he has been), and announces their mother's death.

Section Thirteen, narrated by Vardaman

- Vardaman goes out to the porch, crying. He goes over to the ground where he dropped the fish he caught and thinks about how, now, the fish is in pieces of "not-fish." He's basically trying to understand his mother's death through the fish as example. (Remember, he's just a little kid.)
- He immediately scapegoats his mother's death on Peabody, reasoning that before the doctor had arrived, she had been alive.
- Vardaman runs to the stalls, vomiting and crying.
- He throws sticks at Peabody's horses, crying out that they killed his mother. The horses run off.

- Cash comes and takes in the scene. He hopes that they run past Tull's house.
- Vardaman can hear Dewey Dell calling out for him to eat dinner. He struggles to understand death, since the fish was once right there on the ground and is now on the table for supper.

Section Fourteen, narrated by Dewey Dell

- Dewey Dell wishes that Peabody, whom she refers to as "he," would perform an abortion for her.
- She feels that she is alone.
- She can hear the sound of Cash still sawing away on the coffin. When he comes in for dinner, he is covered in sawdust.
- Dewey Dell comments in narration that she doesn't know how to cry.
- At dinner, the men ask why she isn't serving the big fish that Vardaman caught. Dewey Dell responds that she never had time to cook it.
- The doctor welcomes Dewey Dell to sit and eat with them, but she runs off to the barn to milk the cow. Anse himself doesn't eat until the doctor tells him to.
- Dewey Dell finds Vardaman and tells him to go eat dinner. Beside herself, Dewey Dell violently shakes her little brother. Crying, he accuses Peabody of killing their mother. Vardaman insists that he doesn't want dinner, and he doesn't want to go to Jefferson (to bury Addie). He eventually leaves Dewey Dell alone in the barn.
- Death hangs in the air as Dewey Dell is left alone to think and worry.

Section Fifteen, narrated by Vardaman

- Vardaman is not handling death well. He asks Cash if he is going to nail the coffin shut with their mother inside it. Vardaman describes how his father walks around the coffin, and his father's shadow also walks around the coffin.
- Dewey Dell and Vardaman are supposed to go to buy bananas because coffee, sugar, and flour are too expensive. Vardaman questions why they are too expensive and, if so, how come people in town can afford them – and why wasn't he born in the town, not in the country?
- Vardaman believes that the corpse is not his mother, that his mother left before she was bedridden. He again relates the fish's death to his mother's death, confusing his mother for the fish. He figures that once the fish is cooked and his family members eat it, their mother will be alive in them.

Section Sixteen, narrated by Tull

- Vernon and Cora see Peabody's team of horses run past their house. Cora understands right away (that Addie has died), but Vernon is either slow to catch on or lazy and in denial.
- Vardaman comes around at midnight and knocks on their door. He is dripping wet from the four mile walk to the Tulls'.
- He tells Vernon that he was there earlier in the day and that he knows there was a fish. Cora says that Vardaman has gone mad and that Addie must have passed away.
- Tull hitches up the team of horses, and the three of them go back to the Bundrens'.
- Cash has finished the coffin, and Anse nails the coffin shut.
- The next day, Vardaman is found in the same room, having fallen asleep after drilling the coffin full of holes. Two of the holes went into the corpse's face.
- Cora says that Anse is getting what he deserves as a sinful man. Vernon thinks that that wouldn't be right because Anse did the best he knew to. Still, Vernon is glad that his wife is so pious, figuring it can't hurt him in the long run.

Section Seventeen, narrated by Darl

- (Darl is still out in the wagon with Jewel, yet he's narrating what goes on at home.)
- Cash continues to labor over the coffin, despite buckets of rainfall. Anse is by his side but pretty much useless.
- They pitch a make-shift tent with Dewey Dell's raincoat over the lantern. Instead of covering his son, Anse uses Jewel's raincoat to protect himself from rain.
- Vernon and Cora arrive. Vernon helps Cash into the sunrise until the coffin is complete.
- Vernon, Anse, Cash, and Peabody carry the finished coffin into Addie's room. They walk gingerly, as though the coffin were asleep.
- Darl contemplates how hard it is to know whether you are alive or not when you're falling asleep. He guesses that Jewel doesn't have these problems, because he never asks himself difficult questions about his own existence.

Section Eighteen, narrated by Cash

- Cash goes through the thirteen steps explaining why he constructed his mother's coffin on a bevel, or a slanted angle. The slant will keep out water better and will account for the weight distribution of a corpse, among other things.

Section Nineteen, narrated by Vardaman

- "My mother is a fish."
- That's it.

Section Twenty, narrated by Tull

- Two local men, Quick and Armstid, discuss how the local bridge is about to break from wear and weather. The Bundrens will need to cross that bridge in order to get to Jefferson.
- Vernon has brought back Peabody's horses and offers to fix the damage. Peabody suspects that Vardaman, who has been missing, is responsible for cutting them loose.
- Cash has fixed up the extra holes in the coffin by carefully carving out wooden circles.
- Addie was put in the coffin backwards (her head where the feet are supposed to be), because she's wearing her wedding dress, which is flared at the bottom and needs some extra room. They placed a veil over her face to cover the holes.
- At the funeral ceremony, the minister, Whitfield, arrives late and announces that the aforementioned bridge has been washed away. Then everyone sings.
- Several local men discuss the Bundrens' upcoming trip to Jefferson. They think it's madness to attempt such a journey, especially since the bridge is now out, but they understand that Addie desperately wanted to be buried there with her own family.
- Cash joins the group, and they discuss his old injury. He broke his leg when he fell 28 feet from the top of a church. (He was doing something carpentry-related up there.)
- Tull listens to the singing of the minister and of the women. His wife keeps it up, even on the way home.
- Vernon figures that, however bad Addie had it, at least she's free from Anse now.
- In an italicized portion of narration, Vernon offers to lend his wagon to transport the coffin to Jefferson, but Anse refuses and instead waits three days for Darl and Jewel to come home, pick up a replacement wheel, and then return with the fixed wagon.
- Still on the ride home from the Bundrens', Tull and his wife spot Vardaman sitting with a fishing pole on the edge of a fish-less swamp. Tull tries to tell him that it's no use, but he says that Dewey Dell told him there was a big fish in there.

Section Twenty-One, narrated by Darl

- Darl and Jewel have returned home, albeit later than they hoped.
- They have missed Addie's death, and as they approach the house they see buzzards flying overhead. Darl offers Jewel the comforting thought that at least it wasn't his horse that died.

- Jewel curses at Darl.
- Darl reflects that he doesn't have a mother anymore and therefore can not love her. Jewel's mother, he thinks, is a horse.

Section Twenty-Two, narrated by Cash

- Cash's helpfully tries to tell Jewel how to place the coffin on the wagon so that it won't tip over, but he is continually interrupted. He knows the coffin won't balance in the position the men have placed it, but no one heeds his advice.

Section Twenty-Three, narrated by Darl

- The men move the coffin to the wagon. Well, they're trying to. Jewel shouts at Darl, Cash, and Anse to hurry up, which isn't exactly helping.
- Jewel, furious, lifts his end suddenly and with too much force. They continue to struggle to maintain balance as Jewel runs down the mountain and hurls the coffin into the wagon.
- Jewel curses at Darl, again.

Section Twenty-Four, narrated by Vardaman

- The family prepares for their journey.
- Dewey Dell has promised Vardaman that something would not be sold because Santa Claus will protect it until next Christmas. We're not sure what this something is yet, so hold tight.
- Jewel insists on getting his horse even though Anse wants them all to ride together in the wagon.
- Vardaman asks Darl about the horse, the fish, and their mother. He wonders if his mother has to be a horse if Jewel's mother is a horse.
- Cash brings his toolbox for work at the Tulls' when they return, though Anse finds this disrespectful.
- Dewey Dell brings a mysterious package which she claims has Cora's cakes inside. (Riiight. Keep an eye on that package, OK?)

Section Twenty-Five, narrated by Darl

- Jewel goes to the barn where his horse waits. Anse again says that Jewel ought to be riding with them in the wagon.
- Dewey Dell sits next to Vardaman in the wagon, holding her parcel in her lap.
- Cash says to let Jewel do what he wants.
- Darl predicts that Jewel will meet them with the horse at Tull's.
- The family starts their journey, leaving Jewel behind for now.

Section Twenty-Six, narrated by Anse

- The family passes Tull's house in the first leg of their journey to Jefferson.
- Anse is still complaining that Jewel has no respect for Addie.
- Darl laughs as Jewel comes into view with his horse.
- Anse wants no blame for the way his boys are acting.

Section Twenty-Seven, narrated by Darl

- Jewel rides up three hundred yards behind the wagon in what Darl describes as a "dreamlike" sequence (27.2).
- The family passes a sign announcing that New Hope Church is three miles away.
- Cash warns that the corpse will start to smell soon. He also worries that the ill-balanced coffin will fall from the wagon.
- Galloping swiftly alongside or in front of the wagon, Jewel's horse kicks dirt onto Addie's coffin. Cash takes care to remove the dirt stain with wet leaves.

Section Twenty-Eight, narrated by Anse

- Anse complains that hard-working people like himself never get any breaks in life.
- The family passes Samson's farm to find another bridge ruined by the bad weather.
- Anse, still cursing his bad luck, takes solace in the fact that he will soon get some new teeth.

Section Twenty-Nine, narrated by Samson

- Samson and some local farmers watch the Bundrens' wagon pass by. One of them, named Quick, hurries out to give the news of the road conditions ahead (the bridge they were planning to cross has washed away).
- Samson generously invites the Bundrens to stay overnight in the barn. The plan is for them to head up to New Hope in the morning.
- The Bundrens refuse to be indebted to anyone, refusing Samson and his wife Rachel's invitations to eat and stay inside. They choose to sleep in the barn instead.
- Samson thinks Anse is a lazy jerk trying to make a victim of himself by showing off the hardship he's willing to endure.
- Jewel offers to pay Samson for extra feed for his horse. Samson refuses, inviting him to use as much food as he'd like for free.
- Samson's wife Rachel talks about how inappropriate it is for Anse to be bringing his family over to Jefferson. She bickers with Samson, who claims he just cannot understand women.
- The next morning, Samson stays in bed while the Bundrens get ready and depart. When they're gone, Rachel yells at him for not making them breakfast.
- Samson goes out to the barn and finds a buzzard.

Section Thirty, narrated by Dewey Dell

- As the family passes the New Hope sign in the morning, Dewey Dell ponders her mother's death. She feels it happened too soon and wishes she had had more time.
- In an italicized stream of consciousness she imagines herself sitting naked on the wagon, taking the knife which Vardaman used to gut his fish and killing Darl with it.
- Dewey Dell remembers a nightmare she had one night when she used to share a bed with Vardaman. She dreamed that she was awake, but numb. Then she felt a breeze and "all of them" under her, dragging across her naked legs.
- Vardaman asks his dad why they're not going to New Hope, as Samson suggested. No one answers.
- Darl calls Jewel's attention to the buzzard following them, but Jewel ignores him.
- Dewey Dell reminds herself that she believes in God.
- The family passes by Tull's again.

Section Thirty-One, narrated by Tull

- Tull sees the Bundrens pass and takes his mule out to meet them. He finds them at the edge of the water, readying to cross the river even though the bridge is flooded.

- Vernon suggests they wait until the water level goes down, but the Bundrens decide to cross it now anyway.
- Cash suggests that Dewey Dell, Vardaman, and their father walk across the flooded bridge.
- Jewel and Darl demand that Vernon lend his mule to help them get across more safely. Cash tells them to back off.
- Vernon refuses to put his mule at risk in these waters.

Section Thirty-Two, narrated by Darl

- Darl reminisces about the time when Jewel was fifteen and he kept falling asleep throughout the day.
- Secretly, Addie would ask Dewey Dell and the others to help her make up Jewel's share of farm work, in order to keep the problem from Anse.
- Darl hated this sort of hypocrisy, given that his mother always preached about honesty. He knew that Jewel was sneaking out at night because the lantern was always missing after dark. He and Cash figured he must have been sleeping with a married woman.
- One night, Cash followed Jewel out and learned his secret. But when he returned, he refused to tell Darl. He just continued to pick up the slack on the farm created by Jewel's seeming narcolepsy.
- Finally, one morning, Jewel wasn't there when the Bundrens woke up. When he finally returns to the farm, he's riding a spotted horse.
- Anse is immediately upset, assuming that Jewel bought the horse on credit and now he (Anse) will have to pay for it.
- Cash spills the beans: Jewel has been up nights single-handedly clearing Mr. Quick's 40 acres of land – in exchange for this horse.
- Anse is again angry that his son would spend all this money on a horse for himself, and that now he will end up paying to feed it.
- Jewel swears that his horse will never eat anything of Anse's and will never cost him a cent.
- Addie is shocked that her son has been keeping this secret. She starts crying, and Cash consoles her and leads her into the house.
- Later that same night, Darl sees their mother crying next to Jewel's bed. He suddenly "knows" something, just as he "knew" about Dewey Dell's pregnancy.
- (All in good time. Hold your horses.)

Section Thirty-Three, narrated by Tull

- Vernon walks across the bridge with Dewey Dell, Anse, and Vardaman.
- Cash, Jewel, and Darl then prepare the way for the wagon.
- Vernon holds tightly to Vardaman's hand as they walk. He feels a confidence and comfort in doing so; it's as though he has a special affinity for the young boy.
- Vernon says once again that they ought to wait overnight for the water level to go down, but Anse insists that he needs to honor his wife's wish to be buried in Jefferson.

Section Thirty-Four, narrated by Darl

- Darl and Cash bring the wagon to the water's edge. Jewel is still on his horse. Tull, Anse, Dewey Dell, and Vardaman have already crossed to the other side.
- Cash proposes several ideas re: crossing the river. Jewel turns all of them down and insists that they just get this over with already, sans clear thinking and logical plans. On his horse, he crosses the river and pulls Cash, Darl, and the wagon behind him with a rope.
- Jewel and his horse head into the river, guiding Cash, Darl, and the team with a rope. (Darl is inside the wagon, while Cash is outside guiding the team.)
- Cash focuses on a huge log speeding towards them, realizes it is dangerous, and calls for Darl to jump into the water and head for the other side of the bank.
- The log knocks into the wagon. Cash holds onto the coffin and again tells Darl to jump out of the wagon and get himself safely to the other side.
- The mules pulling the wagon are drowned.

Section Thirty-Five, narrated by Vardaman

- Vardaman watches his mother's coffin fall into the water. He runs along the shore, calling out to his brothers in panic.
- He believes that Darl is going to get hold of the coffin and bring her back safely to the shore.
- Vardaman notes that Vernon doesn't go in the water to help. Neither does Anse, for that matter.
- Darl eventually comes out of the water, but without the coffin.

