Alexandra Probst

Navid Ebrahimzadeh

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Close Reading of *As I Lay Dying* Passage

Most of Darl’s first chapter since the death of Addie Bundren focuses on the final construction of her coffin. Interestingly, Darl is not actually involved in this process; he and Jewel are still on their way back from town. In the last two paragraphs of the chapter, however, the narration abruptly veers to Darl’s contemplations as he drifts to sleep. The majority of the first person reflections in this novel are far from predictable syntax and style, but this specific meditation upon sleep, death, and the very act of existence is particularly baffling and dense. Through an analysis of Darl’s sentence structure and word choice the reader can begin to decode Darl’s thoughts and the context that creates them. Darl begins his reflection as such:

In a strange room you must empty yourself for sleep. And before you are emptied for sleep, what are you. And when you are emptied for sleep, you are not. And when you are filled with sleep, you never were. I dont know what I am. I dont know if I am or not. (Faulkner, 80).

Though initially confusing, Darl’s repetitiveness and vague word choice actually work to clarify the context of this passage. Because the majority of this chapter does not focus on the activities of Darl, such a sudden switch in focus could leave the reader unsure of what Darl is doing. His first sentence is simply a statement. There is no initial implication that he is actually falling asleep; he could just be ruminating on the importance of a calm mind before a good night’s sleep. However, the imprecise wording allows the inference to be made that Darl is currently going to sleep. This hazy language evokes the image of a mind slowly fading into unconsciousness.

While these ideas are admittedly abstract, they are not completely incomprehensible. A structuralist analysis of the words allows for a better understanding of what Darl means. Much of the passage’s mystifying quality stems from the departure of the signifier, or word, from its usual signified, or meaning. If one applies slightly altered definitions to Darl’s words, a potential meaning of his sentences becomes clear. Darl ends his second sentence with the words, “what are you” (Faulkner, 80). This would typically be taken as a question, but it is instead presented as a statement. In the following sentences Darl repeats this same idea but reverses the structure of the phrase to convey a more obvious statement, with the word “you” at the beginning. If his first phrase is reordered to match the structure of the second two it would read “you are what.” It then could be interpreted to mean you exist. “What”, in this case, does not signify its usual definition, but is instead a signifier for the idea of being and existing in the present. If the next sentence is decoded in the same manner, “you are not” (Falkner, 80) would mean that you do not exist as your normal, conscious self right before falling asleep. The final sentence would then imply that you simply do not exist at all when actually asleep. That statement may be one of physical and philosophical contention, but it is at least an understandable idea.

Throughout the paragraph, however, Darl’s thoughts devolve to an extent that they cannot be elucidated with a simple, structuralist scrutiny. The sentences become increasingly unclear and obscure as Darl’s thoughts bounce from a wagon to Jewel to the wind and rain. This tangential train of thought further is very similar to that of an almost asleep individual whose mind is unfocused and drifting from topic to topic. Even the format of the paragraph itself suggests a slow slip into rest. One sentence extends for six lines of text, connected with myriad commas to create an extended run-on, and the paragraph as a whole is a long block of text. The visual effect is that of an uninterrupted stream of thought, such as that of a mind that is no longer producing distinct, fully-formed thoughts.

If Darl’s reflections are viewed with the understanding that they are not the product of a fully awake individual, then it becomes much simpler to accept the fluidity and irrationality of them. At this point, a further, more speculative analysis can begin. For example, Darl’s pondering of philosophical matters of existence, such as when he states, “I dont know if I am or not” (Faulkner, 80) could be his form of coping with the death of his mother. Many characters have noticed his penchant for thinking and observing; he sometimes even seems to communicate solely by thought, as Dewey Dell states: “He [Darl] said he knew without the words…” (Faulkner, 27). It would thus be logical for Darl to delve even more deeply into his thinking as a way of momentarily forgetting about Addie Bundren’s death. Near the end of his long paragraph of contemplation, Darl does consider Addie briefly. Given that his language becomes more obscure – indicating that he is sliding ever deeper into sleep – his eventual mention of her could be a sign that his subconscious cannot move past her death so readily, despite his attempts.

Conclusions such as these cannot be definitively proven, but there is some textual evidence and interpretation to support them. This in depth analysis of the paragraph allows the reader to best understand the context of Darl’s thoughts, and therefore begin to make their own suppositions as to the importance and meaning of his reflection beyond the literal definitions of the words.

Works Cited

Faulkner, William. *As I Lay Dying*. New York: Vintage Books, 1930. Print.