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Faulkner's Fundamental Morality in  
*As I Lay Dying* and *The Sound and the Fury*

In the late 1920s, deep in the throes of Modernism, Faulkner wrote two literary masterpieces: *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*. Faulkner's innovations regarding perspective, multiple narrators and stream of consciousness writing constitute the defining features of these works. Both shocking in their approach and notoriously difficult to unravel, they present their own challenges and peculiarities to the author as well. With the absence of an omniscient or representative voice, conveying the underlying moral principals that the author sees as crucial to society becomes its own challenge. None of these values can be clearly stated; instead, the author must rely on the interplay between his flawed characters to gradually illustrate what the ideal might be—and this occurs as often through its absence as its presence. Cognizant analysis reveals that the ability to see beauty and give love are foundational to Faulkner's construction of morality; in both works, these two aspects can be used to gauge the true character of an individual. Faulkner uses the absence or presence of these values to define the inner reality of each character, and their actions function as his commentary on the nature of human failure. The novels thus construct a dynamic reality in which individuals demonstrate morality in direct proportion to the extent to which they find beauty and express concern for their fellow man. This aspect of Faulkner's work is so fundamental to

his message that it directly affects the form of the novels themselves through the beauty of the language Faulkner uses and the multiple points of view he presents.

Throughout *As I Lay Dying* and *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner ensures that each narrator remains perfectly locked within their own ability to process what occurs around them; as Pettey puts it, “the world represented” by any single character is “not the world as it actually is, but as it appears” to them (Pettey 28). Each narrator’s capacity and ability to convey events and impressions thus define both their individual experiences, and what the reader receives. In *As I Lay Dying*, Darl acts as the most consistent primary narrator, but Darl can hardly be relied upon as a moral compass. He is, after all, quite mad. Yet Darl’s recognition of beauty lends his voice importance through the impact of his perceptions. A lyrical quality permeates Darl’s sections from the first page with his descriptions of an old log cotton house that “leans in empty and shimmering dilapidation” and his portrayal of the planks Cash holds: “between the shadow spaces they are yellow as gold, like soft gold, bearing on their flanks in smooth undulations the marks of the adze blade” (Faulkner *Dying* 1). Woven through his narration, Darl finds poetry in the mundane, from the contents in a bucket seen as “the still surface of the water a round orifice of nothingness” in which he might find “a star or two”(ibid 8), to the way a wagon crests a hill: “In the sand the wheels whisper, as though the very earth would hush our entry. We descend as the hill commences to rise”(ibid 132). The world Darl portrays holds something beyond easy expression, something of aching wonder and barely unattainable beauty bordering on the divine. It does not matter where in the physical world this beauty resides, for to Darl it can be found anywhere and everywhere, or nowhere at all.

While seeing this beauty does not ensure goodness, it nonetheless becomes clear how important it is to Faulkner when he presents characters who lack the ability to find it. In the initial scene of her section, Addie goes to the woods at the end of winter, in slanting sun beside a bubbling spring, and yet she seeks only to “be quiet and hate” (Faulkner *Dying* 98). At a place ripe with potential life and rich with natural beauty, she experiences only her own misery and bitterness. This single act constitutes a fundamental failure on her part, setting the tone for the rest of her section focusing on the emptiness of words, sin, God and love. Faulkner constructs the novel in such a way that this deficit of beauty enables the reader to anticipate the resulting flat emptiness that characterizes the entirety of Addie’s life, and to appreciate the depth of implications such an absence entails.

The fundamental importance of finding beauty runs through *The Sound and the Fury* just as strongly as it does *As I Lay Dying*. Yet this novel, like *As I Lay Dying*, opens with an impression of beauty, as seen by Benjy: “Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them” (Faulkner *Sound* 1). Benjy, despite not having the capacity to conceptualize time or engage in critical analysis of anything that occurs to him, nonetheless recognizes and finds comfort in beauty. All through his section, Benjy cries for flowers, holds them tight, arranges them in straggly bottles, whimpers when he notices their absence—jimson weed, daisies, broken narcissus. In moments of calm or sleep, and in the fire, he finds “bright, smooth shapes” that bring him solace and indicate that he is at peace (Faulkner *Sound* 41). These details contribute to an impression of a person capable of recognizing beauty, even if he lacks the capacity to understand or interpret it. In his simplistic innocence, Benjy seems guaranteed a level of moral reprieve,

but Faulkner reinforces this through the sensitivity and attraction Benjy displays towards things he finds beautiful.