Section Thirty-Six, narrated by Tull

- Tull goes home and tells Cora about what happened at the bridge.
- Cora commends Darl for being the only one who went into the river after the coffin. She also thinks the accident was the hand of God.
- Tull gets frustrated with his wife and rehashes the rest of the scene internally. The log finally got free from the wagon and floated downstream. Jewel tried to lead his horse back to the wagon and ended up loose in the water.
- Meanwhile, Cash doesn't know how to swim, gets a hold of the rope attached to Jewel's horse and is dragged out of the water, basically unconscious.

Section Thirty-Seven, narrated by Darl

- Cash lies on the bank. He's alive, albeit covered in vomit.
- Dewey Dell cleans his face with the hem of her dress.
- Vernon and Jewel are busy looking for Cash's tools in the river. Vardaman keeps an eye on the rope that they're both tied to.
- Jewel finds many of Cash's tools in the water.
- Anse complains about being the most unfortunate man to have ever lived.
- Cash comes to. He has broken the same leg he once broke by falling off the church.

Section Thirty-Eight, narrated by Cash

- Cash remembers telling them to reposition the coffin. And now look what happened.

Section Thirty-Nine, narrated by Cora

- Cora recalls a conversation she had with Addie about faith, sin, and punishments. She doubts Addie's piety and feels that she loved her son, Jewel, more than God. Addie even described Jewel in religious terms, as her "salvation," which is not OK by Cora.
- She also notes that Jewel never seemed to return his mother's love. Cora remembers praying for Addie.

Section Forty, narrated by Addie

- Addie's remembers what her father used to say to her when she was younger, that the point of living was to ready oneself to be dead a long time.
- She then recalls Anse courting her when she was a single schoolteacher. She used to take pleasure in whipping the schoolchildren who were bad.
- Then came her wedding to Anse and her first two children, Cash and Darl. Addie wasn't one for maternal instinct, because she felt violated by these children, as though she could never be alone again. She resented Anse for fathering the children.
- Then Addie had an affair with the minister Whitfield, and Jewel was born. She loved Jewel the most because she felt he was the only child that was her own, whereas the other kids belonged to Anse.
- Addie next gave birth to two more of Anse's children, Dewey Dell and then Vardaman. She feels she paid her debt to Anse with these babies, and after they were born she was finally allowed to die.
- She also remembers Cora rambling on about sin and redemption and God, none of which she took very seriously.

Section Forty-One, narrated by Whitfield

- When Whitfield heard that Addie was dying, he rushed over to the Bundren farm to ask for Anse's forgiveness (for sleeping with his wife).
- He is prepared to confess his and Addie's sin to Anse and, for practice, confesses to God, asking for forgiveness. He desperately hopes that Addie hasn't already spilled the beans.
- Upon his arrival on the farm, he learns that Addie has already passed away. He figures that confessing to God was enough, so he shouldn't have to tell Anse about the affair.

Section Forty-Two, narrated by Darl

- Jewel rides to Armstid's farm and returns with Armstid's team of mules.
- Cash, still half-unconscious, is placed on top of Addie's coffin. (He was kicked in the stomach by Jewel's horse after he was pulled out of the water.) He tries to make sure his tools are nearby (everyone has a security blanket).
- The Bundrens travel to Armstid's place for food and shelter for the night.
- Jewel hangs back to take care of his horse while the others go in for dinner.

Section Forty-Three, narrated by Armstid

- At dinner, Anse refuses to use Armstid's team of mules – he would rather buy a new team of his own.
- Meantime, Jewel goes to get Peabody to fix Cash's leg. All he can find is a horse doctor, who does what he can. Cash elects to pass out rather than complain.
- Anse rides Jewel's horse over to Snipe's to find a team of mules to buy.
- Vardaman chases the buzzards around.
- When Anse returns and announces that he mortgaged all his stuff to buy a new team, Darl knows that he must have traded away something more than his junky farm equipment.
- As it turns out, Darl is right. Anse used the eight dollars that Cash had been saving up to buy a graphophone. He also used some money from his own personal "Let's get me some teeth!" fund.
- Oh, and he also traded away Jewel's horse.
- Jewel takes his horse and rides off into the horizon.
- Anse claims that his family will go with their own team, again refusing Armstid's offer to lend his own mules. Cash is placed on a quilt on top of Addie's coffin.
- The next morning, Snopes brings the mules over and explains that Jewel's horse was left on his property (meaning the trade went through.) Jewel is nowhere to be seen.
- Armstid notes that there's something about Anse that makes other men want to help him.

Section Forty-Four, narrated by Vardaman

- The family travels towards Mottson. Anse figures they'll need to buy Cash medicine, and Darl says they'd better sell Dewey Dell's cakes in Mottson before they go bad.
- Jewel still hasn't shown up.
- Cash is awake and in pain. Darl tries to adjust the rope to make it better for him.
- Vardaman and Darl count the number of buzzards flying above them.
- As they ascend a hill, Darl, Vardaman, and Dewey Dell walk while Anse drives the weak team of mules.

Section Forty-Five, narrated by Moseley

- The family arrives in Mottson.
- Dewey Dell enters a drugstore and indirectly asks for the druggist, Moseley, to give her something to abort her two-month-old baby. She offers him the ten dollars Lave gave her.
- Moseley refuses to do so, advising Dewey Dell to take the ten dollars and marry Lave.
- One of the boys goes in a hardware store to buy cement for Cash's leg.

- The marshal says cement will kill Cash, a Vardaman Bundren Id corpse. In fact, *all* the townspeople are offended and disturbed by the Bundrens and their traveling corpse party.
- Anse defends his family by bombarding the citizens with all of the obstacles they've encountered thus far.

Section Forty-Six, narrated by Darl

- The family stops at a house to ask for water, since Cash is on the edge of death.
- Darl mixes cement for Cash's leg with powder, water, and some sand that Vardaman collects.
- They pour the cement over Cash's leg to create a cast.
- Jewel returns, says nothing, and gets into the wagon.
- Anse sees a hill ahead of them, so he has them all get out and walk.

Section Forty-Seven, narrated by Vardaman

- Dewey Dell, Jewel, Darl, and Vardaman walk up the hill. Anse and Cash are in the wagon.
- Vardaman counts five buzzards and asks Darl where they (the buzzards) go at night. He resolves to watch and find out for himself.

Section Forty-Eight, narrated by Darl

- The Bundrens have stopped to rest at a farm owned by a man named Gillespie.
- Darl asks Jewel who his father was. Jewel curses him and doesn't answer.
- Cash starts sweating. He's in pain because, in the heat, his leg is swelling against the concrete. They pour water on his leg, he thanks them, and everyone tries to sleep.

Section Forty-Nine, narrated by Vardaman

- In the middle of the night, Darl and Vardaman go over to Addie's coffin, which they've placed under an apple tree.
- Darl has Vardaman put his ear to the coffin to see what their mother is saying.
- Vardaman says Addie is asking God to help her.
- They go back to check up on Cash, who has them pour more water on his leg.

- Anse, Jewel, and Darl all move the coffin into the barn for the night.
- Later that night, Vardaman gets up to go see where the buzzards are after dark.
- He then sees "something," namely Darl setting fire to the Gillespie barn. Dewey Dell later tells him not to reveal what he saw to anyone.

Section Fifty, narrated by Darl

- The Gillespie barn is on fire. Everyone runs out of the house.
- Jewel rushes in to save the horses and cows from the burning barn. He then does the same thing to save his mother's coffin.

Section Fifty-One, narrated by Vardaman

- The cement around Cash's leg is blackened. Anse tries to break the cast off.
- Gillespie wonders why they ever put cement on it without greasing it up first. Anse claims he had the boy's best interest at heart.
- Darl is nowhere to be found until Vardaman sees him lying on Addie's coffin, crying.
- Dewey Dell applies a butter ointment onto Jewel's burnt back.
- Darl continues to cry over Addie's coffin while Vardaman tries to console him.

Section Fifty-Two, narrated by Darl

- The family is almost to Jefferson. Anse concludes that once they get to town, they'll need to take Cash to a doctor right away.
- Anse adds that they ought to have done what Armstid and Gillespie recommended and called in to have the burial plot dug ahead of time. But he feels someone in the family should do the digging. Jewel states that *anyone* can dig a hole.
- Out of the blue, Dewey Dell runs for the bushes on the side of the road. She comes back wearing her Sunday dress, which Anse criticizes her for bringing.
- As the Bundrens approach town, they pass by three people on the road. Two of them comment on the stench of the box, and Jewel turns to the third person and aims to punch him. He insults the man, and the pedestrian pulls out a knife. Darl orders that Jewel take back what he said, and this avoids a physical fight.
- Instead of getting back into the wagon, Jewel sits on the perimeter, the better for pouting.

Section Fifty-Three, narrated by Cash

- Darl is being sent to a mental institution in Jackson. The Bundrens are worried that if they don't, Gillespie will sue him for burning down his barn.
- Jewel wants to tie Darl up so he can't set fire to anything else, but Cash says they should wait until Addie is buried to do so.
- Anse laments his own rotten luck. Again.
- Cash philosophizes that there is no such thing as "crazy" or "sane," and that it all depends on who's looking at you when you act and what they think. (This is important stuff, Shmooper.)
- He understands Jewel's anger, but he thinks that Darl was trying to burn up the value of Jewel's horse in the barn, to make up for the fact that it was traded away.
- He also thinks it was God's plan to have Addie's body taken in an easy, natural way. He wonders if Jewel worked against God's plan when he fought so hard to pull the coffin from the river.
- Still, nothing justifies Darl's burning down Gillespie's barn. He muses that this must be how "crazy" is defined – by acting in a way that other men can't see eye to eye with.
- As the family makes their way into town, Darl proposes that they take Cash to the doctor before burying Addie. But Cash says he can wait until after.
- Pa realizes they don't have a spade to dig the hole with. Jewel wants to spend the money to buy one, but Pa says that he will borrow it from a citizen in town.
- The boys wait in front of a house while Pa goes in to get a spade. Cash refers to it as "Mrs. Bundren's house," which will make sense by the end of the novel. From inside the house he can hear music playing from a graphophone –just like the one he would have bought with the money that Anse took to buy the replacement team of mules.
- Anse comes back from the house with two spades. They drive away from the house, but he looks back it. In the window Cash can see a woman's face.
- After Addie is buried, some men come to take Darl away to the institution. A fight breaks out when he resists apprehension. Jewel is angry, yelling for them to kill Darl. Darl looks up at Cash and says, "I thought you would have told me." Then he begins laughing maniacally.
- Cash tells his brother that it will be better for him to go. Darl just keeps laughing.
- Cash feels conflicted, but he maintains his earlier conviction that nothing justifies burning down a barn, a man's livelihood.
- But then he again doubts himself, reiterating that no man has a right to deem an action sane or crazy.

Section Fifty-Four, narrated by Peabody

- Peabody tries to remove the cement from Cash's leg and takes with it 60-some square inches of skin.

- He marvels when Cash calmly accepts the situation, even the news that he might not be able to walk again.
- By now, Darl has been handcuffed and arrested.
- Peabody says they ought to have buried Anse while they were burying Addie, on account of how poorly he treats his children (like setting his son's leg in cement).

Section Fifty-Five, narrated by MacGowan

- MacGowan is a clerk at a pharmacy. He sees Dewey Dell enter, finds her attractive, and pretends to be the doctor.
- Dewey Dell asks him, again indirectly, about getting an abortion. MacGowan decides to take advantage of the situation. While nothing is explicit, it seems he's asking her to have sex with him as payment, in addition to the ten dollars she brought from Lafa.
- Dewey Dell seems to agree, implicitly. McGowan gives her turpentine and asks her to return at 10pm for the rest of the remedy.
- Dewey Dell returns at 10pm with Vardaman, whom she leaves waiting on the curb outside. MacGowan gives her capsules he has filled with talcum powder and leads her down to the basement.

Section Fifty-Six, narrated by Vardaman

- Vardaman waits outside while Dewey Dell is in the pharmacy.
- He keeps thinking about Darl, his brother, who is going to Jackson because he is crazy.
- Vardaman notices a cow across the street. No one else is out at night.
- Vardaman thinks about the train set in the window they passed.
- After a long time, Dewey Dell comes out, cursing the "doctor" and saying that she knows it won't work.
- Vardaman wants to know what won't work, but Dewey Dell just answers that they should go back to their hotel.

Section Fifty-Seven, narrated by Darl

- Darl talks in the third person about himself, wondering why Darl keeps laughing.
- As he is being taken away to the insane asylum, he looks back and sees his family by the wagon. Dewey Dell, Cash, and Vardaman are eating bananas.

Section Fifty-Eight, narrated by Dewey Dell

- Anse finds the ten dollars that Dewey Dell was going to use for an abortion.
- He demands to know where she got the money from. Dewey Dell denies that it is hers, saying it belongs to Cora and that she got it by selling Cora's cakes in town.
- Anse guilt trips Dewey Dell. He says that he does so much for her and doesn't expect anything in return, and now she won't even lend him ten dollars.
- Dewey Dell insists over and over that it is not hers and she doesn't have the right to give it away.
- Anse takes the money from Dewey Dell.

Section Fifty-Nine, narrated by Cash

- Anse is gone a long time while supposedly returning the shovels. He insisted that he had to be the one to bring them back.
- While waiting outside, Cash remembers the graphophone they heard earlier. He thinks music is just about the greatest thing in the world. He thinks he could have bought one with five dollars, except that Anse took the money for the replacement mules.
- After he comes back, Anse goes into the barber's to get a shave. Cash notices that he's all prettied up when he comes back.
- The next morning, Anse asks Cash if he has any more money. Cash says no, and then says that if they need anything else, they should go to Peabody. Anse says no, they don't need anything else.
- Cash waits in the wagon with Jewel, Vardaman, and Dewey Dell, who are eating bananas.
- Finally, they see Anse approaching with the woman he borrowed the spades from. Jewel notices that he finally got the teeth he's been talking about.
- The woman in question is "duck-shaped," dressed-up, and carrying a little graphophone. Cash momentarily wishes that Darl were around so that he could listen to the music, too, but concludes that "this world is not his world; this life his life."
- Pa introduces all of his children to the new Mrs. Bundren.

Themes

Theme of Mortality

As I Lay Dying suggests that dying is a relief from the suffering of life. Religious characters in the novel believe that, because death is a reward, it provides the motivation to live one's life well. Get done everything you need to get done, and you'll be granted...death. The physical process of death is a large part of the novel as well, however, so mortality is far from glorified. The smell of a rotting corpse hangs on every chapter, reminding the reader that death is both spiritual and visceral.

Questions About Mortality

1. How does Addie maintain a presence in the novel even after her death?
2. Which character has the healthiest reaction/deals best with his mother's death? Which characters are unable to process the event?
3. How does Addie's death shape the way that those outside the family view the Bundrens?

Chew on Mortality

Death is the only relief from suffering in *As I Lay Dying*.

