



## QUEER MOTHERING AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE CHILDREN IN WILLIAM FAULKNER'S *AS I LAY DYING*

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### Abstract

Mothers in William Faulkner's novels are not only unconventional, they fail to fit in the role of an ideal mother too. It is interesting to note that Faulkner's mothers rarely do the real job of mothering and that responsibility is rather taken care of by other characters such as domestic help or siblings. In *As I lay Dying*, the protagonist Addie too has been delineated as an unconventional mother who holds a very unusual attitude towards her five children, favouring only two of them while remaining almost indifferent to the rest. Without a sense of commitment, Addie attains the title of motherhood bearing one child after another partly because of the social approbation associated with it and partly because of her own situations. The novel further demonstrates how the whole Bundren family collapses under the weight of the mother's nihilistic philosophy. Adversely influenced by that philosophy, Addie's children fail to gain a proper understanding of life and to coalesce into a healthy family unit. Addie, because of her queer notion of motherhood's power, believes that proliferation without the division of motherly love is possible; and therefore, she keeps three out of her five children almost completely devoid of affection causing each mother-child relationship in the family to turn into a bizarre one. The present paper explores how Addie's failure to adhere to the ideals of motherhood and her dysfunctional mothering style cripple her children's minds and spirits irrevocably, rendering them incapable of having a grasp on reality; and how her queer mothering ruins every mother-child relationship in the Bundren family beyond repair.

**Keywords:** Southern fiction; Female sexuality; Mothering; Motherhood; Nihilistic philosophy; Southern white woman

The antebellum Southern white woman has been highly celebrated in Southern fiction as the ideal representative of womanhood on earth. Several writers in the nineteenth century have asserted idyllic glorification of woman where the image of a lovely, pious and submissive lady was greatly adored by the South and was considered an

apt model for the Southern woman. Strikingly, during this whole period, very few writers bothered to probe into the actual experience of Southern women. The dawn of the twentieth century, however, witnessed a revolutionary change in tendencies. As truly stated by Prensshaw, "In the twentieth century, the Old South paragon who was

in every way good and beautiful has been subjected to widespread skepticism, although the mythology of ladyhood has continued, paradoxically, to maintain a spirited vitality" (74). Therefore, while the Southern woman was still defended, the myth of the ideal Southern white lady began to be challenged by most of the writers.

Many twentieth-century writers delineated female characters "whose chief conflicts grow out of the tension between the social archetype and their own striving for individuality" (Prenshaw 79). William Faulkner too, being one of those writers, portrayed some peculiar female characters while delving into unconventional themes concerning womanhood, female sexuality, and most importantly, motherhood. Faulkner's perception of women in general and mothers in particular, was undoubtedly, far from archetypal. Therefore, rather than being the specimen of morality and uprightness, Faulkner's woman often deflects from the path of virtue thereby, failing to fit in the role of an ideal wife, sister, daughter, beloved, or of course mother, for that matter. Her failure to comply with societal rules not only damages her own self, but her whole family as well, more so when she happens to be a mother in the narrative.

A close reading of Faulkner's works suggests that it is the absence of a decent motherly figure in the story that mainly gives rise to those complex characters that keep struggling to come to terms with the society's norms and their own temporal reality; and whose life, consequently, becomes a constant torturous battle between mind and heart. Interestingly, Faulkner's mothers are quite unusual in that they do not do the real job of mothering and that role is, instead, performed by other characters such as domestic help or siblings. This is ironic since 'family' was a priority in the South and the mother was considered the key to a family's survival and proper functioning. It was the mother who was supposed to hold the family together and largely foster the children and cultivate in them the desirable values and skills. But in William Faulkner's novels, contrastingly, we see that the mothers fail miserably in nurturing their children idealistically or in holding the family intact.

In *As I Lay Dying*, there are two major mother characters—Addie Bundren and her daughter Dewey Dell but unfortunately, both of them are peculiarly flawed. While Addie Bundren, the ailing protagonist remains oblivious of her dysfunctional family, especially the children who languish in neglect in the absence of motherly guidance and care, Dewey Dell, the daughter, constantly contemplates aborting her illicit unborn child and is ready to go to any extent to get it done.

