

An Analysis on the Theme of As I Lay Dying -- A World without Love and Understanding

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Abstract

William Faulkner is one of the most important writers after the First World War, and he presents the emotional world of the Bundrens in his famous novel As I Lay Dying in which the family members live in their private world without communicating with each other, which makes the incompleteness of their emotional world. Faulkner uses the situation in the Bundrens to stand for the general phenomenon existing in western countries after the First World War.

Keywords

Emotional world, love, communication, isolation.

1. Introduction

As I lay Dying has been long recognized in America as one of William Faulkner's most powerful and remarkable works. This novel reveals the psychological relationships among the poor white Bundrens in their pilgrimage-like journey, presenting human life as well as human emotional condition. Through his description, we can get a glimpse of the emotional world of all the family members of the Bundrens. They response to everything out of their instinct and consider everything form their own benefit. From their attitude towards their dying mother, we can see it is such a cold world without love and understanding. There is absolute emptiness in their emotional world. Faulkner uses their conditions to present the emotional crisis that most Americans were facing at that time.

It was well-known that the First World War was the biggest event that had a profound impact in the period of 1920s. Many people went into the war propagated by the words like enthusiasm, inspired by the ideal of making the world safe for democracy. However, there was a tremendous letdown after the war because nothing had changed. The idealism that had spurred droves of young men into the war evaporated in face of its disastrous effects. The heroism, patriotism and the zeal for democracy that the romantic notion of war had inspired now proved to be false and tasteless to a generation who had once had faith in them. Excitement and enthusiasm subsided to make way for disillusionment, their dream had failed, and most of them totally got lost in this society. Meanwhile, the loss of faith which began with Darwin's theories continued with great intensity in this period. Modern science destroyed man's ability to believe, without faith man could no longer keep his feeling and thought whole; hence the sense of life being fragmented, chaotic, and disjunctive. And without faith man no longer felt secure and happy and hopeful in this world. In short, people found themselves living in a spiritual wasteland[1].

2. The Isolation between Addie and Anse

Then, let's look at the emotional connection between Addie and Anse, the couple married for more than twenty years. Before their marriage, Addie is a primary school teacher which means

that she is good-educated with pretty family background, different from other country girls like Cora, her neighbor who tries her best to make more money for her family all day. Addie has been deeply influenced by the concept of nothingness since childhood, and her father told her that the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time [2]. It is obvious that she doesn't get enough emotional care from her father like other children during the process of growing. Lack of emotional care makes her hate her father for bringing her into the world to suffer a lot. There is no target in her life only to wait for death which could free her from suffering.

When grown-up, she became such a lonely person with complicated thought and didn't know how to communicate with others around her. In her spare time, she likes to watch the plants on the hill and to talk to them instead of staying with other people. The incompleteness of her emotional world makes her can't feel her existence. So sometimes she whips her students to make them aware of her by such extreme way, "when the switch feel it was my blood that ran, and I would think with each blow of the switch: now you are aware of me! Now I am something in your secret and selfish life, who have marked your blood with my own for ever and ever" [3]. She uses such extreme way to call others' attention which actually reflects that she wants to communicate with others to get rid of the sense of loneliness and rootlessness accompanied her so long. So when Anse proposes to her, Addie takes it as a chance to get the things that she has been longing for so long. But the marriage was turn out to be a total disaster to her.

Anse is proved to be a self-centered man who never tries to understand Addie. To him, marriage is a way to get a woman to shoulder the responsibility of the family and born children for him. Life on the countryside is not easy, and they must work very hard to make a living. Anse tells other people that he would die if he ever sweats, of course which just an excuse to free from the hard work. When finding the meaningless of Anse's words, Addie becomes so disappointed with him. Even their first child Carl can not call her passion towards their marriage, "And when I had Cash, I knew that living was terrible and that this was the answer to it"[3]. And she asks Anse to take her back to her to her hometown after death not to bury with him.

In other words, Anse does not possess the inner power strong enough to help Addie free from the deep-rooted loneliness to have the sense of existence. In their marriage life, Addie realizes that she is caught in a biological trap, which makes it of no importance whether she feels herself a separate individual or not. She takes the children as a kind of duty that she must perform, and then she has no love towards them. After having given Anse two children, she believes that her duty to the husband has been fulfilled. Later, she has a love affair with the Reverend Whitfield, giving birth to Jewel. Shortly after that, the priest's cowardice disappoints her deeply. After all of this, she recognizes the arbitrariness of language, and refuses to believe them any more.

Anse never tries to walk into the heart of Addie and never gives the love that Addie wants. When Addie is at the moment of dying, he insists on earning the three dollars instead of accompanying her. He doesn't send for a doctor for Addie until the very end of her life for saving money. At the same time, he takes the act of taking her body to Jefferson as performing his last duty not for the love towards his wife.

3. The Isolation Between Parents and Children

And how is the relationship between this couple and their children. If we trace Addie's psychology accordingly, we can find out that children are just some certain matters unexpectedly intruding into her silence and thus make her living even more terrible. Two exceptions are Cash as the eldest son, and Jewel, her illegitimate child, who once got some love from her. However, the only reason is just like what Addie tells Cora Tull when Addie is questioned for not being a good mother: "He is my cross and he will be my salvation. He will

save me from the water and from the fire. Even though I have laid down my life, he will save me" [3].

