

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

As I Lay Dying

by

William Faulkner

Book Information

William Faulkner, As I Lay Dying

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Book Level: 5.4

Interest Level: UG

This novel portrays the story of Addie Bundren of Mississippi, her sons, and the family trip to bury her.

Topics: Adventure, Life Changes; Classics, Classics (All); Family Life, Death; Family Life, Mothers; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

Main Characters

Addie Bundren the matriarch of the Bundren family, whose death and burial creates the central conflict of the novel

Anse Bundren Addie's husband, who doggedly fulfills his promise to bring her body to Jefferson, although perhaps for reasons of his own

Cash Bundren the Bundrens' oldest son; a simple, precise, and hard-working young carpenter who saws and hammers Addie's coffin in the final hours of her life

Cora Tull a neighbor of the Bundrens who admonishes Addie to confess her "sins"

Darl Bundren a sensitive and intuitive young man who seems almost able to read minds, but loses his own as a result of the family's bizarre journey with their mother's coffin

Dewey Dell Bundren the Bundrens' only daughter, who is pregnant and uses the trip to Jefferson to seek "medicine" to put an end to her dilemma

Dr. Peabody the country doctor who attends Addie's deathbed and who Vardaman believes has killed her

Jewel Bundren Addie's favorite son, a cold and outspoken person, who prizes his horse and saves his mother's coffin on multiple occasions

Reverend Whitfield the local minister, who has an affair with Addie and, it is implied, may have fathered Jewel

Vardaman Bundren the youngest of the Bundren children, who begins to confuse his mother with a fish he caught on the day of her death

Vernon Tull Cora's husband; one of the local men who finds he is somehow always helping Anse Bundren

Vocabulary

adze a curve-bladed tool used for shaping wood

buckboard an open carriage with the seat attached to a flexible board

expiation the way of atonement

frieze a decorative band on the upper part of a wall

keen to loudly wail or mourn

passel a large number or large quantity

pussel-gutted fat (implied)

shoat a young pig

victuals food

Synopsis

As the story opens, Cash Bundren is preparing a coffin for his dying mother, Addie. The story of Addie Bundren's death and the family's odyssey to bring her body to Jefferson is told through the first-hand narration of all the Bundrens, as well as several minor characters.

As Addie lies on her deathbed, Cash's incessant sawing provides a constant backdrop for the drama. Darl convinces Addie's favorite son, Jewel, to leave the house to deliver a load of lumber, knowing that she will die while they are gone. Addie is visited by neighbor Cora Tull, Reverend Whitfield, and Doctor Peabody, who is too late to help her. After she dies, young Vardaman Bundren vents his rage and grief by beating the doctor's team. Thereafter, he begins to associate his mother with the fish he caught that day.

Anse Bundren has promised his wife to bury her

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with "her people" in Jefferson and, after a three-day delay, he doggedly tries to cross the river even after the local bridges have washed out. While making a misguided crossing attempt, the coffin washes downstream, the team of mules drown, and Cash breaks his leg.

After recovering the coffin, Anse acquires a new team by trading Jewel's beloved spotted horse, and the family continues toward Jefferson, increasingly attracting attention and disgust due to the smell of the rapidly decomposing body. The family spends the night at the Gillespie farm, where we later learn Darl has set fire to the barn in an attempt to end the journey to Jefferson. Meanwhile, Cash's leg worsens due to Anse's attempt to set the leg with concrete.

When the family finally arrives in Jefferson, they bury Addie with borrowed shovels. Dewey Dell seeks "medicine" to abort a suspected pregnancy, and Cash finally sees a doctor about his leg. Darl is summarily dispatched to a mental asylum after his role in the Gillespie fire is discovered. But the greatest surprise comes from Anse who, in addition to getting a new set of teeth, introduces the family to a brand new Mrs. Bundren.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

While they were talking about sin and forgiveness, Addie told Cora Tull, "He is my cross and he will be my salvation. He will save me from the water and from the fire. Even though I have laid down my life, he will save me." Addie was referring to Jewel when she spoke this "sacrilege." In what way was Addie's prophecy fulfilled?

