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English 111

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“A Discourse Analysis of Darl’s Descent into Madness in Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying”

 Shannon Terry Wiley’s article attempts to track Darl Bundren’s evolving insanity by examining the changes exhibited in Darl’s language throughout the novel. Specifically, this article analyzes the differences between Darl’s first monologue and his last. Wiley contends that through such an evaluation it can be determined that Darl’s use of markedly dissimilar linguistic and structural format further proves his insanity. Wiley performs this analysis by scrutinizing the sentence structure, adjective and pronoun use, and overall composition of Darl’s passages, rather than solely looking at what is being said in these monologues. In his final passage, the seeming incoherence of Darl’s thoughts dominates the reader’s understanding and judgment of his sanity. Wiley’s close structural analysis allows the reader to evaluate the question of Darl’s sanity through another lens.

 Wiley assesses three distinct aspects of Darl’s first and last monologues: references to himself and others, self-questioning, and the use of repetition. In his first passage, Darl uses the word “I” seven times, in each instance referring to himself. “We” is used three times to refer to both Jewel and himself, and “he” or “him” eight times to refer to either Jewel or Cash (Wiley). All of these situations conform to typical uses of personal pronouns. However, by his last passage, Darl uses first, second, and third person pronouns all while referring to himself.

Much of this back and forth frame of reference takes place in a series of questions Darl asks himself. This self-questioning presents itself in various forms of the question, “Why are you laughing, Darl?” (Faulkner 253-254). This third person line of questioning does not happen at all in Darl’s first monologue. Wiley also notes that the overall complexity of the sentences seriously decreases in the final Darl passage. The first passage utilizes varied sentence structure and is rich in descriptors, whereas Darl’s last has far fewer adjectives and much simpler sentences, most likely as a sign of his degrading mental state.

Finally, repetition plays a large role in both of these passages, but to very different effects. In Darl’s first section, the continual use of the word “chuck” serves to create an onomatopoeia for the sound of the adze as Cash works on his mother’s coffin. This is a perfectly acceptable literary device, and the repetition calls attention to the coffin, which Wiley describes as, “the novel’s central symbol.” However, when the word “yes” is repeated over and over in Darl’s last section, it creates a disorienting uneasiness exacerbated by unorthodox personal pronoun usage and descriptions of Darl bound and foaming at the mouth.

Wiley’s critical analysis of these two passages does a good job of closely examining the use of grammar, structure, and style in conveying Darl’s mental state. She relies most heavily upon textual evidence, as well as the occasional outside literary source, and so her conclusions are arguably sound interpretations. By focusing only on two passages though, Wiley limits her case. This could be interpreted as an apt scope-narrower, but I argue that it diminishes the strength of her argument. For example, one could easily make the claim that Darl did not jump from seemingly completely sane at the beginning of the novel to purportedly entirely insane in his last passage. His monologue on the subject of sleep and existence (Faulkner 80), insights into other characters’ personal lives (Faulkner 27, 136), and ability to omnisciently narrate a scene at which he is not present (Faulkner 47-52) all could be taken as greater evidence of Darl’s escalating madness throughout the entire novel.

The framework of analyzing Darl’s sanity through his changing syntax is very helpful, and provides a lens outside of solely analyzing the content and meaning of his passages. Employing such a framework in my own research and reading of *As I Lay Dying* will be highly beneficial as I attempt to deduce whether or not Darl can truly be classified as insane. However, Wiley’s argument was made less persuasive by her dismissal of the possibility that Darl is not, in fact, certifiably insane. This is her main qualification, and she treats the matter as if it is already decided, largely because of assertions Faulkner made regarding the novel and Darl specifically.

Faulkner clearly states that Darl is mad, saying in a lecture at the University of Virginia, “Darl was mad from the first. He got progressively madder… but he was mad all the time,” (Faulkner qtd. in Wiley). Although this may seem to be an inarguable position, textual evidence is much stronger than an author’s claims after a book is written. Individuals can change their minds regarding their characters as years go on, but once a work is published it stays basically the same. For this reason, it is possible that I will work against the claims made by Wiley, based on my analysis of certain aspects of *As I Lay Dying* as well as other scholarly sources. It is entirely likely that I will utilize some aspects of Wiley’s article, particularly her framework for analyzing structure and syntax, but also expand upon her evidence as well as attempt to refute aspects of her claim.

Works Cited

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