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The Purported Insanity of Darl Bundren

William Faulkner’s novel *As I Lay Dying* is told through the first-person viewpoints of fifteen different characters. This form of narration prevents any single character from dominating either the plot of the novel or the reader’s understanding of it. However, if an argument could be made for the character with the most influence on the telling of this story, that character would undoubtedly be Darl. It is Darl that opens the novel, Darl that provides the most detailed descriptions of events and reflections upon other characters, and Darl’s perspective that constitutes the plurality of the chapters with 19 of the 55 total. For this reason, Darl strongly influences the reader as he or she wades through the confusing world of the Bundren family and their at times near indecipherable thoughts, words, and actions. This dependence on Darl for some semblance of guiding narration makes his eventual insanity all the more shocking.

After reading Darl’s final passage, one cannot avoid the conclusion that he has gone mad. In every other chapter, the character who recounts that passage speaks from his or her perspective in the first-person, often as stream of consciousness. Darl’s last narration is the only one to refer to the speaker – in this case Darl – in the third person. Because of the precedent set by the rest of the book, it is fair to conclude that Darl is therefore legitimately thinking about himself as if he were an observer of his own life. This startling pronoun usage can be quantified to show the vast difference between Darl at the beginning of the novel and Darl as the reader last sees him. In the very first chapter, Darl uses the word “I” to refer to himself seven times, the word “we” to refer to Jewel and himself three times, and the words “he” or “him” to refer to either Jewel or Cash eight times (Wiley). However, in Darl’s last passage every use of the words “I,” “he,” or “him” refer to Darl himself, and the pronoun “you” is also used, again referring to Darl (Wiley).

In her assessment of Darl’s insanity, Shannon Terry Wiley provides various analytical lenses to interpret his descent into madness, such as the aforementioned linguistic changes, but does not offer a possible explanation for why Darl becomes insane in the first place. Laura Mathews does, however, present such a potential rationale for Darl’s madness in her article. She first claims that Darl’s seemingly strange actions can best be understood with the qualifying assumption that he is being used as a surrogate narrator, rather than as an actual character. Readers suspend their disbelief for realistic fiction such as *As I Lay Dying*. While they consciously understand that the plot and characters are fabricated, the unbroken fourth wall allows readers to believe in the legitimacy of the Bundren family’s story. For this reason, the characters’ actions are typically understood within the context of their textual reasoning. Jewel refuses to accept free food for his horse because he is determined to be entirely responsible for it. Anse’s primary motivation for going to Jefferson is debatable, but the manifold reasons presented are all logical within the novel: loyalty to his dead wife’s wishes, a desire for new teeth, and the acquisition of a new wife. When Darl’s actions are viewed through this frame, however, such rational explanations for many of his actions are less apparent. For this reason, it is arguably best to view Darl through the perspective that he is the most important narrator for the text.

Mathews provides a second layer by which to analyze Darl’s insanity: treating it as a product of his tendency to focus on the past or future in conjunction with his difficulty with rooting himself in the present (235). This struggle is clearly documented in *As I Lay Dying*. For example, in Darl’s reflection on existence, he desperately attempts to tie himself to the present tense. Darl does spend time contemplating sleep’s ability to make an individual lose their conscious identity, and therefore become “is-not,” but focuses more heavily on the idea that things cannot exist in both the past and present (Faulkner 80). In fact, Darl even seems to deny his mother’s impending death because “… Jewel *is*, so Addie Bundren must be. And then I must be” (Faulkner 81). In his mind, if Jewel exists in the present then Addie cannot soon die, and thus become a part of the past.

Mathews argues that this tendency of Darl’s only serves to make him a better narrator, thus supporting her first claim. She states “His consciousness of now is split between memory and anticipation” (235). In her view, his ability to provide past information and consider possible future events is directly tied to his insanity, and it is this insanity that makes his character such an important one for guiding the reader through the novel. While Mathews suggests literary explanations for why Darl should be mad, neither she nor Wiley entertain the notion that Darl could, in fact, be sane. Darl is undoubtedly mad in his last chapter, but that does not mean that he was always insane or that he is destined to be always insane. Both authors depend on the same statement from Faulkner: “Darl was mad from the first. He got progressively madder because he didn’t have the capacity – not so much of sanity but of inertness to resist all the catastrophes that happened to the family” (Wiley; Mathews 243). Relying on any individual’s interpretation of a novel, even that of the author’s, is problematic because it negates contradictory textual evidence by default. It is therefore important to find verification within *As I Lay Dying* itself before making such a definitive conclusion.

Cash is extraordinarily perceptive in his analysis of sanity when he states, “Sometimes I think it aint none of us pure crazy and aint none of us pure sane until of the balance of us talks him that-a-way. It’s like it aint so much what a fellow does, but it’s the way the majority of folks is looking at him when he does it” (Faulkner 233). These two sentences delve to the root of the problem determining whether or not Darl is insane. In *As I Lay Dying*, he is considered strange by other characters throughout the novel, but he is never deemed insane until his family decrees him so at the very end. No one in the Bundren family is a psychiatrist, and the majority of Darl’s family has ulterior motives for committing him to an asylum. Anse hopes to avoid being sued by the man whose barn was burned (Faulkner 232), Dewey Dell wants to silence the one person in her family who knows of her pregnancy (Faulkner 121), and Jewel is glad to be rid of the brother who attempted to burn his beloved mother’s corpse and in doing so almost destroyed both Jewel’s last connection to Addie and the symbolic value of his sold horse (Faulkner 233). The unprofessional manner in which Darl is determined to be insane and his family’s selfish interests cast suspicion on the credibility of their assessment of his sanity.