By contrast, Jason (like Addie) demonstrates an utter inability to perceive beauty that corresponds to his deeply flawed morality. Although he can recount events in a clearly structured and delineated fashion, his perception is so twisted by self-absorption, the strength of his narration is often undermined. As he steps out of the shop, Jason relates the following scene:

The sun was down beyond the Methodist church now, and the pigeons were flying back and forth around the steeple, and when the band stopped I could hear them cooing. It hadn't been four months since Christmas, and yet they were almost as thick as ever. (Faulkner *Sound* 154)

He stands in a doorway at sunset, bright music and soft quiet drifting towards him, flocks of birds wheeling and turning through the sky, and all Jason can see are vermin that cost forty-five dollars of tax-payers' (and therefore his own) money to clean out. Jason finds no glint of light off of feathers or rise and fall in melodies. He instead remembers counting "over a hundred half-hatched pigeons on the ground"(ibid 155)—focusing not on hope or beauty, but on destruction and cause for personal offense. This interpretation of reality provides telling insight into how Jason structures his world—centered firmly around his sense of entitlement and bitter self-interest, utterly lacking in any perception of beauty, it is as damning a one as can be found. For, Labrie states, "Faulkner regarded evil as essentially narcissistic" (Labrie 404). Thus, Jason comes to represent pure human failing through the absence of both of those two basic qualities

Faulkner upholds: not only does he lack a perception of beauty, but he also lacks the ability to see outside of himself. Isolated within the walls of his own self-absorption, Jason Compson entirely fails at human goodness.

Simple recognition of beauty then, while relatively easy to identify in the novels and a useful initial indicator of a character's nature, does not constitute a complete measure of a character's morals. It must be combined with expressions of love. What is more, this love is not as straightforward as it initially seems, for it encompasses the issue of perspective fundamental to the entire underlying premises of the novels. Such acts of love require the capacity to act for the good of another rather than one's self. And in order to perform such an act, an individual needs to be aware of a reality beyond their own—he must be able to step outside of the confines of his own perceptions and see through another's eyes. He must experience, through the largesse of empathy, someone else's reality, even if it is only for a moment.

Faulkner repeatedly demonstrates how crucial both of the qualities relating to beauty and love are to his sense of morality. In *As I Lay Dying*, Darl possesses great capacity to recognize beauty. He can spend two eloquent paragraphs describing the strength, the beauty, the pull of a “thick, dark current” (Faulkner *Dying* 82). Yet he also demonstrates an equal lack of capacity in finding this beauty in the people around him.

Petty observes:

Darl often relies upon artistic metaphors to demarcate his animosity toward members of his family. For example, Darl sees Jewel in terms of banal, crude

modes of art as though the form itself will be the essence of what Jewel is. (Petthey 29)

Darl shows similar contempt for Anse, describing his face as “carved by a savage caricaturist in a monstrous burlesque” (Faulkner *Dying* 45), and for Cash, comparing him to a “signboard” (ibid 62). It is through this aspect of Darl that Faulkner establishes his doom from the outset; he is implicated through his lack of sympathy, tenderness and love—all critical to true morality as Faulkner constructs it. Darl actively torments Jewel with his knowledge of Addie’s death (ibid 31), and his deficiency of understanding what another might need further condemns him. Faulkner explicitly demonstrates this lack through Darl’s failure to help Vardaman process the death of their mother. Darl has Vardaman listen to the sound of their mother’s body decaying in the coffin, and rather than offer any comfort, support or explanation, he simply allows Vardaman to continue to fumble his own way through navigating the death of his mother. Darl does not answer Vardaman’s questions in any way the boy can understand, ultimately turning away (ibid 124). But this deficiency is not limited to Darl.

