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As I Lay Dying

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Teacher's Guide written by Laura Reis Mayer

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INTRODUCTION

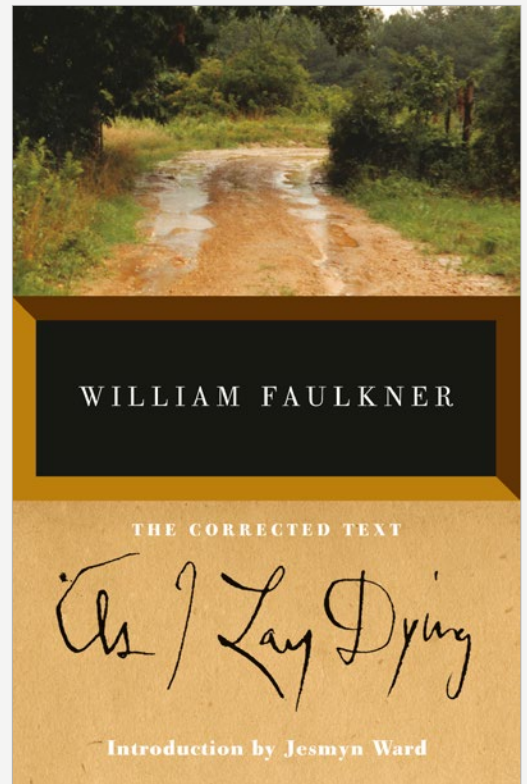
William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* remains one of the most celebrated and challenged novels of our time. At once a tragedy, heroic journey, and Southern gothic narrative, the Bundren family's quest to shepherd their dead matriarch to her family resting place is an epic pilgrimage replete with unsavory antagonists and catastrophic events. As they traverse the rain-soaked cotton fields of 1920s rural Mississippi, towards the shallow promises of the big city, each grief-stricken family member shares a portion of the story through their varied voices and revealing inner monologues. The resulting narration paints a picture of post-World War I society in the American South, steeped in natural beauty and tradition while fraught with a complex history of poverty, prejudice, and patriarchy. As these remain focal points in today's social and political climates, Faulkner's novel remains quite relevant for today's student readers.

In this guide, students are asked to read closely, write critically, make relevant connections, and collaborate with peers as they tackle the challenges of a complex text. Two compelling questions provide an overall line of inquiry: *How is As I Lay Dying both a reflection of its time period and a tale for the ages? How do Faulkner's stylistic choices contribute to the text's overall structure and aesthetic impact?* A range of activities and questions are included to generate possible answers to this line of inquiry and to promote the critical reading, writing, and thinking required of today's students. Educators may choose any combination of these activities as they challenge students to embark on the reading journey of *As I Lay Dying*.

Teacher's Guide

Includes:

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES,
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS,
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES,
AND LINKS TO RESOURCES



PREPARING TO READ THE TEXT

As I Lay Dying is ripe with historic and literary references that may be unfamiliar to some students, requiring opportunities to build background and context. Not all knowledge should be “front loaded.” While some topics might need to be investigated prior to reading, others can be explored when they arise in the text. Possible topics, activities, and links are listed below.

TEXT-TO-TEXT COMPARISON

Show students the video “Mississippi Delta,” a short film from Mississippi Public Broadcasting’s *Mississippi Roads* series (prhlink.com/mississippidelta). In it, students will learn about the cotton fields and farms that are the setting of Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, as well as the inevitable changes necessary for the Delta’s people to survive. The video explores the juxtaposition between the Delta’s striking beauty and its constant danger, citing the “brooding landscape” of the swamps and bayous left behind by the ever-flooding Mississippi River. After students have watched the video clip, read as a class the excerpt from Jesmyn Ward’s introduction to the novel:

“Perhaps so many great writers are born of this state because this place has endowed us with the particular temperament that demands we witness the outrageous pain and the outrageous beauty of Mississippi” (p. xi).

Discuss with students: *Why does Ward use this language as she introduces Faulkner’s text? How do her words reflect the sentiment expressed in the video?* Challenge students to look for this juxtaposition of pain and beauty while reading the novel.