Insanity is not a true medical term, and has not been in use as such since the late 1800s. However, it is still used in legal capacities, and individuals can plead not guilty by reason of insanity. In 1843, the M’Naghten rule was established in the United Kingdom, and it quickly spread to the United States. This measure of insanity is still used in approximately half of the states in the United States today, and would likely have been used in the case of Darl. It states that a person can be acquitted of their crime if “at the time of committing the act, the accused was laboring under such a defect of reason, from disease of the mind, as not to know the nature and quality of the act he was doing or, if he did know it, that he did not know what he was doing wrong” (Cornell Law). Given this qualifying definition, it is difficult to argue that Darl was legally insane when he set Gillespie’s barn on fire.

Before his last chapter, characteristics Darl exhibited that were deemed unusual by other characters were not significant enough so as to diagnose him mentally ill, which would thus disqualify him from pleading innocent by virtue of insanity under the first half of the M’Naghten defintion. Many individuals had noted that he was strange, or that other people thought he was strange. For example, both Vernon Tull and Dewey Dell mentioned that Darl’s eyes seemed knowing and full of land, but “queer eyes” has never been a recognized symptom of schizophrenia, psychosis, or another mental illness that could qualify one as legally insane (Faulkner 121, 125). Darl’s narration of the chapter of Addie’s death, despite his absence, has been considered another sign of his insanity. However, other characters have had similarly questionable situations, such as Addie, whose chapter appears long after she is already dead. Most interpretations of that passage do not take its placement within the novel to mean that Addie is literally speaking from the afterlife. Instead, it is understood to be a literary technique meant to make a dramatic impact on the reader. Likewise, Darl’s passage utilizes his voice as the central narrator of the story, but does not necessarily mean he was literally viewing or imagining Addie’s death scene from afar. Other seemingly impossible scenarios include Cash description of “Mrs Bundren’s house” (Faulkner 235) before Anse announces that the woman who lives there will be his new wife and Addie’s statement that Jewel will “save me from the water and from the fire. Even though I have laid down my life, he will save me” (Faulkner 168), all of which Jewel quite literally does, but after Addie’s death. Yet, it was never suggested that Cash or Addie be locked away in a mental institution.

An analysis of the chapters directly preceding the barn fire shows that Darl was fully aware of his actions. The evening before he burned down the Gillespies’ barn, Darl and Vardaman went to their mother’s coffin, where Darl said that Addie was asking them to “hide her away from the sight of man” (Faulkner 215). Just as Anse supposedly felt it was his duty to Addie to bury her in Jackson, it is clear Darl felt it was his duty to end the family’s shambling effort to do so and finally put Addie to rest. Other characters had previously expressed such a sentiment: Armistid’s wife Lula thought that it was an outrage that Addie’s rotting body was being paraded about and said that Anse had already done enough (Faulkner 187-188) and the marshal in Mottson was appalled by Addie’s corpse and ordered the Bundrens to “get this thing buried soon as you can” (Faulkner 204). Darl was thus motivated by this same, logical response to a conspicuously rotting corpse and made an informed, aware decision to burn down the barn.

Darl also clearly understands the ramifications of his crime. While the barn was burning down Darl was the first to think of the animals, saying “Quick… the horses” (Faulkner 219). He suggests that Mack use a nightshirt to cover a mule’s eyes so that it can be led out of the barn without balking and helps Jewel make it safely out as well (220-221). Because Darl actively works to prevent harmful consequences of the fire, it is apparent that he understands the repercussions of his actions, and moreover, realizes that they are negative. Therefore, it can be reasonably deduced that Darl absolutely knows “what he was doing wrong” (Cornell Law). He is motivated by a desire to dispose of Addie’s body and end the trials of his family, and not by some sort of fit of insanity.

After the barn arson, Darl is rational and level-headed. He is the only one to take action and prevent Jewel from engaging in a fight with a man from town (Faulkner 230-231), and he rightly recommends that Cash be taken to see a doctor now that the family is in town (Faulkner 234). It is only after the duplicity of his family is revealed that his narration suddenly shifts to what could easily be considered insane. Dewey Dell jumps on him and wildly attacks him, Anse and Jewel pin him to the ground while he is forcibly seized, and Cash, to whom he was closest, does nothing to warn him or prevent the arrest from taking place. In addition to this physical betrayal, Jewel repeatedly yells “Kill the son of a bitch,” and Cash does not deny that he wants Darl to go to the mental institution (Faulkner 238). This, on top of the complete stress and chaos of the past two weeks would be enough to make many an individual temporarily crack.

Mathews views Darl as the most important chronicler of the Bundren odyssey, and asserts that his insanity is important throughout the story for that purpose as well as an “authorial device” to effectively finish the novel (243). Wiley, too, finds great significance in Darl’s insanity, although more as an example of linguistic genius by Faulkner. While their arguments are compelling and provide important lenses through which to analyze the text, an examination of *As I Lay Dying* with the assumption that Darl is not inherently mad presents myriad new questions and interpretations of the novel. The Bundrens are not extraordinarily virtuous from any reading of the text, but the implications for their capacity for vindictiveness and self-interest are profound if it is assumed that they would willingly commit their sane brother to an insane asylum for their own selfish motives. Moreover, operating under the supposition that Darl was sane up until his last chapter provides more potential prospects for him. He could recover and be released from the institution. He could be rightfully tried for his crime as a healthy, mentally competent individual. He could have many possible futures other than the picture given of him foaming at the mouth, wasting away behind bars. Valid arguments can be made for Darl’s declining mental state, but affording him the possibility of sanity – based on legitimate textual evidence – is only fair for such an important, complex character.

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