Addie is depicted as a complex character that remains persistently conscious, throughout the novel, of the limitations of the life she has been goaded into by the society. Deeply dissatisfied in the marital relationship with her laidback husband Anse Bundren, who is certainly not a man of action, Addie keeps on yearning silently for a spiritually fulfilling violent experience that can give meaning to her existence. "In *As I Lay Dying*, Addie Bundren is aware of her responsibility," rightly points out Linda Welshimer Wagner, "but her attitude toward it is paradoxical. In some ways she is the proud woman who never complains . . ." (135).

Addie has always been a lonely and neglected spirit who is deeply influenced by her father's nihilistic conception of life, that is, living is nothing but a preparation of death. She is egocentric and her sole focus is on thrusting an awareness of herself on others so much so that taking care of her children and catering to their requirements take a back seat. Addie's self-centredness and sadistic tendencies being way beyond acceptable limits make her impose that violence and apathy upon her defenceless children very easily.

Failed in achieving the desired violent passions in her union with Anse in order to attain consciousness of life, Addie had to wait until Cash was born for her aloneness to get infiltrated. Cash's birth makes her feel that her aloneness has been penetrated and that she has become whole and complete as an individual. In her monologue she describes how her turbulent aloneness and her naive state was intact despite the presence of Anse in her life, and how it came to a sudden end with the birth of Cash because it made her attain

entirety of selfhood assimilated in the newly acquired motherhood. According to William H. Rueckert:

With Cash, she discovers love and for the first time experiences the blood union she has been seeking. It is Cash, not Anse, who brings her virgin state to an end because of the intensity of the direct experience of motherhood. It is Cash who violates her aloneness and in so doing makes her whole again. For the first time, she experiences real "living" and begins to understand what her father meant when he told her that living was getting ready to stay dead a long time. (52)

Cash by providing Addie with that intense and lively experience intrudes into her inner circle that Anse could never enter. William H. Rueckert rightly points out, "Anse is reduced to his empty words—Anse or love, what difference did it make—and, though he does not know it, is dead to Addie. He can never be inside her circle and never be part of what she means by living" (52).

Since Addie's attitude at the time of the birth of each child moulds that child's personality and echoes in the latter's actions, her first child Cash, accordingly, has a matter-of-the-fact approach towards life and is in no conflict with the world around him as he performs one task at one point working through a single plane of perception, unhurried and steady. Being a pure reflection of her mother's wish to let the act replace the word, Cash speaks only when a task is completed. And therefore, though seems cruel, he shows each and every plank to Addie for approval, in order to build a perfect coffin for her. Since the only way Cash knows of expressing himself is through some sort of action such as striking nails with his hammer for building the coffin, this is an indication that his conception is the result of an act of violence. Besides, since Addie had happily ushered him into the inner circles of her existence, there has been no clash as such, between the mother and the son.

Unfortunately, Addie's feelings of relative harmony and gratification survive only until her second son, Darl is born. On discovering that she

has conceived Darl, she feels cheated by Anse's words and begins hating him for encroaching upon her perfectly fulfilling relationship with Cash through the second-born Darl, who, in turn, is destined to live in neglect forever. Addie, in one way or the other, views Darl as a rival to her first experience of love and attainment of selfhood-in-motherhood and therefore, never lets him inside her circle of selfhood. Apparently, "the repeatable character of the experience of childbirth devaluates it for her" (Bockting 101).

Addie becomes convinced that words are useless because they are not connected with violence. She realises that Anse is nothing but empty words and that he can never make her feel alive in want of violence of action. Anse, therefore, ceases to appeal to her. Edmond Loris Volpe correctly puts it, "Anse belongs to this limbo of words, and when Addie realizes that he can never exist on her level, she knows only contempt for him; he is, for her, dead" (135).