CHALK TALK READ-ALoud

Conduct a whole-class read-aloud of chapter one to immerse students in Faulkner’s diction, syntax, and style. Play for students the chapter one audio excerpt (prhlink.com/asilaydying). While the excerpt is playing, project the text on the whiteboard. Once the read-aloud is complete, invite students to approach the whiteboard and annotate the text with their initial notices. Students might comment on the first-person point of view, the lyrical narration, and the artistic description of the cotton fields.

After these initial reactions, invite students to continue approaching the whiteboard, this time to write questions or to respond to something a classmate has said. Expect moments of silence as students continue to reflect and respond. What transpires becomes a silent “chalk talk” conversation that leaves a record of student thinking (prhlink.com/connectextendchallenge).

Once the class has finished the chalk talk, encourage students to take a quick book walk through the ensuing chapters. Students should notice that each chapter is narrated by a different character, often in stream of consciousness constructions, and that sometimes the text is italicized. Discuss how these structural and stylistic characteristics are intentional Faulknerian devices that compel readers to become active participants who must construct

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their own versions of the story as they navigate the inner monologues and musings of the grieving Bundren family.

IMAGE ANALYSIS

Ask students to analyze an image(s) from Mississippi History Now's "Farmers without Land" (prhlink.com/farmerswithoutland). These 1930s U.S. Farm Security Administration photos document the lives of poor farmers in early Depression-Era Mississippi and align with the time and place of *As I Lay Dying*. Students might apply the "See, Think, Wonder" routine to analyze one of the FSA photos. In this protocol, students ask themselves:

- What do I see? (What details stick out?)
- What do I think? (What about the image makes me think that?)
- What does this make me wonder? (What broader questions does this image raise?)

With each question, students apply a more critical lens. As an example, the class might study a Cleveland, Mississippi farm family photo and notice the large number of children outside the family's modest cabin. Students might wonder what farm tool the small boy is using for a toy. They may think the family's life seems laborious and wonder why the children aren't in school prhlink.com/farmfamily.

The idea here is to use a primary historical document to build knowledge and interest in the setting of Faulkner's novel. An alternative tool for image analysis can be found at The Library of Congress's website (rhlink.com/photosandprints).

JIGSAW READING

Build background on the Southern Gothic literary genre by having students jigsaw read and discuss the Oxford Research Encyclopedia's article "Southern Gothic Literature" (prhlink.com/southerngothiclit).

Divide students into small "expert" groups and assign each a section of the article. Groups should read their assigned section, discuss its main idea, and summarize it in the margins in their own words, either annotating on paper or using digital tools. Once all groups have completed their summaries, students should move to their "home" groups, which are comprised of one student "expert" from each section of the article. As students share summaries of their individual sections, group members add notes to their own copy of the article.

By the end of the jigsaw activity, students should be clear on the characteristics of the Southern Gothic genre and familiar with its key authors, one of the most famous being William Faulkner. Challenge students to keep their notes handy as they read *As I Lay Dying*, and look for "the presence of irrational, horrific, and transgressive thoughts, desires, and impulses;

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grotesque characters; dark humor, and an overall angst-ridden sense of alienation,” as well as “the suppressed sins of slavery, patriarchy, and class strife (that) bubble to the surface in uncanny ways.”

The following classroom activities promote critical reading, writing, thinking, and discussion.

THEMES TRACKER

College and career-ready standards ask students, rather than teachers, to determine themes and central ideas and to analyze their development and interaction over time. With this in mind, ask students to keep a “themes tracker” for ideas they will uncover in *As I Lay Dying*. As students read and begin noticing a pattern developing, they create a new entry in their tracker. Possible themes for Faulkner’s novel might include: poverty, alienation, identity, family, gender, social hierarchies, and nature. Students can track these ideas digitally or by hand. Students might share their themes and central ideas with each other and add new entries from classmates’ ideas. If students need help getting started, choose one topic and model how to track its development.

DIALECTICAL JOURNAL

To promote active, close reading, ask students to keep a dialectical response journal while reading. Dialectical response journals are typically double-column pages that list specific quotations and excerpts from the novel on the left and responses to text on the right. Responses might include analysis, questions, connections, reactions, or any other notes that help students engage with the text. For example, students reading *As I Lay Dying* might record and respond to compelling quotations, such as Darl’s “I don’t know if I am or not” (p. 80), or they might note shifts in narrative style, such as the Cash chapter that appears in the form of a list (pp. 82–83). These response journals can be brought to book circles, small-group activities, and class seminars, providing students with textual evidence to support their thinking and discussion. The journals can also provide ideas and support for culminating writing products.

