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Research Abstract

This paper will break down the subject of Darl’s purported insanity by answering a series of questions: Do Darl’s actions in As I Lay Dying correspond to an expert definition (rather than a socially construed) definition of insanity? Is there enough evidence to support the conjecture that Darl was committed to an insane asylum purely because of his family members’ ulterior motives? If insane, can Darl’s madness be traced throughout the novel or does it only fully present itself in his last chapter? To answer these questions, I will analyze Darl’s actions and shifts in narrative technique, focusing on five key chapters: his opening monologue, his rumination on being and existence, his passage detailing the wagon river crossing, his account of the barn burning, and his final monologue. I will examine these chapters in part through the perspectives provided by Shannon Terry Wiley’s article “A Discourse Analysis of Darl’s Descent into Madness in Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying” and Laura Mathews’ article “Shaping the Life of Man: Darl Bundren as Supplementary Narrator in As I Lay Dying.” Based on preliminary research, I expect to find that Darl Bundren is indeed insane at the end of the novel, but was not necessarily so at the beginning and is not forever consigned to such a fate. If this conclusion can be reached, it will provide an important lens for understanding insanity as a changeable phenomenon rather than an irreversible quality, which would have implications both inside and out of the field of literature.