

# Motherless Children in *As I Lay Dying* ---Darl, Dewey Dell and Vardaman

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## Abstract

*As I Lay Dying* is one of the family novels William Faulkner wrote in the 1930's. It depicts the Bundrens, a peculiar family in which parents and children are alienated like strangers, and parents are responsible for their children's distorted personalities: loneliness, indifference, and even hatred for each other.

**Key words:** *As I Lay Dying*, William Faulkner, Darl, Dewey Dell, Vardaman, alienation

## 1. Introduction:

A family is the basic unity of a society. The relationship and interaction between the family members is a manifestation of culture and civilization of the society. *As I Lay Dying* is one of the family novels William Faulkner wrote in the 1930's setting in the fictional kingdom of Yoknapatawpha County. The Bundrens is typical of the Southern civilization and culture in which parents and children are alienated like strangers. As Noel Polk observes, "If Yoknapatawpha in this period is for the adults a wasteland of frustrated passions and spend, wasted lives, it is for the children a singular and unrelenting torment. There are practically no children in Yoknapatawpha ... who have anything like a normal, even a reasonable, much less a positive and healthy, childhood. Childhood in Faulkner is almost invariably a terrifying experience." (Polk, 1984, P67) Faulkner attaches great importance to the influence of parents on their children in the family. The inertness and emotional paralysis of the Bundrens' children in *As I Lay Dying* is attributed to their mother's neglect to them.

Addie Bundren is an arrogant and private woman, affected by the nihilism of her cynical father. When her attempts to communicate with the others fail, she resorts to violence or pathological hatred for them; and the hatred, in turn, leads to not only her own tragedy but also to that of her children. In her narration, Addie

divides in private her five children into two groups. One group has three, the other two. She puts in detail how she manipulates her secret plan: "I gave Anse Dewey Dell to negative Jewel. Then I gave him Vardaman to replace the child I robbed him of. And now he has three children that are his not mine" (165). Three children whom Addie supposes to belong to Anse are Darl, Dewey Dell, and Vardaman who are deserted at the very beginning of their life. This paper aims at finding out what mentally detrimental effect the lack of motherly love may have on each child.

## **2. Darl**

Darl is absolutely irrationally abandoned the minute Addie 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" (160). The birth of Darl is a curse from the outset. With Darl's birth, Addie's indifference to Anse evolves into hatred. The coziness and harmony between her and Cash are in contrast with coldness and hatred between her and Darl. She narrates, "While I lay with him (Anse) in the dark and Cash asleep in the cradle with the swing of my hand, I would think that if he (Cash) were to wake and cry, I would suckle him, too. My aloneness had been violated and then made whole again by the violation: time....Then, I found that I had Darl. At first I would not believe it. Then I believed that I would kill Anse. It was as though he had tricked me..." (160-161)

Even though Addie doesn't like Darl, genetically, he takes after her more than other children. Like her, he is the most intelligent and sensitive among the Bundren children. And as a child victim in an unhappy family, he constantly seeks for his identity and the meaning of living by venturing to intrude into the privacy of others, with the intention to find gratification in hurting others. Moreover, he wants to prove his existence; in spite of the sense of alienation, by breaking down the barriers of communication, only to get disillusioned. As an unwanted child, he is supposed to have caused the unbalance of the number for the children who belong to Anse and her husband respectively.

No other child craves as strongly for motherly love as Darl does. He often associates his existence with his mother. 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. Once he thinks longingly of his home: "How often have I lain beneath rain on a strange roof, thinking of home" (74). 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" (73). 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 the loss of motherly love: "that's why I am not is" (91). Darl's awareness of his rejection is as acute as his remarks are pungent. "I cannot love my mother because I have no mother" (86).

