

## Which Child Does Addie Bundren Reject, Cash or Darl?

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### Abstract:

*As I Lay Dying* (1929) is one of William Faulkner's major family novels that depict how much an abandoned child may suffer from irresponsible parents. Addie Bundren's nihilistic idea, inherited from her deceased father, deprives her ability to establish a normal relationship with people around her, including her husband and children. The ambiguity in her narration causes controversy as to whether it is Cash or Darl that she has rejected. Through a careful analysis of the narration and character of Darl and Cash, this essay aims at proving that it is Darl not Cash that Addie begrudges her motherly love to.

**Key Words:** *As I Lay Dying*, Darl, Addie, Cash, motherly love

### 1. Introduction

*As I Lay Dying*, published in 1929, is one of William Faulkner's major family novels that concern how much a neglected child suffers. Addie Bundren, the mother of five children: Cash, Darl, Jewel, Dewey Dell and Vardaman, is instilled in her early childhood by her father's remark that "the reason of living was to get ready to stay dead a long time."<sup>[1] P.157</sup> Such a nihilistic idea has detrimental effect upon her so that it deprives her ability to establish a benign relationship with the world around her, including Anse, her husband and children. She harbors hatred for her husband whom she thinks has cheated her. To prevent her aloneness from being violated, she shuts herself up and retreats to her lonely world to separate her husband and her, "his" children from "hers". She says: "I gave Anse Dewey Dell to negative Jewel; then I gave him Vardaman to replace the child I had robbed him of. And now he has three children that are his and not mine. And then I could get ready to die."<sup>[1] P.165</sup> The ambiguity of the word "the child" in her remark triggers disagreement as to which child she refers to, Cash or Darl? Some critic argues that it is Darl that she refers

to <sup>[2] P.77-80</sup> only because the most unreliable narrator Cora says, “I always said Darl was different from those others. I always said he was the only one of them that had his mother’s nature, had any natural affection”<sup>[1] P.17</sup>. In my opinion, it is Darl whom she rejects. Her introversion and pathological hatred for others leads not only to her own tragedy but also to that of her children, especially to the child she abandons the minute she gives birth to.

## 2. Darl: a Motherless Child

Addie abandons and rejects Darl the minute she realizes his existence: “then I found that I had Darl. At first I would not believe it. Then I believe that I would kill Anse” <sup>[1] P.160</sup>. If the birth of Cash is a blessing in her life, the birth of Darl is a curse from the outset. With Darl’s birth, Addie’s indifference to Anse evolves into hatred. Warmth and harmony between her and Cash are in contrast with coldness and hatred between her and Darl.

Even though Addie doesn’t like Darl, genetically, he takes after her more than any other child. Like her, he is the most intelligent and sensitive among the Bundren children, a child victim in an unhappy family, who constantly seeks for his identity and the meaning of living and ventures to intrude into the privacy of others, with the intention to find gratification in hurting others. In addition, both of them want to prove their existence; and in spite of their sense of alienation, they try to break down the barriers of communication. However, both of them get disillusioned in the end. Like his mother, Darl’s disillusionment and isolation originate from his denial of his existence early in his childhood. As an unwanted child, he is supposed to have caused the unbalance of the number for the children between Anse and her husband. No other child craves as strongly for true love as Darl does. Once he thinks longingly of his home: “How often have I lain beneath rain on a strange roof, thinking of home” <sup>[1] P.74</sup>. The roof of the Bundren is “a strange roof” beneath which he can’t find his place. So, he keeps on seeking for his identity, inquiring for his existence: “I don’t know what I am. I don’t know if I am or not” <sup>[1] P.73</sup>.