At the birth of the second son Darl, Addie finds tricked by Anse hopeless in life. She rejects offering love to Darl, so Darl does the same in return. In the end, Darl is caught in a conflict between mind and behavior and is abandoned by the family, being sent into the madhouse. Dewey Dell is just her compensation for Anse to "negative Jewel" and the last child is Vardaman, who is given birth "to replace the child" she has robbed Anse of [3]. Under such circumstance, Addie does not give much love to these two children and even does not take them as her children. They are brought up by their mother casually. Consequently the former shows indifference to her death and never asks for help from mother when encountering difficulties, like she chooses to get rid of the illegal baby by herself; what's more, she takes the death of her mother as a chance of getting comfort from her lover. The latter is an idiot and always thinks his mother is a fish. Because Addie has not fully transmitted care and love to her children, her children do not show care to her when she is at the very moment of dying. And each of the children in the Bundrens strives to search for or identify the image of mother and thus adopts some mother-substitute for the missing maternal affection. Darl substitutes the land for mother, Jewel the horse, Dewey Dell the cow, Cash the craft or the coffin and Vardaman the fish.

At the beginning of the novel, we can see Cash making the coffin for her mother. In his mind, making a better coffin is the best way to show his concern to his mother. When watched by his mother from the window, he thinks that his mother wants to keep an eye on the coffin; so he chooses to work near the window in order to make his mother see it clearly. Jewel and Darl decide to earn that three dollars even they know maybe they will lose the chance to say "goodbye" to their dying mother. And Darl is keeping on talking about the death of his mother with Jewel without doing any concrete thing to comfort his mother, and in his deep mind there is no mother at all, "I cannot love my mother because I have no mother. Jewel's mother is a horse" [3]. From the eyes of Addie's neighbor, Cora, we can see the indifference attitude towards Addie adopted by her children, "Not him to miss a chance that extra three dollars at the price of his mother's good-bye kiss [3].

The wall between Addie and her children is so strong that they do not know how to communicate with each other which makes them become strangers. It is obvious that Addie is a total failure as a mother. Anse, their father, doesn't show any love to his children, either. Once Carl broke his leg, Anse did not worry about his wound but feel unhappy because Carl could not earn money for him. As a father, he seldom meet his children's needs, so when Jewel wants a horse, he must work for others very hard at night to earn enough money. In Anse's mind, there is only himself; and he seldom thinks others, even his wife and children. After Addie's death, he has no grieve, the only thing he wants to do is to finish the funeral as soon as possible, and then he can get the teeth that he wants badly. During the process of taking Addie's body to Jefferson, he doesn't send Carl to see the doctor after breaking his legs again. And he sells Jewel's precious horse without talking to him. What's more, he even takes Dewey's ten dollars away. Later just after Addie's funeral, he remarries without consulting with his children. It is obvious the couple does not give enough love to their children during their process of growing, so they can not get their love in return.

4. The Isolation Between Family Members

Each of the Bundrens lives individually lack of any unity, care or love. Addie dies with two of her Children away; Anse takes a new wife just after the funeral; Jewel earns money for his horse by secret work and resorts all his problems to soles actions without any communication with his family. Children never expect or receive needed advice from parents. Vardaman is exposed to a tremendous shock and fear of Addie's death pictures his unaided confusion about his

mother's sudden death. None of the adults will stop long enough to show him any tenderness or any affection. Thus the family's failure to communicate reassurance and explanation with Vardaman consequently makes him go to the barn to seek for animal comfort. Dewey Dell lacks mother's love or any care from her siblings.[4] She is unable to ask for practical or psychological support from family, friends or even Dr. Peabody only leading to her unwanted pregnancy.

Addie lives in isolation and thus each of her children lives isolated from others. Addie's denial of her children and that she fails to truly love or care them finally lead to Cash's indifference, Vardaman's helplessness, Dewey Dell's immaturity, Darl's final madness, Jewel's fierce .

5. Conclusion

In the whole novel, it is obvious to see that fifty-nine sections make up the novel. Readers read their individual monologues, separate memories or reflections that they will never reveal to each other. Everyone experiences isolation between and within self and other. The Bundrens are living each in a private world. They talk to themselves instead of communicating with others. Addie lives lonely and she obviously has no close friend in whom she could confide; Dewey Dell has no one who can calm and comfort him; Jewel who is inarticulate resorts his problem to sole actions of himself or animals instead of his family. And they use this way to make up the love they can not get from their family members; meanwhile, they never try to walk into other's heart or in other way, the wall between them is so strong that no one can break it.

Faulkner depicts the isolation of the Bundrens and uses it to represent the emotional wasteland of the whole western worlds after the First World War. The society had gone tremendously change after the First World War, and all the glorious things were mashed into piece in that war. The young generation got totally lost, wandering with the hope to find the meaning of living. There was no peace in their mind, if they did not keep on looking for the lonesome in their mind would drive them crazy. In their worlds, there were no God, no holy, only spiritual wasteland.

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