

THE POLYPHONIC VOID: NARRATIVE MULTIPLICITY AND THE  
SUBVERSION OF AUTHORIAL DOMINANCE IN FAULKNER'S  
"AS I LAY DYING"

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*UDK -820(73)-9(021)*

**Abstract.** This article investigates the architectural complexity of William Faulkner's modernist masterpiece, "As I Lay Dying", through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of polyphony. By deconstructing the novel's 59 monologues delivered by 15 discrete narrators, this study explores how Faulkner achieves a radical subversion of authorial dominance, replacing a singular, omniscient "truth" with a fragmented network of subjective realities. The analysis focuses on the interplay between multiplicity of narrative voices and the technical execution of stream of consciousness, arguing that these methods serve to expose the epistemological limitations of human perception. Central to this inquiry is the role of Addie Bundren, whose posthumous monologue creates a central void that both anchors and destabilizes the surrounding narratives. By examining the linguistic variation across characters—from Cash's mechanical precision to Darl's poetic clairvoyance—the study demonstrates how Faulkner's polyphonic structure mirrors the internal isolation and the breakdown of communal truth within the Bundren family. Ultimately, this research posits that the novel's formal innovation is not merely a stylistic choice but a thematic necessity, illustrating the profound incommunicability of grief and the inherent fragmentation of the modern human condition.

**Keywords:** Polyphony, William Faulkner, narratology, stream of consciousness, multiplicity, modernism, subjectivity.

### **Introduction.**

William Faulkner's 1930 masterpiece, *As I Lay Dying*, stands as a landmark of literary modernism, primarily due to its radical departure from the traditional, unified narrative voice. By employing a polyphonic structure, Faulkner decentralizes the "authoritative" truth, instead presenting a fractured, kaleidoscopic reality. This study examines how Faulkner utilizes multiple perspectives to explore the subjectivity of human experience and the disintegration of the Bundren family. From a narratological perspective, William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* functions as an intricate experiment in epistemological fragmentation, where the objective reality of the Bundren family's

odyssey is subordinated to the subjective mechanics of fifteen discrete consciousness. Utilizing a polyphonic structure, Faulkner replaces the traditional omniscient narrator with a decentralized network of internal monologues, effectively transforming the narrative into a psychological case study of grief, trauma, and linguistic inadequacy. The text employs stream of consciousness to illuminate the cognitive dissonance between the characters; for instance, the contrast between Cash's mathematical, spatial reasoning and Darl's metaphysical, clairvoyant perceptions suggests that "truth" is not a singular entity but a composite of conflicting temporal and emotional filters. Centered around the "void" of Addie Bundren's decaying corpse, the novel ultimately demonstrates the collapse of communal meaning, as the characters remain linguistically isolated within their own minds, unable to bridge the gap between private thought and shared reality.

### Discussion.

The term "polyphony," originally coined in a literary context by Mikhail Bakhtin, refers to a narrative characterized by a plurality of independent and unmerged voices. Unlike a traditional novel where the narrator's voice dominates (monologism), "As I Lay Dying" is composed of 59 monologues delivered by 15 different characters. No single voice is granted ultimate authority. Even the deceased Addie Bundren is given a voice from beyond the grave, complicating the timeline and the reader's moral judgment. Faulkner uses polyphony to show how the same event—such as the crossing of the river—is perceived differently based on a character's internal biases, intelligence, and emotional state.

In Faulkner's construction, polyphony is achieved through the juxtaposition of localized truths. Because there is no "master voice" to reconcile the differences, the reader is forced to inhabit the cognitive space between the narrators. While each chapter is a "monologue," the novel as a whole is "dialogic." For example, when Cora Tull describes Addie's religious devotion on page 23, and Addie later describes her own nihilism and adultery on page 170, the two voices engage in a posthumous argument. This is the essence of polyphony: the truth exists only in the tension between Cora's external observation and Addie's internal reality. Faulkner uses polyphony to demonstrate that a single event is not a single "fact." The crossing of the river is a physical struggle for Jewel, a mathematical problem for Cash (calculating the slant of the wagon), and a metaphysical transition for Darl. By presenting these simultaneously, Faulkner argues that reality is a "polyphonic" event—a harmony (or dissonance) of multiple simultaneous frequencies.

