

An Analysis on the Subject of *As I Lay Dying*

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Abstract—*As I Lay Dying* is one of William Faulkner's most influential works. William Faulkner shows the lower-class people's several qualities in the novel, and he reveals this theme through his whole writing. Generally speaking, the understanding of the novel should be started from the understanding of the title. What is the deep meaning of the novel, what connections does the title have with the author himself and what does the author want to convey through the title? This essay will elaborate the meaning from four different parts- from the superficial level, from the family level, from the social level and from the literary level. Though Addie is dead at the beginning of the story, her influence and control disappear after a really long time. Thereby, it can be said that the title "As I lay dying" is better than "After I died". In his novels, William Faulkner delivers most of his life outlook and history outlook views. In a word, the life is hard, the road is long, the future is confused, but the heart is determined. The Bundren family's willing to send Addie's remains to her hometown have never been shaken during their journey, which inspires us a lot.

Keywords—William Faulkner; *As I Lay Dying*; title; meaning

I. INTRODUCTION

Although Faulkner has said several times that the novel *As I Lay Dying* one of his most simple and insightful works, however, the critical explanations for this book have still been debated for a rather long time. Some critics think that this novel is an investigation made for the realistic society of the poor Southern American; some think that this novel is another adaption of the Bible. Generally speaking, the title of the work is often closely connected with the theme of the book, so the understanding of the main knowledge or the meaning of the novel should start from the title of the novel — *As I Lay Dying*.

In fact, this strange title is quite confusing from time to time. In terms of literal meaning, *As I lay dying* should describe about the thing which has happened at the death of Addie. However, from the actual content of the novel, Addie hasn't been dead for a long time, and she was dead on the first night. However, the whole process lasts for more than 10 days. What is the reason for this continuity? What does the story want to convey to us? What is the background meaning behind the title?

II. SUPERFICIAL LEVEL

Apparently, the body of the plot is about the thing took place after Addie's death, which seems different to the

meaning to the title. Now that the title is "I'm dying", the main writing should be about the feeling of "I", or the perspective should be based on me. In fact, Addie only stands out and says some words in chapter 40, which is exactly 3 days after her death. The rest of the novel is the other people's narration after her death.

In other words, she is not dead on the first day in the novel; instead, she is "really" dead at the ninth day after her burial. That is to say, in "the whole process of the journey", all the events (except the events of Addie's being buried at the end of the novel) happened at the death of Addie, or as she lay dying. This point of view has been a breakthrough to the traditional viewpoint: the title "I" just symbolizes Eddie flesh. In a broad and deeper sense, the "I" has a whole new meaning, which means the loss of Addie's control over her family members. This idea provides us with a wider way of thought. Based on this point, there comes another question, now that Addie has already been dead, how can she keep this kind of control for nearly nine days? Is it a natural maintain of the formal state, or is it guaranteed by someone? Then how it vanishes in the end? The most important thing is, what does the control mean by itself?

We may come to a question — Now that Addie has died in the first night, what kind of reason makes the old order last for nine days? The answer is about the most important character in the book — Darl. He is the most controversial character in the book; his relation with Addie is the most important point in the book. From this point, many critics hold a similar idea; Darl is Addie's deserted child. In fact, Darl is the child who is most similar to his mother, in other words, she is the only spiritual successor of his mother.

He is not only a special part of the old family order himself, after the death of Eddie; he has also tried to maintain the old order. In the novel, the author says in the name of Addy's neighbor Cola: "I've always said, and is not the same as the other children. I always say he is the only nature as the mother of them (to "his mother's nature", "nature" trans. Li Wenjun as "disposition", it seems like the "nature" is a more appropriate) (Faulkner, 30). From this sentence, I think Addie's feeling towards Jewel is fake, her true understanding and true love is only on Darl."

III. FAMILY LEVEL

Addie is not the center or the narrator the novel, which is quite contrary to the subject shown in the novel. Towards this point, some researchers propose different explanations. Among which, Mr XiaoMingHan has cited the point of

karstens buller's, and he thinks that the dying "is not only referred to the death of the body, the more important thing is about her the loss of control over the family" (Xiao, 162).

We believe that the "I" here should be regarded as the Bundren family's old order. In this novel, what Faulkner wants to convey most is the loss of such control, and it is exactly the title's meaning "As I Lay Dying". Then, what does the order mean? And what does the vanishing of this process show? How does it transform from appearing to the vanishing and can we find some examples in the novel? If we want to take a further look into this viewpoint, we should understand the image of Addie and Darl.

Darl is quite similar to his mother, who is also a lonely and love-thinking person. Darl always considers about who he is, and whether he is existing or not.