He often associates his existence with his mother. When he discusses the question of what a mother is with Vardaman, he says: “I haven’t got ere one.” He attributes his non-existence to his motherlessness: “that’s why I am not is” <sup>[1] P.91</sup>. He can’t separate his ego, his being from his mother, which indicates that his earlier years’ sufferings have had a detrimental impact upon his life. Although he is nearly 30 years old, he is still dependant on his mother for love. Darl’s awareness of his rejection is as acute as his remarks are pungent. “I cannot love my mother because I have no mother” <sup>[1] P.86</sup>. His attitude toward his mother is also contradictory. It is a mixture of love and hatred, a suppression of jealousy and rejection. There is some truth in Cora’s beliefs that Darl is the sweetest boy in the family and it is true love and understanding between Darl and his mom.

His devouring eyes, full of jealousy and bitterness, often follow Jewel, Addie’s favorite child. “He (Jewel) is a head taller than any of the rest of us, always was. I told them that’s why ma always whipped him and petted him more. Because he was peaking around the house more. That’s why she named him Jewel” <sup>[1] P.14</sup>. He finds it out that Addie asks Dewey Dell and Vardaman to help Jewel with his assigned housework, and “even doing herself when pa wasn’t there” <sup>[1] P.116</sup>. Seeing that Jewel is getting exhausted from overwork, Darl finds his mother “fix him (Jewel) special things to eat and hide them for him” <sup>[1] P.116</sup>. Darl’s awareness of his rejection keeps him aloof from his mother. He seldom calls her mother, instead, he often relates to her

as “Addie Bundren” as if she were a stranger to him or at most, an acquaintance. He often finds fault with her: “when I first found it out, that Addie Bundren should be hiding anything she did, who had tried to teach us that deceit was such that, in a world where it was, nothing else could be very bad or very important, not even poverty” <sup>[1]P.116</sup>. Instead of showing his respect to Addie, he assumes an ironic tone while talking about her coffin that Jewel is carrying: “For an instant it (the coffin) resists, as though volitional, as though within it her pole-thin body clings furiously, even though dead, to a sort of modesty, as she would have tried to conceal a soiled garment that she could not prevent her body soiling. Then it breaks free, rising suddenly as though the emaciation of her body had added buoyancy to the planks or as though, seeing that the garment was about to be torn from her, she rushes suddenly after it in a passionate reversal that flouts its own desires and need” <sup>[1]P.88</sup>. The second time when Jewel saves the coffin from the fire, Darl is amused again at the sight of Addie’s coffin out of the fire. “It (the coffin) looms unbelievably tall, hiding him: I could not have believed that Addie Bundren would have needed that much room to lie comfortable in; for another instant it stands upright while the sparks rain on it in scattering bursts as though they engendered other sparks from the contact” <sup>[1]P.208</sup>. However, it is entirely wrong to assume that he does not love his mother. Quite the opposite, he seems to be the one most affected by his mother’s death in the family. In order to set Addie’s decomposed body at rest as early as possible, he sets fire to the barn to put an end to the absurdity of the Bundrens, as he understands her wishes to be hidden away from the sight of others. He weeps bitterly over her coffin after he fails in his attempt. Darl’s tears show “the understanding and the true love” <sup>[1]P.20</sup> between him and his mother, and also contrast with his laughter through out the journey. Some critics attribute his introvert personality, his weirdness to Schizophrenia or hallucination. However, one can hardly be convinced of his craziness in setting fire to the barn, considering his thoughtfulness in taking care of Cash whose leg has been seriously injured, and his calmness in preventing Jewel from confronting a town man who is just as hot-tempered as Jewel. Knowing that he can hardly prevent the family from going further into absurdity, he begins to laugh at them. He laughs first time when the journey starts. The second time he laughs when his father, Jewel and Dewey Dell fix him for the two gunmen to take him to the asylum. He is surprised that Cash, the only one he trusts and admires should be one of them to betray him. With the power of omniscience, he should foresee the family conspiracy, and expect Cash to be different from others. However, the last good person in the world dies in his mind, and his laughter is mixed with bitterness and despair; it is a knife piercing into the dirty minds of the secretive family. He is immediately caught as soon as Addie is buried, “which indicates that they have buried not only her body, but also the last bit of conscience, and sense the Bundrens have”[4]. His laughter only makes the self-righteousness and hypocrisy in the morality of Cash’s balanced and logic thinking even more absurd and hypocritical. “It was bad. It was bad so. I be durn if I could see anything to laugh at. Because there just ain’t nothing justifies the deliberate destruction of what a man has built with his won sweat and stored the fruit of his sweat into” <sup>[1]P.225</sup>. Darl is not mad from the beginning, but is driven mad at last. The third time he laughs is when he is put on the train to Jackson. He laughs all the way there. This time, he is split into two persons, with one watching what the other is doing. And time and time again Darl asks himself what he laughs at. He finds that everything and everyone in the world is laughable, hence the definite answer: “Yes yes yes yes yes.” Here, repetition is an order for the groundless, “the critical mask for nothingness” <sup>[3]</sup>. Darl finds absurdity in everyone on his way to Jefferson: the passers-by’s heads turn like the heads of owls; two men put him on the train have mis-matched