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" (14). 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”(116). Seeing that Jewel is getting exhausted from overwork, Darl finds his mother “fix him (Jewel) special things to eat and hide them for him” (116). 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” (116). 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”(88). 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”(208). However, it is entirely wrong to assume that he does not love his mother. On the contrary, no other child in the family is more affected by his mother’s death than him. 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” (20) between him and his mother, and also contrast with his laughter throughout the journey.

Some critics and narrators attribute his introvert personality and 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 for the 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. With the power of omniscience, he should have foreseen the family conspiracy. Yet, to his surprise, Cash, the only one he trusts and admires should also join in the conspiracy and betray him. It is a heart-wrenching for him to find out that the most dependable brother is not at all different from others. Thus, 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. Together with her, the family buries the last bit of compassion, brotherly love and humanity. His laughter only makes Cash’s balanced and logic thinking even more absurd and hypocritical. “It was bad. It was bad so. I be darn 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”(225). 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 driven crazy, being 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 groundlessness, “the critical mask for nothingness” (Kartiganer, 1987,P45) 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” (242). But he fails to come up with an ideal answer and his calling only echoes in Vardaman’s childish mind “Darl is our brother...” (237-240) Darl is not mad from the beginning, but is driven mad at last.

No other child can be more sensitive than Darl. He is most typical of the lost souls, the disillusioned hollow men T. S. Eliot describes. 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” (120), 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” (248).

### **3. Dewey Dell.**

Likewise, Dewey Dell, the only girl in the family, is probably the second most helpless and alienated child. She acts like a mother, a caretaker in the family. She tends to her dying mother, cooks the meals, milks the cows, does the housework, and takes care of her younger brother, Vardaman. However, there is no one in the family she can turn to for help when she is in trouble. She is almost nameless in the narrations of the others. Peabody refers to her as “the girl, or the gal” (39). Cora refers to her as “a tome-boy girl” (5), “that near-naked girl” (20). Similarly, Dewey Dell is neglected by her mother, who has given birth to her to make a balance in the number of the children between the parents. Addie doesn’t take a single look at her, or even utter a single word to her, in spite of Dewey Dell’s having been tending her for ten days. Dewey Dell, seventeen, is undoubtedly in dire need of a mother’s instruction into a new world of the sexual relationship between men and women. However, since she has been deserted by Addie Bundren, all she can do is to follow her instinct blindly. In this case, she is very much like her mother- a woman poorly prepared for the likelihood of pregnancy from a sexual contact with a man. Critics often condemn her as loose, causal, and irresponsible in a game-like love affair with a farm hand. However, she is excusable, judging from her fear of being found pregnant without being married, and her eagerness to get an abortion. No one can be convinced that she is an unscrupulous, promiscuous girl. (Xiao Minghan, 1997, 305) Instead, her helplessness and vulnerability earn a reader’s sympathy. Dewey Dell’s loneliness results from her helplessness as a pregnant unmarried girl. Like her mother, she is not prepared for a child, nor for motherhood. Unlike her mother who can shovel the responsibility to an unworthy husband for having taken advantage of her with the pretext of love, Dewey Dell has to keep the secret to herself, constantly worrying about the growth of the baby. She is frustrated why women should be doomed: “God gave women a sign

