

THIS GUIDE CONTAINS:

- Three lesson plans
- Each lesson will take one to two class sessions
- Strategies and considerations for teaching William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*

TARGET AGE:

- 9 - 12 grade

DISCIPLINE:

- ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS

A Study Guide from Chicago Humanities Festival 2010 CLASSICS IN CONTEXT by BILL YARROW

William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*

The program on *As I Lay Dying* took place at the Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities at Northwestern University. Professor Julia Stern led the conversation.

Professor Bill Yarrow from Joliet Junior College moderated the curriculum session and produced the following study guide and lesson plans.



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“It’s better to build a tight chicken coop than a shoddy courthouse”

LESSON PLAN #1: The Richness of Faulkner: Novel vs. Play:

Age and Discipline: This lesson is most suitable for high school English/Language Arts classes.

Goals:

- To teach students close reading of a literary text
- To teach students the essential difference between a modern novel and a play
- To exercise the imaginations of students
- To teach the richness of Faulkner’s interior monologues
- To expose students to a 20th century work of experimental fiction

Objectives:

Students will utilize comparison and contrast and oral and written communication skills..

Materials: Text of *As I Lay Dying*

Timeframe: This lesson will take 1-2 days to complete.

PROCESS AND PROCEDURE:

1. The difference between a novel and a play is that in a novel, readers can enter a character’s head and see his or her thoughts. *As I Lay Dying* with its fifteen narrators and fifty-nine chapter narrations is an exemplary example of that quality of the novel. In a play, however, this is much harder. Plays are dependent on public speech (what characters say directly to each other) and actions

(what characters do or don’t do). To reveal a character’s thoughts in a play, artificial conventions such as voicing a soliloquy or uttering an aside needed to be established.

2. This assignment calls on the creative abilities of students.

3. Completing this assignment will allow students to see William Faulkner’s accomplishment in his novel *As I Lay Dying*.

4. Each student should pick a brief scene from the novel (more than one student can choose the same scene). Students might choose the scene in which Dewey Dell goes to the pharmacy or the scene in which Darl is taken away to the asylum or the crossing of the stream in the flood or any other scene of their choosing.

5. Students should write out the scene from the novel as a scene in a play. Students should provide clear and detailed stage directions (that is key) and dialogue with clear identification of character names. Students should avoid soliloquies and choose scenes where there is the opportunity for significant dialogue and interaction between and among characters.

6. Students should stay within the guidelines of Faulkner’s characters and diction but can add additional appropriate dialogue where necessary.

7. The teacher will read all the student submissions and pick out a number of examples (perhaps three) to be acted out in front of the class.

8. The authors of the scenes selected will select students to act out his or her scene in front of the class. (This may involve having to write out or make multiple copies of the script to be acted.)

9. The teacher should supervise cast selection to make sure that as many different students as possible are involved in playing parts.

10. A short amount of time should be devoted to a rehearsal or run through.

11. The scene should be acted out in front of the class and should then be followed by a reading (by a student or students) of that section of the novel on which the scene is based.

12. As students watch and listen, they should compare the acted play vs. the spoken excerpt from the novel. The notes they take should provide the basis for the class discussion which follows.

13. Present all the scenes and readings.

14. Discuss the difference(s) between the words and events in the novel presented as a play vs. the same events as rendered in the novel itself.

15. The rich interior mental landscape of *As I Lay Dying* will be missing from the bald presentation of speech and action in a play. This does not mean, however, that students will necessarily prefer Faulkner’s intricate prose to bare-bones dialogue. The teacher should address that aspect of the novel directly and guide the discussion to a question of taste. Can a modern audience and modern readers “love the difficult” (i.e. Faulkner) as Rilke suggested in *Letters to Young Poet*?

DIGGING DEEPER:

1. Students who have a musical background and talent may choose to render and perform their scene musically with lyrics replacing dialogue.

Assessment: Evaluation of creative work, participation in presentation, and participation in class discussion.

LESSON PLAN #2: The Nature of Experiment:

Age and Discipline: This lesson is most suitable for high school English/Language Arts classes.

Goals:

- To teach students how to marshal evidence for an argument
- To teach students to form and defend a thesis
- To expose students to a 20th century work of Modernist fiction

Objectives:

Students will utilize analysis and written communication skills.

Materials: Text of *As I Lay Dying*

Timeframe: This lesson will take 1-2 days to complete.

