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Eng 376

"Just a matter of words": pride, trauma, and hypocrisy in *As I Lay Dying*

In William Faulker's self-proclaimed *tour de force, As I Lay Dying,* the Bundren family—poor in spirit and finance—goes to all lengths to fulfill their mother's dying wish: to be buried many towns away with her own kin. Faulkner raises critical questions about Christian faith, Southern culture, and family pathology as wills collide, fingers point, and almost no one tells the truth. One particular preoccupation dominates the mind of Cora Tull, the Bundrens' neighbor: that even as Addie lies on her deathbed knowing that "the eternal and the everlasting salvation and grace is not upon her," (8) still she will not "kneel and open her heart and cast from it the devil of vanity and cast herself upon the mercy of the Lord" (168). While Cora lays Addie's unfaith and general perceived immorality at the feet of Addie's own pride, in reality it is pervading Christian hypocrisy—exemplified in Cora herself—that alienates Addie from the Christian faith.

In sanctimonious soliloquies Cora details her diagnosis of Addie's immorality and general unfaith: that Addie's pride, the "vanity of her mortal heart" (166) keeps her from better moral character as well as eternal salvation. In the third of these soliloquies Cora relates telling Addie "many a time" that "she took God's love and her duty to Him too much as a matter of course…" (166). To suggest that Addie takes something for granted—in particular the love of God and duty to God—is to accuse Addie of a sense of entitlement, certainly a trait of pride. Later in the same passage Cora is more explicit, testifying that Addie would not change even after Brother Whitfield, the minister, strove with the "vanity of her mortal heart". Vanity of course being an ecclesiastic synonym for pride, Cora heightens the accusation by saying it springs from Addie's very "heart"—the deepest part of her being. When Addie attempts to clarify

her attitude towards the Lord—"My daily life is…"—Cora continues that "just because a woman's life is right in the sight of man, she cant know if there is no sin in her heart…" (167). By rebuking Addie's perceived claim to "know if there is sin in her heart," Cora again accuses Addie of pride. Next Addie grows more confessional: "I know that I deserve my punishment. I do not begrudge it" (167). Yet Cora responds with "It is out of your vanity that you would judge sin and salvation in the Lord's place" (167). Cora, then, explicitly indicts "your vanity" as Addie's basis for the immorality Cora accuses her of. In her ultimate indictment, however, Cora relates that "I went down on my knees right there. I begged her to kneel and open her heart and cast from it the devil of vanity and cast herself upon the mercy of the Lord. But she wouldn't" (168). Cora's most dramatic demand is that Addie cast the "devil of vanity" from her heart: vanity isn't just in her heart; the *devil of vanity* lives in Addie's heart. For Cora, therefore, Addie's lack of faith in God springs largely from her own pride.

But Addie would rebut that the sufferings of her personal life preclude faith in a God or even hope. Granted, we might feel some indignation at some of Addie's less motherly confessions: "I would look forward to the times where they faulted, so I could whip them" (170). Initially we may assent to Cora's assessment of Addie's character. But the next sentence evokes our pity: "When the switch fell I could feel it upon my flesh; when it welted and ridged it was my blood that ran; and I would think with each blow of the switch: Now you are aware of me!" (170). This poignant confession makes us witnesses to how child abuse propagates down generations, inhibiting mental health and the development of moral character. Addie doesn't exactly have a life-giving or hope-affirming experience with her husband either. As she explains, Anse "had a word, too. Love, he called it." Anse soon insists on more children than she wants to bear; her inability to resist his will further embitters her against circumstance: "He did not know

that he was dead, then" (173). After already being abused throughout childhood, Addie again feels hurt and betrayed by her husband, who seems to value her as a child-rearer more than as a partner. It is to these slights that Addie refers when she defends her unfaith to Cora by explaining that her "daily life" is the atonement ("expiation") (167) for her sin. Most of all however, Addie's faith is obstructed by her Father's—literally and brutally—whipping it into her as a child that "the reason for living is getting ready to stay dead a long time"—that is, there is no afterlife (169, 175). Addie underscores her Father's impact on her worldview by mentioning his brutal life philosophy twice in her sole soliloquy. Addie even mentions Cora's judgments directly and makes some move to rebut them: "… when Cora Tull would tell me that I was not a true mother, I would think how words go straight up in a thin line, quick and harmless…" (173). In Addie's own words, then, it is not so much personal pride but the tribulations of her life that preclude better moral behavior, as well faith in a merciful God.