coats on them, with their neck's hair line looking as if it has been made by a carpenter's chalk-line, and the way they sit opposite reminds him of his spy-glass and the state's money which is incest. His family members around the wagon on the square of the town look funny to him, too. The way they eat bananas from the paper also sets him laughing. He laughs at his siblings for deserting him without feeling guilty. Now they have quickly forgotten him but enjoy bananas when he is in a cage in Jackson. He tries to locate his identity in the world by calling for their conscience: "Darl is our brother, our brother Darl"<sup>[1] P.242</sup>. But he fails to come up with an ideal answer and his calling only echoes in thoughts in Vardaman's childish mind "Darl is our brother"<sup>[1] pp. 237-240</sup>.

No other child in the Bundrens can be more sensitive than Darl. He is most typical of the lost souls, the disillusioned hollow men T. S. Eliot describes. His poetic and dream-like narration shows his nihilism: "How do our lives ravel out into the no-wind, no-sound, the weary gestures wearily recapitulant: echoes of old compulsions wearily recapitulant: echoes of old compulsions with no-hand on no-strings: in sunset we fall into furious attitude, dead gestures of dolls"<sup>[1] P.194</sup>. He is most isolated and most actively involved in the attempt to understand others. His awareness of others' inner aspirations and desires, his sensitivity and his obsession with his identity, unfortunately, violate the family's "telepathic agreement"<sup>[1] P.120</sup>. As a result, he turns out to be far from being comfortable to others. His weirdness is understandably caused by his sense of insecurity and craving for maternal love. However, in a barren world where love is as scarce as the water in the desert, he is doomed to failure. As Cash puts it, "this world is not his world; this life his life"<sup>[1], P. 248</sup>.

### 3. Cash: Emotional paralysis

Comparatively, Cash is more like Jewel, Addie's illegitimate son with Reverend Whitefield, in nature. Both are not haunted with an apparent loss of identity, nor are as articulate as Darl. Out of the total thirty-eight narrations made by the Bundren Children, thirty-two narrations have been made by Anse's children, only six by Addie's children, five by Cash, and one by Jewel. Both Cash and Jewel seem to have followed faithfully Addie's principle that "words go straight up in a thin line, quick and harmless, and... doing goes along the earth, clinging to it"<sup>[1] p.162</sup>. They deny the function of words and speak so little as if they have been molded as men of actions rather than words. It is possible that to survive in the barren world where communication seems to be useless and futile, they have reduced to mute; or it is possible that their eloquence resides in their obsessions with carpentry and horse-training respectively.