BACKCHANNELING

Encourage students to collaborate through a “back channel” while reading *As I Lay Dying*. Using a digital collaborative app such as Gravity (usegravity.io) or Padlet (padlet.com), students can post or answer questions throughout their reading or reflect on a topic or quotation posted by the instructor. Posts can be video or written.

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Sample teacher prompts might look like the following: “What stood out to you in this chapter, and why?” or “Why did Faulkner choose to include Addie’s narration at this point in the novel?” Students might be provided with starters such as, “The most significant word or phrase in this section is ...”

Because students can respond not only to original prompts but to one another’s written or video reflections, they are practicing critical thinking, speaking, and listening as well as civil discussion using multiple perspectives.

MICRO MENTOR TEXT

In her introduction to Faulkner’s text, Jesmyn Ward discusses the value of reading like a writer. She describes the process as “assess(ing) how the author is working, how they are constructing the story and then imitate that in one’s own work in a kind of apprenticeship” (p. viii).

Select a sentence, paragraph, or short excerpt from the novel, and invite students to read it “like a writer.” For instance, Darl describes the cottonhouse in chapter one with:

“The cottonhouse is of rough logs, from between which the chinking has long fallen. Square, with a broken roof set at a single pitch, it leans in empty and shimmering dilapidation in the sunlight, a single broad window in two opposite walls giving onto the approaches of the path” (p. 4).

Ask students to turn to a partner and discuss their observations, such as wording, sentence structure, punctuation, imagery, and more. For example, students might notice how the paragraph reads like descriptive exposition in a play, how Darl paints an image for the reader, and how he starts some sentences in the middle, the way a person thinks to himself.

Next, ask the class to suggest a place or situation, and model for students how to write a sentence or two in the style of Faulkner’s excerpt. The imitation sentence might start out:

“The cafeteria is of metal tables and benches, the tops of which the laminate has long worn off. Littered, with the remnants of beefaroni and canned peaches still to be wiped off all surfaces, a lone plastic tray calls out to be returned to its window.”

At this point, it is the students’ turn. They can choose their own scene or situation and write an imitation sentence or paragraph based on Faulkner’s micro mentor text. Afterwards, discuss as a class: What have we learned about Faulkner’s stylistic choices by imitating his narrative style? How might we describe the aesthetic impact of these choices? For more on micro mentor texts, see prhlink.com/micromentortexts

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CLOSE READING

Encourage student readers to “deep dive” into *As I Lay Dying*. Faulkner’s novel is complex, and students will benefit from working through their reading in a low-stakes, collaborative manner that models what good readers do on their own. The close-reading process focuses on excerpts, or “chunks,” of text, promoting interpretation that is deep rather than wide and fostering critical thinking skills through writing and speaking.

Choose a scene or short excerpt from the novel. One scene that works well from *As I Lay Dying* is the harrowing water crossing that ends in the mules’ deaths (pp. 141–149). Ask students to perform three reads. (If any of the reads are to be conducted out loud, remind students of class norms for handling sensitive language, including dialects).

After each read, one of the following questions can be discussed with a partner or group and answered in writing. After the first read, students answer a simple plot question: “What is happening in the text?” In the second read, students delve into author’s purpose: “What is this text beginning to be about?” Finally, after the third read, students focus even deeper: “Which words and phrases contribute to the text’s meaning and tone?” For all three questions, students must return to the text and cite evidence. For more information on close reading, view the following Douglas Fisher video: rhlink.com/douglasfishervid.

IDENTITY CHART

Challenge students to think critically about how identity is formed, both in *As I Lay Dying* as well as in society. According to the organization Facing History and Ourselves, identity charts can “deepen students’ understanding of themselves, groups, nations, and historical and literary figures.”

Before asking students to create a chart for one of Faulkner’s characters, model an exemplar chart for the class. Place a character’s name in the center of a starburst. At the end of each ray extending out from the character’s name, fill in a text box with a short, defining characteristic. For example, characteristics for Darl Bundren might include “soldier,” “loyal son,” and “crazy.”

