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FAULKNER'S *AS I LAY DYING*: THE COFFIN PICTOGRAM AND THE FUNCTION OF FORM

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Modern critics have written quite a large body of work on William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and generally agree the novel is a radical experiment in terms of narration, a fusion of form and function. If this indeed is true, then what *is* the form? Is the novel simply a collection of fragments, or is there a controlling device? The latter seems more reasonable in *As I Lay Dying* because Faulkner creates an icon that represents the Bundren family structure, the narrative, and even the functional structure of the language used in the novel. This image is the pictogram of the coffin in Tull's third section. Not only does the coffin stand out as a structural symbol, but it also becomes a metaphor, a shape that is built and filled. And finally, it functions metonymically, binding together the Bundrens, the narrative, and the nature of language with what Cash would call "animal magnetism."¹ Therefore the pictogram is, in a sense, a special emblem² which not only takes on varied meanings depending on the context, but which also links the contexts themselves together.

In its basic form, the coffin pictogram is a structural symbol. Faulkner apparently wants the reader to remember the icon—he literally draws it in the text and furthermore describes its construction from the perspective of an objective onlooker, Tull. Tull states:

They had laid her in it reversed. Cash made it clock-shaped, like this



with every joint and seam

beveled and scrubbed with the plane, tight as a drum and neat as a sewing basket, and they laid her in it head to foot so it wouldn't crush her dress. (77-78)

In giving a geometric diagram, Faulkner begs the reader to notice the coffin has six sides, with perfect symmetry. Interestingly enough, there are six family members, excluding Addie: Darl, Jewel, Cash, Dewey Dell, Vardaman, and Anse. Addie, naturally, fills the coffin. One may be tempted to place the six Bundrens, according to personality, in a pattern of opposition around the coffin, for Darl and Jewel *seem* antithetical, as do Anse and Addie, but the analogy and geometry break down there. However, the fact that each member has a figurative place

around Addie is intriguing (see figure 1), for the whole narrative is set into perspective.

Just as the individual Bundrens correspond to a side of the coffin and surround Addie, the narrative also surrounds her chapter.³ One would expect, if this structural icon applies, for Addie's section to be precisely in the center of the novel. It is not. Her section is the fortieth of fifty-nine.⁴ If the non-family members' chapters are excluded from the count, Addie's chapter falls twenty-ninth out of forty-three. Her section is narratively out of balance—directly paralleling her physical situation in the coffin. Recall that Tull said, “They laid her in it reversed” (77). And Cash spends much time lamenting his carpenter's nightmare: “It wont balance. If you want it to tote and ride on a balance we will have—” (86). The fact that the body causes the coffin to be off-balance in the same manner the narrative structure is off-balance provides more insight when viewed from yet another level, the level of language, with the pictogram representing a signifier.

With the coffin shape, Faulkner has given the reader a concrete object to represent an abstract idea. The pictogram is similar to Lacan's mathematical symbol of S/s, which represents “distinct orders separated initially by a barrier resisting signification,” “the signifier over the signified.”⁵ However, in the case of Faulkner's icon, the relationship could be better classified as inside/outside or centered/non-centered. Lacan's point is that the Real object (the signified) never *exactly* corresponds to the representation (the signifier). Faulkner, who was influenced by the Cubists and Surrealists,⁶ makes a similar point concerning the crisis of the object in *As I Lay Dying*. That is, the shape of the exterior does not necessarily match the essence of the interior. The coffin, though painstakingly and meticulously constructed for Addie's body (just ask Cash) does not represent Addie's position: she is upside-down, de-centered.⁷ The coffin pictogram not only functions as a structural icon, but it also may be viewed as a symbol of a container (see figure 2), and this view applies to Addie as well as the other Bundrens.⁸

Hence the pictogram of the coffin also functions metaphorically in that it is a shape to be filled. Addie speaks of words, particularly the word “love,” as “just a shape to fill a lack” (158). For her, words are empty—a lack of concrete reality.⁹ In fact, she describes her own body in the same manner: “I would think: The shape of my body where I used to be a virgin is in the shape of a _____ and I couldn't think *Anse*, couldn't remember *Anse*” (159). Her self-image is that of an empty container; she feels as meaningless as words which have no