At the beginning, Cash impresses the reader and all the other narrators with nothing but the monotonous "chuck chuck chuck" when he makes the coffin for his mother. More preposterously, he makes no emotional remarks about his mother's death but an impressive long list of thirteen reasons to make a coffin on a bevel and meticulously arrives at the conclusion that "it makes a neater job"<sup>[1] P.75</sup>. However, from the way that Cash is obsessed with his carpentry work and his somberness and his inarticulateness, we can see he basically lacks communication with other members of the family as well. He and Darl should be the closest in the family, but even when they sleep on the same bed, they seldom talk with each other. Hardly can he finish one sentence before he is rudely interrupted by Jewel: (Cash :) "I am telling you it won't tote and it won't ride on a balance unless---"(Jewel :) "Pick up! Pick up, goddamn your thick-nosed soul to hell, pick up". As Darl narrates jealously: "A good Carpenter, Cash is. Addie Bundren could not want a better one, a better box to lie in. it will give her confidence and comfort. I go on to the house, followed by the chuck

chuck chuck of the adze”<sup>[1] P. 87</sup>. The very last line of the first narration of the novel made by Darl echoes exactly what is inside of Jewel: “one lick less until everybody that passes in the road will have to stop and see it and say what a fine carpenter he is...it would just be me and her on a high hill... until she was quiet and not that goddamn adze going one lick less. One lick less and we could be quiet”<sup>[1] PP. 11-12</sup>.

Cash is modeled on Jesus Christ for his vocation as a carpenter, for his sacrifice and endurance, the personality Faulkner hails most in “ the immortal human beings”<sup>[5]</sup>. However, he is far from being a respectable Jesus Christ. At the beginning of the novel, he is the second funniest character, next to Anse. By being funny, it doesn't mean that he is a man of a sense of humor. Quite the contrary, his first narration is nothing but thirteen reasons to make the coffin on the bevel. When he is asked how far he has fallen from the church, he answers precisely: “twenty-eight foot, four and a half inches about”<sup>[1] P. 82</sup>. It shows that he is unemotional and unimaginative as Darl is emotional and as Jewel is impulsive. In fact, Darl and Cash are opposites. Where Darl is sensitive and observant, Cash is insensitive and unaffected. Darl is an eloquent poet and a philosopher whereas Cash is a man of somber mind and a man of reason, logic and action. Darl contributes eighteen most imaginative and lyric narrations out of the total fifty-eighty throughout the novel whereas Cash only makes five narrations. When his mother lies dying, he is seen working meticulously day and night to make her a coffin. He is not so emotionally affected by his mother's death, neither is he affected by his own suffering. At the beginning of the story, he has his leg broken when he falls off the roof of the church, and yet, he limps about to make his mother a coffin. Near the end of the story, he has the same leg broken again when he tries to save his mother's coffin from being washed away by the flooding river. However, what he is most concerned is not his wound, but his tools in the water. In order not to hinder the plan of the family, he endures great pain in his broken leg, not a single groan does he makes; instead, what he replies repetitively is “I am fine, I am obliged to you,” and “It don't bother me none”<sup>[1] P. 196, P. 199, P. 201</sup>.

Unlike Jesus Christ, who is a savior, Cash is only a victim of the follies in his world; and in turn, he victimizes his brother Darl. He is an important person in the family conspiracy to send Darl to Jackson in order not to pay the loss of the barn. “It wasn't anything else to do. It was either send him to Jackson, or have Gillespie sue us”<sup>[1] P. 219</sup>. Cash has already turned it in his mind whether they should send Darl to Jackson or not. It is obviously a hard choice for him, but as a man who needs balance, he loses his balance like the coffin loses its balance when crossing the river. On one hand, in order to justify his decision to sacrifice Darl for the family interests, he tries to convince himself that Darl is insane, but on the other, he obviously knows that Darl is not insane because he himself think Darl has done right in a way to “get shut of her in some clean way”<sup>[1] P. 220</sup>. He is not sure “who's got ere a right to say when a man is crazy and when he ain't”<sup>[1] P. 226</sup>. He is reluctant to send Darl away because of the brotherhood and closeness between them, but he is weak and lacks the courage to go against the will of the majority. He is alone, and the only one among the decision-makers to have sympathy with Darl. As a Christ-like character, he can't be a savior for Darl. When Darl shows his concerns for his wound several times by suggesting, “We better take Cash to the doctor first. We can leave him there and come back for him”<sup>[1] P. 221</sup>. One can read his complication and confusion and bewilderment and helplessness in his mind: “it's because me and him was born close together...I feel kin to them, all right, but I don't know. And me being the oldest, and thinking already the very thing that he done: I don't know”<sup>[1] P. 221</sup>. The repetition of “I don't know” shows how hard he is struggling with himself, and that there is injustice and absurdity in the decision. Cash, though more humane

