

## FAULKNER'S *AS I LAY DYING*: AN ATTEMPT TO RE-EXAMINE THE WORTH OF WORD

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### Abstract

In our everyday life, we cannot deny the necessity of word but many a time, language or word has become a serious matter of concern to linguists, writers, philosophers and literary critics. Eliot, Joseph Conrad and other modern writers found words increasingly difficult to describe things. In *As I Lay Dying*, William Faulkner has created some characters and incidents that question the power of word in meaning and communication. This paper tries to argue that as a writer of modern period, it is quite natural for William Faulkner to contemplate on the idea that word lacks something in giving the actual meaning of the concept but the way in which Faulkner presents this idea in *As I Lay Dying* is certainly unique and deserves admiration. This paper is based on data collected from secondary sources. At first the topic is mentioned. Then views of some philosophers and linguists have been described. Then some characters, incidents and the form of *As I Lay Dying* are examined. The paper is wrapped up in the conclusion part.

**Key words:** Faulkner, Word, Modernism, Language, Communication

### INTRODUCTION

Language is an essentially human phenomenon. Words as a part of language can be considered as tools which human beings use intelligently. We can use words so that others can understand us. Words convey meanings and can be interpreted. It is virtually impossible to advance our knowledge and our understanding of various problems without using words effectively. All people who speak the same language have agreed to use certain words for certain jobs; this enables them to communicate with each other. Most of the failures in communication are caused by people's inability to distinguish the proper uses of words and to employ the distinction effectively. From times immemorial; language or word has always been a serious matter of concern to philosophers, linguists, writers and literary critics. In *As I Lay Dying*, William Faulkner, like other modernists, has some characters and incidents that question word's

controlling power, that is, he arouses the old debate regarding words; it is like re-examination of word's expressing power in meaning and communication. The paper tries to focus on the following questions:

- Did Faulkner present the theme of word and meaning as unique subject matter in his novel?
- In which ways Faulkner resembles other modernist writers in thinking that word lacks something?
- How *As I Lay Dying* is unique in supporting inefficiency of word and lack of communication?

This paper tries to show that as a modernist writer, it is not unusual for William Faulkner to contemplate on the idea that word lacks something which causes difficulty in communication and usually fails to give the actual meaning of the concept. The way in which Faulkner presents the inefficiency of word in *As I Lay Dying* is certainly a unique attempt and for this exceptional effort William Faulkner deserves admiration.

### **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The objectives of this paper are:

- To explore word and meaning as century long element for debate in philosophy, literature and linguistics
- To show the theme of word and lack of communication as common elements in literature of modern age
- To study Faulkner's unique use of narrative technique and style that support inefficiency of word
- To find out the theme of word as interwoven in the story of the novel.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This paper is based on data collected from secondary resources. Library materials such as text books, reference books, journals, scholarly articles, research papers have been consulted to gather information. Materials available on internet have also been collected and analyzed.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The 1949 Nobel Prize winner, William Faulkner is regarded as one of the greatest American novelists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but the numbers of researches are not enough in comparison to his popularity. Some of the researches focused on the characters while others analyzed his techniques. Merrill has tried to find out the tragic and comic elements in "Faulknerian Tragedy: The Example of *As I Lay Dying*". Hewson, Marc; Chan, Amado and Rippetoe, Rita have analyzed the characters of Addie and Anse Bundren. In "Something New and Hard and Bright: Faulkner, Ideology and the construction of Modernism", Mellard has made a comparative study on Faulkner, Warren and Lukacs. According to him, Faulkner's, *As I Lay Dying* is unlike a traditional novel with its content, form and philosophy of language. Swiggart has presented *As I Lay Dying* as a modern mock epic in *The Art of Modern Novel*. Some of the researches have praised Faulkner's unique techniques in *As I Lay Dying* but this present paper has tried to show that the concept of "inability of word" is not a sole idea of Faulkner rather this concept has repeatedly aroused in the minds of philosophers, linguists and other scholars.

## ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

**Different philosophers’ and linguists’ views on word:** Word has been an important element of concentration in both philosophy and linguistics. The importance of language, word and meaning has been recognized since time immemorial. Pre- Socratic Greek philosopher, Heraclitus considered word as “the unquestioned and eloquent presence of the thing” (Brogmann 24-25). In Plato, there is an example where Socrates implies that only the ideal word lets the thing be truly present but the ideal word is not the one we use day by day. To Plato, the reality that the poets give in their words is dubious; therefore, he dismisses both language and reality as unreliable.

Ancient Indian scholar Patanjali believed that words naturally express meaning. According to the famous Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, a language is a system of differences, that is, “there is an absolute difference between (concepts of) objects in the real world and the lexical sounds or marks used to denote them” (Childs 64). The most influential linguist of today, Noam Chomsky says, “my words have a strict meaning and I can very well mean what I say, but...what I intend my audience to believe or do might give little or no indication of the meaning of my discourse” (Davidson 273). From the above discussion, it is clear that many scholars and thinkers have contemplated on the nature of word to know how much it is efficient in conveying the concept of things in verbal communication. William Faulkner has offered the old wine in a new bottle; that is he has provided a century old issue in his novels and has expressed his own view on the idea of word. In *Mosquitoes*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner has depicted that word lacks something in representing reality. He has placed action in superior position over word.

**Word and narrative method:** *As I Lay Dying* is the story of a journey of Bundren family who struggle to fulfill the promise to the dead mother (Addie) to take her body to Jefferson. The method of presentation is both impressive and ingenious. Here, Faulkner mainly depends on two narrative modes– stream of consciousness and interior monologue for unfolding the events of the novel; both are pre-speech thought. Therefore, we can say that, Faulkner has made his readers rely on the thoughts of his characters rather than utterance; in other words, the narrative method of *As I Lay Dying* supports the idea of the inefficiency of word. Moreover, the novel unfolds in a complex way. Fifteen characters narrate the novel in their distinct styles. For example, in Darl’s (the second child of Bundren family) section, we find a vivid description of incidents while in Vardaman’s (the youngest son of Bundren family) section, we find confusion and puzzlement. The sections do not follow chronological order; that is why; this fragmented development of the novel signifies lack of communication through word.

**Word and stylistic devices:** In the novel *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner has employed gaps, pictures and italicized sentences and unpunctuated sentences to express meaning. A picture of the coffin has been used to supplement the word. Addie, the most important character of the novel, says in her section, “The shape of my body where I used to be a virgin is in the shape of a ( ) and I couldn’t think Anse” (Faulkner 161) – here the blank space has been employed in lieu of word to convey meaning. This manipulation of gaps and pictures suggest that word lacks something. Word is not enough to express what we want to express. In one of the sections of Darl we find the use of italics. For example, “Pa leans above the bed in the twilight... ‘Darn them boys’, he says. *Jewel, I say. Overhead the day drives level and gray, hiding the sun by a flight of gray spears*” (Faulkner 44).

Now, the italicized part indicates that it does not belong to the above part. Therefore, Faulkner may have used italics to mark the changes of time, place or idea and the use of italics show that mere words are not enough to mark the changes.

Faulkner has also used unpunctuated lines. These unpunctuated lines express more meaning than those lines that have punctuation marks. For example, in Vardaman's section we see,

“Cash tried but she fell off and Darl jumped going under he went under and Cash hollering to catch her and I hollering running and hollering and Dewey Dell hollering at me Vardaman you vardaman you vardaman and Vernon passed me...” (Faulkner 138).

The omission of punctuation marks symbolizes the tensed condition of Vardaman as the coffin was drowning under water. To emphasize a chaotic situation without any order Faulkner has not found word enough for portraying situation like this one; so, he has depended on special techniques like unpunctuated lines to meet this purpose.

**Word as a theme:** A careful reader can easily find that the idea of word comes repeatedly in *As I Lay Dying*. The giving of word is unimportant to the wealthy people. Although the rich lady gave her word to take cakes from Cora, the rich lady suddenly changes her mind. Cora's daughter thinks, “she ought to taken those cakes she same as gave... her words”.

