

Addie Bundren, A Round Character in *As I Lay Dying*

DENG Yun Fei 邓云飞

School of Foreign Languages, China West Normal University

No. 1, Xihua Road, Shunqin District

Nanchong, Sichuan

People's Republic of China

中国四川省南充市顺庆区西华路 1 号

西华师范大学外国语学院

Email: 948043201@qq.com

Abstract

Addie Bundren is a controversial figure in William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying (1929). She is often labeled as an eccentric and demonic mother who is responsible for the dislocation of her family members. However, a close reading of the novel can enable us to find in her a much more complicated image. Not only is she an independent and capable woman but also she is an honest and responsible mother. She is a round character that denies being stereotyped and caricaturized.

Key Words: *As I Lay Dying*; William Faulkner; Addie Bundren; characterization, round character

1. Introduction

As I Lay Dying (1929) is one of the family novels written by William Faulkner, the most well-known American Southern writer in the late 1920's and in 1930's. Faulkner cherished it so much that he called it as "tour de force," and even thought it superior to *The Sound and the Fury* (1930). Faulkner was awarded the Noble Prize for Literature in 1949 for the novels including *As I Lay Dying*. On the list of 100 best English novels of Modern Library in 1998, *As I Lay Dying* ranked 35.

Structurally, *As I Lay Dying* is divided into 59 chapters, each entitled with the names of 15 narrators. Some chapters are as long as tens of pages while one chapter is as short as one sentence. The narrators are 7 members of the Bundrens and 8 neighbors of the family and passers-by they met along the journey. The multiple narrations help readers to get to know the internal relationship when 7 family members talk about each other and the exterior insight into the family from the comments of 8 outsiders. Even though their narrations may contradict, but a general clue strings them together to a meaningful story: it tells us about the death of Addie Bundren and the 9-day journey during which the family members transport her decomposing body to her family burial place in Jefferson.

2. Addie Bundren, a round character with multiple facets

Addie is the heroine, who is often negatively viewed by many critics. She is often condemned as one of the Faulknerian mothers whose pathological personalities bring about the tragedy of their families. As Quentin Compson says in *The Sound and The Fury*, “mother is the dungeon.” (Polk, 1984: 60-93) Critic Irving Howe classified her as “one of the Faulknerian characters concerning whom one finds little to admire except their utter insistence upon taking and struggling with life until the end.” (Howe, 1952: 177) However, as a literary heroine, she is far more complicated than any ‘superfluous Faulknerian mothers’ in the 1930’s.

In *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), E. M. Forster divided characters into flat and round. “Flat characters”, he says, “are constructed round a single idea or quality. They undergo no change or development.” “They are types”, “caricatures. If, in a sense, the flat character embodies an idea or quality, then the “round character encompasses many ideas and qualities, undergoing change and development, as well as entertaining different ideas and characteristics” (Forster, 1927: 48)

Addie is such a round character who denies to be stereotyped and caricaturized. Having given birth to five children and brought them up single-handedly, she has been leading the life of a slave till her last day. Actually, the hard life has burned her out. On her bed where she lay dying, her eyes bore a resemblance to “candles when you watch them gutter down into the sockets of iron candle-sticks” (Faulkner, 1996: 7) and “lamps blared up just before the oil is gone” (41); her look touched “not with sight or sense, but like the stream from a hose touches you, the stream at the instant of impact as dissociated from the nozzle as though it had never been there” (39); her face “wasted away so that bones draw just under the skin in white lines” (7); and her hands “lay on the quilt like two of them roots dug up and tried to wash and you couldn’t get them clean” (13); her body was “no more than a bundle of rotten sticks” (40); her voice was “harsh and strong, unimpaired” (42). Cora admires her for her skill as such a good cook that “there’s not a woman in this section could ever bake with Addie Bundren” (5). Anse acknowledges her as a self-sufficient woman: “she was ever one to clean up after herself” (18). Anse explicitly characterizes her as “a private woman” (17); and to him, she has been a dedicated mother to her sons: “couldn’t no woman strove harder than Addie to make them right, man and boy: I’ll say that for her” (34). Both Cash and Darl find her partial to Jewel, “she would sit in the lamplight, holding him on a pillow on her lap” (130). So it is fair for us to conclude that she is a private and proud woman, honest, hard on herself, lonely, and perhaps somewhat harsh and selective in her affection for her children. Similarly, Addie is certainly perceived as lonely, distinctive, and even somewhat deviant in the eyes of her neighbors. Cora appraises her succinctly: “She lived, a lonely woman, lonely with her pride, trying to make folks believe different.” (18) From her own narration, we are further informed of her personality. We understand how desperately she tries to maintain her aloneness and punish those who venture to violate her privacy and loneliness.

