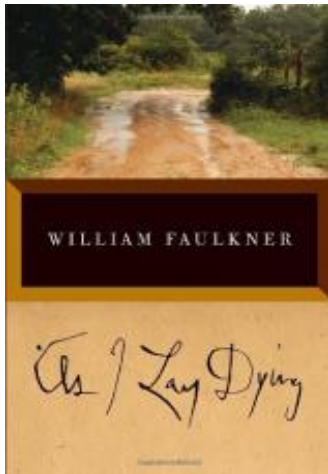


# As I Lay Dying

by William Faulkner

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## About the Book

AS I LAY DYING is Faulkner's harrowing account of the Bundren family's odyssey across the Mississippi countryside to bury Addie, their wife and mother. Narrated in turn by each of the family members --- including Addie herself --- as well as others the novel ranges in mood, from dark comedy to the deepest pathos. Considered one of the most influential novels in American fiction in structure, style and drama, AS I LAY DYING is a true 20th-century classic.

## Discussion Guide

1. Which are the most intelligent and sympathetic voices in the novel? With whom do you most and least identify? Is Faulkner controlling your closeness to some characters and not others? How is this done, given the seemingly equal mode of presentation for all voices?
2. Even the reader of such an unusual book may be surprised to come upon Addie Bundren's narrative on page 169, if only because Addie has been dead since page 48. Why is Addie's narrative placed where it is, and what is the effect of hearing Addie's voice at this point in the book? Is this one of the ways in which Faulkner shows Addie's continued "life" in the minds and hearts of her family? How do the issues raised by Addie here relate to the book as a whole?
3. Faulkner allows certain characters--especially Darl and Vardaman--to express themselves in language and imagery that would be impossible, given their lack of education and experience in the world. Why does he break with the realistic representation of character in this way?

4. What makes Darl different from the other characters? Why is he able to describe Addie's death [p. 48] when he is not present? How is he able to intuit the fact of Dewey Dell's pregnancy? What does this uncanny visionary power mean, particularly in the context of what happens to Darl at the end of the novel? Darl has fought in World War I; why do you think Faulkner has chosen to include this information about him? What are the sources and meaning of his madness?
5. Anse Bundren is surely one of the most feckless characters in literature, yet he alone thrives in the midst of disaster. How does he manage to command the obedience and cooperation of his children? Why are other people so generous with him? He gets his new teeth at the end of the novel and he also gets a new wife. What is the secret of Anse's charm? How did he manage to make Addie marry him, when she is clearly more intelligent than he is?
6. Some critics have spoken of Cash as the novel's most gentle character, while others have felt that he is too rigid, too narrow-minded, to be sympathetic. What does Cash's list of the thirteen reasons for beveling the edges of the coffin tell us about him? What does it tell us about his feeling for his mother? Does Cash's carefully reasoned response to Darl's imprisonment seem fair to you, or is it a betrayal of his brother?
7. Jewel is the result of Addie's affair with the evangelical preacher Whitfield (an aspect of the plot that bears comparison with Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*). When we read Whitfield's section, we realize that Addie has again allied herself with a man who is not her equal. How would you characterize the preacher? What is the meaning of this passionate alliance, now repudiated by Whitfield? Does Jewel know who his father is?
8. What is your response to the section spoken by Vardaman, which states simply, "My mother is a fish"? What sort of psychological state or process does this declaration indicate? What are some of the ways in which Vardaman insists on keeping his mother alive, even as he struggles to understand that she is dead? In what other ways does the novel show characters wrestling with ideas of identity and embodiment?
9. This is a novel full of acts of love, not the least of which is the prolonged search in the river for Cash's tools. Consider some of the other ways that love is expressed among the members of the family. What compels loyalty in this family? What are the ways in which that loyalty is betrayed? Which characters are most self-interested?
10. The saga of the Bundren family is participated in, and reflected upon, by many other characters. What does the involvement of Doctor Peabody, of Armstid, and of Cora and Vernon Tull say about the importance of community in country life? Are the characters in the town meant to provide a contrast with country people?
11. Does Faulkner deliberately make humor and the grotesque interdependent in this novel? What is the effect of such horrific details as Vardaman's accidental drilling of holes in his dead mother's face? Of Darl and Vardaman listening to the decaying body of Addie "speaking"? Of Vardaman's anxiety about the growing number of buzzards trying to get at the coffin? Of Cash's bloody broken leg, set in concrete and suppurating in the heat? Of Jewel's burnt flesh? Of the "cure" that Dewey Dell is tricked into?
12. In one of the novel's central passages, Addie meditates upon the distance between words and actions: "I would think how words go straight up in a thin line, quick and harmless, and how terribly doing goes along the earth, clinging to it, so that after a while the two lines are too far apart for the same person to straddle from one to the other; and that sin and love and fear are just sounds that people who never sinned nor loved nor feared have for what they never had and cannot have until they forget the words" [pp. 173-74]. What light does this passage shed upon the meaning of the novel? Aren't

words necessary in order to give form to the story of the Bundrens? Or is Faulkner saying that words--his own chosen medium--are inadequate?

**13.** What does the novel reveal about the ways in which human beings deal with death, grieving, and letting go of our loved ones?

## Author Bio

**William Faulkner** (1897-1962), who came from an old southern family, grew up in Oxford, Mississippi. He joined the Canadian, and later the British, Royal Air Force during the First World War, studied for a while at the University of Mississippi, and temporarily worked for a New York bookstore and a New Orleans newspaper. Except for some trips to Europe and Asia, and a few brief stays in Hollywood as a scriptwriter, he worked on his novels and short stories on a farm in Oxford.

In an attempt to create a saga of his own, Faulkner has invented a host of characters typical of the historical growth and subsequent decadence of the South. The human drama in Faulkner's novels is then built on the model of the actual, historical drama extending over almost a century and a half. Each story and each novel contributes to the construction of a whole, which is the imaginary Yoknapatawpha County and its inhabitants. Their theme is the decay of the old South, as represented by the Sartoris and Compson families, and the emergence of ruthless and brash newcomers, the Snopeses. Theme and technique - the distortion of time through the use of the inner monologue are fused particularly successfully in *THE SOUND AND THE FURY* (1929), the downfall of the Compson family seen through the minds of several characters. The novel *SANCTUARY* (1931) is about the degeneration of Temple Drake, a young girl from a distinguished southern family. Its sequel, *REQUIEM FOR A NUN* (1951), written partly as a drama, centered on the courtroom trial of a Negro woman who had once been a party to Temple Drake's debauchery. In *LIGHT IN AUGUST* (1932), prejudice is shown to be most destructive when it is internalized, as in Joe Christmas, who believes, though there is no proof of it, that one of his parents was a Negro. The theme of racial prejudice is brought up again in *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!* (1936), in which a young man is rejected by his father and brother because of his mixed blood. Faulkner's most outspoken moral evaluation of the relationship and the problems between Negroes and whites is to be found in *INTRUDER IN THE DUST* (1948).

In 1940, Faulkner published the first volume of the Snopes trilogy, *THE HAMLET*, to be followed by two volumes, *THE TOWN* (1957) and *THE MANSION* (1959), all of them tracing the rise of the insidious Snopes family to positions of power and wealth in the community. *THE REIVERS*, his last - and most humorous - work, with great many similarities to Mark Twain's *HUCKLEBERRY FINN*, appeared in 1962, the year of Faulkner's death.

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