Next, draw some arrows facing inward. These reflect how characters see themselves, while the rays facing outward depict the way they are seen by society. Darl’s inward facing rays might read “artist,” “morally outraged,” and “questioning his existence.” Once the chart is complete, synthesize the reflection in a summary statement at the bottom of the page. Darl’s summary might read, “While the world sees Darl as insane, his moral outrage has intensified to the point that he does the most sane and moral thing he can think of—burn it all down.”

The goal is to reflect on how identity is shaped and stereotypes built by both internal and external factors, not only in the text, but in society and in students’ lives, as well. As an extension, students can create their own identity charts, and if they choose, share them with peers to build community and

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challenge stereotypes. For templates and more on identity charts, see rhlink.com/facinghistoryidentity.

CLAIMS, EVIDENCE, REASONING ANALYSIS (CER)

In *As I Lay Dying*, multiple characters suffer from injuries, infection, and chronic illness. Discuss with students that almost one hundred years later, poverty remains a significant factor in diseases such as diabetes, cancer, and more.

For evidence, project and discuss one or more infographics from the article “Beneath the Surface: The History Behind U.S. Southern Health Disparities” prhlink.com/beneaththesurface.

As a class, discuss what the graphs indicate. Next, ask students to use the “Claims, Evidence, Reasoning” framework to analyze the article’s assertions about poverty and its impact on health in the American South. Using a three-column chart, students will record the article’s claims, evidence, and reasoning. Ask students:

- What questions and concerns did the article raise for you?
- How might understanding the link between poverty and health impact our judgements about people we encounter?
- How might this knowledge influence our understanding of literary characters?

CONNECT, EXTEND, CHALLENGE

Deepen students’ understanding of the role of artist in *As I Lay Dying*. Refer to the novel’s introduction, where Mississippian author Jesmyn Ward depicts Darl Bundren as an artist, a seer who “render(s) art from the world around” him (p. xi). Discuss how this characterization of Darl reveals itself in the pastoral imagery he utilizes and the italics that often reveal his secret, inner thoughts. To illustrate, reference what is revealed about Darl towards the end of the novel. As he is led away by authorities, he remembers “the little spy glass he got in France at the war” (p. 254).

Discuss the possible impacts of the war on Darl, and the questions around identity and existence represented by the spyglass. Ask: Is Darl actually insane? Or is he able to “see” realities others cannot due to his artistic nature and his war experience? Next, ask students to read “The Silent Wounds: Long-Term Mental Health Effects on WWI Veterans” (prhlink.com/thesilentwounds).

While reading, students should annotate the article using the “Connect, Extend, Challenge” thinking protocol. Notes include connections to *As I Lay Dying*, new ideas that extend their thinking, and challenges or confusing areas. After reading, discuss: What connections do we see to characters and situations in Faulkner’s text?

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For more information on Connect, Extend, Challenge, see rhlink.com/harvardthinkingprotocol. As an extension, share and discuss the work of Walter Anderson, a well-known Mississippi artist who lived and worked during the time of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, and who spent time in mental health hospitals (prhlink.com/walteranderson).

SYNTHESIZING THE NOVEL**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

The following text-specific and text-dependent questions can be utilized for quick writes, formal essays, small-group discussions, and whole-class seminars.

- Why did Faulkner choose to rotate the novel's narration between characters? How does this shifting narration impact the reader?
- What does the author's use of italics throughout the novel reveal about characters' interior thoughts versus their external conversations?
- Why does Cash insist on building Addie's coffin while she is still alive? What does this imply about Cash's feelings towards his mother?
- Vardaman says, "My mother is a fish" (p. 84). What is revealed here about Vardaman's age, his state of mind, and his understanding of death?
- What does Darl mean by "I cannot love my mother because I have no mother. Jewel's mother is a horse" (p. 95)? How does this revelation illustrate themes of mortality, identity, and existence?
- Throughout the novel, Dewey Dell is referred to as "the girl." Discuss possible reasons for this choice. What does it reveal about Dewey Dell as well as the characters who think of her this way? What timeless issues of gender are illustrated here?
- How does Faulkner draw a distinction between Mississippi country and city life? What is the author's purpose in doing so?
- Was setting the barn on fire the act of an insane man, or did Darl's actions reveal something more complex? Explain.
- Almost every character in the novel either chooses or is forced to sacrifice something dear. What does each sacrifice, and what is the impact? Who sacrifices nothing? Why?
- "Meet Mrs. Bundren" (p. 261) is the famous last line of the novel. In what ways does this quotation reveal Anse's true character and support the author's purpose?