PROCESS AND PROCEDURE:

1. *As I Lay Dying* is described as and considered by critics and readers to be an experimental novel.
2. In what ways specifically is *As I Lay Dying* an experimental novel? And how experimental is it really?
3. In order to define experimental, one first has to define traditional.
4. The teacher should help guide students in a discussion of what makes a novel traditional. That is to say, the teacher should help students elicit the elements of a traditional novel. Examples from the 19th century (Dostoyevsky or Austen or Hawthorne or Dickens, for example) would probably be the most helpful to students.
5. Aristotle's six elements of drama (from *The Poetics*) may provide a useful guide.
6. Aristotle's six elements (in order of importance) are plot, character, thought, diction, music and spectacle. The first four are relevant to works of prose.
 - a. Is the plot of *As I Lay Dying* traditional or experimental? [First address the question: what is the plot of *As I Lay Dying*.]
 - b. Is the presentation of character in *As I Lay Dying* traditional or experimental? [First address the question: how is character presented in *As I Lay Dying*.]

c. Is the thought (ideas presented) of *As I Lay Dying* traditional or experimental? [First address the question: what are the central ideas of *As I Lay Dying*.]

d. Is the diction (Faulkner's word choice / individualized language associated with each character) of *As I Lay Dying* traditional or experimental? [First address the question: what kind of language does Faulkner use in *As I Lay Dying*.]

7. These are not easy questions, but they are worthwhile questions and will help students engage more fully with the novel.

8. Students may also see that it is not necessary for every aspect of a novel to be experimental for a novel to be considered experimental. In this instance, students may notice that the most experimental parts of *As I Lay Dying* are the presentation of character through changing points of view in each chapter, the multiple levels of diction in the novel, and wholly subjective rendering of interior states, including the thoughts of a dead woman. The plot of *As I Lay Dying* does not seem particularly experimental (in fact, the journey / quest plot has a long history in literature) though there are elements of experimentation in the novel in the reordering of straight chronology. Whether the "ideas" in the novel are experimental (i.e. unusual) is open to debate.

9. After the class discussion, students should be asked to write and hand in a position paper in which they argue the extent to which and the ways in which *As I Lay Dying* is (or is not) an experimental novel.

DIGGING DEEPER:

1. Students who have acquaintance with other experimental texts (*Tristram Shandy*, *Jacques the Fatalist*, etc.) or other Modernist texts (*The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Ulysses*, *The Waste Land*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Counterfeiters*, etc.) should be encouraged to use those texts to help them define the place of *As I Lay Dying* in the experimental tradition.

Assessment: Evaluation of written position paper and participation in class discussion.

LESSON PLAN #3: “MEET THE PARENTS IN *AS I LAY DYING*”:

Age and Discipline: This lesson is most suitable for high school English/Language Arts classes.

Goals:

- To teach students close reading of a literary text
- To have students collect evidence
- To teach students to form and defend a thesis
- To expose students to a 20th century work of Modernist fiction

Objectives:

Students will utilize analysis and written communication skills.

Materials: Text of *As I Lay Dying*

Timeframe: This lesson will take 1 day to complete.

PROCESS AND PROCEDURE:

1. The relationship of parents and children is central to *As I Lay Dying*. But what kind of parents are Addie and Anse and what kind of relationship does each have with his or her children?

2. Is Addie a good mother?

a. Students should first consider the question: what are the qualities of a good mother. (Students should create a checklist, to be turned in along with the final paper.)

b. Students should then consider the question: what are the qualities of Addie Bundren based on the evidence in the novel. (In gathering evidence from the novel, students should consider words (what someone says or thinks), deeds (what someone does or does not do), and reputation (what others think of the person.)

c. Then students should come to a conclusion about whether Addie is or is not a good mother.

3. Is Anse a good father?

a. Students should first consider the question: what are the qualities of a good father.

(Students should create a checklist, to be turned in along with the final paper.)

b. Students should then consider the question: what are the qualities of Anse Bundren based on the evidence in the novel. (In gathering evidence from the novel, students should consider words (what someone says or thinks), deeds (what someone does or does not do), and reputation (what others think of the person).

c. Then students should come to a conclusion about whether Anse is or is not a good father.

4. The key to writing a successful paper on this subject is not deciding in advance the fitness or unfitness of Addie and Anse as parents but in carefully considering all the evidence (both positive and negative) and coming up with as balanced portrait of each parent.

5. The best papers will see both sides of each character.

6. Students should combine their findings and put them in a written paper on the subject of the Bundren parents in *As I Lay Dying*.

DIGGING DEEPER:

1. What evidence is there in the novel of the effect of Addie and of Anse on each of the children? Consider each parent and each child separately.

Assessment: Evaluation of written work.

CLASSICS IN CONTEXT

Classics in Context is a series of seminars that take a fresh look at universally established and contemporary literary classics. Offered to area educators by the Chicago Humanities Festival, the four programs consist of lectures by university faculty on a classic literary work, followed by a discussion with a curriculum developer on strategies for integrating the text into their classrooms.

The 2010 Classics in Context Program included: *Confabulario and Other Inventions* by Juan Jose Arreola, co-sponsored by the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Chicago, featuring Professors Mauricio Tenorio and Nelly Palafox; *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, co-sponsored by the Franke Institute for the Humanities at the University of Chicago, featuring Professors Heather Keenleyside and Timothy Campbell; *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, co-sponsored by the DePaul Humanities Center, featuring Professor Francesca Royster and director Phyllis E. Griffin; and *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner, cosponsored by the Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities at Northwestern University, featuring Professor Julia Stern.