Figure 1: The Bundren Family Structure

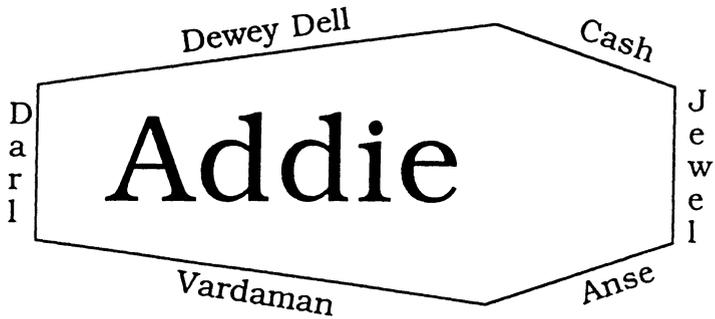
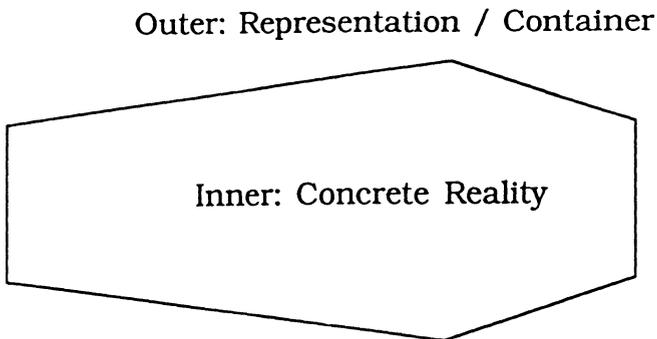


Figure 2: A Shape to be Filled



substance or action. The only way Addie is “filled” is when Anse is “in” her and when she is with child. But even that sense of being filled, Addie says, “fades away” (159).

Other Bundrens involve themselves with containers and shapes. Vardaman, the youngest in the family, creates a metaphorical shape to fill the lack Addie, his mother, left when she died. “My mother is a fish,” (74) he states. John Tucker, in his discussion of Cubism in *As I Lay Dying*, notes Vardaman has transferred the general shape of the coffin to that of a fish (Tucker, 391). Understandably, this transformation is the only manner in which the young boy can deal with the abstract concept of death.¹⁰ He has seen a fish die, and so his mother must be a fish. Dewey Dell, on the other hand, is a shape that is already filled (i.e. with a child), and she wants to empty herself (Tucker, 400). Quite possibly, this desire could be a reaction against her mother. By ridding herself of the child in her womb, Dewey Dell will no longer be identified with Addie whose only real production in life was in the form of children. As a final example of how certain characters fill shapes, Cash stoically fills the concrete container which surrounds his broken leg (Tucker, 400). But more interesting is the fact that Cash actually *builds* containers; he makes the coffin which Addie’s body fills. Paradoxically, Cash also becomes the *filler* of space on the narrative level.

Darl, when he burns down Gillespie’s barn, is sent away to the Jackson insane asylum. This creates a gap in the narrative, for Darl speaks more than any other character—a third of the novel. More importantly, Darl’s keen descriptions and almost telepathic insights have conditioned the reader to trust him. When Darl is revealed as insane, the reader scrambles to fill the lack of a poetic narrator. Fortunately, Faulkner develops Cash throughout the novel to take over Darl’s position as key narrator (Garcia Landa, 69-70). Cash’s first section in the book, as the reader may recall, is the terse list of reasons why he built Addie’s coffin “on the bevel” (73). His thoughts literally are numbered; there is no ambiguous or superfluous description. And, of course, the section is highly limited in its topic. Cash’s second and third sections are even more succinct: “It wont balance” (86) and “It wasn’t on a balance. I told them if they wanted it to tote and ride on balance, they would have to—” (151). But Cash’s later sections radically depart from the style of the former scraps of narrative. In the fourth section, for example, Cash expands his viewpoint into a colorful and sensitive portrayal of his family. He first examines the reasoning behind Darl’s commitment to the Jackson institution, then shows a

great capacity for compassion with regard to Darl's aberrant behavior. Cash says:

