

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

As I Lay Dying

by William Faulkner

written by Elizabeth Osborne

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As I Lay Dying

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. explain how Faulkner experiments with chronological organization and narrative perspective to tell the story.
2. analyze the use of black humor in the novel.
3. explain the relevance and meaning of allusions to the following works:
 - The Bible
 - Homer's *Odyssey*
 - Shakespeare's *Macbeth*
4. trace the development of ideas of fate, eternity, and being that appear in the book.
5. explain the discrepancy between words and experience in the book.
6. explain the relevance and meaning of the following symbols in the novel:
 - the fish
 - Jewel's horse
 - the wagon
 - Cash's tools
 - wheels and circles
 - the graphophone
 - the toy train
8. analyze the characters' diction, syntax, and figures of speech and explain how the language contributes to characterization.
9. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
10. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.

Introductory Lecture

William Faulkner is an author best known to most readers for two things: the difficulty of his works and his invention of the fictional community of Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi.

Faulkner started writing fiction in the 1920s, when writers were breaking away from old conventions and experimenting with form, style, diction, and even the chronological organization of their works. Ernest Hemingway, for instance, wrote in flat, short sentences unlike any seen before. James Joyce, another famously difficult writer, wrote a novel (*Ulysses*) that consists solely of the stream-of-consciousness impressions of its protagonist as he travels through Dublin through the course of a single day. These works are now considered part of the first wave of a movement called Modernism.

The development of automated technology, especially in World War I, contributed to the rise of Modernism. Soldiers and journalists who had experienced the war returned home with the sense that the world had changed; men could be killed in huge numbers by efficient weapons, though there was little gain for any of the warring parties. Painters, writers, and other artists also commented on the way the new society valued the anonymous and mechanical over the individual or handmade. They tried to reflect the strangeness of the new world through radical experimentation in their writing.

Like Hemingway, Faulkner applied to serve in the United States military in World War I and was turned down by the branch to which he applied. Hemingway, however, did witness war atrocities as an ambulance driver for the Red Cross. Faulkner served in the British and Canadian Air Forces, but did not see action. While Hemingway would choose to set some of his most famous stories in wartime Europe, Faulkner grounded his characters in the culture of the place where he had grown up. Lafayette County, Mississippi, was the model for Yoknapatawpha, where almost all of Faulkner's characters either live or originate.

In Faulkner's most famous work, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), the narrative shifts among members of the Compson family. The Compsons, residents of Yoknapatawpha, are of an old (and thus respected) Southern lineage in the area, but are also tragic figures, unable to deal with the passing of the Old South. The novel gained fame because of its stream-of-consciousness narration, which many readers found difficult to follow. Because one of the narrators is the mentally disabled Benjy, and because the other narrators suffer from varying degrees of mental illness, the time and space in which the action occurs can shift without warning.

Faulkner often dealt with the fate of the Old South in his works, usually without much hope. Mental illness, incest, suicide, and loveless marriages occur repeatedly in his novels. He also considers race and class; during the time he was working, the Civil Rights movement in America was just about to begin.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. How and why does Faulkner experiment with narrative conventions and chronological structure in *As I Lay Dying*? Explain how this book is like and unlike other works.
2. Compare different narrators (Darl, Vardaman)—who seems reliable at first? Does something change this impression?
3. What role do women play in the novel? Are they limited or empowered by their gender?
4. How do the Bundrens identify themselves socially? How does their class affect their ideas about identity and existence?
5. Identify the rising action, complication, climax, and denouement in the story.
6. Analyze wood imagery in *As I Lay Dying*.

As I Lay Dying

Darl (Pg. 3)

1. What details stand out about this first chapter? What is Darl's language style? Which person is his main focus?

2. What is Darl's narrative perspective? Give some evidence for this.

3. What signs do we get in this chapter that Darl is a prophet or a seer?

4. Judging by the details in this chapter, what is the occupation of Darl's family?

Darl (Pg. 47)

1. Which two children does Addie seek in her last moments, and why is this important?

2. Describe the interaction between Addie and Cash.

3. Darl is not actually present at the scene he is describing. Are there any indications that he is making the story up?

4. What are Anse's first words after Addie's death? Why are they significant?

5. What kind of power do we see from Anse in this scene?

6. Why is Anse's final gesture and words towards the deceased Addie symbolic?

7. How does the author contrast Jewel and Anse at the end of this scene? What does this emphasize?

Darl (Pg. 107)

1. Describe Darl's language in this chapter. Why does Faulkner give him this vocabulary?

2. What can we infer Cash wants when they pass the sign to New Hope? What does this indicate about his character?

3. Darl describes the road as a spoke of a wheel, and the wagon, with Addie on it, as the rim of the wheel. Explain the significance of this metaphor.

Anse (Pg. 110)

1. What do we learn about Anse’s motivation for the journey in this chapter?

2. Explain Anse’s views on class and wealth. Why, judging by what other characters have said, are his remarks ironic?

3. Why does Anse consider himself “the chosen of the Lord”?

Darl (Pg. 156)

1. How does Darl describe the wagon in this chapter? What earlier description does this recall?

2. What signs of Darl's psychological disintegration appear in his narration in this chapter?

3. How is the reassembling of Cash's tool kit symbolic?

4. Why is it important to Tull and the Bundrens that Cash get his tools back? What does it indicate about their relationship with him?

5. How does the family dynamic change when Cash is disabled?

6. Why might Faulkner include a long chapter that is seemingly only about the retrieval of tools from the river?

7. What is Darl's view of women, judging by the last sentence in this chapter?

Vardaman (Pg. 223)

1. What is suggested by Vardaman's italicized statement at the beginning of this chapter? How does its placement suggest what Vardaman saw?

2. What does the business with Cash's leg have to do with the narrative at this point? What is this episode an example of?

3. Why is Darl crying in this chapter?

4. What is suggested by the sequence of ideas and images at the end of this chapter?