It is no surprise that Addie rejects her most vocal child, Darl too, given her absolute contempt for words. "The strange distance that is such a disturbing aspect of Darl's behavior can be linked to his mother's disbelief of his existence. . . . Even his name, Darl, with its loving reverberations of 'darling' is unreal. It seems as if his mother's disbelief has become Darl's own disbelief and has disturbed the normal development of his ego strengths" (Bockting 109). Interestingly, since Darl is intuitive, cerebral, and eloquent, he is the only character capable of putting in words his reflections on himself, other characters, and life lucidly, and driving home the author's message. Cleanth Brooks, therefore, rightly explains:

Because Darl is by far the most articulate of the Bundrens, because his speech is endowed with a certain poetry, and because he voices what is probably the reader's own revulsion against the Bundrens' foolish and horrible journey, it is very likely that Darl will appear to be the representative intelligence of the novel and the mouthpiece of the author. (144-45)

Being the result of words rather than violence, Darl fails to be accepted by Addie and to penetrate her aloneness till her death. He is a complex and sensitive character who keeps brooding over life's complex questions and becomes able to gradually comprehend his own motherless-and-unwanted existence. Like his mother, Darl also understands life's intricacies but unlike Addie, he does not agree with her nihilistic philosophy of violence. Ironically, Darl is in striking contrast with Addie in that while the mother rejects words and considers them useless, the son depends heavily upon them and their value as "He dwells in border states of the imagination . . ." (Towner 25). In Cleanth Brooks's view:

Darl represents, among other things, the detachment and even callousness which we sometimes associate with the artist. Darl is pure perception. He intuits almost immediately Dewey Dell's pregnancy, and his sister, realizing this, resents and fears him. . . . Twice he tries to stop the outrageous journey to the Jefferson cemetery. In general, in spite of all his poetry, he is a rationalizing and deflating force—the antiheroic intelligence. (145)

Addie, on the other hand, unable to put up with the fact that Anse has cheated her into conceiving Darl whom she ultimately refuses to accept, resolves to take her revenge on Anse:

But then I realized that I had been tricked by words older than Anse or love, and that the same word had tricked Anse too, and that my revenge would be that he would never know I was taking revenge. And when Darl was born I asked Anse to promise to take me back to Jefferson when I died, because I knew that father had been right, even when he couldn't have known I was wrong. (Faulkner 157)

After the birth of Darl, Anse becomes completely dead to Addie and for ten years, she shuts herself off from him. Interestingly, all this while, Anse remains largely unaware of his being dead to his wife. Meanwhile, Addie gets into an adulterous relationship with Whitfield the preacher, and once

again experiences the same power and intensity in her existence as she did with Cash's birth. Addie views preacher Whitfield as the supreme symbol of violence because the fact that he has exchanged his sacred garment for sin convinces her that she would be able to attain in Whitfield, the fulfilment that she has been seeking for a long time. Whitfield does not disappoint her too, and makes Addie know what real passion is, while their lovechild Jewel, having been conceived in violence, becomes a spontaneous choice for salvation for Addie. Jewel instantly becomes Addie's favourite child and she invests all her affection solely in him instead of among all the children equally or in God. But since both love and salvation have to be borne out of violence, Jewel's violent attitude sets the ground for his immense love towards his horse and for salvaging Addie's corpse from the river water and from the fire of the burning barn. Jewel being the product of violence participates in all situations with reckless and aggressive candour. He is, "perhaps the least reflective member of the group, violent and even brutal, whose heroism is so pure and unself-conscious that he is not aware that it is heroism. It burns like a clean flame that exhausts itself in the process, leaving no sooty residue" (Brooks 165). According to Volpe:

Cash and Jewel, whom Addie loved most, have the strongest grip upon reality. Absorbed in concrete details, Cash seems to think of death only in terms of the coffin he is building. Jewel, who has only one monologue, is presented mainly through the eyes of Darl. And what Darl perceives is that Jewel, secure in his love for his mother and her love for him, has created a relationship with his horse that duplicates his relationship with Addie. She whipped and petted Jewel more than any of the other children; and to Darl, Jewel's beating and caressing the horse mirrors that relationship. Because Darl is obsessed by Jewel as the living symbol of Addie's rejection of himself, it is difficult to ascertain what does go on in Jewel's mind. (137)