Addie has as great a depth of perception as Darl, “almost as though the trait were genetically passed from mother to son” (Petthey 30), yet she not only fails to use this capacity to find beauty, but also to express love. Addie clings tenaciously to one thing: her aloneness. The birth of her first child, Cash, proves traumatic as it “violated” this aloneness (Faulkner *Dying* 99). She turns away from her family with diligence and care, drawing a circle tight around her. There is no room for her children within such a circle, and so she “gave Anse the children,” pulling herself tight and close to patiently await her only escape: death (ibid 100). Although Cora expresses horror at her understanding that

Addie has replaced love for God with love for Jewel (ibid 97), this love does not find the selfless expression necessary to Faulkner's definition of morality. Addie's love for Jewel, while fierce, remains selfish. Addie bases this love on her own construct of what she desires from Jewel ("he is my cross and will be my salvation" (ibid)), and not on an understanding of what she might be able to give to him. Thus, Addie provides an example of one of the many ways an individual can spiral inward into the 'evil' of isolation and self. This isolation, so often cited as one of the defining characteristics of *As I Lay Dying*, can be read as a catalogue of human failure as character after character demonstrates their inability to fully engage with the others, or to find in them any beauty or appropriate receptacle for love.

The vast majority of *The Sound and the Fury* shows a reality as isolated and cold as that found in *As I Lay Dying*. The other characters' treatment of Benjy (and his resulting reactions to them) can be read as a sort of litmus test for their ability to express this selfless love. This is due to multiple factors: partly because love shown to Benjy must be love solely for love's sake as Benjy is incapable of returning favors; partly because Benjy is not necessarily easy to love as a "slobbering" and "moaning" man incapable of even feeding himself (Faulkner *Sound* 172); partly because in reading Benjy's section, the reader is granted ready access to unbiased interpretations of the actions that occur to him; but also because "there is a strong sympathy in Faulkner's fiction for those who are powerless, and there is a fundamental respect for the ability of human beings to help each other in a communal fashion"(Labrie 404) that interactions with Benjy encapsulate as no other interactions could.

Thus, through Benjy, the reader learns to love Caddy. Caddy who puts her arms around him, with her “cold bright face” in the winter light, with her sweet smell of trees (Faulkner *Sound* 6). Who reminds him to keep his hands in his pockets so they won’t freeze, who even in the dead of winter climbs through brown flowers (ibid 9). Caddy snuggles her head next to his on the pillow at night so he can fall asleep (ibid 29); Caddy carries him even when he seems too big to be carried, insisting that she likes “to take care of him” (ibid 41). From Caddy, Benjy receives love. Not because he is able to give her anything other than his adoration in return, but because she sees in him the innate beauty of humanity. Benjy gravitates to Caddy in the same way he gravitates towards beauty, equating her with all that is good and comforting in his world: “Her hair was like fire, and little points of fire were in her eyes, and I went and Father lifted me into the chair too, and Caddy held me. She smelled like trees“ (ibid 46). Fant argues that Benjy goes so far as to equate Caddy with physical light, confusing her very name, “Candace” with the pronunciation of “candles” (Fant 106).

But Caddy’s treatment of Benjy proves to be the exceptional rather than the usual. His own mother repeatedly rejects and misunderstands Benjy, often having no idea what to do with him. In pages 41-2, Caroline Compson makes one ridiculous demand after the next: she calls Benjy away from the beautiful fire he has been watching, demands Caddy withdraw her physical support and presence, refuses her own lap, will not call him by his nickname, and denies him the comfort of a pillow he finds beautiful. Completely locked within the tightly constructed world of her own selfish desires, in which Benjy serves as “a judgment” on her (Faulkner *Sound* 2), Caroline is incapable of perceiving what he



might want or need, let alone feel. Seeing her through Benjy's eyes is heartbreaking as Faulkner allows the reader to experience the repercussions of selfishness.