What makes most people surprised is that Darl's communication with Addie's spirits last even after Addie's death. When the family came to Gillette's home for one-night's stay, Addie's corpse's smell attracts a large group of vultures. Darl told Vardaman that he could hear Addie talk, she prayed to god to help her hide herself in order not to let others see. In which case, she can sleep on her own. So he set fire to the barn, and tried to prevent the journey from lasting, which directly led to his being put into an asylum. Obviously, Darl, like Addie, is an image of modernism, and is also her soul successor. His personality and mentality is the product of the family life shaped by Addie. After the death of Addie, Darl is the last remains of the house, and he determines to keep this in old order.

In a word, after Addie dies, the existence of Darl prevents the other family members from establishing a brand new family order, which leads to his finally being betrayed and put into the lunatic asylum. Cash, who keeps a good relationship with Darl, says some meaningful sentences when Darl is caught, "I think it is a suitable place for you, for no one will disturb you." Later on, when Anse got married with a new wife immediately, at the point of the family's transition, Cash said again: "Every time when I think of Darl, I feel quite depressed as he cannot enjoy with us, it's really a pity. But it may be better for him not to see this scene". The world is not corresponding with his style, and this kind of life is not the life he should live." (Faulkner, 102) These words also make it clear that, as an important part of the old order, Darl will eventually be cleared away from the family. His being put into an asylum also means that the family's old order finally completely vanished after nine days of "dying" state.

In the whole Bundren's family, the selfish and lazy father, the suffering — hardness throughout life and never knows what happiness-is mother, a large group of sons and daughters, all the people torture each other in a nest. Anse, who thinks himself as the most hardworking person, has suffered great injustice. The mother is already numb, and she has a famous saying "My father once said that the reason we live is to prepare in the long term for the death of others. I finally understand his meaning" (Faulkner, 96). Cash is man who only knows about working honestly, and he is even honesty to numb. After Cash's leg is broken and rotted, the

doctor has to cut his leg off, and he even has no painful feeling at all.

Dewey Dell can only communicate his feelings with a cow. Not to mention Vardaman, as he's a weak-minded mental retardation, and he even cannot tell the differences between the mother and the fish. He regarded the doctor as the killer of his mother, and chased after his horse with a stick. After his mother's death, he thought that his mother would hardly breathe in the coffin, so he drilled several holes in the coffin, which in the consequence, brought much damage to her mother's body. In such a family, whoever has a heart, and whoever has a noble emotion would wait for the pain and the suffering. That quite well explains why Darl is doomed to become crazy. Jewel's beloved horse was taken by others, and his fortunate is no better than Darl. As to Anse, Dewey Dell and Vardaman, they have no sense of guilty in their heart, and actually, they are more terrible than Darl, who has been viewed as the monster and kept in the madhouse.

We may regard Addie as an image woman created by Faulkner instead of saying she is just a country woman. She is the deconstruction and the rebellion of the traditional concept, which is clearly shown through her deny for the language and her loneliness. Especially the latter, the American scholar David ray griffin said the individualism is the core of modern spirit, which means that denying the person himself has internal relations with other things. Denying oneself consists of a person's relation with others, nature, history and the divine creator, which is exactly the essence of Addie's living state.

IV. SOCIAL LEVEL

Addie's existence is the symbol of the Burdren family's old order. Addie is the mother and the main controller of the family. As the creator of the family, she lives with his husband Anse for decades, and brings up 5 children together. In this process, her lonely and treacherous character greatly influences the formality of this family, which is especially obvious on the children. Then, what does the old order created by Addie mean?

Addie comes from Jefferson, this is quite important but easy to neglect. The typical southern people have fabulous family, gorgeous history and thick old noble tradition. After the southern America was beaten, the heavy historical burden and the huge comparison made them indulge in the daydreaming.

Although Faulkner has not shown clearly that Addie is the later generations of the great family, some of her characters really show that he is among the old southern people' level. Her combination with Anse symbolizes the decline of the upper class people, and she actually brings a nihilistic living state to the Burdens. So we can see that Addie's death not only takes an end to her life, but also takes an end to the influence of her thought and the order which is brought to the family. In a deeper sense, it means the influence of the old southern people's ideas to the lower class people have vanished.

In the novel *As I Lay Dying*, William Faulkner describes the dying out of two images: Addie and Darl. Their death also means the abortion of Burdren's old family order which is influenced by upper strata thinking. In this way, Faulkner reveals that the old southern noble's influence on the people of lower strata is withering away, and the nobles' stratum has inevitably been thrown out from the stage of the history.