when something has happened bad” (52). Pregnancy to her is “the agony and despair of spreading bones” (107); and “the process of becoming unalone is terrible” (55). The baby is “the outraged entrails of events” (107) that she anxiously hopes that Doctor Peabody can help her to get rid of; but in the end she lacks the courage to reveal her secret to him. “It is because I am alone. If I could just feel it, it would be different, because I would not be alone. But if I were not alone, everybody would know it. And he could do so much for me, and then I would not be alone. Then I could be all right alone” (52). For Dewey Dell, this terrible awakening to the alienation within herself comes from being unable to speak of her unwanted pregnancy, a muteness compounded by her mother’s death. She wails by the deathbed of her mother, partly because of the loss of her hope to clinch to a monarch, another female in the family who might lead her out of the quagmire of her situation. “I heard that my mother is dead. I wish I had time to let her die. I wish I had time to wish I had. It is because in the wild and outraged earth too soon too soon too soon. It is not that I wouldn’t and will not it’s that it is too soon too soon too soon” (107). Neither her father nor his brothers can give her a helpful hand out of the situation. Her father, Anse, even robs her of the ten dollar, which the baby’s biological father has given to her for an abortion. Her eldest brother, Cash, cares about nothing but his carpentry; her illegitimate brother, Jewel, careless, self-centered, arrogant, and hot-tempered, seems to treat none but the horse with tenderness. Vardaman, her youngest brother, whom she gives the most motherly love and takes care of, who, in turn, keeps her company the most of the time, namely, her only bodyguard, ironically, waits for her while she is fooled by MacGowan, a fake doctor, into having sex. The only being she confides in is the cow she milks everyday: “what you got in you ain’t nothing to what I got in me, even if you are a woman too” (57). She can only go to the barn to seek animal comfort. In despair, she compares herself to “a wet seed wide in the hot blind earth” (58). The image of a wild seed is an image of an unsayable passion that has become as insentient as the life of a plant: worry unable to know if it is worry, crying unable to know if it is crying. Part of Dewey Dell’s anguish is the frustration of anguish itself. Emotion, denied open expression by the family’s customary desire for secrecy, is so bottled up that it is unable to feel itself. She is typical of the victims what the critics have called “the ordeal of Southern womanhood: rebellious female desire, stifled by a southern idealization of virginity, propriety and family status.” (Zender, 2002, P58)

Darl, being sensitive, is the only one who knows about her secret as he knows about that of the others. As Cash observes: “and then I always kind of had a idea that him (Darl) and Dewey Dell kind of knowed things beweixt them. If I’d a’ said it was ere a one of us she liked better than ere a other, I’d ‘a’ said it was Darl” (224). This shows that they used to be on good terms with each other before Dewey Dell’s pregnancy. Unlike Quentin Compson who is obsessed with his sister’s loss of virginity, Darl seems to become more aware of her as a sexual being than as a sibling of his. To get a calculation of the age for each one of them, Cash is about thirty-one, Darl, twenty-nine, Jewel, twenty, Dewey Dell, seventeen, and Vardaman, fifteen. Among these full-fledged children, only Darl and Dewey Dell are sexually awakened, and the two most isolated children develop a pathetic union during their seeking for love and comfort. Dewey Dell imagines that “they (Darl’s eyes) begin at my feet and rise along my body to my face, and then my dress is gone: I sit naked on the seat above the unhurrying mules, above the travail” (107). She is confident that she can manipulate Darl because of his affection for her: “He’ll do as I say. He always does. I can persuade him to anything. You know I can” (107). Darl also views her feminine figure as “mammalian ludicrosities which are the horizons and the valleys of the earth” (152). However, such an incestuous relationship is too much

for her to handle. Her life is as confusing as one of her nightmares in which she doesn't know if she is asleep or awake, she doesn't know her name and her identity. She is so hopeless that wakes "with a black void rushing under me, I could not see" (107).

Dewey Dell is alone the world. To a great extent, she has inherited much from her mother, whose life, needless to say, is prophetic of her future. Unlike her mother who is self-reliant, and independent, but often gets frustrated, she fails in her intention to get an abortion. Like her mother, she will give birth to an undesired baby. There will be another round of tragedy, as an ill-prepared mother, she will only pass her misfortune to the next generation. She is a victim herself, and in turn, she also victimizes others. Like her mother, she alienates herself from finer emotion, and falls in incestuous love with Darl, eventually she becomes so sour and hateful that she turns out to be an active accomplice in sending Darl to the asylum. Somehow, she has been shaped into a new pathological Addie. Darl is lonely and bitter while Dewey Dell is lonely and helpless. What is ironic and tragic about their stories is that each of them turns to the other for motherly love, but is denied by the other of it.

