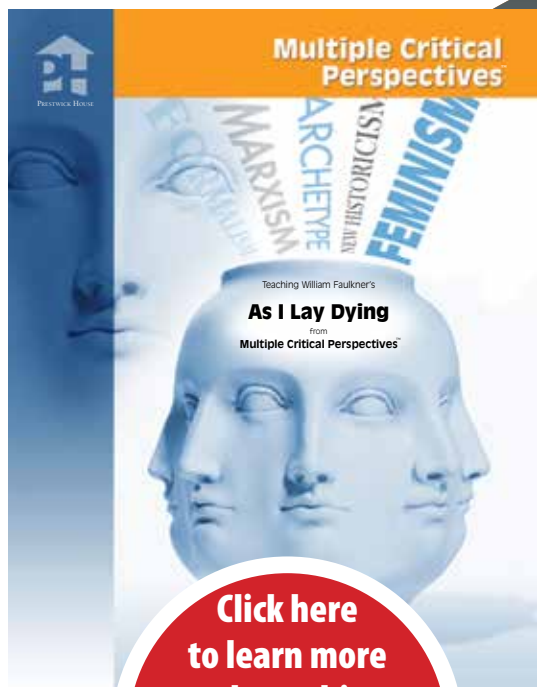




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Teaching William Faulkner's

As I Lay Dying

from

Multiple Critical Perspectives™

by

Elizabeth Osborne



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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *As I Lay Dying*

WILLIAM FAULKNER IS AN AUTHOR best-known to most people for two things: the difficulty of his works and his invention of the fictional community of Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi.

Faulkner started writing fiction in the 1920s, when writers were breaking away from old styles and experimenting with form, style, diction, and even chronological organization of their works. Ernest Hemingway, for instance, wrote in flat, short sentences unlike any seen before. James Joyce, another famously difficult writer, wrote a novel (*Ulysses*) that consists solely of the stream-of-consciousness impressions of its protagonist as he travels through Dublin on a single day. These works are now considered part of the first wave of a movement called Modernism.

The development of automated technology, especially in World War I, contributed to the rise of Modernism. Soldiers and journalists who had experienced the war returned home with the sense that the world had changed; men could be killed in huge numbers by efficient weapons, though there was little gain for any of the parties in the war. Painters, writers, and other artists also commented on the way the new society valued the anonymous and mechanical over the individual or handmade. They tried to reflect the strangeness of the new world through radical experimentation in their writing.

Like Hemingway, Faulkner applied to serve in the United States military in World War I and was turned down by the branch to which he applied. Hemingway, however, did witness war atrocities as an ambulance driver for the Red Cross; Faulkner served in the British and Canadian Air Forces, but did not see action. Where Hemingway would choose to set some of his most famous stories in wartime Europe, Faulkner grounded his characters in the culture of the place he had grown up. Lafayette County, Mississippi, was the model for Yoknapatawpha County, where almost all of Faulkner's characters either live or originate.

In Faulkner's most famous work, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), the narrative is traded back and forth between members of the Compson family. The Compsons, residents of Yoknapatawpha, are of an old (and thus respected) Southern lineage in the area, but are also tragic figures, unable to deal with the passing of the Old South. The novel gained fame because of its stream-of-consciousness narration, which many readers found difficult to follow. Because one of the narrators is the mentally disabled Benjy, and because the other narrators suffer from varying degrees of mental illness, the time and space in which the action takes place can shift without warning.

Faulkner often considered the fate of the Old South in his works, and usually without much hope. Mental illness, incest, suicide, and loveless marriages all occur repeatedly in his novels. He also considers race and class; during the time he was working, the Civil Rights movement in America was just about to begin.

Mythological/Archetypal Approach Applied to *As I Lay Dying*



Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is "a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested." He believed that human beings were born with an innate knowledge of certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When looking for archetypes or myths, critics take note of general themes, characters, and situations that recur in literature and myth. In modern times, traditional literary and mythological archetypes are successfully translated to film. For example, Jane Austen's *Emma* was adapted into the popular Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to feel that they know the characters in a work with very little background information. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!



Activity One

Examining the Journey Archetype in *As I Lay Dying*

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *As I Lay Dying* Archetypal Activity One: The Journey
2. Divide the class into six groups or a number of groups divisible by six.
3. Assign each group, or allow each to choose, one of the following characters.
 - Anse
 - Cash
 - Darl
 - Jewel
 - Dewey Dell
 - Vardaman
4. Have students peruse the novel, looking at it as the story of their assigned character's Journey and provide the requested information on the handout.
5. Reconvene the class and discuss the characters and their archetypal journeys.

Formalist Theory Applied to *As I Lay Dying*



Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with form, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on how something is said, rather than what is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.



Activity One

Examining Shifts in Time in *As I Lay Dying*

1. Copy and distribute the handout: Shifts in Time and Space in *As I Lay Dying*.
2. Divide the class into five groups.
3. Assign each group, or allow each to choose, one of the following characters:
 - Darl
 - Dewey Dell
 - Vardaman
 - Tull
 - Cora
4. Have each group review several of the chapters narrated by its assigned character and answer the questions on the handout.
5. Reconvene the class and have each group present its findings.
6. As a class, discuss the following questions:
 - What verb tense seems to be most prevalent for a particular character? For all the characters?
 - What seems to prompt a shift in time? Is it the same for each character?
 - What is the overall impact of time and location shifts in the novel? What was probably Faulkner's intent in telling this story in a non-linear fashion?

NOTE: As with other Multiple Critical Perspectives activities, students do not need to agree or come to consensus.

Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *As I Lay Dying*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Approach

THE TERM “PSYCHOLOGICAL” (also “psychoanalytical” or “Freudian Theory”) seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character's outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son's desire for his mother, the father's envy of the son and rivalry for the mother's attention, the daughter's desire for her father, the mother's envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father's attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person's subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

Activity One

Examining Ideas of Self in *As I Lay Dying*

1. Copy and distribute the handout: Examining Dichotomies Involving the Self in *As I Lay Dying*.
2. Divide the class into three groups or a number of groups divisible by three.
3. Assign each group one of the following chapters:
 - Vardaman’s chapter beginning, “When they get finished...”
 - Darl’s chapter beginning, “The lantern sits on a stump,” especially the penultimate and final paragraphs
 - Addie’s chapter
4. Have groups follow the instructions on the worksheet.
5. Reconvene the class and use the following question to start a class discussion:
 - What do you think Faulkner is trying to say about the way people see themselves in relation to the world around them?