Sometimes I think it aint none of us pure crazy and aint none of us pure sane until the balance of us talks him that-a-way. It's like it aint so much what a fellow does, but it's the way the majority of folks is looking at him when he does it. (216)

Granted, Cash's level of diction is not the highest, but he has expressed himself much more than in the previous sections. Before, Cash only concerned himself with his own work, the coffin. Now he explains not only his *view* of the others in the family, but also his *connection* to them. Significantly, the last section in the novel is Cash's, completing the displacement of Darl as poetic narrator. Cash's final words are more objective than Darl's and, from the reader's perspective, the most reliable of the book.¹¹ Thus, Cash fills the lack Darl left in the narrative.

The metaphor of a lack to be filled, furthermore, operates on a language level. If the pictogram of the coffin expresses the structure of inner/outer or signified/signifier, then one may understand how the language in *As I Lay Dying* constantly struggles to "fill" empty words. Again, Addie provides the most candid account concerning the disparity between words and their inherent meaning, and consequently, value. She says she "learned that words are no good; that words dont ever fit even what they are trying to say at" (157). Of her conversations with Cora, Addie says, "And I would think when Cora talked to me, of how the high dead words in time seemed to lose even the significance of their dead sound" (161). Even the forms of the words dissolve for Addie. But the clearest example of how words are empty containers desperately needing to be filled with meaning is Whitfield's section. He prays:

I have sinned, O Lord. Thou knowest the extent of my remorse and the will of my spirit. But He is merciful; He will accept the will for the deed, Who knew that when I framed the words of my confession it was to Anse that I spoke them, even though he was not there. (165)

Whitfield states he "framed the words"—created the structures, the signifiers, but they were never spoken to Anse. The confession, thus, is

meaningless, empty, and absurd. The coffin functions, then, as a metaphor of a shape to be filled in several different contexts.

The last function of the coffin pictogram is metonymic, a linking together of characters, narrative, and language. The coffin itself was built on the principle of “animal magnetism,” as Cash explains in his first section:

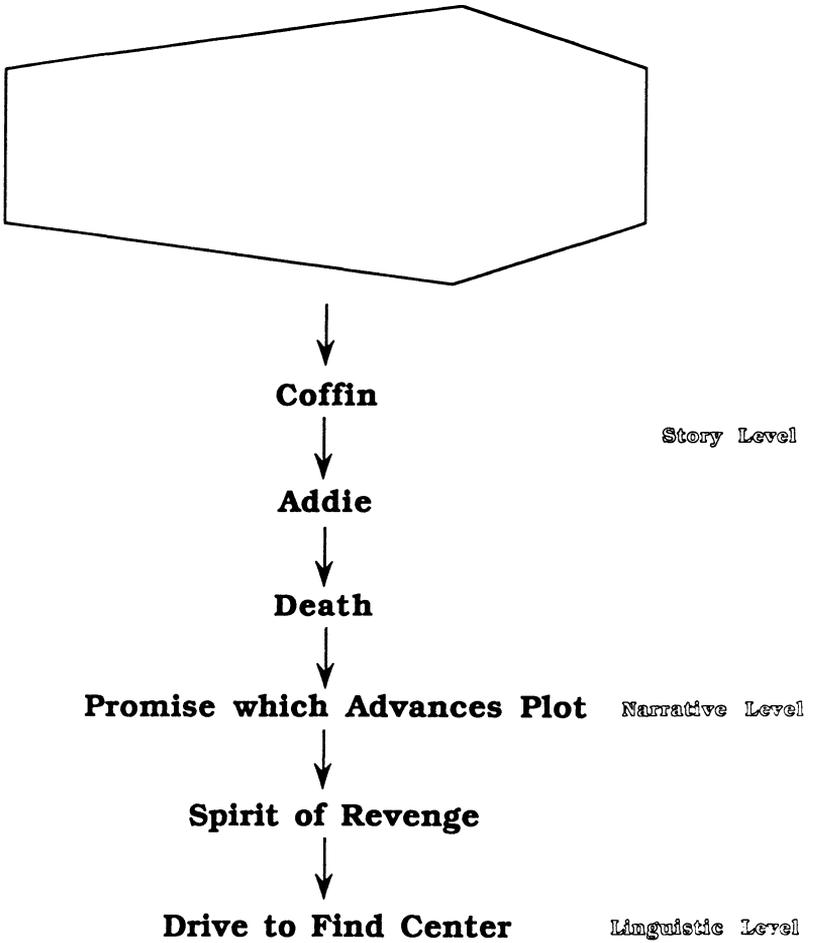
9. The animal magnetism of a dead body makes the stress come slanting, so the seams and joints of a coffin are made on the bevel. (73)