In the novel, Cora is a self- righteous country woman who is fond of uttering religious clichés. She inspires Addie (the mother) to “raise voices in His undying praise” for God's mercy and for gaining salvation from sin. Addie's lack of reliance upon word restrains her from saying prayers to God, she says, “people to whom sin is just a matter of words, to them salvation is just words too.” In the novel, Whitfield appears to be a godly man. Although he is a man of religion, his religiousness is limited in uttering religious words only.

In *As I Lay Dying*, Addie prefers action rather than word. To Addie word is “just a shape to fill a lack”; word is a lifeless shape, a vessel” and “words are no good; that words don't ever fit even what they are trying to say at”. Words are like virgin bodies, neither words nor virgin bodies are productive. Words are useless unless one transform them into action.

This is what we find in the case of Anse (the father). Anse can only murmur platitude, he rarely engages himself in work. He speaks of love but he is not true to his word. Addie gains promise from Anse hoping that this time his word would be converted into action. Cash and Jewel support Addie's view upon word. Most of the time, Cash contemplates on work and engages little in verbal communication. Jewel expresses his love for his mother (Addie) by action. Although he loves his mother, he never articulates it. He saves his mother's coffin from fire and water and shows his intense love.

**Word and deconstruction:** “The work of Derrida signals recognition that language as typically instanced in writing is inherently polysemous, that there is always an unstoppable flow of meaning...” (Easthope 167). In *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner has shown what Derrida has spoken about meaning. The very title of the novel is an example of this fluidity of meaning. The sound of “I” is close to the sound of “Eye”; it seems that someone is closing eyes near the moment of eternal sleep. Therefore, the disorientation of this particular word “I” gives us the feeling that multiple meaning is always possible. Moreover, *As I Lay Dying* is the story of the Bundren family. Here, the word “Bundren” is close to the word “burden”, from the story we know that the Bundren are in the habit of living by others' help. Anse Bundren “allows others to carry his

burden”. (O’Connor & Van 129) Often members of the Bundren family refuse to take any help from outsiders but the irony is that most of the time they depend on others’ assistance.

**Word and feminism:** Feminists scholars think that through their control of language men are able to exercise the control over women. Dale Spender says, “Many everyday words possess meanings ‘fixed’ by men”, such as “motherhood”, that do not offer actual meaning of the condition (142). In *As I Lay Dying*, Addie talks like a feminist. She says,

“When he was born I knew that motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that had the children didn’t care whether there was a word for it or not” (Faulkner 159).

Spender also talks about a language trap; males have “developed a language trap which is in their interest” (143). Addie feels herself betrayed by both her husband and the word. She says, “I realized that I had been tricked by words older than Anse or love...” (Faulkner 161). She takes promise from Anse to bury her in Jefferson and in this way she wants to take revenge against Anse and word, because this time Anse’s word would be transformed into action.

From the above discussion, we can perceive that the whole novel is based upon word. The narrative method, the manipulation of gaps, pictures, unpunctuated and italicized lines, the themes- all of these imply the insufficiency of word in the act of meaning and communication. Undoubtedly, the use of gaps, pictures and italics has been an innovative endeavor in Faulkner’s time. Therefore, it can be said that although Faulkner has worked on an old theme, he has given it a new dimension in *As I Lay Dying*.

## CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

In modern era, people manipulate word for their own purpose –they use word as slogans and banners but never turn them into action; that is why, people have lost reliance upon word. William Faulkner has questioned the controlling power of word in meaning and communication in his novels- *As I Lay Dying*, *Mosquitoes* and *The Sound and the Fury*. As a person with modern sensibility William Faulkner contemplates on the idea that word is not enough for communication with others, we have to depend more on non-verbal signs rather than word. This paper has tried to demonstrate that although the method employed in *As I Lay Dying* is certainly unique but the concept of word and meaning had always been a serious matter of debate. *As I Lay Dying* is obviously innovative for its age. For this exceptional attempt William Faulkner deserves admiration.

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