The polyphonic nature of the novel is fundamentally linked to the absence of authorial dominance. Faulkner "withdraws" from the text, leaving a vacuum that the characters struggle to fill with their own words.

*"I dont know what I am. I dont know if I am or not."* — Darl (p. 80)

This quote exemplifies the polyphonic crisis: without a stable narrator to define them, the characters must constantly "narrate themselves" into existence. Their identities are not fixed by the author but are perpetually being negotiated through their stream-of-consciousness monologues.

Ultimately, the polyphony in "As I Lay Dying" serves to highlight the thematic implication of isolation. In a truly polyphonic world, voices are independent and unmerged. This creates the tragic irony of the Bundren family: they are physically bound by the same journey and the same coffin, but because their "voices" are so distinct and internal, they are unable to achieve a communal truth. The polyphony doesn't lead to a shared understanding, but to a cacophony of grief, where each character suffers in a private, linguistic vacuum. The polyphonic model in "As I Lay Dying" functions as a non-linear data set, where each narrator provides a subjective variable. The "scientific" value of the text lies in its refusal to solve the equation, leaving the reader to interpret the overlapping waves of consciousness as a singular, albeit fractured, human experience.

Faulkner's genius lies in his ability to differentiate these voices through stream of consciousness and distinct linguistic registers. The polyphony is not just a structural choice but a psychological one. Faulkner uses "idiolects"—individual ways of speaking—to signal the intellectual and emotional state of each narrator. This ensures that even without a chapter heading, the reader would know who is "speaking." Cash's voice is characterized by logic and spatial reasoning. In Chapter 18, his entire monologue is a numbered list explaining why he built the coffin a certain way:

*"1. So that the grit could not feed into it... 2. Every joint and seam made with a microscope..." (p. 82-83)*

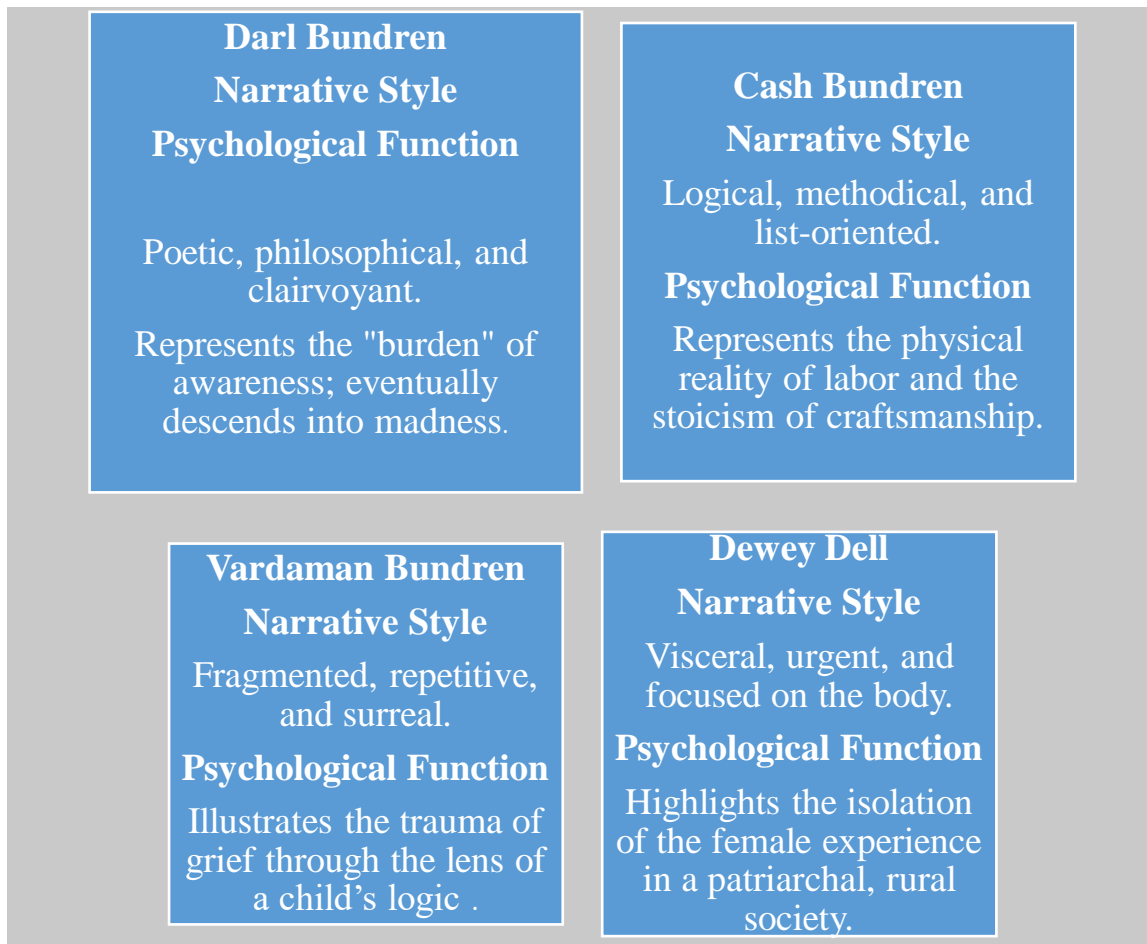
His language is devoid of emotion; he processes grief through the precision of carpentry.