After the civil war, the old noble ideas, which do not correspond with the historical trend, had lost the existing economic basis, and itself was becoming more and more declined. Although Addie had flowed into the common society, she still couldn't mix into their lives entirely. The loneliness is her lifestyle, and the family atmosphere which she brings to the Bundren's family also interferes with the normal life of the family members. This Bundren's home's old order presents the influence which Jefferson — born noble thoughts have on the lower area. There are many outstanding qualities arising from the lower people's mental and physical state, such as the doctor's humanitarian spirit, the neighborhood's close and harmonious relationship with each other. Anse and other family members' sticking to their promise, insisting on sending the Addie's body back to her hometown's behavior is quite precious and admiring. Faulkner speaks highly of their endurance and determination in their way to the goal. From his viewpoint, these poor people are more adapted to the after-war reality, and they are more practical, who can better create the after-war society.

V. LITERAL LEVEL

Addie and Darl are two most important characters in *As I Lay Dying*. The Bundren's family vision is always confined to the little house, and they are buried in the household chores of family dispute. What's worse, they are totally surrounded by all kinds of immediate interests and family trifles from both the body and the mind. In other words, they survive like animals, as William Faulkner himself has said, "they let a complete nature motivation to control themselves, they are the so-called materialists"(Faulkner, 105). In the novel, the author concludes in the name of the main characters, "waiting, waiting and waiting, tomorrow, tomorrow, and tomorrow"(Faulkner, 76).

Structurally, the book is divided into 59 parts, which are told by 15 narrators. Among all the parts, 19 are told by Darl. After carefully researching, you may discover that the most important the plots of the novel, such as Addie's death, the family's crossing the river with the hardships, the fire to the barn, are all narrated from Darl's point.

The most important scene in the novel — the Addie's death is a very good example. At this point, Darl is not present, but still Faulkner arranges him to be the narrator, which serves to show the importance of this character. If we take Addie's confession into consideration, which has great significance to the analysis of the theme to this novel, we may come to a conclusion that the novel is a story of a mother and son. If we only keep this two parts remained, and remove other parts of the novel, the main idea of the novel and the plot basically will not be affected.

In fact, if we take Addie's life into consideration, we may find something unusual. Addie is the mistress of the family, who has been greatly affected by the deep nihilistic thoughts. Her father told her at an early age that people's lives are to be prepared for their long dead, and she has been carved with this idea deeply in her heart. After she becomes an adult, she turns into a complex and lonely woman, and she even has not learned how to establish a proper relation with others because of her childish experiences.

The gloomy and numb after-married life added Addie's loneliness. She began to think that there are different meanings between the words' superficial meaning and the deep meaning behind them. The thing itself is completely different. The good manners, such as the mother's love, the religion, and other traditional thoughts in her brain have become meaningless words. What's worse, Addie thinks that the language system is the way people use to cheat each other. Addie not only denies the objective world represented by the language, but also denies the relationship between people built on the language. The negative attitudes towards the language make Addie isolated from the surrounded life, and make her drag into a more profound loneliness and vanity, finally turns her into a lonely person.

Objectively, Addie's thought is quite profound, and her understanding of things is very penetrating. She has a feeling of emptiness and loneliness towards the surrounding people, and sometimes with even a little point of existentialism

At the same time, the scholars indicate that "the effort which Faulkner has taken towards the criticism on the noble myth is not only confined to the description of the upper-class society, but also on the showing of the historical events". In the end, the possibility of rebuilding the public order is in the hand of the people of lower strata because of their endurance and action abilities. This is also the theme of the novel. From the essence of Faulkner's creation, this theme slightly shows his historical criticism to the myth system created by himself, and further shows his transitional process from Modernism to Postmodernism.

VI. CONCLUSION

Taking the title of the novel *As I Lay Dying* as an example, "dying" is a word full of the religious meaning. According to Christian's point of view, people should do the confession before they die, through which they can wash their sin before they die. A person, no matter how evil his sin is, as long as he prays for what he has done, his soul can be redeemed and lifted into the heaven. For instance, in Shakespeare's famous tragedy "Hamlet", the Danish prince — Hamlet, is hesitated to kill Claudius — the man who has killed his father, just because Claudius has prayed for his evil behaviors. This is a good example of this religious idea. However, under William Faulkner's writing, Addie who is lying dying, unfolds a lot of conscious activities in the process of her dying. She looks back on her love affairs, her marriage, her family, but with not even the slightest confession.

From this point, in the final moments of life, Eddie bravely disobeys the "god" again, which flashes out of the

Eve's rebellious spirit. In the face of heaven and hell, she is willing to say "no" and determines to go the hell. In the reflection of such prototype in the religion, Addie's revolt towards the god, which ignores the death, and chooses her own spirit, is not only a source of evil in human history, but also a strong driving force for the wheel pushing forward the history.

Modern people are suffered from the alienation of the heart, of the inner beliefs, and of the social lives. So the first thing they need to do is to establish the new belief and face the reality bravely. At the same time, the social should provide people from each stratum with the dignity to live. Only by doing this can people live with courage, and can they be "immortal" forever.

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