Like Caroline, Jason also mistreats Benjy. Yet there is a calculated cruelty to Jason's actions that betray a darkness missing in Caroline. Caroline's selfishness shows an ignorant self-absorption expressed in passivity; Jason's selfishness erupts as an active force even in childhood. Jason destroys Benjy's paper dolls "just for meanness" (Faulkner *Sound* 42)—an action he will mirror as a grown man maliciously burning the band tickets in front of Luster (ibid 159).

While the entirety of *As I Lay Dying* and the majority of *The Sound and the Fury* illustrate the importance of this ability to express love for another human primarily through its absence, *The Sound and the Fury* nevertheless provides crucial moments where it exists. In characters like Caddy, goodness can be found. Not always entirely, convincingly, or even sustainably, still it is there. This presence provides evidence of the impact such love has. Even Jason cannot remain unaffected by Caddy—when he encounters her by their father's grave, he reflects, however briefly, that life without her in it gets him to "feeling funny again." He stands beside her, conscious of the fact that without her, he is alone under Uncle Maury's reign—a cold reality that leaves him in a world utterly lacking in care "like the way he left me to come home in the rain by myself" (Faulkner *Sound* 127).

These abilities to find beauty and express love can even be held up like a template over the characters that people the novels, providing a sort of casual checklist to ascertain each one's moral standing:

Quentin—beauty, yes; love, yes, but then it quickly diminishes as he becomes engrossed in his own construct of a moral code.

Dewey Dell—beauty, no; love, definitely not. She thinks only of herself, hardly registering her mother's death or considering the new life inside her.

Luster—beauty, some; love, also some. He lies somewhere in the middle, which adds some good texture.

Anse—beauty, heck no; love, not really. Great comic relief, though.

Dilsey—beauty, in abundance; love, unfailingly. That she endures, like the love of first Corinthians, comes as no surprise at all.

This simple exercise shows how useful these two qualities of finding beauty and expressing love can be when used as defining characteristics for determining morality in Faulkner's characters. But the strongest argument for the importance of these two qualities is Faulkner's writing itself. For if we, as readers, begin to tug at the issues represented by this single thread, the whole tapestry of his works begins to unravel. Once values are established, their persistent absence begs us to question why these protagonists lack such basic decency; what forces of social disintegration have led humanity to a point where the average individual is unable to succeed at such a fundamental humanity? In creating major characters that are consistently flawed and deeply defective, and then insisting that his readers view the world through their perspectives, Faulkner forces us to question our own values, attitudes and assumptions. As we read Darl's hauntingly beautiful words, we are pulled into his reality. When we stand by Addie in the winter light, we find comfort in the smell of damp decay. Through Benjy's eyes, we glimpse the

beauty in the smooth brightness of Caddy's face on the pillow. In Jason's desperate failings, our own angst leaps bitter to our throats. We suddenly see through eyes we actively shun, walk in shoes we would readily destroy if given the chance. He gives us no opportunity for denial, thrusting us into his world as it rapidly disintegrates around us. We follow Darl into madness, we receive salvation beside Dilsey. All things are possible. All things are real.

This, then, is the genius of Faulkner's form and approach. Faulkner does not tell us that beauty and the ability to feel empathy for others are what human experience demands. He forces us to experience them in the very reading of his words—words that catch and astound us with their unexpected beauty and plunge us deep into the reality of others. Who else has ever described voices as a feather, rising, brushing, slanting backward towards the listener (Faulkner *Dying* 13)? Or told us of “girls with tight pigtailed bound with small scraps of cloth like butterflies” (Faulkner *Sound* 182)? Who else pulls us in and out of the consciousness of not one, but a half a dozen others, showing us their wounds, their bright hopes, their cracked desires, their desperate failings? We would be less than human ourselves if we failed to feel at least some empathy with them, if we set the book down without asking why and how. Why would someone end up like that? How could such a thing happen? And so, flush with beauty and tender with empathy, we tug on that thread.

Faulkner thus impeccably illustrates the importance of beauty and empathy, the two elements fundamental to his construct of morality. Not only that, he directs us as readers to experience them in such a way that it leaves us incapable of arguing with these measures of morality. How could we? We have just felt the full impact of their effects.

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