3. A Victim of a Loveless Family

When she was young, she was a victim in a loveless family. To some extent, she is a rootless, parentless child. With bitterness, she compares her effort to seek for her identity as “fumbling at the deeds like orphans to whom are pointed out in a crowd two faces and told, That is your father, your mother” (163). Her existence is denied by her father whose nihilistic ideas have had a detrimental effect on her personality: “I could just remember how my father used to say that the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long

time” (157). Thus, since a human lifetime is in essence an existential zero when seen in contrast to the seeming eternity of the universe, she feels to seize upon what meager power she has, that she might impose her mark upon the world- while simultaneously being powerless to escape the pettiness of her life. As living is a way to get ready to stay dead, she lives in emptiness and blind hatred. As a daughter, she hates her father for having planted her. As a schoolteacher, she hates the schoolchildren for their mischievous behaviors. As a wife, she hates Anse for cheating her, in the name of love, to have more children than she wants. On one hand, she hates those who have violated her aloneness; on the other, she deliberately takes revenge on others and spares no effort to impinge her will upon them. Just as the Christian invoke Christian blood as a sacrament, it is only by inflicting hurt on others can she cope with the existential dread of their mutual existence. To punish the students, she “would look forward the times when they faulted, so I could whip them. And I would think with each blow of the switch: Now you are aware of me! Now I am something in your secret and selfish life, who have marked your blood with my own for ever and ever” (157). To combat her sense of loneliness and despair, Addie does make some other attempts. She longs for the companionship of a man who can understand her proud and lonely heart. “In the early spring it was worst. Sometimes I thought that I could not bear it, lying in bed at night, with the wild geese going north and their honking coming faint and high and wild out of the wild darkness...”(158) So she “took” Anse who is almost as rootless as she is. He has no relative, and he lives alone in a new house; hopefully, their future life is expected to be free from responsibility for others. What’s more, she chooses Anse because the marriage will not likely to violate her pride, privacy and ego. However, the marriage doesn’t last long before she tires of it. She begins to project upon him her own angst and alienation. Then, she hates Anse for the unexpected pregnancy and deems him invisible and metaphorically dead, even vanishing like liquid in a jar. Having dehumanized him, she turns to another man for meaning of the meaningless life. Undoubtedly, she is dauntless and reckless to flout the conventions of the community, horrifying the Protestants by the scorn she pours on their faith. She is the embodiment of nihilism, (total negation of everything, total skepticism). She emerges as a mature, strong-willed, but complex and enigmatic woman, radiant and triumphant in her arrogance. She is the type of woman that intrigues the reader. In spite of her pathetic personality, she earns the reader’s sympathy, and lives on in the reader’s mind.

4. A Woman of Courage and Honesty in contrast with Anse and Whitfield

Addie Bundren’s character is particular with the contrast between two men in her life. One is her husband Anse, and the other is Whitfield, her lover. Anse is acknowledged as one of the most despicable Faulknerian characters. He is often condemned and scorned by critics for his laziness and his meanness in selling Jewel’s horse having been bought with the money Jewel has earned with back-breaking labor, in grabbing the money Dewey Dell wants to buy pills for abortion. He is accused of bringing about great losses to the family because of his being poorly manipulative. He is also scorned for his pettiness to wear away Addie’s heroic and passionate life. Anse mortgages the most expensive parts of the family’s property to buy a new team of mules. This trade is significant, as the money from Anse’s pilfering of Cash’s gramophone fund and the sale of Jewel’s horse represents the sacrifice of these characters’ greatest dreams. But the fact that Anse throws in his farm equipment should not be overlooked, as this equipment guarantees the family’s livelihood. In an effort to salvage the burial trip, Anse jeopardizes the very tools the family requires to till its land and survive.