After Jewel's birth, Addie feels like she has lived her life and is now ready to lay dying. However, before

that, she gives birth to Dewey Dell with Anse to nullify Jewel and later Vardaman to replace Cash. And as expected, neither Dewey Dell nor little Vardaman could break into her aloneness. Born just to negate Jewel, Dewey Dell resembles a lot to her father Anse and her brother Darl. She remains confined in her orbit of egoism and perceives each action only as it directly affects her. She is a self-centred and self-absorbed person who, just like her father, can deceive others to any extent to get her own way. In addition, as InekeBocking rightly observes:

Dewey Dell's mind-style, like her brother Darl's, is characterized by negative space, void. Unlike Darl, who creates his own void, Dewey Dell seems passively confronted by it. . . . In contrast to Darl, who denies and distorts his affect, Dewey Dell is able to feel as well as to express her emotions, and to attribute cause-effect relations to them. . . . (126)

As Dewey Dell fails to leave any impression on Addie with her birth, she feels the absence of her mother in her existence more desperately than even Darl. "Her closeness to the family cow, the only other female in her vicinity, answers her need for intimacy and recognition. . . . Another coping strategy is formed by Dewey Dell's mothering behavior, through which she can give others what she herself lacks" (Bocking 124). She keeps fanning Addie on her deathbed, prepares food for the family and takes care of her brothers. But she fails to do any better because Addie brought her to this world only to negate her illegitimate child, Jewel. Other than that, Dewey Dell just serves to comfort her mother's guilty conscience for cheating on her father, Anse. Unable to realise her existence as an individual entity and her purpose, Dewey Dell develops into a morally loose woman lacking a healthy self-image due to inadequate emotional support from her mother and crippled familial foundation.

Feeling incomplete, Dewey Dell tries to fill her emptiness through erotic experiences. However, since she rarely receives motherly affection and timely guidance, her sexual decisions

become unfortunate evidence of that want and longing. She tries to ward off her loneliness by indulging in a promiscuous affair with the field hand Lefe but unfortunately, ends up getting pregnant before marriage. Faulkner, through Dewey Dell's condition and her response to it, draws immediate comparison between the mother and the daughter; and it is quite interesting to note, as Amy Louise Wood also observes, "Although, unlike Addie, her sexuality and motherhood make her feel disconnected and outside of herself, she, like Addie, struggles to find a sense of herself through bodily connections with others" (86). At the same time, unlike Addie, Dewey Dell knows for sure that she cannot foster an illicit child alone and therefore, wants to get rid of the unborn child before anyone can discover her condition. Dewey Dell's efforts to abort her illicit child without any regret or angst parallels, to some extent, with her mother Addie's guiltless and partial mothering behaviour towards Darl, Dewey Dell, and Vardaman. However, as mentioned earlier, this behaviour is also in apparent contrast with Addie's in the sense that while the mother sustains life by giving birth to her illegitimate child Jewel, Dewey Dell has no such intentions and wants to get hers aborted as soon as possible. Interestingly, Dewey Dell seems to be unconsciously making up for her transgression by trying to sustain life by nurturing her family members instead. And therefore, she appears as a typical example of Faulkner's paradoxical mothers who, despite being shallow, selfish, promiscuous, and devoid of a sense of responsibility, are so full of maternal instincts.

After Dewey Dell, Vardaman is born as a replacement for Cash. According to Bocking, "There is very little to say about the way in which Addie's relation to her youngest son started. . . . This means that Vardaman is not canceled like his sister, whose function was to 'negate' Jewel, but it does mean that he is as motherless as she is" (131).

Vardaman, the youngest member of the Bundren family, is an observant innocent child with vivacious fancies. What sets him apart from other Bundren children is his tender love for his mother, which makes it too hard for him to cope with her death in the absence of adequate family support.