CULMINATING WRITING ASSESSMENT

A culminating writing assessment provides students with a frame for reading and analyzing the novel, and it provides a formal writing opportunity at the end of the reading. Students should be introduced to this prompt prior to reading so that they read with a purpose. Prompts should be complex enough to encourage critical thinking and to promote a variety of student responses. Students can

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apply thinking and evidence from their themes tracker, dialectical journal, back channel posts, and other activities outlined in this guide as they respond to the prompt. The essential questions in the introduction of this guide can serve as culminating writing prompts, or students might respond to a more text-specific prompt such as one of the following:

- Analyze how Faulkner conveys themes of mortality, identity, and existence (or choose another theme) through purposefully chosen literary elements and techniques. Focus may include, but is not limited to, diction, imagery, and point of view. Use explicit text evidence to support your thesis.
- Write an essay in which you analyze how Faulkner's distinctive style reveals his purpose in *As I Lay Dying*. Consider his use of multiple narrative voices, the book's alignment to the Southern Gothic tradition, a specific motif, or another of his writer's crafts. Support your thesis with examples and details from the text.

MULTIMEDIA RESPONSE

Once students have completed the novel, encourage them to extend and personalize their analysis of Faulkner's text by producing a multimedia response. Students will conduct research and produce a digital product that answers one of the essential questions from the beginning of this guide. Students might choose to respond in the form of a video speech, podcast, digital story, interactive webpage, or a different format that can be published for an audience. As an example, reintroduce the essential question: *How is As I Lay Dying both a reflection of its time period and a tale for the ages?* One multimedia response might be a podcast discussing current economic disparities in rural versus urban areas in the South. Or, students might choose to discuss gender rights, grief and dying, PTSD in veterans, the impacts of poverty on mental and physical health, or class inequality. Topics should reflect individual student choice and a clear connection between Faulkner's era and today. Digital products can be shared on a class website or linked to an online bulletin board such as [Padlet.com](https://padlet.com).

SEMINAR DISCUSSION: THE HERO'S JOURNEY

One interpretation of *As I Lay Dying* is to read it as a quest or hero's journey. Share with the class how the novel's title is derived from one of literature's most famous quests, The Odyssey. In Homer's epic poem, Agamemnon laments how his wife forced him to keep his eyes open as he descended into hell:

“As I lay dying, the woman with the dog's eyes would not close my eyes for me as I descended into Hades” (p. 266).

Once students have finished reading the novel, challenge them to support or challenge the choice of “heroic quest” to describe the novel's genre. First,

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provide students with background on Joseph Campbell's hero's journey (prhlink.com/herosjourney).

Students can work individually or in partners to read and discuss the twelve-step process that defines the quest. Once students have built background, pose the seminar question: Is William Faulkner's novel *As I Lay Dying* a hero's journey? Using specific text references and research, students should prepare evidence detailing which of the twelve steps the Bundrens navigate, and which are missing or imperfect.

Once the class seminar begins, the teacher should take an observer role while students talk to each other in an effort to defend their point of view around the seminar question. Talking points should include that while there is in the novel a definite call to adventure and there are multiple ordeals, there seems to be no reward or resurrection for any character other than Anse. In fact, every other member of the Bundren family must ultimately sacrifice something significant.

When students are ready to move on from the main seminar question, pose two follow-up questions: Why does the author choose to invert the quest genre in this novel? What about Faulkner's perspective here relates to our world today? Closing discussion might center on the quests we are on, the impediments in our paths, and the answers that might serve as "elixirs."

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following resources provide additional information, ideas, and research for engaging students in the world of William Faulkner and *As I Lay Dying*.

- *As I Lay Dying* (movie trailer)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bDsoOKaTuk
- Atmospheric Southern Gothic Novels (reading list)
prhlink.com/southerngothicnovels
- The History of Cotton in Mississippi (blog)
prhlink.com/historyofcotton
- Teaching William Faulkner in High School Advanced Placement Classrooms (website)
prhlink.com/faulknerap
- Top Books by Mississippi Authors (article)
prhlink.com/mississippiauthors
- William Faulkner Diagnosed Modern Ills in *As I Lay Dying* (article)
prhlink.com/modernills
- Video: *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner (webinar)
prhlink.com/asilaydyingwebinar

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