In the eyes of the narrators, he is often not described as a man or a father, but as an animal or a creature. For instance, he is likened to “old dogs” (14) “a dipped rooster” (39), “a scarecrow” (156), “a feeled steer” (660), “a failing steer” (147), “and old tall bird” (147), or “a tall bird hunched in the cold weather, on the wagon seat” (156), and “a figure carved clumsily from tough wood by a drunken caricaturist” (151). His hands are “awkward as a claw” (47); his eyes are “like two hounds in a strange yard” (158). He often wears a hangdog look on his face, humped, dangle-armed, and motionless, with his eyes blinking.

Anse is deplorably despised throughout the novel by his children, his folk fellows and his wife. In Addie’s narration, Anse is found in a marriage arranged by the purposeful, determined but cynical Addie to inflict violence and suffering on another person. Through her verbal as well as her physical violence, Addie is able to act out her hatred; her marriage will provide an opportunity to continue displacing her rage against her father. “So I took Anse” brings out the inequality in the relationship, and it is soon to become even more unequal, when she even takes away his life: “I believed that I would kill Anse” (158). A “possible world” soon presented as if real: “and then he died, he did not know he was dead” (160). To replace her anger and disappointment toward her husband, she further dehumanizes Anse by thinking of himself as “the shape and echo of his word,” and “the word as a shaped, a vessel, and I would watch him liquefy and flow into it like cold molasses flowing out of the darkness”(161). To justify her refusal of Anse in her life, she has an extra-marital affair, and then she “lay with Anse again” (163). Thus, as a gregarious animal, Anse has not duly given the respect and love by his wife and children. He is one of the walking dead.

As to Whitfield, her lover is a minister. He falls into the category of those whose “words are not deeds.”(162). His “swift and secret” entry into Anse’s life leaves her “no sense of beginning and ending” (164). She takes the precaution because he thinks “necessary for his sake”, (162) not for her safety. When he learns of her dying, he is sleepless the whole night not for her loss, but for his sake again. He spends a whole night in deciding whether to confess to Anse of his adultery lest Addie should tell in advance, getting him in a disadvantageous place. “Let me not be too late; let not the tale of mine and her transgression come from her lips instead of mine. She had sworn then that she would never tell it, but eternity is a fearsome thing to face...let me not have also the sin of her broken vow upon my soul.”(166) He interprets Addie’s death as God letting him off the hook: “my soul felt freer, quieter than it had in years...to either side I saw His hand; in my heart I could hear His voice: “courage. I am with thee.”(167). When he learns that she dies without breaking the vow, he is relieved: “it was He in His infinite wisdom that restrained the tale from her dying lips.”(168)

5. Conclusion

All in all, Addie Bundren is a round character that develops with the plot. A reader gets to know more about her from different narrators with the story going on. Not only is she an independent and capable woman, but also she is a lonely woman whom no one can understand and men appear to be wretched, selfish, mean, and petty at her presence.

References

- [1] Faulkner, William (1996), *As I Lay Dying*. Vintage
- [2] Howe, Irving *William Faulkner: a Critical Study*. New York: Vintage Books, 1952: 177
- [3] Polk, Noel. "The Dungeon Was Mother Herself: William Faulkner: 1927-1931." *New Directions in Faulkner's Studies: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha*, 1983, ed. Fowler, Doreen & Abadie, Ann J. Jackson: University Press Of Mississippi, 1984:60-93
- [4] R. Rio- Jelliffe. "As I Lay Dying: The voiced and Unseen" in *Obscurity's Myriad Components: the Theory and Practice of William Faulkner*. London: Associated University Press, 2001: 108.
- [5] Forster, E. M. (1927) *Aspects of Novel*. New York: Rossetta Books LLC