Incidentally, although Vardaman is the only son who remains present in his mother's last moments, he still finds it impossible to believe that his mother is dead and therefore, remains largely unable to find the way to express his emotions sensibly. Since he is too young to have yet developed the faculty to comprehend the phenomenon of death, his rambling thoughts come out as incoherent speech quite difficult to decipher. At the same time, his behaviour seems strange and queer too, which may be subjected to different explanations or rationalisations. Although Vardaman's baffled antics may be interpreted as being the result of the trauma due to his mother's death, an equally logical explanation for his behaviour can be found in the fact that he has been a neglected child conceived as a replacement for one of his siblings, and that it must be having a negative bearing on his psyche, as well. Hence, it is quite understandable, "Vardaman cannot accept his mother's death and blames Dr. Peabody's arrival for causing it. In a wild rage, Vardaman chases the doctor's horses off. He is also afraid that his mother will suffocate when she is laid in her coffin; consequently, the night after her death, he drills holes in the top of the coffin, inadvertently ripping into her face" (Fagnoli et al. 52). Apparently, in the absence of his mother's care and guidance, Vardaman does not get to learn social behaviour and manners; and therefore, even though he cusses like a grown man, he fails to find apt words to articulate his grief over his mother's death. It is no surprise that words remain a problem with him. Marc Hewson rightly notes:

Indeed, Vardaman is unable to express the loss of his mother in words at all. . . . The reason Vardaman is a failed speaker lies in the fact that words are powerless for him because they are arbitrary. . . . Ultimately, though, Vardaman's puzzlement over language, his birthright from Addie, is perhaps less important than his propensity for action, something he holds in common with his brothers. (76)

Addie's death has such a deep impact on Vardaman's mind that he starts comparing her mother with a fish. "Grief and ignorance of death

and the brief time interval between the death of the fish and that of his mother confuse Vardaman" (Watkins and Dillingham 104). Lisa K. Perdigao, thus, rightly observes:

As the youngest child, Vardaman represents the symbolist imagination in his constructions of metaphors to represent his mother. . . . Vardaman continually re-presents Addie in the narrative through metaphors, trying to bridge the gap between the material and discursive, between the living and the dead, through figurative language. Yet this metaphorical transformation of the body continually comes undone in the narrative, in Vardaman's own negation of the terms as well as in the characters' readings. The materiality of the body continually re-presented throughout the narrative, problematizes the burial trope as well as the plot's final coherence. (45)

Still too young to know his real self, Vardaman keeps on repeating that he is not "anything" which, in a way, echoes Addie's notion that people are nothing if they do not violate. Since each Bundren child has shared a distinct bond with Addie, each one of them seems to be responding differently to her death. But still, it is rather disturbing to note that most of the family members neither seem to be too moved by nor express much grief at Addie's death and that more than honouring her last wish, it is their own selfish reasons that motivate them to go to Jefferson. It is only later revealed that Addie has already balanced everything out by intentionally making them undergo that difficult journey in order to take revenge on Anse.

Therefore, the whole situation becomes all the more ironical and, to some extent, amusing too because while Addie assumes that her revenge will be complete if she makes Anse bury her in Jefferson with her own folks instead of her in-laws, little does she know that Anse as well as majority of her children happen to be least concerned about fulfilling her last wish and rather want to realise their own self-seeking motives in Jefferson. While Anse plans to get himself a new set of teeth, Cash