Theme of Family

Family is not a pleasant topic in *As I Lay Dying*. Poor or no communication creates intense barriers of misunderstanding and resentment between family members, but particularly siblings who are rivals for their mother's love. An illegitimate child further complicates an already tense set of relationships. Personal needs trump familial duties, though these selfish acts are masked with the pretense of devotion. For women, family is particularly painful, since it essentially assigns child-bearing as their sole purpose in life.

Questions About Family

1. Does Anse love his children? Do her family members love Addie?
2. What kind of family dynamic do the Bundrens have going on?
3. How is the Tull family similar to or different from the Bundren family?
4. What is each family member's role in the Bundren family?
5. How is family portrayed in this novel? What does it matter that Jewel is not Anse's son?
6. How do the family members communicate to one another? What is said, and what is assumed or understood without words?

Chew on Family

The Bundrens' journey to Jefferson is driven by familial duty, *not* by familial love.

Theme of Suffering

Suffering is very much a part of every day life in *As I Lay Dying*. The novel tells the story of a poverty-stricken family traveling to bury their mother during the 1920s in Mississippi. Times are tough and the difficult journey brings obstacle after obstacle. As each family member is forced to give up his or her dreams – and needs, in some cases – it becomes clear that death is really the best option around, and a welcome alternative to the hardship of their lives.

Questions About Suffering

1. Which character suffers the most in *As I Lay Dying*? The least?
2. Which kind of suffering is the most destructive in this novel – physical, or emotional?
3. What causes the suffering the Bundrens face? Are they responsible for their own misery, or is it, as Anse believes, simply a case of bad luck?

Chew on Suffering

The Bundren children intentionally inflict emotional pain on one another in response to their mother's death.

Theme of Women and Femininity

Women have it rough in *As I Lay Dying*. Their basic role in life is to have babies, which makes it difficult to establish a personal and individual identity, at least for one woman in particular. The novel also features a single, teenage girl pregnant with an unwanted baby. The difficulty of maintaining this secret while trying to get an illegal abortion is staggering. Meanwhile, shame and embarrassment seem to accompany any mention of the female body or female sexuality.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. How is sex portrayed in *As I Lay Dying*? Is this a positive or negative representation?
2. What is the significance of Addie's death when you consider that she is the matriarch of the Bundren family?
3. What ideal of femininity is promoted in this novel? What about masculinity? Is there an ideal male or ideal female character?

Chew on Women and Femininity

Addie is the strongest character in this book.

Theme of Religion

Religion is in many ways mocked by *As I Lay Dying*. The story is an ironic twist of the classic quest – a journey without a purpose, confession without redemption. Divine justice is never just, as immoral men are rewarded with good luck while struggling devotees are destroyed with bad. The central religious figure of the novel – a minister – is a hypocritical adulterer who illegitimately fathers a son while preaching chastity and morality.

Questions About Religion

1. What is the significance of Christianity and faith in this novel?
2. Which characters are particularly religious? Which characters reference God or Christianity? Are they the better for it, or worse off because of their faith?
3. What does the novel suggest about Faulkner's view on religion?

Chew on Religion

In *As I Lay Dying*, women possess sincere religious beliefs, while men are hypocritical in their faith.

Theme of Duty

As I Lay Dying explores obligation to the family as well as to honor and principles. But the story's principle plot line – a family's lengthy journey to town from the country – is essentially only masked by the guise of duty. Supposedly the trip is to honor the wishes of a dead woman, but the patriarch's reasons are ultimately selfish. Familial obligations create resentment in more ways than one, most noticeably for the family's matriarch, who despises her duty to have children and play wife to a husband she can't stand.

Questions About Duty

1. Why really drives Anse to Jefferson? We ventured that it might have something to do with those false teeth, but maybe we're just cynical. What do you think – how seriously does he take his duty to his wife?
2. Why does Tull help the Bundrens? He doesn't really have a duty to...right?
3. *As I Lay Dying* is full of characters persevering to accomplish what they think they *need* to do. From where do these various duties stem? Family? Religion? Morality?

Chew on Duty

Cash is the only Bundren to act according to the other family members' wishes.

Each member of the Bundren family focuses on an artificial or trivial "duty" to distract himself from the pain of Addie's death.

Theme of Versions of Reality

As I Lay Dying is written in multiple first-person narratives. Every new section is a new version of reality, particularly noticeable when the narratives overlap and cover the same event two different ways. The novel reminds us of the inherent subjectivity in any story, memory, or narrative. There are no "facts" in this novel, only opinions. Narratives toward the end of the story push the envelope even further, asking if terms like "sane" or "crazy" can ever be objectively defined, or if actions can ever be categorized clearly as one or the other.

Questions About Versions of Reality

1. Which character do we trust most in this novel? Who is trusted most by the other characters?
2. What is the difference between sanity and insanity, as portrayed in the novel?
3. What evidence is there against Darl's insanity?
4. Which other characters (besides Darl) might be considered insane?

Chew on Versions of Reality

Darl is the only trustworthy narrator in *As I Lay Dying*.

Theme of Poverty

As I Lay Dying tells the story of a poverty-stricken family experiencing disaster after disaster in Mississippi in the 1920s. Every incident is made worse by the fact that they have no money. Many of the characters have funds set aside for some special purpose: sometimes a luxury, sometimes a necessity. But in every case these funds are sacrificed to keep the family going. The youngest member of the family, a small boy, realizes what it means to be poor when looking at toys in the store window in town and understanding that rural boys like himself aren't allowed to have such things.

Questions About Poverty

1. How much of the suffering the Bundrens experience is the result of their poverty?
2. How does social class affect the way that those outside the family view the Bundrens?
3. Why does Anse repeatedly refuse help from others? Are his reasons valid, or, to put it

gently, stupid?

Chew on Poverty

All of the Bundrens' problems can be traced back to their poverty.

Quotes

Mortality Quotes

"She's a-going," he says. "Her mind is set on it." It's a hard life on women, for a fact. Some women. I mind my mammy lived to be seventy or more. Worked every day, rain or shine; never a sick day since her last chap was born until one day she kind of looked around her and then she went and taken that lace-trimmed night-gown she had had forty-five years and never wore out of the chest and put it on and laid down on the bed and pulled the covers up and shut her eyes. "You all will have to look out for pa the best you can," she said. "I'm tired." (8.9)

Thought: This hints at the way we ought to interpret Addie's death – as a respite after a long, difficult life. When we finally get to hear Addie's thoughts on the matter, she confirms this interpretation.

And the next morning they found him in his shirt-tail laying 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. (16.28)

Thought: Vardaman drilled these holes in the coffin because he thought his mother needed air to breathe. This is another example of the dark irony which pervades *As I Lay Dying*.

"Who's talking about him?" she says. "Who cares about him?" she says, crying. "I just wish that you and him and all the men in the world that torture us alive and flout us dead, dragging us up and down the country – " (29.48)

Thought: Rachel Samson makes Addie and her death into a symbol for the way women are treated.

I heard that my mother is dead. I wish I had time to let her die. I wish I had time to wish I had. It is because in the wild and outraged earth too soon too soon too soon. It's not that I wouldn't and will not it's that it is too soon too soon too soon. (30.2)

Thought: Dewey Dell realizes that she will soon be a mother herself. In this sense, her own mother died "too soon" – before Dewey Dell could properly take her place.

I could remember how my father used to say that the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead for a long time. (40.2)

Thought: We get more than one hint that Addie is actually the best off of all the Bundren family members. Life isn't exactly fun, so death is actually the greatest deal around.

We see his shoulders strain as he up-ends the coffin and slides it single-handed from the saw-horses. It looms unbelievably tall, hiding him: I would not have believed that Addie Bundren would have needed that much room to lie comfortable in; for another instant it stands upright while the sparks rain on it in scattering bursts as though they engendered other sparks from the contact. [...] This time Jewel is riding upon it, clinging to it. (50.16)

Thought: Look at the specific language used in this passage. The coffin almost becomes a being in itself, something alive... something Jewel can ride...like a horse. Hmmm!

But when we got it filled and covered and drove out the gate and turned into the lane where them fellows was waiting, when they come out and come on him and he jerked back, it was Dewey Dell that was on him before even Jewel could get at him (53.40).

Thought: Addie's burial is not the momentous occasion it was previously made out to be. In fact, it's not even covered in the narration. What do you make of that?

"God Amighty, why didn't Anse carry you to the nearest sawmill and stick your leg in the saw? That would have cured it. Then you all could have stuck his head into the saw and cured a whole family..." (54.7)

Thought: This is a bit of dark humor, but it's not out of line in this novel. Death in many ways is the cure for the suffering life brings.

"It's just a loan. God knows, I hate for my blooden children to reproach me. But I give them what was mine without stint. Cheerful I give them, without stint. And now they deny me. Addie. It was lucky for you you died, Addie." (58.24)

Thought: Anse begins to realize what the reader has known all along: that death is the best deal around.

Family Quotes

"Eat," he says. "Get the goddamn stuff out of sight while you got a chance, you pussel-gutted bastard. You sweet son of a bitch," he says. (3.12)

Thought: Jewel speaks to his horse in an unusually crude way. Since we know his horse is his most valued possession, we get the sense that he deals with love differently than his brothers. This goes some way in explaining his strange reaction to his mother's death.

I said you'd just let her alone. Sawing and knocking, and keeping the air always moving so fast on her face that when you're tired you cant breathe it, and that goddamn adze going One lick less. One lick less. One lick less. (4.2)

Thought: Jewel's love for Addie alienates him and causes the rest of the family to resent him.

"If everybody wasn't burning hell to get her there," Jewel says in that harsh, savage voice. "With Cash all day long right under the window, hammering and sawing at that – "

"It was her wish," pa says. "You got no affection nor gentleness for her. You never had." (5.21-2)

Thought: Although Addie's death brings the family physically together, they are torn apart over their varying feelings for her.

"She is going to die," he says. And old turkey-buzzard Tull coming to watch her die but I can fool them.

"When is she going to die?" I say.

"Before we get back," he says.

"Then why are you taking Jewel?" I say.

"I want him to help me load," he says. (7.6-10)

Thought: Darl is so jealous of his mother's love for Jewel that he deprives her of her favorite son's presence at her death.

"Why didn't you send for me sooner?" I say.

"Hit was jest one thing and then another," he says. "That ere corn me and the boys was aimin' to git up with, and Dewey Dell a-takin' good keer of her, and folks comin' in, a-offerin' to help and sich, till I jest thought..."

"Damn the money," I say. "Did you ever hear of me worrying a fellow before he was ready to pay?"

"Hit ain't begrudgin' the money," he says. "I jest kept a-thinkin'...She's goin', is she?"
(11.16-7)

Thought: This is the first of many pieces of evidence we get suggesting that Anse does not really love Addie.

Cash is filling up the holes he bored in the top of it. He is trimming out plugs for them, one at a time, the wood wet and hard to work. He could cut up a tin can and hide the holes and nobody wouldn't know the difference. Wouldn't mind, anyway. I have seen him spend a hour trimming out a wedge like it was glass he was working, when he could have reached around and picked up a dozen sticks and drove them into the joint and made it do. (20.20)

Thought: Cash shows his love for his mother in the meticulous work he does for her coffin.

"It's all right," Cash said. "He earned the money...So I dont reckon that horse cost anybody anything except Jewel. I dont reckon we need worry." (32.52)

Thought: Jewel and Cash show their love for each other by uniting against their father.

[Addie] cried hard, maybe because she had to cry so quiet; maybe because she felt the same way about tears she did about deceit, hating herself for doing it, hating him because she had to.

Thought: Addie's love for Jewel is complex and different from her love for her other sons.

"I give my promise," he says. "She is counting on it." (33.16)

Thought: Why does Anse work so hard to get Addie's coffin to Jefferson? All his other actions seem to suggest that he doesn't respect her (you know, like picking up a new wife at her grave site).

"It never bothered me much," [Cash] said.

"You mean, it never bothered Anse much," I said. (54.6)

Thought: Peabody recognizes that Anse has taken advantage of his children's obedience to the point of endangering their well being.

Suffering Quotes

I strike. I can hear the stick striking; I can see it hitting their heads, the breast-yoke, missing altogether sometimes as they rear and plunge, but I am glad.

"You kilt my maw!"

The stick breaks, they rearing and snorting, their feet popping loud on the ground; loud because it is going to rain and the air is empty for the rain. (13.9-11)

Thought: Each member of the Bundren family reacts to suffering in a different way. Here, Vardaman wants to blame it on someone or something, like Peabody's horses.

When we are going out, Whitfield comes. He is wet and muddy to the waist, coming in. "The Lord comfort this house," he says. "I was late because the bridge has gone. I went down to the old ford and swum my horse over, the Lord protecting me. His grace be upon this house." (20.26)

Thought: Whitfield seems to have no trouble crossing the bridge – the same crossing which will later devastate the Bundrens. Faulkner suggests that suffering is meted out unjustly, given that Whitfield is a hypocrite and a coward. (He preaches fidelity but has had an affair; he is too afraid to admit his action to Anse.)

"He ain't never been beholden to no man," he says. "I rather pay you for it." (29.36)

Thought: Jewel, like his father, is willing to make sacrifices on behalf of his pride.

I felt the current take us and I knew we were on the ford by that reason, since it was only by means of that slipping contact that we could tell that we were in motion at all. What had once been a flat surface was now a succession of troughs and hillocks lifting and falling about us, shoving at us, teasing at us with light lazy touches in the vain instants of solidity underfoot. Cash looked back at me, and then I knew that we were gone. (34.52)

Thought: In a way, Anse is right about bad luck – the Bundrens suffer at the hands of every possible calamity. It almost feels as though the world, or at least nature, really is against them.

"They can't be far away," pa says. "It all went together. Was there ere a such misfortunate man." (37.4)

Thought: Anse selfishly pities his luck after his sons unsuccessfully and almost fatally ford the river while he watched from the other side.

And then, life wasn't made to be easy on folks: they wouldn't ever have any reason to be good and die. (45.37)

Thought: This suggests that Addie got the better end of things by dying – she was at least spared the suffering of continuing to live.

The stall door has swung shut. Jewel thrusts it back with his buttocks and he appears, his back arched, the muscles ridged through his garments as he drags the horse out by its head. In the glare its eyes roll with soft, fleet, wild opaline fire; its muscles bunch and run as it flings its head about, lifting Jewel clear of the ground. He drags it on, slowly, terrifically; again he gives me across his shoulder a single glare furious and brief. (50.5)

Thought: Jewel's bravery and heroism shine in the novel's most violent moments.

It just cracked. It wouldn't come off.

"It'll take the hide, too," Mr. Gillespie said. "Why in the tarnation you put it on there? Didn't none of you think to grease his leg first?"

"I just aimed to help him," pa said. "It was Darl put it on."

"Where is Darl?" they said.

"Didn't none of you have more sense than that?" Mr. Gillespie said. "I'd 'a' thought he would anyway."

Jewel was lying on his face. (51.13-8)

Thought: Jewel and Cash, the sons who do the most for the family, are punished the most.