#### 4. Vardaman

Vardaman, born as a compensation for Cash, is the son Addie Bundren has robbed Anse of. Like Dewey Dell, he has no identity. So he is often not referred to by his name but rather as "the boy" or "that boy" by neighbors like Tull and Peabody. Nevertheless, Vardaman is a Bundren inside and out. As Cora once says: "that little one almost old enough now to be selfish and stone-hearted like the rest of them" (18). Cora can be at times biased; however, a part of her comment is correct. Like other members of the Bundrens, Vardaman is secretive, and his private purpose of the journey is to buy a toy train. Although he is about fifteen years old, he seems to be a little retarded. Young as he is, he is a round character. As matter of fact, he is very contradictory by nature. His narration sometimes is very sophisticated and philosophical as in "An *is* different from my *is*...all one yet neither; all either yet none" (51), and sometime, is very short and childish as in "my mother is a fish" (76). He is the second most eloquent narrator, next to Darl. Out of the total fifty-nine chapters presented by fifteen alternating speakers, he makes ten narrations. Among fifteen narrators, he is the youngest, and yet, he reacts most emotionally and directly toward his mother's death. He starts to step into a chaotic world and views it with his innocent eyes. He is too young to cope with the change in his life, and he tries in vain to figure out the answers to the confusing and complicated philosophical problems such as "life and death," "rich and poor," "brotherhood and betrayal," "love and hatred." When Addie Bundren dies, while the others have been depicted as have been deprived of sorrow or grief, Vardaman is most grief-stricken, and upset. He confuses his mother with the fish that has been cooked to treat Peabody. He beats Peabody's horse for revenge, and then he runs wildly in the heavy rain to Tull to report Addie's death. Assuming Addie is still alive and needs breathing, he makes a hole in the coffin.

Like Darl, Vardaman constantly seeks for his identity in the family. He repetitively figures out the truth in "Jewel's mother is a horse. My mother is a fish. Darl has no mother" (90,184, 185). To Vardaman, a fish is a symbol of motherly love. A fish to him is as a horse is to Jewel, or carpentry is to Cash. Fishing can be perceived as his favorite recreation to escape from the reality; what's more, fish in the myth is a symbol for incarnation. The stench of Addie's body reminds him of the smell of a dead fish. It indicates his wishes for his mother's rebirth, it expresses how irreplaceable the maternal love is to him. Above all, he is the most

receptive in the family. When Jewel loses his horse and Cash has his leg broken, and then Darl is sent away, he shows his great sympathy for them and aches for the collapse of a family: "Jewel hasn't got a horse any more. Jewel is my brother. Cash has a broken leg...Cash is my brother... Jewel is my brother too" (197). "Darl is my brother...he didn't go on the train to go crazy. He went crazy in our wagon" (239). In his last narration, he is so disturbed by Darl's being sent away to the asylum that it keeps coming to his mind. Repetition of the same thoughts shows how sad he is at the loss of his brother. "He went to Jackson. He went crazy and went to Jackson both. Lots of people didn't go crazy. Pa and cash and Jewel and Dewy Dell and me didn't go crazy. We never did go crazy. We didn't go to Jackson either. Darl" (237-240). Vardaman's thoughts form a sharp contrast with those of Dewey Dell and Jewel. While Vardaman is kind, accommodating, and loving, Jewel and Dewey Dell are unkind and full of hatred. Vardaman is much more like Darl than other siblings. Both are sensitive, passionate, and compassionate. He shares with Darl the same sentiments of being deserted and desperate. Like Darl, he longs for a cozy family union and an intimate brotherhood. But in a loveless family, he is doomed to disillusionment.

## 5. Conclusion

Darl, Dewey Dell and Vardaman are three abandoned children in the Bundrens. Each of them has emotional discards and the loss of motherly love in their childhood has tremendously impact on their perspectives to others and their outlook to the world. Faulkner intends to make clear how important the mother is in a family and the child's personality may be distorted if he is in want of motherly love.

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