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ENG 500: Literary Theory

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Trouble at Home: Struggles between the Matriarch and the Patriarch in *As I Lay Dying* and the Lasting Effect on the Self, Marriage, and the Family

*As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner is the story of a poor Mississippi farming family, the Bundrens, and their quest to bury their recently deceased matriarch, Addie. *As I Lay Dying* has much social commentary on a women's place in her family and society in the rural South. Feminist Theory focuses on women and their place in society as reflected in literature. The novel also features interesting linguistic style choices which Faulkner uses to convey messages about the Bundrens and their world to his readers "between the texts". Deconstructionist Theory further analyzes the usage of the author's language and space within a text to find deeper meaning. One cannot understand *As I Lay Dying* without understanding the complicated dynamic between Addie and Anse, Addie's husband. Both Feminist and Deconstructionist theories are optimal lenses which one can use to further examine Addie and Anse both separately and as a couple, since they impact all of their children and the entire framework of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*.

One of the main troubles brewing in *As I Lay Dying* is the ultimate lack of power that the female characters have. In the world that Faulkner presents his readers, men are allowed to define relationships, but women don't have the same freedom to do so. Women have to be satisfied with what men decide for them, even if it doesn't suit their needs. This leaves many women feeling lonely or lost in relationships that aren't fulfilling for them. Anse seems satisfied in his relationship with Addie while it is made clear that she is not. Anse even uses the word 'love' to describe their relationship while Addie doubts that Anse knows what 'love' even means. Addie didn't have to marry Anse, but she was pressured by society to do so. She would have a higher social standing in their community if she was a wife rather than an unmarried teacher. During the Great Depression, being an unmarried woman was seen as inferior to being a married

woman. So Addie chose the socially 'better' of the two not so great choices presented to her. Addie describes her marriage to Anse as "...not that my aloneness had to be violated over and over each day but...it had not been violated until Cash came. Not even by Anse in the nights. He had a word for it too. Love, he called it. I knew that word was like the others: just a shape to fill a lack...so that was Anse or love; love or Anse; it did not matter." (Faulkner 172) A quote from bell hooks' *All about Love* expands on Addie's loneliness in her relationship with Anse: "Men theorize about love, but women are most often love's practitioners. Most men feel that they receive love and therefore know what is like to be loved; women often feel we are in a constant state of yearning, wanting love but not receiving it" (hooks XX). hooks points out that Addie's experience was not uncommon, especially in a historic context where women were less able to turn down a marriage proposal than they are now. Marriage was equated to safety, higher economic wealth, and social status which was not enjoyed by single women. Usually, women could not refuse a marriage offer because she would be unable to provide for herself as well on her own.

Another attribute of *As I Lay Dying* that can be looked at through a feminist lens is Addie's silence. Silence is a large part of her character; being silenced because she is a woman, choosing silence as a weapon, and literal silence because for most of the novel, she is dead. In the scenes where she is alive, Addie is very self-conscious of the world around her. She often self-silences, suppresses what she's actually wants to say because of what she has been taught. She seems to have internalized the idea that women should be quiet. The fact that she doesn't speak much when alive shows that she isn't empowered to do so on her own behalf. This may seem ironic since Addie is a teacher before she marries Anse so she must speak for the sake of her students' education. However, Addie's silence isn't always because she's a woman. Most notably, she purposely chooses to die without speaking to Anse (48-50) though they are in the same room during her death. She also does not speak for most of the scenes where she has begun to die. She is resentful towards Anse because she had to spend her life in a way that she did not want to. She dies silently out of spite. Addie is relatively silent throughout the novel, since she is dead for most of it.

She is voiceless, except for small passages when other characters remember her speaking. When she speaks in these chapters we don't have any insight into her thought process because we aren't in her head. She briefly has a speaking chapter in the middle of the book (Faulkner 169-176). This chapter enlightens readers about her marriage to Anse and the shocking truth that Jewel has another father, who Faulkner implies is Whitfield. Another quote by feminist theorist bell hooks further explains Addie's lack of choices and lack of power in *As I Lay Dying*: "Being oppressed means the absence of choices. It is the primary point of contact between the oppressed and the oppressor. Many women do have choices (as inadequate as they are); therefore exploitation and discrimination are words that more accurately describe the lot of women in the United States" (hooks 5). This explains that Addie doesn't have many good choices between her broken speech and her silence because she is a woman. She often chooses silence because she thinks it is the best option of two not so desirable choices.

Moving away from feminist critiques and towards deconstructionist theory, another way to understand *As I Lay Dying* is through Anse's God-Complex as shown by his neglect and mistreatment of his family. He says often enough that he cares about Addie, but he does not act like it; watching his actions (or lack of them) reveals this. He also harms most of his children on the journey to get Addie buried. He takes Dewey Dell's last ten dollars (256-257) which she needs for her abortion, ignores Cash's wounded leg for days so that he almost loses it to infection (154,156-157, 185-186, 191,195, 207-209, 215, 224,227, 234, 239-240, 258-259) attempts to sell Jewel's horse (186-191) and has Darl taken away to the state asylum (232-238). This quote from Gayle Rubin may explain why Anse feels he has the right to treat his children and his wife as he sees fit: "Patriarchy is a specific form of male dominance...one old man whose absolute power over wives, children, herds, and dependents was an aspect of the institution of fatherhood, as defined by the social group where he lived" (907). Feminist theorists may claim Faulkner frames Anse as the patriarch to the dysfunctional Bundren family. There are other biblical themes throughout the novel, like the flood scenes, that tie into this idea of Anse as a patriarch. The scene where Anse confronts Jewel about his new horse supports this idea: 'So you bought a horse, [Anse] said. 'You