But even more than the tribulations of her personal life, Addie indicts a pervasive cultural abuse of language which perpetually frustrates relationships and shatters confidence in religious faith and even moral living. Addie puts it this way: "... I learned that words are no good; that words dont ever fit even what they are trying to say at. When [Cash] 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. I knew that fear was invented by someone that had never had the fear; pride, who never had the pride" (172). Addie perhaps suggests that words have become tools for discussion—indictment?—of other people's lives and never one's own. Going further Addie grasps after the social impact: "I knew… that we had to use one another by words like spiders dangling by their mouths from a beam, swinging and twisting and never touching, and that only through the blows of the switch could my blood and

their blood flow as one stream" (172). Addie suggests that since words like "pride" were made up by people who never had—or thought they never had—pride, then language is debased into a tool merely for declaring judgment on others: "And so when Cora Tull would tell me that I was not a true mother, I would think how words go straight up in a thin line, quick and harmless…" (173). In an obvious reference to her earlier spider-web analogy, Addie isn't merely reasoning away Cora's words; she's indicting language itself—or at least its misuse—for being a tool of describing "what they never had," such that every utterance is a judgment and every phrase points the finger, as all words grasps after things the speaker has not had, and "cannot have until they forget the words" (174)—mutual experience is so inhibited that the only intimacy is "through the blows of the switch." In conclusion Addie makes an example of her neighbor: "Like Cora, who could never even cook" (174). With this concluding jab we at last understand the source of Addie's embitterment concretely. By mentioning Cora while defining the linguistic abuse, and belittling her cooking abilities, Addie asks whether Cora is qualified to sermonize on the eternal matters that she does. Hence this linguistic abuse that so embitters Addie: it might be a helpful oversimplification to call it hypocrisy. In a conclusion to her soliloquy, Addie asserts that Cora wanted her to kneel and pray, "because people to whom sin is just a matter of words, to them salvation is just words too" (176). For Addie, therefore, even the faith that Cora professes to have is "just a matter of words," a web for lonely spiders swinging from a ceiling, a tool to "use one another by".

For Addie, Cora in particular exemplifies one of those spiders who use language as a tool to "use one another", ultimately alienating Addie from moral behavior, religious faith, and even hope. Observe again Cora's conversation with Addie about faith. Addie's earliest explanation of her attitude towards God is that "My daily life is an acknowledgement and expiation [atonement]

of my sin" (167). Cora interprets this such that Addie asserts her innocence before God: "… just because a woman's life is right in the sight of man… because you have been a faithful wife" (167). But Addie's next words clarify that she was not declaring blamelessness at all, but confessing sin: "I know my own sin. I know that I deserve my punishment. I do not begrudge it" (167). Hearing—but apparently not processing—this rather humble confession, Cora proceeds about "your vanity". Still the accusations escalate: "Not even after Brother Whitfield, a godly man if ever one breathed God's breath, prayed for you and…" (167). The dramatic irony of course is that firstly, Addie has not been a faithful wife to Anse, and that secondly, it is none other than the godly Brother Whitfield that she has been meeting in the woods. But most shocking—and hilarious—is perhaps Cora's final assertion that "You'd think from the way she talked that she knew more about sin and salvation than the Lord God Himself…" Of course, given who is sermonizing whom in this scene, the accusation sticks better to the speaker. The same is true of Cora's final rebuke "It is His to judge and to mete. Not yours" (168). Again, it's ironic to whom this indictment most applies. Indeed nearly every statement Cora utters betrays an ignorance of Addie's personal life, a general disinterest in what Addie has to say, and a deep blindness to her [Cora's] own failures to live up to the standards she demands of others. Even the fact that Cora would find it worthwhile to relate the time she sermonized her neighbor suggests not a desire for Addie's salvation but an eagerness to advertise her own virtue. Indeed when the nearest Christians—her neighbor and even the town preacher—are those for whom sin seems "just a matter of words," who could blame her for concluding that salvation must be as well?

In short, while Cora might blame Addie's perceived immorality and lack of belief in God in her own pride, in truth Addie's abusive upbringing, loveless marriage, and disillusionment with Christian hypocrisy all work together to obstruct her faith. Cora takes Addie's remarks

about sin and God always to indicate pride. But in a more nuanced sense, Addie is considering that her traumatic life has been enough penitence. For her part Addie views religious faith with deep suspicion because the actions of the most bombastic believers she knows suggest that for them, salvation, like sin, is "just a matter of words".

Not that pride has nothing to do with Addie's unfaith. From beyond the grave she engineers a revenge on her own family (173), and in a harrowingly accurate prophesy, declares that her own son, rather than God's, will be her salvation from "fire" and "water". Either way it may be that both women are correct. To have possessed such mastery of the postmodern dilemma, long before metafiction catapulted into the mainstream—perhaps this is the genius of William Faulkner: when irreconcilable narratives are true simultaneously, and the human heart makes war with itself, the mathematical impossibility $P \wedge \neg P$ must be considered true.