"I reckon he ought to be there," pa says. "God knows, it's a trial on me. Seems like it ain't no end to bad luck when once it starts." (53.7)

Thought: Again, Anse's lament revolves only around his own pain. He doesn't seem to recognize (or care?) about the rest of his family.

Women and Femininity Quotes

Then I would wait until they all went to sleep so I could lie with my shirt-tail up, hearing them asleep, feeling myself without touching myself, feeling the cool silence blowing upon my parts and wondering if Cash was yonder in the darkness doing it too, had been doing it perhaps for the last two years before I could have wanted to or could have. (3.3)

Thought: Darl, too, associates shame with his sexuality. (He's talking about masturbation here, by the way.)

"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. (6.9-11)

Thought: Cora is a firm believer in the standards of womanhood which Addie rejected.

I said if it dont mean for me to do it the sack will not be full and I will turn up the next row but if the sack is full, I cannot help it. It will be that I had to do it all the time and I cannot help it. (7.2)

Thought: Dewey Dell bases her decision on something arbitrary (cotton-picking), so she doesn't have to feel responsible for the consequences.

And that's why I can talk to [Darl] with knowing with hating because he knows.

Thought: Dewey Dell is referring to the fact that Darl knows she had sex with Lame. She clearly associates a great deal of shame with her actions.

"Poor Anse," I say. "She kept him at work for thirty-odd years. I reckon she is tired."

"And I reckon she'll be behind him for thirty years more," Kate says. "Or if it ain't her, he'll get another one before cotton-picking." (8.42-3)

Thought: Anse doesn't care who his wife is as long as he has a woman taking care of him.

She watches me: I can feel her eyes. It's like she was shoving at me with them. I have seen it before in women. Seen them drive from the room them coming with sympathy and pity, with actual help, and clinging to some trifling animal to whom they never were more than pack-horses. (11.27)

Thought: Addie was treated like a servant in her own home – this is the position women have in this novel.

He could do so much for me if he just would. He could do everything for me [...] But I know it is there because God gave women a sign when something has happened bad. (14.1)

Thought: Dewey Dell looks to men to solve her problems.

The cow nuzzles at me, moaning. "You'll just have to wait. What you got in you ain't nothing to what I got in me, even if you are a woman too." She follows me, moaning. (14.45)

Thought: Dewey Dell compares her own situation to that of the cow. Indeed, women are little more than animals in this world.

Pa was looking back at the house. He kind of lifted his hand a little and I saw the shade pulled back a little at the window and her face in it. (53.40)

Thought: Women are a source of resentment and conflict in *As I Lay Dying*.

"You guess three times and then I'll show you," [MacGowan] says. (55.65)

Thought: Sex is a commodity in *As I Lay Dying*.

"It ain't going to work," she says. "That son of a bitch." (56.20)

Thought: Dewey Dell is so desperate to discreetly get rid of her pregnancy that she ignores her better judgment and has sex with a stranger. Even though she suspects MacGowan is tricking her, she feels compelled to participate.

Religion Quotes

Riches is nothing in the face of the Lord, for He can see into the heart. (2.5)

Thought: Religion offers solace for the Bundrens.

Now and then a fellow gets to thinking about it. Not often, though. Which is a good thing. For the Lord aimed for him to do and not to spend too much time thinking, because his brain it's like a piece of machinery: it won't stand a whole lot of racking. It's best when it all runs along the same, doing the day's work and not no one part used no more than needful. (16.22)

Thought: Vernon uses the idea of God to give authority to his own opinions.

"I can't get nothing outen him except about a fish," she says. "It's a judgment on them. I see the hand of the Lord upon this boy for Anse Bundren's judgment and warning." (16.24)

Thought: Cora does the same as her husband – uses religion to back her own beliefs.

If it's a judgment, it ain't right. Because the Lord's got more to do than that. He's bound to have. (16.29)

Thought: He is more practical and less bound to dogma.

"Well, it'll take the Lord to get her over that river now," Peabody says. "Anse can't do it."

"And I reckon He will," Quick says. "He's took care of Anse a long time, now."

"It's a fact," Littlejohn says.

"Too long to quit now," Armstid says.

"I reckon He's like everybody else around here," Uncle Billy says. "He's done it so long now He can't quit." (20.42-6)

Thought: Anse has gotten by only with the help of God and kind neighbors. Tull even remarks that there's something about him that makes other men want to help.

"I'm bounding toward my God and my reward," Cora sung. (20.81)

Thought: Cora's faith in God contrasts to the bad luck the Bundrens face throughout the novel. It suggests that her beliefs are unwarranted.

I am chosen of the Lord, for who He loveth, so doeth He chastiseth. But I be durn if He don't take some curious ways to show it, seems like. (28.2)

Thought: Anse believes that God punishes him because He loves him. He (Anse) seems to be comforting himself.

"I give her my word," Anse says. "It is sacred on me. I know you begrudge it, but she will bless you in heaven." (33.12)

Thought: This would suggest that Anse tries so hard to fulfill his wife's wishes for religious reasons.

I said, "Just because you have been a faithful wife is no sign that there is no sin in your heart, and just because your life is hard is no sign that the Lord's grace is absolving you." And she said, "I know my own sin. I know that I deserve my punishment. I do not begrudge it." (39.1)

Thought: Addie views her death as the punishment she deserves for having an affair. That is why she so willingly goes toward death.

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 people to whom sin is just a matter of words, to them salvation is just words too. (40.30)

Thought: Addie is more religious than Cora because she knows sin and salvation beyond mere words.

Duty Quotes

"She ought to taken them," Kate says. "But those rich town ladies can change their minds. Poor folks cant" (2.4).

Thought: Rich people are free of the sense of responsibility which so plagues the Bundrens.

Then they are rigid, motionless, terrific, the horse back-thrust on stiffened, quivering legs, with lowered head; Jewel with dug heels, shutting off the horse's wind with one hand, with the other patting the horse's neck in short strokes myriad and caressing, cursing the horse with obscene ferocity.

They stand in rigid terrific hiatus, the horse trembling and groaning. Then Jewel is on the horse's back. He flows upward in a stooping swirl like the lash of a whip, his body in mid-air shaped to the horse. For another moment the horse stands spraddled, with lowered head, before it bursts into motion. (3.8-9)

Thought: Jewel's steady patience and persistence explain his affinity for horses.

Sawing and knocking, and keeping the air always moving so fast on her face that when you're tired you can't breathe it, and that goddamn adze going One lick less. One lick less. One lick less until everybody that passes in the road will have to stop and see it and say what a fine carpenter he is. (4.2)

Thought: Jewel resents Cash's actions because he doesn't understand him. He mistakenly believes that his brother is reveling in his abilities.

I made it on the bevel.

- 1. There is more surface for the nails to grip.*
- 2. There is twice the gripping-surface to each seam. (18.1-3)*

Thought: From Cash's perspective, we see that his obsession with the coffin is really a reflection of his love for his mother.

She laid there three days in that box, waiting for Darl and Jewel to come clean back home and get a new wheel and go back to where the wagon was in the ditch. Take my team, Anse, I said.

We'll wait for ourn, he said. She'll want it so. She was ever a particular woman.

On the third day they got back and they loaded her into the wagon and started and it already too late. You'll have to go all the way round by Samson's bridge. It'll take you a day to get there. Then you'll be forty miles from Jefferson. Take my team, Anse.

We'll wait for ourn. She'll want it so. (20.72-5)

Thought: Anse insists he's doing his duty as Addie's husband, but it's clear that such perseverance is impractical.

Ma wanted to get the doctor, but pa didn't want to spend the money without it was needful, and Jewel did seem all right except for his thinness and his way of dropping off to sleep at any moment. (32.17)

Thought: Jewel's perseverance in obtaining his horse defines his character.

It wasn't on a balance. I told them that if they wanted it to tote and ride on a balance, they would have to – (38.1)

Thought: Cash repeats the same line we heard earlier in Chapter 22. His blind insistence mirrors that of his father's.

"But I reckon I can talk him around," he says. "A man'll always help a fellow in a tight, if he's got ere a drop of Christian blood in him." (43.4)

Thought: The Bundren's persistent faith in God is mocked by the tragedy which befalls them.

It wasn't nothing else to do. It was either send him to Jackson, or have Gillespie sue us, because he knows some way that Darl set fire to it. I don't know how he knowed, but he did. (53.1)

Thought: Anse does his duty as a citizen by sending Darl to the mental institution, but he betrays his duty to his family in doing so.

Versions of Reality Quotes

He said he knew without the words like he told me that ma is going to die without words, and I knew he knew because if he had said he knew with the words I would not have believed that he had been there and saw us. (7.3)

Thought: Dewey Dell and Darl's strange ability to communicate without words is the first indication that Darl has strange, magical narrative capabilities – it's also the first indication that he's crazy.

I have said and I say again, that's ever living thing the matter with Darl: he just thinks by himself too much.

Thought: People mistake Darl's pensiveness for insanity.

My mother is a fish.

Thought: The way Vardaman deals with his mother's death is not dissimilar to Darl's own surreal thought processes.

[...] we hadn't no more than passed Tull's lane when Darl begun to laugh. Setting back there on the plank seat with Cash, with his dead ma lying in her coffin at his feet, laughing. How many times I told him it's doing such things as that that makes folks talk about him, I don't know. (26.1)

Thought: Darl is laughing at the utter absurdity of his family's situation. In a way, *As I Lay Dying* ends on this sort of dark humor (with Anse picking up a new wife while he borrows the shovels to bury his first).

He is looking at me. He dont say nothing; just look at me with them queer eyes of hisn that makes folks talk. I always say it aint never been what he done so much or said or anything so much as how he looks at you. It's like he had got inside of you, someway. Like somehow you was looking at yourself and your doings outen his eyes. (31.15)

Thought: Darl's eyes make people feel uncomfortable because his powers of *perception* scare them.

And then I knew that I knew. I knew that as plain on that day as I knew about Dewey Dell on that day. (32.63)

Thought: See? Darl perceives that which other people miss. This frightens Dewey Dell and anyone else trying to keep a secret.

And then I knew that I knew. I knew that as plain on that day as I knew about Dewey Dell on that day. (32.63)

Thought: Darl's conception of fact is actually conjecture.

When the only sin she ever committed was being partial to Jewel that never loved her and was its own punishment, in preference to Darl that was touched by God Himself and considered queer by us mortals and that did love her.

Thought: Cora's lack of knowledge of the Bundrens' family dynamic as well as her devout Christian faith limits the accuracy of her perceptions.

I don't know how he knowed, but he did. Vardaman seen him do it, but he swore he never told nobody but Dewey Dell and that she told him not to tell nobody. But Gillespie knowed it. But he would a suspicioned it sooner or later. He could have done it that night just watching the way Darl acted. (52.1)

Thought: Everyone seems to think they know something, but in the end a lot of information is assumed or told second-hand and thought of as factual. Faulkner leaves holes in the story so readers can interpret the truth for themselves.

Poverty Quotes

So when Miss Lawington told me about the cakes I thought that I could bake them and earn enough at one time to increase the net value of the flock the equivalent of two head. And that by saving the eggs out one at a time, even the eggs wouldn't be costing anything. And that week they laid so well that I not only saved out enough eggs above what we had engaged to sell, to bake the cakes with, I had saved enough so that the flour and the sugar and the stove wood would not be costing anything. (2.1)

Thought: Faulkner very skillfully contrasts Cora's obsessive concern over something so trivial – the cost of the cakes – with the gravity of Addie's death.

"We'll need that three dollars then, sure," I say. (5.8)

Thought: Darl parts with his dying mother for a mere three dollars. (Though keep in mind that three dollars was a lot more money then than it is today.) Still, the point is that the Bundrens' poverty is so restrictive that it affects all their decisions, even during this family crisis.

"Why didn't you send for me sooner?" I say.

"Hit was jest one thing and then another," he says. "That ere corn me and the boys was aimin' to git up with, and Dewey Dell a-takin' good keer of her, and folks comin' in, a-offerin' to help and sich, till I jest thought..."

"Damn the money," I say. "Did you ever hear of me worrying a fellow before he was ready to pay?" (11.16-7)

Thought: Anse risks his wife's life just to save money. As readers, we may be inclined to condemn him for this, but it soon becomes clear that even the smallest amount of money is a matter of life and death for the Bundrens.

"God's will be done," he says. "Now I can get them teeth." (12.22)

Thought: Then again, maybe he is a selfish jerk after all.

Dewey Dell said we will get some bananas. The train is behind the glass, red on the track. When it runs the track shines on and off. Pa said flour and sugar and coffee costs so much. Because I am a country boy because boys in town. Bicycles. Why do flour and sugar and coffee cost so much when he is a country boy. "Wouldn't you ruther have some bananas instead?" Bananas are gone, eaten. Gone. When it runs on the track shines again. "Why ain't I a town boy, pa?" I said God made me. I did not said to God to made me in the country. If He can make the train, why can't He make them all in the town because flour and sugar and coffee. "Wouldn't you ruther have bananas?" (15.3)

Thought: The Bundrens' poverty seems to affect Vardaman most of all, here, and again later when he admires the toy train sets in the store window in Jefferson.

"I thank you," Bundren says. "We wouldn't discommode you. We got a little something in the basket. We can make out." (29.25-6)

Thought: Anse's pride overcomes practicality as he refuses yet again to take help.

And that may have been when I first found it out, that Addie Bundren should be hiding anything she did, who had tried to teach us that deceit was such that, in a world where it was, nothing else could be very bad or very important, not even poverty.

Thought: Addie's principles prove to be hypocritical, like so many other characters in the novel.

"I got the money to pay you," she said.

"Is it your own, or did he act enough of a man to give you the money?"

"He give it to me. Ten dollars. He said that would be enough."

"A thousand dollars wouldn't be enough in my store and ten cents wouldn't be enough," I said.

"You take my advice and go home and tell you pa or your brothers if you have any or the first man you come to in the road." (45.28-31)

Thought: Like Anse, Moseley cares more about principles than money.

"God knows," pa says. "I wouldn't be beholden, God knows." (46.3)

Thought: Pa insists that only someone inside the family dig the grave for Addie, so that he doesn't become beholden to any man. Ironically, he's hurting his own family and forcing them all to make sacrifices for him (Cash and his broken leg, Dewey Dell and her abortion money, etc.).

"It was give to me. To buy something with."

"To buy what with?"

"Pa. Pa."

"It's just a loan. God knows, I hate for my blooden children to reproach me. But I give them what was mine without stint. Cheerful I give them, without stint. And now they deny me. Addie. It was lucky for you you died, Addie."

"Pa. Pa."

"God knows it is."

He took the money and went out. (58.21-7)

Thought: This is Dewey Dell's abortion money, and Anse eventually uses it to buy a new set of teeth for himself. His selfishness dominates the end of the novel.

Plot Analysis

Classic Plot Analysis

Initial Situation

Waiting for Addie's death

The first few chapters of *As I Lay Dying* explore many different perspectives, but all are focused around the same thing: Addie is dying. From Jewel and Darl debating their three-dollar journey, to the dull thudding of Cash's axe, to Cara and her cakes, all thoughts are filtered through this lens.