Apparently, the belief was that a body exerts magnetic forces through 360 degrees; thus, to relieve the pressure on the coffin’s joints, Cash beveled them.¹² This implies the forces emanating from the dead body pull the sides of the coffin inward. The dead body is Addie. And it is quite reasonable to say Addie holds the family and the novel together.

In a sense, all of the Bundrens are fragments of Addie, representing extremes and different sides (corresponding to sides of the coffin again) of her personality.¹³ For example, Addie does not trust words or put any faith in their meaning; Darl, antithetically, “uses words poetically” and essentially “his reality is the verbal world inside his head.”¹⁴ Addie is also the shape to be filled; Anse, however inadequately, fills Addie. And Dewey Dell is like Addie because she is pregnant, though Dewey Dell chooses to reject that identification. Vardaman similarly identifies with Addie because he thinks in concrete terms. Jewel represents the pure determination and action of Addie. And Cash, by his very namesake, is a maker, a doer in contrast to Darl, who says much but does nothing, and when he finally takes action, it is destructive, not constructive as Cash’s. So, Addie is the common link among all the characters, the force that holds the family together just like the animal magnetism that holds the coffin together. Indeed, the whole journey motif centers around Addie; without her, there would be no plot.

In this regard, the coffin pictogram represents the force by which the narrative is held together, despite the attempts of Darl to undermine the mission.¹⁵ The coffin is an object transported by the family through the water and the fire (154), but really the coffin itself is not important—it is simply a *container* for the body. The *body* is what needs to be buried in Jefferson. But then again, the body does not need to be buried, *Addie* does. A dead body can be buried anywhere, but Addie must be buried in Jefferson. Yet it is not Addie’s body that

Figure 3: The Metonymic Chain



needs to be buried, but the *spirit* of Addie's "revenge" (159). Addie wants Anse to keep his word, to make his promise *mean* something (Allen, 185). So, by metonymy, the *coffin* in the end is the *promise* exacted by Addie.¹⁶ Ironically, the metonymy progresses one step further, for Anse's new wife replaces the coffin on the return trip.¹⁷ In fact, this new wife fills the space left by the coffin, Addie's body, and Addie's spiritual revenge. And this linking together of shapes forms the effectual function of the coffin emblem in the novel.

In linguistic terms, the coffin pictogram (signifier) transforms itself into a metonymic chain that holds the novel together across levels of reading. The coffin is a physical structure as well as a metaphorical structure, but other signifiers can be substituted for the coffin. The best example is the substitution of "death" for "coffin." The metonymy exchanges the inner (death) for the outer (coffin), but neither exists apart from each other; they exist in tension with one another. In linguistic terms, the *signifier* does not hold together a larger meaning structure—the tension *between* the signifier and the signified is the bonding force. Or, in Neo-Freudian terms, this tension is the desire to find meaning, to discover true substance and identity behind the form (Morris, 122). Faulkner uses the symbol of the coffin, functioning metaphorically and metonymically, to represent this drive; the symbol denotes the filling up of space, the transference from one shape to another, and the constant fluctuation and battle for definition which unifies both horizontally (within the story itself) and vertically (on various levels of reading).

The coffin structure represents the Bundren family and the narrative. Additionally, the metaphor of a space to be filled is derived from the pictogram. Finally, a substitution of terms forms a chain of association with the pictogram being the linking force. Thus, the pictogram is a symbol which, in its basic form, arises from an interaction of the axes of metaphor and metonymy. Although the pictogram functions in the above three ways, in general, it also unifies distinct levels of context: story-level, narrative-level, and language-level (figure 3). Perhaps there are more symbols in other Faulkner texts which function in the same manner as the coffin pictogram. They await our further research.