than Anse, Jewel, and Dewey Dell, is too weak to go against the majority. The only help he can offer to Darl is to suggest postponing turning Darl in as “a fellow that’s going to spend the rest of his life locked up, he ought to be let to have what pleasure he can have before he goes”<sup>[1] P. 219</sup>.

However, we cannot expect too much from Cash, who can’t even save himself from being a victim of the poverty and ignorance of the family. He himself is just one of those who shamle through their day-by-day activities as if saddled with death wishes they are too enervated to act upon. As the oldest son of a weak and lazy father, Cash has to play a major role in supporting the family. He is docile, obedient, and compliant. He never cares about his personal interests, but tries to conform to the interests of the majority. Even though he has realized the absurdity of the family’s expedition, he is not assertive to stop it, and he lacks Darl’s courage to stop it as well. Even though he has got his right leg broken again while he tries to save the coffin in the river, he doesn’t even groan, what he cares about is his tool that he takes along with him, with the intention of working for Tull on his way back. He works day and night to make Addie a coffin; he is tolerant of his father’s laziness and poor management and judgment, he is receptive of the duck-like woman by anticipating her to be “Mrs. Bundren”. He minds little Jewel’s rudeness and hot temper, and he shows due sympathy for Darl’s craziness, and suggests postponing giving him in. However, while he chooses to project an outwardly strong appearance and keep his feelings inside, he hurts; he bleeds, he cracks like any human being would. Cash tries his best to keep his world balanced, but it keeps losing balance. He is too weak to prevent his world from being losing balance, after all. Nowhere can he find comfort, in fact. Thus, he has to go to music for a sort of escape. Like what he said about Darl, “this world is not his world”<sup>[1] P. 248</sup>. This world is not for him either, thus, he can only retreat to the world of music. “I reckon I wouldn’t never get no work done a-tall for listening to it. I don’t know if a little music ain’t about the nicest thing a fellow can have. Seems like when he comes in tired of a night, it ain’t nothing could rest him like having a little music played and him resting”<sup>[1] P. 245</sup>.

#### 4. Conclusion

To conclude, neither Cash nor Darl is happy in a family of coldness and alienation. Addie, the victim of her father’s nihilism, becomes, in turn, the perpetrator of her children. In Faulkner’s family novels in 1930’s, he “portrays the tragedies of men and women whose commitment to the dead and concomitant inability to perceive reality condemn them to rage, passivity, and impotence. They live only in the past and live through others. Their fanatic devotion to private, untranslatable dreams causes other people’s spiritual and physical destruction”<sup>[6]</sup>. In *As I Lay Dying*, the entire life of Addie is haunted by her dead father’s instruction that the reason for living is to get ready to stay dead for a long time so that she cannot she denies herself joy in life. She is unable to establish a normal relationship with her students. She remarks at the beginning of her narration: “In the afternoon when school was out and the last one had left with his little dirty snuffling nose, instead of going home I would go down the hill to the spring where I would be quiet and hate them”<sup>[1] P. 157</sup>. Addie wants to get into her students secret mind to understand them but she doesn’t know how to deal with them. She can only imagine herself whipping the students when they fault. And she is looking forward to it. This shows her distorted mind caused by her loneliness and her eagerness to quench loneliness. This is the case with Darl who, who is constantly seeking for his identity, mother and home.

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