Conflict

Addie's body has to be taken to Jefferson

Unfortunately, this journey is a bit more involved than hopping on the freeway. Given the Bundren's level of poverty, traveling at all means relying on the generosity of others, and we all know how much that bothers Anse.

Complication

Bad weather.

OK, that's a bit of an understatement. We're not talking a light drizzle here. Lots of rain means flooding, and flooding means no easy bridge access. The whole episode of crossing the river is The Big Complication on the Bundrens' journey to Jefferson.

Climax

FIRE!!!

If we had a nickel for every novel that hit its climax with a mass conflagration... Anyway, you get the picture: raging fire, Jewel dashing into the flames, the near cremation of our main dead girl.

Suspense

Who set off the fire? Will Dewey Dell get her abortion? What secret something did Vardaman see?

These are the questions which plague the reader in the suspense portion of the novel. It's not exactly clear whether Darl set the barn fire, even if we suspect as much. It's hard to tell much of anything from the child-like ramblings that are Vardaman's narrations, so when he reveals that

he saw something it's completely unclear what that might be. In fact, at first it seems like he's just talking about his sister's secret baby, until he ups the stakes by revealing that it has nothing to do with her. Speaking of babies, we worry that Dewey Dell won't be able to get her abortion. Oh, the suspense.

Denouement

Some questions are answered, others not so much

We know for sure that Darl set fire to the barn, but Cash raises a far more interesting question: what does it mean to be crazy? And can we really dismiss Darl as a psycho for the crime we now know he committed? Meanwhile, we know that Dewey Dell hasn't been able to get her abortion and that Pa took her money, but does this mean she's stuck with the baby? Hard to say, since the novel ends before we can be sure.

Conclusion

"Meet Mrs. Bundren."

Basically, everyone got screwed, no one got what they wanted, and life is more full of suffering than ever. Except for Anse, who finally got his teeth at the expense of all of his children's dreams.

Booker's Seven Basic Plots Analysis: The Quest

The Call

Addie Bundren's dying wish is to be buried in Jefferson.

This last wish instigates the story arc of the novel, sending the Bundrens on their journey.

The Journey

Traveling to Jefferson

This is your classic journey stage, fraught with peril as you might expect. Bad weather, a broken bridge, a secret pregnancy, and Anse's rather annoying pride are all obstacles faced on the way to Jefferson.

Arrival and Frustration

Darl burning the barn down

OK, so this is more frustration than it is arrival (the Bundrens haven't gotten to Jefferson yet). But it has all the hallmarks. Just ask Cash, whose twice-broken leg is encased in cement that gets charred in the flames. Or Jewel, whose horse is traded for a team of crumby mules that can barely pull the wagon the rest of the way.

The Final Ordeals

The Bundrens arrive in Jefferson; everything continues to suck.

The journey might be over, but the obstacles keep right on coming. Darl is taken away to the mental institution and Dewey Dell gets taken advantage of.

The Goal

Addie is buried.

Oddly enough, the narrative doesn't even cover the burial, probably to make the point that it doesn't really matter. The goal may have been achieved, but it doesn't mean the journey – or the suffering – is over.

Three Act Plot Analysis

Act I

Everyone waits for Addie to die. Then...she dies.

Act II

The Bundrens' journey to Jefferson is rough and full of obstacles, including the weather, sabotage from within the family, and general hatred/mutual animosity between the family members themselves. The act ends when Darl burns down the Gillespie barn.

Act III

The family arrives in Jefferson only to have Darl dragged off to be institutionalized. Addie is buried, Dewey Dell doesn't get an abortion, Cash's leg is ruined, and Anse welcomes a new Mrs. Bundren to the family.

Study Questions

1. What is more important in *As I Lay Dying* – form or content? That is, is the concept of multiple narratives more important than the story of the Bundrens?
2. Which character is the reader meant to relate to in this novel? Does the answer to this question change as the novel progresses?
3. What is the effect of hearing narrative perspectives from *outside* the Bundren family, in addition to those from the members of it?
4. How is *As I Lay Dying* a portrait of its setting? What do we learn about Mississippi in the 1920s from reading this novel?
5. How is information revealed to the reader in this novel? When are we intentionally left confused, and how does this affect the way we process the story?
6. How does the narrative structure change over the course of the novel? (Start with the fact that we begin in Darl's perspective and end in Cash's.)

Characters

All Characters

Darl Bundren Character Analysis

Darl is Addie's second child and narrates sections 1, 3, 5, 10, 12, 17, 21, 23, 25, 27, 32, 34, 37, 42, 46, 48, 50, 52, 57. He is probably in his late teens.

Darl's Relationship to Jewel

...is messy, we know. The very first paragraph of the novel starts with the two boys walking toward the house together. Darl makes a point of describing the fifteen feet between them and the different ways they walk, as well as the disparity in height. Later in the novel, he again points out that Jewel is 300 yards away. These physical distances and differences set the stage for the more relevant differences in character between these two. Articulate and cerebral, Darl is a far cry from the stoic and brooding man of action that is Jewel.

He also resents his younger brother, and it probably has a lot to do with the fact that Addie loves Jewel most of all (read her post-mortem confessional in Section 40 for all the proof you need). This really hits home when you consider that Jewel doesn't outwardly show his affection, and Darl does. From one perspective, Cora's for example, Darl deserves his mother's love and unfairly doesn't get it.

So Darl lashes out, mostly by taunting Jewel in what, from yet another perspective, seems incredibly cruel. He repeats over and over that their mother has died. He continually points out the buzzards that fly overhead. And he essentially tells Jewel that he is not a real member of the family by calling his paternity into question to his face. At the beginning of the novel, when he takes Jewel away on that three-dollar trip for Tull, he does so intentionally to ensure that Jewel is not around for Addie's death.

Is Darl Crazy?

Take all of these malicious actions and add in the fact that Darl burns down an entire barn, is carted off to a mental institution, and rambles on about himself in the third person, and you've got a solid case that the guy is insane. Unfortunately, in *As I Lay Dying*, nothing is this clear cut. As you'll read more about in "Point of View," there is no such thing as "sane" and "crazy" – it all depends on who's looking.

Take the barn-burning, for example. From one point of view, Darl is a psycho, lashing out in destructive ways. From another, he is trying to end this fruitless quest to Jefferson and put his mother's body to rest in an easy, natural way. Notice that Darl cries after Jewel saves the coffin? It's likely that Darl's actions are driven not by mental incapacity, but by powers of perception which exceed those of the rest of his family. If Darl realizes that the journey is a farce and that his father's motives aren't as noble as he pretends, then burning the body ASAP (or letting it wash down the river) are fairly logical attempts. It's probably also his attempt at burning away everything his family has built up on the course of this journey – think of it as cleaning out your desk drawers or going through your closet and throwing out those tie-dyes you've been keeping since the mid-eighties; it's a purging act. Cash picks up on this when he says that Darl was trying to burn up the value of Jewel's horse. Darl is cleansing away all that emotional garbage in one big bang.

Unfortunately, not all the characters share Cash and Darl's powers of perception. What seems justified to Darl ends up looking like madness to everyone else. Darl's ability to really see things sets him way apart from the others, and this barn-burning isn't the first time. Darl somehow knows "without words" that Dewey Dell is pregnant. He is aware that Jewel is not Anse's son. More than one character remarks on his eyes with a sense of trepidation (see "Symbols, Imagery, and Allegory" for more). This is a scary talent to have, and it probably has something to do with the weird narrative technique of *As I Lay Dying* and the unique role Darl plays in this structure.

Darl as the Narrator

Is Darl the unofficial narrator of *As I Lay Dying*? That would certainly explain why he knows everything – narrators are traditionally by nature omniscient regarding the stories they tell. It would also explain how he's able to narrate scenes for which he is not present, like Addie's death. As the novel progresses, and he seems to get "crazier," he also gets more narrator-like. Think about the very last section Darl narrates: it's in the third person. Crazy, maybe, but also par for the narrator course.

Darl Bundren Timeline and Summary

- Darl returns from fields with Jewel, a head shorter than his brother.
- He finds Cash working on Addie Bundren's coffin; he thinks it will give her "confidence and comfort" (1.5).
- He goes to get a cool drink of gourd water.
- Darl tells his pa a half truth about Jewel's whereabouts; he really knows about Jewel's devotion to the wild horse.
- Darl leaves with Jewel to earn three dollars, wanting him along to help with the load.

- He predicts the timing of his mother's death.
- Darl is the only family member who knows of Dewey Dell's secret pregnancy.
- Darl narrates Addie's death scene, from on the road.
- He tells Jewel that Addie has died while they're stuck in a ditch during the storm.
- Darl philosophizes about existence before he sleeps.
- Darl returns to the barn with Jewel.
- He carries the coffin to the wagon with the family.
- On the wagon, he notices Dewey Dell looking at Peabody.
- Darl tells the family that Jewel will catch up with them.
- He leaves for Jefferson with the family.
- Darl laughs when Jewel catches up with them right where he predicted he would, at Tull's.
- Darl stays overnight at Samson's with the family.
- He gets to the flooded bridge.
- He expects Vernon to lend his mule to the family.
- Darl fords the river on the wagon with Cash.
- He jumps into the river when the team is lost.
- Darl gets out of the water safely, but doesn't save the coffin.
- He stays overnight at Armstid's with the family.
- He arrives in Mottson.
- Darl mixes cement to pour on Cash's leg.
- Darl asks Jewel who his father is.
- Darl burns Gillespie's barn down.
- Darl arrives in Jefferson with the family.
- He offers to bring Cash to Peabody's.
- He is thought of as mentally insane and arrested.
- Darl is handcuffed and taken away, laughing hysterically.
- He sees his family eating bananas on the wagon.
- He speaks of himself in the third person.

Jewel Bundren Character Analysis

Jewel is Addie's third child and narrates Section 4. His biological father is the Reverend Whitfield.

If you look at the amount of times Jewel narrates in this novel, you might think that he were a minor character just passing by the Bundrens' lives. And this would be an interesting note to make because, biologically, Jewel is not part of the Bundren household. Darl reminds us of as much by repeatedly describing him as pale, wooden, rigid, solid – words that both characterize and separate Jewel, physically, from the others. Rough around the edges and relating more to horses than people, he doesn't quite seem the same as others – like Darl, say. A man of few words, and fewer nice words, Jewel is a foreigner amongst family. And he knows it. Jewel's

actions further isolate him from his siblings and father. After he stays up working nights to earn a horse, he becomes the only Bundren child to have a possession of his own. Notice how adamant he is that his horse will never eat any of Anse's hay. He doesn't want to be beholden to his "father." He doesn't want to be a part of this "family."

So of course it's no surprise that Jewel takes off with his horse after Anse tells him he's traded it for a mule. This is the perfect time for Jewel to get out of town and away from the Bundrens. So why, oh why, does he ever come back, especially since it means giving up the horse for which he worked so hard?

The short answer is: Addie. It's hard to see it, but Jewel fiercely loves his mother. Remember, Jewel may not feel a part of the Bundren family, but he's still Addie's son. In fact, he probably feels closer to her because he can't feel close to the rest of the family. We really get to see Jewel's love for his mother during the one section he does narrate. His feelings are unique in that he wants to be alone with her for her death—he doesn't want to share her with anyone else, and particularly not his siblings, who he feels are disrespecting her. Notice that Darl describes the sound of Cash's adze as "Chuck," while Jewel hears "One lick less." He imagines that every swing of the adze means that the distance to Addie's death is made one lick less; he is chipping away her life. In this way, we, perhaps for the first time, get the feeling that someone actually cares about Addie, that her life is consequential. Throughout the novel, Jewel continues to prove his love for his mother, first in the river and second in the barn, both times by saving the coffin. Remember Addie predicting that Jewel was her salvation, that he would save her from water and fire? We'll deal with that more in her character analysis.

Meanwhile, let's talk about horses. Jewel is repeatedly characterized by his affinity for these creatures. And, because it's Jewel, we're talking tough love. He's rough with the horses, but that's what tames them. His abilities set him apart from the others in the novel, establishing Jewel as a loner – as if we didn't know that already. Interestingly, Jewel's love for horses isn't that different from the way he feels about his mother. The emotion is an incommunicable one and ill-understood by those around him. This is yet another case of perspective. From Cora's point of view, Jewel is selfish and uncaring. From Darl's, he is unfairly the object of their mother's love. Peabody feels as though Jewel treats his mother as nothing but a pack-horse – the irony, of course, is that Jewel intensely loves both beings. Look at this description of Jewel saving Addie's coffin from the fire: "This time Jewel is riding upon [the coffin], clinging to it, until it crashes down and flings him forward and clear" (50.16). Sounds like a horse, right?

Jewel Bundren Timeline and Summary

- Jewel's history: he secretly worked overnight for months on Quick's forty-acre field to earn his horse.
- Jewel returns from the fields with Darl, taller and soldier-like, stepping through cottonhouse

windows.

- He goes straight into the pasture after getting home, whistles for his horse.
- Jewel more or less gets in a brutal fight with the horse, and reigns him in to feed him.
- Jewel commands the horse to eat all the free hay he can get, while no one else is watching (except for Darl).
- Jewel resents Cash for flashily building the coffin for Addie for everyone to see.
- Jewel seems to be a man of few words, often described as wooden.
- He hates people who speak as though his mom were going to die tomorrow. He is in denial about the depth of Addie's sickness.
- Jewel leaves with Darl to earn three dollars.
- Jewel attempts to free the wagon from the ditch after a wheel breaks.
- Jewel is told by Darl that their mother has died.
- Jewel returns to the barn with Darl.
- He roughly hurries the coffin onto the wagon.
- He curses Darl to his face.
- Jewel goes to the barn, rebelling against Anse's wishes.
- Jewel rides his horse to catch up with the family at Tull's.
- He stays overnight at Samson's with the family.
- He offers to pay Samson for extra food for his horse.
- Jewel arrives at the flooded bridge with the family.
- Jewel shuts Vernon up when he suggests that they prolong the journey even longer.
- Jewel demands that Vernon lend his mule to them.
- Jewel leads the river cross on his horse.
- He is thrown into the water and separated from his horse.
- Jewel looks for Cash's tools, is successful at finding several tools.
- Jewel stays overnight at Armstid's with the family.
- He rides off with his horse after hearing that Anse bartered it for a team.
- Jewel trades the horse for the mules, but doesn't go with the family.
- Jewel returns to the family after they've arrived in Mottson.
- Jewel curses Darl when he asks who his father is.
- Jewel frees the animals from the burning barn.
- Jewel saves his mother's coffin from the fire.
- He almost gets in a fight with a towns person on the way to Jefferson.
- He arrives in Jefferson with the family.
- Jewel tells officials to kill Darl.

Anse Bundren Character Analysis

Anse is Addie's husband and father to Cash, Darl, Dewey Dell, and Vardaman. He narrates sections 9, 26, and 28.