NOTES

¹William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 73. All future references from this text will appear parenthetically.

²I use this term in the sense that David Lodge does in his book, *The Modes of Modern Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977): he refers to a symbol as a "metaphorical metonymy" (100). Of course, he bases his work upon Roman Jakobson's brief but extremely influential essay, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Linguistic Disturbances," which may be found in *Jakobson and Halle, Fundamentals of Language* (the Hague, 1956), beginning on page 58. For a brief sketch of Jakobson's metaphoric and metonymic pole theory, see Lodge's edited collection of literary criticism essays entitled *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (London: Longman, 1988), pp. 31-61.

³See John Tucker, "William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*: Working Out the Cubistic Bugs," *TSL* 26.1 (1984), 394-395. Tucker also states: "Both coffin and book 'contain' Addie" (400).

⁴Jose A. Garcia Landa, "Reflexivity in the Narrative Technique of *As I Lay Dying*," *ELN* 27 (1990), 70. The first note in this essay catalogues the sections in the novel.

⁵Jacques Lacan, "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious," in David Lodge, ed., *Modern Criticism: A Reader* (London: Longman, 1988), p. 83.

⁶For studies on the influence of cubism in *As I Lay Dying* see John Tucker, "William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*: Working Out the Cubistic Bugs," *TSL* 26 (1984), 388-404, and also Watson Branch, "Darl Bundren's 'Cubistic Vision,'" *William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying: A Critical Casebook*, ed. Dianne L. Cox (New York: Garland, 1985), pp. 111-129. Branch also discusses surrealist elements in Faulkner's work.

⁷Georgianne Potts explored Faulkner's use of Southern Black folklore in her essay "Black Images in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*," *UMSE* 7 (1989), 1-26. She notes that "it was traditional for the Black women in their full-skirted wedding gowns to be buried in a reversed position, head to foot, within the coffin" (2), apparently for the same reason that Addie is upside-down: so her dress would not be crushed.

⁸Tucker, 400. Also, see Willim R. Allen, "The Imagist and Symbolist Views of the Function of Language: Addie and Darl Bundren in *As I Lay Dying*," *SAF* 10 (1982), 193.

⁹Charles Palliser, "Predestination and Freedom in *As I Lay Dying*," *AL* 58 (1986), 567.

¹⁰Potts, 6. She, in turns, refers he readers to Leary's *William Faulkner of Yoknapatawpha County*, pp. 69-70.

¹¹See Judith Lockyer, "Language and the Process of Narration in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*," *AZQ* 43 (1987), 165-177. Lockyer concludes, "Cash's words grow increasingly literate, establishing him as the narrator we trust. His recognition of the ability to step outside the self returns the act of narration to sanity" (176).

¹²Rosemary Franklin, "Animal Magnetism in *As I Lay Dying*," *AQ* 18 (1966), 29.

¹³Wesley Morris, "The Irrepressible Real: Jacques Lacan and Poststructuralism," *American Criticism in the Poststructuralist Age*, ed. Ira Konigsburg (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1981), p. 125.

¹⁴William R. Allen, "The Imagist and Symbolist Views of the Function of Language: Addie and Darl Bundren in *As I Lay Dying*," *SAF* 10 (1982), 188.

¹⁵Patricia R. Schroeder, "The Comic World of *As I Lay Dying*," *Faulkner and Humor*, ed. Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1986), p. 44.

¹⁶Olga Vickery, "*As I Lay Dying*," *William Faulkner: Two Decades of Criticism*, ed. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga Vickery (East Lansing: Michigan State College P, 1951), p. 194.

¹⁷Ira Royals points out to me that Anse's new wife carries with her a graphophone (239)—presumably a box, but most definitely a container. So, in fact, the metonymy proceeds even further. Not only is the woman herself a replacement for Addie, but she brings with her a replacement for the coffin. Oddly enough, the matriarchal voice of Addie is transformed at the novel into the "new" Mrs. Bundren's music, which Tucker calls a "disembodied voice" (394). Other references to metonymy in the book may be found in Potts (see page 6) and James M. Mellard, "Lacan and Faulkner: A Post-Freudian Analysis of Humor in the Fiction," Fowler and Abadie, pp. 195-215.