Cora comments that Addie has spoken sacrilege because she has "set that selfish mortal boy in His place." Later events bear out the prophecy as Jewel saves his mother's body from both the river and the Gillespie barn fire.

Literary Analysis

Faulkner uses an interesting device whereby characters in their first-person narration use vocabulary and usage far beyond what is displayed in their dialogue. Look for an example of this technique. What might the author's purpose have been for using it?

Darl's narrations often offer examples of this technique. In Chapter 50, in which Darl narrates the barn fire and Jewel's rescue of his mother's coffin, this uneducated country boy writes, "The front [of the bar], the conical façade with the square orifice of doorway broken only by the square squat shape of the coffin on the sawhorses like a cubistic bug, comes into relief." The technique may allow the author to narrate in more expressive and complex terms than the character might be capable of. In the case of Darl, it also seems to lend mystery and complexity to a character who is already known to have certain cryptic powers of clairvoyance.

Inferential Comprehension

After Addie's death, Anse often made the comment, "The Lord giveth." The full phrase as quoted from the Bible is, "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away." What does Anse mean by his comment? What inference can you make about its use in light of the unexpected ending of the story?

On the surface, Anse is probably reflecting the kind of resolute acceptance of God's will expected of Christian believers in the face of personal tragedy. However, unabashed trading of one wife for another puts an ironic spin on the phrase.

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Constructing Meaning

As I Lay Dying is rich in vivid sensory images, many of which are unpleasant. List some of the visual, olfactory, and other sensory images that come to mind when reviewing the story of the Bundrens' plodding journey to Jefferson. What affect do these images have on the story?

Some possible answers are the smell of Addie's decomposing body, the sound of Cash's persistent sawing, the buzzards gathering above the Bundrens' house, the sound of the women singing hymns after Addie's death, the sound of the swirling Yoknapatawpha River, or the smell of the burning flesh on Jewel's back after the fire. Depending on the image listed, it may add realism to the story, support a mood, or emphasize a theme.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization The members of the Bundren family are some of the most compelling characters in American literature. As an exercise in the craft of characterization, stage a classroom discussion in which the students imagine they are casting directors for a motion-picture version of *As I Lay Dying*. Then, ask them to consider the characters of Darl, Jewel, and Anse Bundren. For each character, write a brief "casting call" in which the nature of the character and his physical characteristics are described. As a class, decide on two or three modern actors who might be suitable for the role.

Understanding the Author's Craft William Faulkner's intense, rambling prose style is so striking and distinctive as to inspire tongue-in-cheek imitation. Since 1990, the University of Mississippi's Center for the Study of Southern Culture and others have sponsored a "Faux Faulkner" contest in which contestants submit whimsical material that imitates the style of the great author. As an exercise in recognizing literary style and learning the art of satire, ask students to reread Chapters 13, 24, 56, or other chapters of their choice that offer good examples of the author's style. Assign students to write their own "Faux Faulkner" composition, in which the

style is applied to a simple event like tying one's shoe. Ask for volunteers to provide a "dramatic" reading of their work.

Comparing and Contrasting Faulkner's first-person narration affords insight into each of the major characters in the book and gives multiple perspectives on the major events of the plot. Assign the class to take up the subject of the narrative technique in *As I Lay Dying*. First, analyze the narrative voices in the book by counting how many chapters are narrated by each character. Create a bar graph or list of characters in descending order of the number of chapters narrated. As a class, discuss why a particular character is chosen to narrate the greater number of chapters. What is the value and purpose of the narration by minor characters? Why is Addie's voice used for so few chapters?

Responding to Literature The plot of *As I Lay Dying*, revolves around Anse's dogged determination to keep a promise to his dead wife. Ask students to consider promises made in their own lives. Assign the class to write three to five paragraphs on a promise they have made to a parent, friend, or teacher. Include discussion on how important the promise was, how difficult it was to keep, and what the consequences would be for breaking it.