Anse is a lazy man. We know as much because most of his neighbors tell us so and because time and time again we see him acting this way. It is Cash and Jewel who almost drown in the river trying to get the wagon and coffin across, NOT Anse. It is Jewel who risks his life saving the coffin from the burning barn, NOT Anse. What makes us dislike Anse even more is that he tries to justify his laziness – by using God. In the first section he narrates, he argues that God never intended man to move much. If he had, he would have built him differently.

In fact, Anse uses God or the supernatural to justify just about everything he doesn't want to deal with. Addie is dying in part because he was too cheap to send for the doctor; yet he claims he's suffering unjust bad luck. Cash's leg is in such bad shape for the same reason, but Anse would rather pour cement over it than spend the money to have it properly fixed. Time and time again he resorts to lamenting his own bad luck instead of admitting his own bad choices.

Worst of all, however, is Anse's selfishness. He repeatedly puts his children's dreams or needs on hold for himself. Jewel's horse, Cash's graphophone, even Dewey Dell's abortion are all sacrificed on behalf of Anse. Of course, according to Anse, the ends justify the means: they have to get Addie to Jefferson to honor her last wishes. Does this sound like the Anse Bundren we know and dislike? Exactly. Throughout the novel, we suspect that Anse has ulterior motives for traveling to Jefferson, starting with the moment that Addie dies and he's all, "At last! Now I can get my new teeth!" This is arguably the reason that he travels to Jefferson at all. Far from respecting Addie and her wishes, the journey largely disrespects her body as it decays above ground for all to witness (and smell). Anse's haste in finding a new wife literally over the grave of his first only adds to this dishonor.

Anse Bundren Timeline and Summary

- Anse is sitting on back porch, and tucks tobacco between his gums.
- Anse is characterized by rubbing his knees, gazing out over the land, and never doing anything that would cause him to sweat.
- He is against Jewel and Darl going, but tells them to be back by sundown tomorrow.
- He claims to always have had terrible luck.
- He orders Vardaman to clean his own fish, without looking at him.
- Anse gets up when the Tulls leave at 5 p.m.
- He goes to Addie's room, where she is not moving.
- Anse apologizes to Vernon for not getting to the corn, saying his mind's not straight.
- Anse dwells on his bad luck, about how it's not something he can escape.
- He reminisces about the transition to Addie's bedridden state.
- Anse tells Vardaman to wash his hands.
- He thinks that his heart just isn't in it anymore.
- He follows Peabody into Addie's room.
- Anse tells Peabody that he would have been called sooner if not for the bad corn crop, but

people have been helping out.

- Anse claims there's no need to tell Addie about her situation, since she would know if she saw Peabody there.
- He orders Cash to finish up the coffin, Dewey Dell to make supper.
- He messes up the quilt of his deceased wife.
- He is happy he'll be able to get teeth (right after his wife has died).
- Anse sits down to eat with Cash and Peabody; he doesn't eat at first, then figures Addie would have no problem with it.
- He sits outside with Cash while his son finishes the coffin.
- When it rains, Anse wears Jewel's raincoat and uses Dewey Dell's to protect the lantern.
- He decides to wait for Darl and Jewel to come home, despite the delay of three days and the bad weather conditions.
- He leaves for Jefferson with the family.
- Anse says Jewel would have killed that horse if it hadn't been for him.
- Anse stay overnight at Samson's with the family.
- He arrives at the bridge with the family.
- He figures they should attempt to cross it.
- Anse walks across the bridge safely, then watches three of his sons get thrown into the river.
- He stays overnight at Armstid's.
- He rides Jewel's horse to Snopes' place and barter's Jewel's horse for a new team.
- Anse arrives in Mottson with the team.
- Anse defends his family's right to be there, stinky coffin in tow or no.
- He denies the fact that Cash needs to see a doctor.
- He decides that cement should be put on Cash's leg, especially once they've spent money on the cement.
- He watches as the barn burns and Jewel and Darl go crazy in it.
- He arrives in Jefferson with the family.
- Anse goes to Mrs. Bundren's to borrow spades.
- He buries Addie.
- Anse allows officials to take Darl away.
- Anse takes money from Dewey Dell to buy himself teeth.
- Anse introduces Mrs. Bundren to the family

Cash Bundren Character Analysis

Cash is Addie's oldest child and narrates sections 18, 22, 38, 53, and 59.

Cash is the novel's logical thinker, as evidenced in his narrative sections. He gives us lists, not paragraphs. He cites reasons instead of delving into the messy waters of emotion. He's a type-A perfectionist – notice how he holds each board to the coffin up to the window for his

mother to approve. This might seem a little tactless –and indeed it is from more than one perspective in the novel – but Cash clearly doesn't intend it this way. Remember that each son shows his love for Addie in his own way, and in a way that is inevitably misunderstood as apathy by those around him. For Cash, creating the perfect coffin is his final gift to his mother. In his mind, it's only logical that her final resting place be as clean and orderly as possible.

Of course, this is *As I Lay Dying*, land of the tragic farce. Addie goes in upside down, the coffin won't balance on the wagon, and Vardaman drills holes into his mother's face. Through all this, no one listens to the very logical Cash. (Check out Section 38, which he narrates, or let us paraphrase for you: "I told you so!")

Despite being completely ignored and unappreciated, Cash turns out to be quite the stand-up guy – especially compared to his brother Darl. Remember that story about Jewel and his horse? Darl resented his younger brother for having something of his own and for getting Addie to cover up for his absence. Cash, on the other hand, kept his brother's secret and harbored no jealousy. On the journey, Cash silently bears the pain of his broken leg while Darl taunts Jewel about his paternity and the buzzards circling above their dead mother. Cash takes over where Darl falls short in more ways than one. In regards to principle and character, yes, but also in terms of function in this novel: as the narrator. Read all about this in "Point of View," where we also discuss Cash's big "crazy is a relative term" revelation.

Oh, and one more thing: Cash is sort of the Jesus guy here. Generally, being the Jesus guy means giving up stuff you want or sacrificing yourself for others. Cash sacrifices the use of his leg to the journey to bury Addie and loses out on the graphophone he always wanted. He's also a carpenter, which is actually your big Jesus figure tip-off. (Jesus was a carpenter.) But what's the point? Remember in "Genre" when we talked about *As I Lay Dying* as an ironic inversion of the classic quest? And how there is no divine justice or worthy purpose to the Bundrens' journey? Good – apply that to Cash's role as a Jesus figure. His sacrifice is all for naught. He loses a leg, but for what? To bury his mother? Not really. To get his father some new teeth is more accurate. When he finally hears a graphophone playing, it's coming from the house of the woman his father takes as a wife (and with whom he tarnishes Addie's memory). And remember that he broke his leg the first time while mending the roof of a church – more ironic inversion of justice. Or, in the words we all remember from childhood: "It's not faiiiirrrrrrrr!!!"

Cash Bundren Timeline and Summary

- Cash is heard building Addie's coffin.
- He shows Addie the coffin throughout the construction process.
- Cash goes into the room and announces Addie's death, saw in hand.
- He goes to the stalls and finds Vardaman sitting alone.

- Cash comments that he hopes the horses have run past Tull's house.
- Cash eats dinner with Anse and Peabody, without washing his hands or arms first.
- Cash works all through the night in pouring rain to finish Addie's coffin.
- Cash gives reasons for creating the coffin on a slant, noting that it looks neater and suits its purpose better.
- Cash advises the men to reposition the coffin, but no one bothers to listen.
- He leaves for Jefferson with the family.
- Cash stay overnight at Samson's with the family.
- He arrives at the bridge with the family.
- Cash suggests that Dewey Dell, Vardaman, and Anse walk across the bridge instead of going with the rest of the boys on the wagon, for safety reasons.
- He attempts to ford the river on the wagon with Darl.
- He suggests that Darl save himself and jump into the water.
- Cash is thrown into the water, holds onto the rope.
- Cash is kicked by Jewel's horse, re-breaking his leg.
- Cash is put on Addie's coffin during wagon rides.
- Cash arrives in Mottson with the family.
- Cash has cement put on his broken leg.
- Cash has water poured on his leg when he starts sweating.
- He has his cast broken off after it is blackened.
- He arrives in Jefferson with the family.
- He decides to be present at Addie's burial rather than going straight to the doctor's.
- He sits on the wagon with family sans Darl, eating bananas.

Dewey Dell Bundren Character Analysis

Dewey Dell is Addie's fourth child and only daughter. She narrates sections 7, 14, 30, and 58. She's also seventeen and pregnant.

It's not easy being Dewey Dell. She's the only girl in a family of boys, now that her mother's just died, she's pregnant with a baby she doesn't want and can't talk about with anyone, her attempts at getting an abortion have been foiled three times – once by her own father, and the stakes of family obligation are now through the roof (as the surviving female, Dewey Dell has to take on matriarchal duties like cooking and cleaning, and even looking after Vardaman). To put it bluntly, her life sucks.

In fact, the only thing worse than being a pregnant Dewey Dell is being a pregnant Dewey Dell in a novel where babies essentially represent sadness, obligation rather than joy, and even decay and death. Addie certainly felt this way about her children, and Dewey Dell seems to realize this, too. She compares herself to a cow who needs to be milked. She refers to the world as a "tub of guts." She is always described in very visceral, even animalistic terms. Check this

out, courtesy of Darl: "Squatting, Dewey Dell's wet dress shapes for the dead eyes of three blind men those mammalian ludicrosities which are the horizons and the valleys of earth" (37.67). Well that's just about the least appealing description of breasts we've ever heard. Being a woman in this novel isn't about femininity or beauty – it's about having babies.

But not when you're seventeen and unmarried. You have to remember that, in this time and place, being a single mom was NOT OK. This goes a long way in explaining why Dewey Dell resents Darl so much: he knows her secret. When she dreams about killing her brother, it's because she fears his powers of perception. (Check out "Symbols, Imagery, and Allegory" for more. It's where we get into her obsession with her brother's eyes.) The social taboos of the 1920s also explain why Dewey Dell feels so much shame about her pregnancy, and by association, about her body, too. Remember that nightmare she had? Let us refresh your memory:

When I used to sleep with Vardaman I had a nightmare once I thought I was awake but I couldn't see and couldn't feel the bed under me and I couldn't think what I was I couldn't think of my name I couldn't even think I am a girl I couldn't even think I nor even think I want to wake up nor remember what was opposite to awake so I could do that I knew that something was passing but I couldn't even think of time then all of a sudden I knew that something was it was wind blowing over me it was like the wind came and blew me back from where it was I was not blowing the room and Vardaman asleep and all of them back under me again and going on like a piece of cool silk dragging across my naked legs (30.5).

Goodness! Sounds like a crisis of identity and sexuality. Who are the "all of them" lying under Dewey Dell? It's very possible that she's referring to the men in her family. Don't worry, this is strictly metaphorical. Remember what we said in the "Overview" about Freud being all the rage when this novel was written? Well, that's what's going on here. Dewey Dell feels shame and embarrassment at being the only female in this family of men. She's embarrassed about her sexuality and her body, and these subconscious feelings bubble up via her dreams.

Dewey Dell Bundren Timeline and Summary

- Dewey Dell recounts her picking cotton by the woods with Lave.
- She made a deal with herself whether or not she would have sex with Lave, depending on the fullness of her cotton sack.
- Dewey Dell is pregnant, and no one else knows but Darl.
- She continues to be in the room with Addie, fanning her.
- Dewey Dell tells Peabody that Addie wants him to leave the room.
- She says that Addie wants to see Jewel.
- She throws herself onto Addie's body after she dies.
- Dewey Dell finally stops fanning while keening.

- Dewey Dell goes onto the porch before start dinner and speaks in abstractions to Peabody, requesting an abortion.
- She prepares a dinner of turnip greens, bread, and buttermilk.
- She calls for Vardaman to return for supper (though she doesn't eat).
- Dewey Dell finds him in the barn, en route to milking the cow.
- She gives Vardaman a harsh shaking.
- She talks to him in the barn after Vardaman freaks out about Cora cooking the fish.
- Dewey Dell leaves for Jefferson with the family.
- Dewey Dell stays overnight at Samson's with the family.
- She arrives at the flooded bridge with the family.
- She walks across the bridge.
- She chases Vardaman when he runs after Darl.
- Dewey Dell stays overnight at Armstid's with the family.
- Dewey Dell arrives in Mottson with the family.
- Dewey Dell goes to the pharmacy and asks the druggist Moseley to give her something to abort her pregnancy for ten bucks.
- Dewey Dell leaves Moseley's without any medicine.
- She tells Vardaman to keep the burning barn events a secret.
- She calls for Jewel when he runs to the coffin by the fire.
- She changes clothes on the side of the road before arriving in Jefferson.
- Dewey Dell is *perhaps* the one who told officials that Darl started the fire.
- She arrives in Jefferson with the family.
- Dewey Dell throws herself on Darl, clawing at him, to ensure the officials get him.
- She goes to a local pharmacy and offers ten dollars (but pays more in dignity fees) to MacGowan for a supposed abortion fix.
- She is coerced into having sex with MacGowan in the cellar.
- She goes back to the hotel with Vardaman, talking about bananas.
- She is sitting on the wagon, eating bananas with Vardaman.

Addie Bundren Character Analysis

Addie is Anse's wife and mother to Cash, Darl, Jewel, Dewey Dell, and Vardaman (in that order). She narrates section 40, though she dies in Section 12.

Before we start a character analysis here, we recommend going back and sloooowly reading Section 40 again. Most of the interesting stuff regarding Addie is revealed in those 10-ish pages.

Back already? Great. Then, first off, you know that Addie hated Anse; that's why she wants to be buried in Jefferson, with her own family, rather than with Anse's (to which she feels no connection). You also know that Addie wasn't exactly an ideal candidate for motherhood to

begin with. She worked as a schoolteacher and enjoyed whipping her students, whom she secretly hated. Oddly enough, what appealed to Addie most about this corporal punishment was the fact that it made her a part of the students' lives. "Now you are aware of me!" she used to think. But when she finally had her own children, what she resented most was that her "aloneness had been violated." What gives? Remember that this is the 1920s and Addie is a woman. She doesn't really have much purpose to her life other than having babies. Her anger at her students probably has a lot to do with the hollowness she feels as a single woman. She wants to be noticed; she wants to be a real person. Having kids doesn't solve the problem; it just presents a new one. Now she's noticed, but defined by her motherhood. She will never be anything *but* a vessel for these babies. She hasn't become her own person – she's become part of a family. Now she resents that attachment, which is why she feels her "aloneness has been violated." This is, of course, the reason for Addie's affair with Whitfield – to rebel against her role in the family. Or, as she calls it, "revenge" against Anse. The product, of course, was Jewel.