went behind my back and bought a horse. You never consulted me; you know how tight it is for us to make by, yet you bought a horse for me to feed. Taken the work from your flesh and blood and bought a horse with it” (Faulkner 136). This quote shows Anse’s anger when Jewel brings home the horse he bought with his own money and labor. Anse is offended that Jewel did this without asking him because he sees Jewel as an extension of himself, not his own person. He thinks that whatever his children have rightfully belongs to him and guilts them if they don’t do what he wants. Later Anse pressures Cash to give up his savings (190) and Dewey Dell to give him her last ten dollars (256-257). Jewel, however, doesn’t listen to Anse and keeps his horse. Anse tries to trade it for a team of horses to pull their wagon since he sees Jewel’s property as his own. This God-complex Anse has is explained by Nietzsche in his essay *The Will to Power*: “Simple, transparent, not in contradiction with himself, durable, remaining the same, without wrinkle, fold, concealment, form: a man of this kind conceives a world of being as ‘God’ in his own image (469).” Anse believes he has the right to treat his family as he sees fit because he sees himself as a God-like figure in their lives. Faulkner’s named the Bundrens with purpose: Anse is the shortened version of Ansel which is derived from the Old German for “God” and Addie is the female version of “Adam”. This is not a mistake and is incredibly telling of how Anse sees his relationship to Addie.

In most families, the parents help define the early lives of their children. This is no different for the dysfunctional Bundrens in *As I Lay Dying*. Addie’s silences and Anse’s lies have lasting effects on their children. Addie’s lack of speech in the novel is her self-suppression. Anse, on the other hand, is all talk. Many of the other characters outside of the Bundren family note this too. One could argue that Addie is just a naturally quiet person or Anse is unaware that his actions don’t match his words. There are quiet women and men who aren’t careful in their speech. Addie herself tells the readers how she came to realize Anse’s hypocrisy: “I would be I; I would let [Anse] be the shape and echo of his word...and then he died. He did not know he was dead. I would lie by him in the dark, hearing the dark talk of God’s love and His beauty and His sin; hearing the dark voicelessness in which the words are the deeds and other

words that are not the deeds, that are just gaps in peoples' lacks..." (Faulkner 174). Anse is willing to speak about other people's faults while being so painfully blind to his own. Ironically, Addie says Anse is dead though it's Addie who dies during the book and remains dead for most of it. Tebbetts' deconstructionist reading of *As I Lay Dying* contends with the idea of how the Bundrens' difficulty with speech in the novel affects the whole family as individuals and as a unit. Tebbetts argues that Addie is silence and death while Anse is full of lies (Mother Death and Father Lie is what he calls them in his article); which makes it difficult for their children to navigate the world. "In the final analysis, the most profound failure in this novel, the greatest source of dysfunction is the failure of language...Anse misuses it so habitually that he subverts credence in its authenticity...Addie, having entered into her marriage distrusting language, has found in Anse nothing but confirmation of her distrust..." (Tebbetts 43). Tebbetts' ideas connect to Derrida's ideas of truth. Because the Bundrens do not seem to know how to articulate themselves, they are out of synch with the world around them. As Rivkin and Ryan write "One cannot, Derrida contends, speak of truth without signification...and non-identity (of the original truth with itself because it's 'self' is entirely other than itself, being difference) that are 'essential' to the making of language (452). Because the Bundrens are so disconnected from their ability to speak properly it is difficult for them to articulate what is the truth. Dewey Dell is deceived by multiple men, Darl goes mad and lights a barn on fire, Cash is unable to say how he feels about Addie's passing, and Jewel blows up at the slightest inconvenience, nearly causing a violent fight, because he was never taught to temper himself. By the end of the novel, Faulkner makes it clear that the legacy that Addie and Anse have left for their children is one of broken, misunderstood communication.

*As I Lay Dying* can be read as a social commentary on what life was like for women and families in the Deep South during the Great Depression. Addie's place as silent matriarch in the Bundren family shows that women did not have the same power as men did. She didn't have much choice when she married Anse due to societal expectations. Married women were simply respected more than single women. Anse is the patriarch to Addie's matriarch; he sees himself as the unquestionable seat of authority

in the Bundren family. He is willing to guilt, use or harm his children in the process of getting what he wants. He does so because he sees them as extensions of himself rather than their own people. Anse displays a God complex and hurts all of his children in the process despite the fact that most of them have names that denote they have value- Cash (money), Darl (short for “darling”), Jewel (a precious gemstone), and Dewey Dell (Dewey is derived from “beloved” in Welsh). While Addie is largely defined by her silence in *As I Lay Dying*, Anse is able to use his words carelessly, but the consequence of his carelessness is never his to bear. It’s his children who pay the price ultimately, because they do not have the framework to communicate with the outer world since their only models are a nearly silent (now dead) mother and a father who never cares to tell the truth. Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* can be seen as a study in dysfunctional family units and how the failure of the parent’s relationship can have long lasting effects on their children, even after one of the parents has died.

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