Darl uses complex metaphors and elevated vocabulary that far exceeds what a "poor white" farmer would realistically say aloud, representing his deep, intrusive intuition:

*"The sun, an old man with a light, stands among the whispering cedars... the path... is a stream of light." (p. 10)*

Darl's linguistic sophistication marks him as an outsider within his own family, eventually leading to his alienation and madness.

Table 1. The spectrum of consciousness



The polyphonic world of the novel revolves around a central “void”—the coffin of Addie Bundren. While the characters speak *at* and *around* her, Addie’s own chapter serves as the anchor of the book’s philosophy. Addie’s rejection of language provides a meta-commentary on the novel itself. Faulkner creates a world of intense verbalization (59 monologues) to describe a woman who believed that doing was the only thing that mattered, while words were merely “a shape to fill a lack.’ The novel is physically and narratively built around Addie’s decaying body. She is the ‘silent center” that everyone else tries to define, yet her own voice, when it finally appears, negates their efforts.

The family spends the first half of the book building a box for a woman who is still breathing. This creates a “void” where the mother should be.

*Where every breath she draws is full of his knocking and sawing where she can see him saying See. See what a good one I am making for you. I told him to go somewhere else. I said Good God do you want to see her in it.(p 4)*

Addie views words as mere shells that people use because they are afraid to face the “terrible” reality of doing.

*I would think how words go straight up in a thin, line, quick and harmless, and how terribly doing goes along the earth, clinging to it, so that after a while the two*

*lines are too far apart for the same person to straddle from one to the other and that sin and love and fear are just sounds that people who never sinned nor loved nor feared have for what they never had and cannot have until they forget the words. Like Cora, who could never even cook.(59)*

Her monologue reveals that the entire journey—a massive “doing”—is based on a promise (to be buried in Jefferson) that she extracted from Anse not out of love, but as a form of revenge. She is a void that swallows the family's efforts.

In “As I Lay Dying”, the polyphonic method serves to highlight the incommunicability of the human soul. Despite the Bundrens traveling together in a cramped wagon, they remain profoundly isolated. In a polyphonic world, “truth” is fragmented because each character sees only a slice of reality, often distorted by their own desires. For instance:

-The fire at Gillespie’s Barn: this event is described through multiple lenses, showing a total lack of communal understanding. Vardaman sees the “pretty” fire and Darl’s silhouette against it. Jewel sees an obstacle to his mother’s body and risks his life to save the coffin. Darl (the arsonist) sees an opportunity to end the nightmare of the decaying corpse.