who is Addie's firstborn and the first one to have gained entry in Addie's inner circle wants to obtain a graphophone from Jefferson. Strikingly, Darl, the second and the outrightly rejected one, has no ulterior motives behind going to the town and his only goal remains the burial of his mother as per the latter's last wish. It is sad and ironic, however, that he himself ultimately realises the absurdity of the journey and in order to get rid of his mother's rotting dead body, sets fire to Gillespie's barn on the way to Jefferson where the coffin is stored for a night. Darl's instinctive tendencies make him sympathise with his family but Addie's horrific last journey and his own inability to either defy or endure silently all the disasters that the family experiences on the way to Jefferson, lands him in a mental asylum. Like Darl, Jewel, Addie's lovechild with Whitfield too, does not have any hidden motive in going to Jefferson; though, unlike his half-brother, he genuinely tries hard throughout, to fulfil his mother's wish to be buried with her people in Jefferson despite the preposterousness of the pursuit. Being the key recipient of Addie's love, Jewel repays the debt of her mother's undivided love by twice saving her dead body from water and fire. In contrast to Jewel, on the other hand, Dewey Dell, the only daughter of the Bundren family, does have an ulterior and bigger purpose in going to the town. Not much different from Addie in terms of egoism and moral bankruptcy, Dewey Dell's sole motive behind going to Jefferson is to get an abortion. Although her mother has passed away just a few days back, her mind remains occupied largely with the thoughts of pregnancy and abortion. The youngest child Vardaman, who is although too young and incapable to endure his mother's death, too wants to get to the town only because he wants to see the toy train-sets in the store window and get the bananas his sister Dewey Dell has promised him.

Since Addie has largely remained an absent mother either due to her personal preference for certain children or physical illness, all her children remain confined to their own specific zone of comprehension, which although severely cramped, somehow justifies their respective behaviours and reactions. Therefore,

"Addie's life and death have changed nothing for them, and Addie—or rather the body that was once identified as 'Addie'—calls attention to this through her reminder about the falsity and hypocrisy of language, religion, and social custom" (Bibler 148).

Faulkner has usually portrayed his women as using their sexuality not for its natural purpose of bearing children but for furtive motives. In *As I Lay Dying*, Addie too uses her sexuality to gain the title of motherhood—a commitment which she has never been ready to take up in a real sense. She bears children only because of the social approbation associated with motherhood and shows no intention or even inclination otherwise, to own the responsibility of children or perform motherly duties. In fact, Addie holds a very unusual attitude towards her children quite unbecoming for a mother such as favouring two of her children and remaining almost indifferent to the rest of them. Addie has been delineated as an unconventional woman who, quite in contrast to the ideal Southern lady, neither bothers about chastity nor adheres to Southern cultural values. Despite being married and having stayed with her husband and children until her death, she develops a passionate extramarital relationship with the preacher Whitfield. This illicit affair results in the birth of Jewel but she keeps this truth hidden from both Jewel as well as her family. She does not have the guts or gumption to confess this even in her death and rather leaves it to Whitfield to reveal the secret to Anse. Since Addie fails to follow the ideals of motherhood, there is no wonder that each mother-child relationship in the Bundren family turns into a bizarre one affecting the way each child feels about the mother.

*As I Lay Dying* demonstrates how the Bundren family collapses under the weight of the nihilistic philosophy of the mother, Addie. Adversely influenced by her philosophy, Addie's children not only fail to gain a proper understanding of life but also remain unsuccessful in coalescing into a healthy family unit. The novel also shows how the mother causes dysfunction in the family by neglecting and refusing love to some of her children while overtly pampering others. Addie has a queer notion of motherhood's power and believes that proliferation without the division

of motherly love is possible wherein she keeps three out of her five children almost completely devoid of her care and affection. Perhaps that is the reason why even after multiple children, her love for her favourite children remains exclusive. She never allows the non-favourite ones to penetrate her inner circle. Apparently, the decline of the Bundren family is largely the result of Addie's failure to perform motherly duties properly. An ideal mother preserves the family by inculcating moral values among her children and binds the family together by promoting functional communication among all its members. But Addie, being just the opposite, comes out as a self-absorbed woman whose consciousness is constantly swayed by her own selfish desires and passion and who is often seen succumbing to her unscrupulous desires. Her failure to adhere to the ideals of motherhood and her dysfunctional mothering style cripple her children's minds and spirits, rendering them incapable of having a grasp on reality. Unfortunately, Addie's queer mothering ruins every mother-child relationship in the Bundren family beyond repair.

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