Just what IS Addie's special connection to this middle child? The way she explains it, Darl and Cash belonged to Anse. She never really wanted them, and having them in the first place was really just about her duty as a wife. But since Anse isn't Jewel's father, he has no ownership over him. Jewel is Addie's and Addie's alone. He's also living proof, at least to her, that she was able to break out of her position as Anse's wife and act as a real, independent person. It gets a little more confusing when Addie refers to Jewel as her "salvation," as he who will "save [her] from the water and from the fire [...] though [she has] laid down [her] life" (39.5). As you've probably noticed by now, Jewel does indeed save Addie – the dead Addie in her coffin – from the water *and* from the fire. So, in one sense, Addie's prophecy comes true. But Jewel saves her rotting corpse from the water and the fire; is this really tantamount to being her *salvation*? Wait a minute...this sounds like more...ironic inversion! (Are you tired of us talking about ironic inversion yet? If not, make sure you've read "Genre" for a full explanation.) The novel has unfolded in such a way so as to make a farce out of Addie's prediction. Jewel didn't save her or her soul; he just hauled a heavy, awkward, backwards coffin out of a river and out of a burning barn. What a mockery.

Still, when you realize that Addie essentially predicted events after her own death, you might wonder for a moment if she isn't the narrator of all the novel, because 1) she's got weird prophetic abilities, 2) the title refers to an "I" which very well could be her, and 3) this would explain why Darl knew what was happening at her death: because she's getting into everyone's head from her all-seeing post-mortem vantage point in the sky. But this is unlikely. The point isn't that Addie might be the narrator; the point is to question what it means to be a narrator, to have a point of view, to be limited by one's perceptions. This segues right into one of Addie's important realizations: words are absolutely useless. On a scale of 1 to 10, the communication skills of this cast rate about a -2. No one ever says what they're really thinking, and everyone is always misinterpreting everyone else. The very concept of the narration itself – different narrators providing different perspectives – suggests that words are never accurate descriptions of reality anyway, because they are inherently subjective and interpretive.

Addie Bundren Timeline and Summary

- Cora and Kate discuss the cakes.
- Addie lies in bed, blind but "watching" Cash construct her coffin behind her.
- Addie is cooled by Dewey Dell fanning her.
- She is described as being as thin as a rail and barely moving.
- She is described by Cora as an excellent cake baker.
- She looks at Vardaman and Peabody after the doctor arrives.
- Addie has eyes like candle flames.
- Addie lifts herself to see Cash through the window.
- Addie calls for Cash in a "harsh" voice.
- Addie looks at Vardaman, and dies.
- She is placed backwards in the coffin, wearing her wedding dress and a mosquito net as a veil.
- She leaves for Jefferson with the family.
- She stays overnight at Samson's with the family.
- She arrives at the bridge with the family.
- Addie is thrown into the water.
- Addie stays overnight at Armstid's with the family.
- She arrives in Mottson, much to the dismay of the townspeople's noses.
- She is almost burned in the barn fire, but Jewel saves her.
- She arrives in Jefferson.
- She is buried with Mrs. Bundren's spades.

Vardaman Bundren Character Analysis

Vardaman is Addie's youngest son and narrates sections 13, 15, 19, 24, 35, 44, 47, 49, 51, and 56.

Vardaman's thoughts are not easy to decipher, are they? His language is convoluted, turning on itself, using pronouns seemingly unassigned to any object. Vardaman speaks like a little kid...because he is a little kid. But he's not just any youngin' – he's a youngin' who has just lost his mom. He's a *traumatized* youngin'. And he deals with this trauma in a variety of little kid ways. Many of his actions and thoughts seem ridiculous and silly, but when you put on your six-year-old hat you'll realize that, from Vardaman's perspective, it all makes perfect sense.

Let's start with Vardaman's decision that his mother is a fish. Vardaman caught a fish and was holding it in his hands. Then he cut it all up into little pieces; once it was cut up, it was no longer

a fish. So it was a fish, and then it was not a fish. Or, as Vardaman sees it, it was a fish, and now it's a not-fish. (By the way, have you seen *Kill Bill*? The final scene totally steals this fish/not-fish discussion from Faulkner.) In Vardaman's yes, this is just like his mother. She was his mother...and then she was not his mother. She functions the same way the fish functions, so she must be a fish.

Let's look at another seemingly crazy action: drilling holes through his mother's face. First of all, Vardaman didn't know he was drilling through her face; he was only trying to drill through the coffin. He thought his mother was still alive. If she's still alive, then she needs air, and she can't get air when the coffin is nailed close over her. So the answer is to put some holes in the box. Makes sense, right?

Think about another one of Vardaman's stunts: beating and letting loose Peabody's horses. In his mind, there must be some reason why his mother died. His mother was alive. Then Peabody's horses showed up. Then his mother died. Conclusion? Peabody's horse made his mother die. Do you see what we're getting at here with little-kid logic? Kind of makes us want to go spell out words in our alphabet soup.

Vardaman Bundren Timeline and Summary

- Vardaman proudly flops the big fish on the ground before Anse and Vernon.
- He goes in the house to ask to see his mother but is stopped by his father.
- He goes to clean the fish.
- Vardaman returns to the porch with blood up to his knees, explaining that the fish had a lot of guts.
- Vardaman asks his father if his ma is more sick.
- Vardaman pulls Peabody up the mountain to the Bundren house.
- He leaves Addie's room to go on the porch with Anse, upon Peabody's request.
- He hides behind Anse's knees during Addie's death.
- Vardaman runs out of the room after his mom's death.
- Vardaman runs to the porch, crying.
- He runs to the horse stalls, vomiting.
- Vardaman attacks the horses with sticks, causing them to run away.
- He doesn't respond to Cash's or Dewey Dell's calls.
- He sits in the dark: "Cooked and et. Cooked and et" (13.30).
- Vardaman tells Dewey Dell that Peabody killed their mom.
- He tells Dewey Dell that he doesn't want to go to Jefferson.
- Vardaman runs/walks over four miles to the Tulls' in the middle of the night.
- Vardaman asks Tull to verify the existence of the fish he caught.
- He returns with Vernon and Cora back to his farm to place his mother in a coffin.
- He makes a big commotion when Cora cooks up the fish.

- Dewey Dell talks with him in the barn.
- He goes missing until Vernon and Cora spot him fishing by the slough.
- Vardaman leaves for Jefferson with the family.
- Vardaman stay overnight at Samson's with the family.
- Vardaman arrives at the flooded bridge with the family.
- He walks across, holding Vernon's hand.
- He shouts for Darl to save their mom's body.
- He stays overnight at Armstid's with the family.
- Vardaman arrives in Mottson with the family.
- Vardaman gets sand for Darl to mix with the cement for Cash's leg.
- He wonders where the buzzards go at night.
- Vardaman goes out to see where the buzzards go and sees the burning barn.
- He promises Dewey Dell that he won't tell what he saw.
- He arrives in Jefferson with the family.
- Vardaman buries Addie with family.
- Vardaman goes with Dewey Dell to the pharmacy at 10pm.
- He goes back to the hotel with Dewey Dell.
- He eats bananas with Dewey Dell on the family wagon.

The Minister Whitfield Character Analysis

The local minister. He has an affair with Addie and fathers Jewel.

Vernon Tull Character Analysis

The Bundrens' neighbor. He narrates sections 8, 16, 20, 31, 33, and 36.

Cora Tull Character Analysis

Vernon's wife and the Bundrens' neighbor. She narrates sections 2, 6, and 39.

Peabody Character Analysis

The doctor. He narrates sections 11 and 54.



Kate Tull Character Analysis

Vernon and Cora's daughter.

Eula Tull Character Analysis

Vernon and Cora's other daughter.

Lafe Character Analysis

Lafe is a farm worker, and also the father of Dewey Dell's baby.

Samson Character Analysis

Samson is one of the farmers who lets the Bundrens stay with him one night on their journey to Jefferson.

Rachel Character Analysis

Samson's wife.

Armstid Character Analysis

Armstid is the second farmer to let the Bundrens crash during their journey.

Gillespie Character Analysis

Gillespie is the unfortunate farmer whose barn Darl burns down.

The Gillespie boy Character Analysis

Gillespie's son (surprise!).

Moseley Character Analysis

Moseley the anti-abortion pharmacy guy.

MacGowan Character Analysis

MacGowan is the sleazy pharmacy boy who coerces Dewey Dell into having sex with him.

Character Roles

Protagonist

Maybe Darl, Maybe Cash – Honestly, Who Knows?

Because Darl is the first voice we hear, we're inclined to think of him as our primary narrator and main character right off the bat. He also narrates more sections of the novel than anyone else, and he has weird magical powers of narration, like witnessing events for which he is not present. But as Darl starts to go mad, we start to lose faith in him as a trustworthy narrator and look to someone else to do the job. In steps Cash. By the last few narrative sections in the novel, Cash has established himself as a reliable and sensible voice, a welcome refuge for the reader given the strange, disjointed words of Vardaman and the maniacal ranting of the now-insane Darl. Much of the novel's denouement – the explanation stage of the story – unfolds during Cash's narration. Cash then becomes the character with whom we identify, just as Darl becomes someone foreign from the reader's own experiences and sympathies.

Antagonist

Anse (sort of)

By now you've probably guessed that there are no clear-cut roles in *As I Lay Dying*. But Anse comes closest to being That Guy We Hate. Anse is selfish and rather directly stands in between his children and their various dreams: Jewel and his horse, Dewey Dell and her abortion, Cash and his graphophone.

Foil

Cora Tull and Addie Bundren

We get to compare these two during Cora's and, later Addie's, narrations. Cora is devoutly religious; Addie had an affair with the minister. Cora embraces femininity and motherhood; Addie finds love and family to be hollow, meaningless terms. Cora loves her husband – we think; Addie hates Anse and the entire concept of marriage.

Character Clues

Names

We're thinking it's no coincidence that the Bundren family is called the Bundren family. Write a 10-15 page paper on these guys and you'll probably find yourself tripping up and typing "Burden" instead of "Bundren." Indeed, the Bundren family is plagued with one burden after another, the principle one being that big ol' coffin, ill-balanced on the wagon. There's the burden of poverty which rests heavily on them all, and the metaphorical weight of their mother's death, but there are also individual burdens which the characters each bear. Darl bears the knowledge of his sibling's secrets, Dewey Dell the weight of the baby in her belly, Jewel the burden of his own illegitimacy as a member of the family. And that's a lot of burden to carry forty miles to Jefferson.

Narrative Voice

As I Lay Dying is one of the few novels that can employ narrative voice as a tool of characterization for more than one character. We can tell the most about a given character by getting inside his head during one or more of his narrations. We know that Darl is perceptive and cerebral because of the internal observations he makes about those around him. We understand Dewey Dell's feelings on sexuality because of the way she views the cow giving milk, or the nightmares she used to have as a younger girl. Vardaman's own strange thoughts would be unfathomable if we weren't allowed first hand access to them, and Anse's true selfish character comes across most in the sections of novel he narrates.

Literary Devices

Symbols, Imagery, Allegory

New Hope Church

Cash and Dewey Dell look over to the sign. Get it, New Hope Church? What is each of the characters' hopes now? We know Dewey Dell is praying for an abortion, but what is Cash thinking as they pass the signpost? Darl suggests that he has questions in his eyes. With the bad and worsening weather, perhaps Cash is wondering whether the family's planned route is going to work. Notice also how Faulkner once again describes Darl's perspective of Jewel as one of distance: 300 yards. Articulate and people-smart, Darl is clearly very different from brooding Jewel.

Eyes

Read *As I Lay Dying* a few times a few times and you'll start to notice talk of eyes all over the place. First you've got Darl's description of Jewel and "his pale eyes like wood set into his

wooden face." Later he notes that again that "Jewel's eyes look like pale wood in his high-blooded face," and only paragraphs later AGAIN notices Jewel's "pale wooden eyes." (Does this seem important yet or what?) Interestingly, Tull later refers to Jewel's eyes as "pieces of burnt-out cinder fixed in his face, looking out over the land."

Cora is the first to touch on Addie's eyes, which she calls "two candles when you watch them gutter down into the sockets of iron candlesticks." Peabody says the same thing: "Her eyes look like lamps blaring up just before the oil is gone." Then Darl puts in his very similar two cents to describe the moment of Addie's death: "She looks at Vardaman; her eyes, the life in them, rushing suddenly upon them; the two flames glare up for a steady instant. They go out as though someone had leaned down and blown upon them."

Dewey Dell has this crazy obsession with Darl's eyes, which she says "go further than the food and the lamp, full of the land dug out of his skull and the holes filled with distance beyond the land." She later says that "the land runs out of Darl's eyes; they swim to pinpoints. They begin at my feet and rise along my body to my face, and then my dress is gone: I sit naked on the seat above the unhurrying mules, above the travail." Anse would seem to concur, as he draws the same conclusion about his son Darl: "He's got his eyes full of the land all the time."

We think we've made our case. Now, it's interesting that different narrators describe certain characters' eyes in exactly the same way. Dewey Dell and Anse both talk about the land running out of Darl's eyes. Peabody, Darl, and Cora all think that Addie's eyes are like burnt-out candles. Remember that *As I Lay Dying* is very much about looking at the world through different people – yet the one thing that unites these different perspectives is the way they view each other's eyes, or maybe even each other's perspectives.

Eyes are also used to get at some bigger plot-related ideas in the novel. Dewey Dell finds Darl's eyes threatening because she finds his powers of perception intimidating – he knows about her baby, remember? That's why she imagines him stripping her naked with his stare; he sees right through her, essentially. Jewel is connected to his mother because he's the only character described as having similar "burnt-out" eyes. On the other hand, Darl's description of Jewel's light eyes sets him physically apart from his other siblings, fitting for this illegitimate child. And of course, Vardaman's round eyes are a mark of his innocence and childlike wonder.

Lastly is the reference to eyes in the title of the novel. If you haven't read "What's Up with the Title?" yet, here's the line from Homer's *Odyssey* to which the title refers: "As I lay dying, the woman with the dog's eyes would not close my eyes as I descended into Hades." You might have guessed that "woman with the dog's eyes" is not a nice term for a lady back in the Greek day. In this case, Agamemnon (the speaker) is justified in referring to his wife this way, since she cheated on and also murdered him. Looks like eyes are again being used to characterize, right? Now the second ocular reference in this passage: it was (and in many places still is) tradition to close a dead person's eyes. Agamemnon's wife wouldn't do that for him, and he considers it a mark of high disrespect (though probably not as much as stabbing him to death).

Addie is in some ways treated with the same post-mortem disrespect: her body is placed upside down in her coffin, holes are bored into her face, she's dropped into a river, nearly cremated, and her burial is used as a pick-up joint for her husband. Isn't it great that you can get all that from a pair of eyes?