-The “new” Mrs. Bundren: the final collapse of a unified family truth occurs at the very end of the novel. After the trauma of the journey, the loss of Cash’s leg, and the betrayal of Darl, Anse simply replaces Addie.

*“It’s Cash and Jewel and Vardaman and Dewey Dell,” pa says, kind of hangdog and proud too, with his teeth and all, even if he wouldn’t look at us. “Meet Mrs Bundren,” he says.(90)*

The “truth” of their mother's memory is instantly erased by Anse’s selfishness. The polyphony ends not in a harmonious chord, but in a jarring, ironic dissonance where the children's suffering is rendered meaningless by the father’s new “truth.”

Characters like Vernon Tull and Cora Tull provide a "social" perspective, often judging the Bundrens' quest as absurd or sacrilegious. The tension between Darl’s intuition and Jewel’s silent action creates a binary of “word vs. deed” that can only be resolved through the destruction of the family unit

TABLE 2. COMPARISON OF SUBJECTIVE TRUTHS

	Character	Perception
Addie’s death	Peabody (Doctor)	A BIOLOGICAL RELEASE FROM A “DAMNED” LIFE
	Vardaman	A mystical transformation; she becomes a fish
	Dewey Dell	An obstacle/distraction from her secret pregnancy.
	Anse	A personal inconvenience that finally gets him his teeth.

The table effectively encapsulates the epistemological fragmentation at the heart of the novel, demonstrating how a singular event—Addie’s death—is stripped of universal meaning and refashioned into a series of localized, subjective “truths.” Through the lens of polyphony, Faulkner illustrates that reality is not an objective constant but a variable filtered through individual trauma, biological necessity, or sheer narcissism. Peabody’s clinical detachment provides a professional baseline of “release,” yet this is immediately challenged by Vardaman’s surrealist, associative logic, which transforms death into a mystical metamorphosis. Meanwhile, the internal monologues of Dewey Dell and Anse highlight the profound isolation of the human condition; for them, the corpse is not a lost loved one but an obstacle to their own immediate, physical desires—be it the resolution of a secret pregnancy or the acquisition of a new set of teeth. This divergence of perspective serves as a micro-study of the novel’s broader thematic implications, proving that within a polyphonic world, communal grief is impossible because each character is trapped within the linguistic and emotional silo of their own self-interest.

Faulkner’s “As I Lay Dying” is not merely a story about a funeral procession; it is an experiment in epistemological uncertainty. By fragmenting the narrative into a polyphonic chorus, Faulkner forces the reader to act as a judge, piecing together a “truth” that is never fully present in the text. The novel remains a definitive study of how individual consciousness shapes, and often distorts, the world it inhabits.

### **Conclusion**

The structural and linguistic architecture of “As I Lay Dying” confirms William Faulkner’s radical departure from the monologic traditions of the nineteenth-century novel. By implementing a polyphonic framework, Faulkner successfully decentralizes narrative authority, demonstrating that “truth” in the modernist context is not a static objective but a dynamic result of overlapping, and often contradictory, subjective frequencies. This study has shown that the multiplicity of narrative voices serves as more than a stylistic exercise; it is an essential epistemological tool used to map the profound isolation of the human psyche.

The subversion of authorial dominance creates a narrative vacuum, or a “polyphonic void,” centered on the figure of Addie Bundren. Within this void, the characters’ use of stream of consciousness reveals a fundamental breakdown of communal truth, where language fails to bridge the gap between individual experiences of grief, desire, and existence. As evidenced by the divergent perceptions of Addie’s death and the subsequent journey to Jefferson, Faulkner posits that reality is an unfixed state, perpetually reconstructed by the observer. Ultimately, the novel concludes not with a harmonious resolution, but with a jarring dissonance that reinforces the tragic incommunicability of the human condition. Faulkner’s polyphonic experiment thus remains a definitive exploration of the fragmented modern soul, proving that in the

absence of a singular narrator, the only available truth is the symphony of the isolated self.

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