Vardaman's Fish

One of Christianity's symbols is the Jesus fish, or ichthys. (It looks like [this](#).) Remember that when Addie dies, Vardaman associates her with his fish, which he has just killed and cleaned himself. When Vardaman focuses on his family eating the fish, we can't help but think of Jesus and the Last Supper, when he has his disciples eat his own flesh and drink his blood. Here's another case of ironic inversion: Addie might die like Christ, having sacrificed her life for others, but she is never resurrected. The closest we get to resurrection, in fact, is the image of her coffin heaving up out of the water. This is a horribly twisted version of the classic biblical story, just like much of *As I Lay Dying* is an inversion of the classic Quest (again, see "Genre" for more).

Setting

Faulkner's fictitious Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, the 1920s

Faulkner uses this fictitious county for many of his novels, including [Sound and the Fury](#), *Absolom, Absolom!*, and *The Unvanquished*. The details of Yoknapatawpha remain constant throughout these works: it is in Mississippi, just south of the Tallahatchie River and north of the Yoknapatawpha River. Jefferson is the bustling, central town of the county. Many believe that Faulkner based this fictional area on Lafayette County, where Faulkner grew up.

Narrator Point of View

Fifty-nine sections comprised of fifteen different first person narrators

Wow. There must be a reason for such a crazy narrative technique, right? Let's start with a little passage from Cash Bundren:

Sometimes I ain't sho who's got ere a right to say when a man is crazy and when he aint. Sometimes I think it aint none of us pure crazy and aint none of us pure sane until the balance of us talks him that-a-way. It's like it aint so much what a fellow does, but it's the way the majority of folks is looking at him when he does it. [...] That's how I reckon a man is crazy. That's how he can't see eye to eye with other folks. And I reckon they aint nothing else to do with him but what the most folks says is right (53.8).

As I Lay Dying reminds us that everything is in the eye of the beholder. Right, wrong, sin, good,

duty, responsibility, love, hate – all of these depend on who's looking. Cora thinks that Darl is a godsend to Addie, while Addie is convinced that Jewel is her salvation. Anse thinks he's doing the right thing while his neighbors question his motives. Dewey Dell is frightened of Darl for his perceptiveness, while Jewel resents him as competition for their mother's love.

It's not just emotion and motive that are up for grabs; fact, too, is a flexible concept in this novel. When narrative sections overlap, we see the same scene from two perspectives, often with incongruities. As a reader, we have to gather what we can of the tale when we can, and we often don't know the full story until after the fact. We aren't sure what caused the fire, for example, until several sections after the Gillespie barn has burned to the ground. It's often unclear whether events are really happening, or are taking place in the given narrator's mind, or are flashbacks to an earlier time. When Addie begins narrating, for example, were not sure if she's speaking from beyond the grave, if she maintains some sort of post-mortem consciousness from inside her coffin, if we're flashing back to a narration she created before her death, or if these words take place in the mind of some omnipresent narrator with magical abilities of perception, like Darl. Notice that Darl narrates Addie's death though he is not present. Is he capable of witnessing it even though he is not there? Or is this the way he imagines Addie's death?

Here's a real kicker of an interpretation: *it doesn't matter*. What's the difference if Darl really sees Addie's death, or if he imagines it? This novel has taught us that *his narration of the event is equally subjective either way*. Scary, isn't it?

Genre

Modernism, Southern Gothic, Family Drama, Quest

Faulkner's novel fits neatly into the beginning of literary modernism. At a time when normal literary conventions were no longer in vogue, writers like Faulkner pushed the envelope with experimental technique and function. That's what you see here in *As I Lay Dying*, as Faulkner experiments with multiple narrative voices and often ambiguous plot lines. There is no reliable narrator, no clear protagonist, and no certainty for the reader as to what is going on or whom to trust.

Southern Gothic is an odd little genre that Faulkner basically stamped his name on. It is composed of literature which explores issues in the American South – like poverty, religion, or familial duty, in the case of *As I Lay Dying* – and relies on the eerie or supernatural to drive the plot. A dead chick in a coffin? Multiple narrative perspectives? Weird omniscience on the part of an otherwise normal kid? Check.

And now for our last two genres. Most of the conflict in *As I Lay Dying* revolves around family, not surprisingly. Questions of love and duty haunt the characters (and the reader) as they

struggle to fulfill and define their various roles in the family unit. The story unfolds via what many critics refer to as an "ironic quest." The journey to Jefferson has all the hallmarks of a typical literary quest – obstacles on the way, perseverance against the odds, etc. – but without a legitimate end goal. Is this quest really necessary? Is Anse traveling to Jefferson for his own selfish purposes? Most importantly, does the completion of the journey really accomplish anything? Not really, and completing the quest simply results in more misery for the members of the Bundren family. This is what renders it ironic, a fruitless perversion of the traditional quest.

Tone

Morbid irony

At times this book is funny, other times it's just plain sick, still other times it's sad, and often it's a combination of all three. Just think about Vardaman confusing his mother for a fish in the shortest section of the entire novel: "My mother is a fish." Humorous in its brevity, poignant in its rendering of a child's thought-process, and of course incredibly sad. When Addie's coffin ends up in the river, we can't help but smirk – morbidly, of course – at the thought of Vardaman's interpretation.

Writing Style

Stream of Consciousness, stylistically varied from narrator to narrator

You're probably familiar with the literary term "stream of consciousness." If you're not, relax, because it only means what it sounds like: a loosely-formatted babble of thoughts. If someone asked you to sit down with a piece of paper and write everything you thought out, without worrying about grammar or form, what you would write would be a stream of consciousness. To see the best example of this in *As I Lay Dying*, read section Thirty-Five, narrated by Vardaman.

In case you were wondering, yes, there is a point to all this. Faulkner has very skillfully imitated the way the human brain processes images and puts them into words. As readers, we are really placed inside the various characters' heads. This all sounds pretty crazy, so how about an example? Let's say you're sitting at your computer reading our very cool discussion of Style in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. Then your mother walks over and tells you that it's time for dinner. How do you register that information? *First* you notice that someone is walking over. *Then* you see that it is your mother. Now look at this line from Cora's point of view: "Someone comes through the hall. It is Darl." If the point of the narrative is to tell us a story, this is wasted text. It would be much cleaner and more efficient to say, "Darl comes through the hall." But the point isn't just to tell us a story – it's to get us to go through the thoughts of the characters. Did you notice that we get very little physical description of the characters? Apply the same logic. Vardaman doesn't see a teenage girl with brown hair and brown eyes; he just sees his sister

Dewey Dell. So that's all he uses to describe her.

This sort of stream of consciousness is about the only stylistic continuity between all fifteen narrators of *As I Lay Dying*. Faulkner personalizes the language and style used by each character, and of course each particular style tells us more about each particular character. Jewel is a man of few words, reminding us that he's a rugged man of *action* instead. Darl is incredibly cerebral, eloquent, incisive, and even poetic in his language. Vardaman looks at the world, predictably, with the eyes of a small child. Anse is poorly educated and his language reflects it. Cash is incredibly logical and regimented in his thought-process.

Compare these passages:

1. *Dewey Dell said we would get some bananas. The train is behind the glass, red on the track. When it runs the track shines on and off. Pa said flour and sugar costs so much. Because I am a country boy because boys in town. Bicycles (15.3).*
2. *From here they do not appear to violate the surface at all; it is as though it had severed them both at a single blow, the two torsos moving with infinitesimal and ludicrous care upon the surface (37.68).*
3. *I have done no wrong to be cussed by. I am not religious, I reckon. But peace is my heart: I know it is. I have done things but neither better nor worse than them that pretend otherlike, and I know that Old Marster will care for me as for ere a sparrow that falls (9.15).*

Can you tell who narrates each of these? (Vardaman, Darl, Anse – good job.)

Before we're done, you might want to check out how Faulkner uses repetition on many different levels. The easiest to identify is the repetition of single words: "The shirt across Pa's hump is faded lighter than the rest of it. There is no sweat stain on his shirt. I have never seen a sweat stain on his shirt" (5.4).

But you've also got structural repetition. Look at this passage:

I say, "Wait." He stops, looking at Pa. Vernon spits, without moving. He spits with decorous and deliberate precision into the pocked dust below the porch. Pa rubs his hands slowly on his knees. He is gazing out beyond the crest of the bluff, out across the land. Jewel watches him a moment, then he goes on to the pail and drinks again (5.2).

Look at the first two words of every sentence: "He stops," "Vernon spits," "He spits," "Pa rubs," "He is gazing," "Jewel watches" – they all begin noun-verb.

There's also repetition of specific images (animals, wood, tools) or themes (duty, luck, justice, God) woven throughout these 59 sections, but we'll let you search for the text for those examples. Our point is that these various repetitions all add up. Just like the "one lick less" or

the "chuck, chuck" of Cash's axe beating out a tempo at the beginning of the novel, all this repetition forms the same sort of dull thud, over and over and over, for the reader. It sets a certain mood, a wasteland of a background against which events take place. Nothing is really being accomplished by the characters in this novel. Obstacle after obstacle, prayer after prayer, disaster after disaster, all is for naught.

What's Up With the Title?

[William Faulkner](#)'s title comes from a favorite speech of his in [Homer's](#) *Odyssey*, Book XI. Odysseus has traveled to the Underworld, essentially to get directions. Once there, however, he's bombarded by the ghosts of all his dead comrades. One in particular is Agamémnon, who tells the story of his own death. He's super pissed that 1) he was killed by his evil, scheming, adulterous wife, and 2) that witch wouldn't close his eyes as he was dying. The line goes a little something like this: "As I lay dying, the woman with the dog's eyes [that would be his wife he's talking about here] would not close my eyes as I descended into Hades [a.k.a. the Underworld]."

Eyes...eyes...that sounds familiar to us. When we're done here, go read what we have to say on eyes in "Symbols, Imagery, and Allegory."

But we're not done yet. Because, while we're digging around in Book XI of the *Odyssey*, we happen to notice Odysseus's buddy Elpênor, who is also dead (a common theme in the Underworld). Elpênor died by falling off a roof. Sound familiar? Yes, Cash also fell off a roof, though he was very nobly mending a church, whereas Elpênor was irresponsibly drunk. And, wait a second, isn't all of the *Odyssey* about a quest, just like *As I Lay Dying*?

Bingo! Go and read what we have to say about "Genre." Great, now you know what we're talking about when we say that *As I Lay Dying* is an ironic inversion of the classic quest. In the *Odyssey*, the quest is just and sensical and ends with a happily ever (if somewhat bloody) after. In *As I Lay Dying*, the quest is pointless and destructive. In ancient Greece, people get what they deserve. Elpênor drank irresponsibly and so he died. In *As I Lay Dying*, divine justice couldn't be less just. Cash was mending a church as a volunteer when he fell and broke his leg. Whitfield, a cheating hypocrite, makes a safe and easy crossing over the same river which devastates the Bundrens on their journey. Unfair? Yes, and also ironic – like we tell you in "Genre."

Before you leave, think about the tense and the person used in the title. *As I lay dying*. Addie dies a good 150 pages before the end of the novel. So, she's only dying for a quarter of the text. Who is still dying – present tense – in the rest of the story? Come to think of it, can we be certain that the "I" refers to Addie? After all, she only narrates one of the fifty-nine sections in this text. Why should she get to title the novel? Could it possibly be Darl? Faulkner himself?

What the title *does* tell us is that *As I Lay Dying* is about just that – dying. Not a dead body, but the very act of dying. And if you want to be all morbid about it, you could say that this is the one,

indisputable fact in a novel which doesn't allow for any other kind of certainty (see "Point of View"): everyone is dying. Darl, Dewey Dell, Vardaman, Cash, Anse, Tull, and every other narrator in the text is united by this fact and this fact only. They are all alive, which means they are all going to die, which means they are all, one way or another, in the process of dying. And so is the reader. (Ouch, we know.)

What's Up With the Ending?

Surprise, surprise – Anse is a selfish jerk. We had our suspicions all along, and now we can be about 90% sure that this entire trip to Jefferson was about him getting his new teeth...and a new wife.

Speaking of that new wife, what do you make of the final line of the novel – "Meet Mrs. Bundren"? Addie's been in the ground about, mmm...two seconds and Anse is already getting married. In fact, he picked up Mrs. Bundren the sequel *before* Addie was buried, since this is the woman he borrowed the shovels from. The lesson here seems to be that people are replaceable – or at least that *women* are. In this time and place, women do little more than serve a household purpose: have babies and cook dinner. At times in the novel, they even seem little more than farm animals. Dewey Dell earlier compared herself to the cow she had to milk, and more than one woman has expressed the idea that, once they have their babies, they are finally free to die (Tull remembers his mother saying as much, and Addie expresses the same thought in her narrative section). Sadly enough, it turns out that Addie isn't finished being used by her husband when she dies. She's still fulfilling an obligation, via her corpse, post-mortem.

Did You Know?

Trivia

- William Faulkner comes from a long family line of influential Southern men including a plantation owner, a colonel, and a novelist. ([Source](#))
- Faulkner wasn't allowed into the American army because of his height (5'6") and weight, so he enlisted in the Canadian army. He was never called into battle, however. ([Source](#))
- Faulkner never finished high school. ([Source](#))
- Looks like he never completed college either. ([Source](#))

Steaminess Rating

PG-13

As I Lay Dying tracks the journey of Anse, Jewel, Darl, Cash, Vardaman, and Dewey Dell en route to Jefferson to bury the late Addie. That makes five guys and one living woman in the family. Funny thing is, only one of the five guys ever mentions having a libido, and that's Darl (who mentions his nighttime masturbation). Dewey Dell, the only woman left in the family, is pregnant throughout the entire span of the novel. She desperately looks for an abortion and is predictably taken advantage of for it. Aside from the cotton-picking session that caused this pregnancy problem in the first place, there's really no sex to be found here. And in a novel in which women are little more than property or cattle, that might be a good thing.

Allusions and Cultural References

Religious References

References to the [The Bible](#) pervade *As I Lay Dying*.

Literature and Mythology

Homer's [Odyssey](#) (Check out "What's Up With The Title?")

Best of the Web

Audios

[Faulkner's 1950 Nobel Prize Speech](#)

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/williamfaulknernobelprizeaddress.htm>

You can read the transcript or listen to the audio.

Images

[Book Cover](#)

<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/7/7f/Dying87.jpg>

(Uncomfortably cartoonish)

[William Faulkner](#)

http://www.olemiss.edu/mwp/dir/faulkner_william/cofield.jpg

Rockin' the 'stache.



Documents

[William Faulkner's 1950 Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech](#)

http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1949/faulkner-speech.html

Good stuff.

Websites

[Bundren Family Tree](#)

<http://www.mcsr.olemiss.edu/~egjbp/faulkner/gen-bundren.html>

Apparently a squiggly line is genealogist for "adulterous relationship."

[Quotes from William Faulkner](#)

http://thinkexist.com/quotes/william_faulkner/

Sin, love, fear – you know the drill.

[Resources from the University of Mississippi](#)

<http://www.mcsr.olemiss.edu/~egjbp/faulkner/faulkner.html>

Lots to look at here. Don't get lost.

[Book-a-Minute](#)

<http://www.rinkworks.com/bookaminute/b/faulkner.asilaydying.shtml>

Hilarious.