STRATEGIES FOR BRINGING

AS I LAY DYING INTO THE CLASSROOM

There are a number of possible ways to approach William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. The approach will influence your teaching of this challenging novel to a middle school or high school class.

1. Through archetype: the plot of the novel can be seen as a traditional quest, journey, or odyssey. Classic examples (e.g. Homer's *Odyssey*, Grail quest in Arthurian tales, etc.) can be used as points of comparison
2. Through structural allusion: specific events and scenes in the novel recall other literary texts.
 - a. The Bible: Darl and Jewel as Abel and Cain.
 - b. Homer's *The Odyssey*: title ("As I Lay Dying") comes from Agamemnon to Odysseus in Hades. As end of this odyssey novel, Anse, like Odysseus, reclaims his new Penelope ("Meet Mrs. Bundren").
 - c. Homer's *The Iliad*: in both texts, the proper burial of a dead body is central. Achilles insists on retrieving the body of Patrocles. In *As I Lay Dying*, Anse insists Addie be buried in Jackson where her people are.
 - d. Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*: in both texts "a man of God committing adultery with a married woman and producing a love child named for a precious stone" (Professor Julia Stern)
 - e. Dostoyevsky's *The Brother's Karamazov*: in both texts, a rotting corpse plays a key role. In Dostoyevsky's work, there is much discussion of the fact that "your elder stinks." The three grown brothers in *As I Lay Dying* (Darl, Jewel, and Cash,) may also profitably be compared to the three brothers (Ivan, Dmitri, and Alyosha) in Dostoyevsky's novel.
 - f. Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*: in both texts, mistreatment of a limb results in a worse condition than originally existed. (Cement on Cash's leg; Homais' black box treatment of Hippolyte's clubfoot.)
 - g. Eliot's *The Waste Land*: in both texts, Fisher King imagery abounds. In *As I Lay Dying*, note particularly the flooded river and the injury (re-injury) to Cash's leg, loss of Cash's tools. [both possibly phallic: infertility theme...]
 - h. Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird": in both texts, there is an inventory of ways to look at something. In

As I Lay Dying there is Cash's short chapter (pages 82-83) of thirteen lines (a kind of sonnet of fourteen lines if one includes the introductory sentence) which reads as thirteen ways of looking at a coffin.

3. Through gender: Dewey Dell, Cora Tull, etc...

4. Through race and race relations: the notion of whiteness in the novel. There are hardly any black people in the novel. The only African Americans to appear in the novel are the three who comment on the stink of Addie when the coffin passes them on the road.

5. Through class: the notion of "poor white trash" in the novel and the sense of superiority of some characters (Armistad, Tull...) over others [Bundrens]. [cf. the white trash Ewells in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*.]

6. Through opposition: country people vs. town people/uneducated vs. educated/laborers vs. professionals. [farmers vs. doctor, preacher, vet, pharmacists, etc.]

7. Through history: "the portrait of flood-plagued, dust bowled, Depression-era northern Mississippi" (Professor Julia Stern); "the fact that Darl had fought in France in the First World War, something that might help provide the back-story to his mental estrangement from his family and subsequent unraveling" (Professor Julia Stern); "Anse complains about taxes and the drafting of Darl, as well as about having to pay for Cash's vocational training and a carpenter's license" (Professor Julia Stern).

8. Through "words" vs. "doing" in novel. [See Addie's "words are no damned good."]

9. Through "facing scenes" (Professor Julia Stern), e.g. Darl and Cash. [Cash's betrayal of Darl by not telling him people were coming to take him to asylum.] See master and slave discussion in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

10. Through Modernism: See John Matthews' "As I Lay Dying in the Machine Age" which explores the "tension between modernism and modernity" (Professor Julia Stern).

11. Through language: examine the style of each speaker in the individual monologues with an eye to seeing in what ways character is illuminated by language choice. Notice the double consciousness in the monologues similar to what Virginia Woolf does in the opening chapter of *The Waves*. Characters use words and references beyond their knowledge, experience, intelligence, and ability (e.g. Dewey Dell's use of the phrase "in the womb of time" impossibly recalls Iago's use of the phrase in *Othello*. Consider also the strange case of eight-to-twelve-year-old Vardaman).

12. Through the importance of art in the novel. Cash is the artist in the book creating his work of art—Addie's coffin. [Defaced by holes Vardaman drills in it—Addie's face literally defaced also.] Note: "the family reconstitutes around the gramophone—mechanically reproduced art" (Professor Julia Stern). Also: destruction as creation. Darl's burning of the barn as an act of creativity. (Professor Julia Stern).

13. Through sexuality: Dewey Dell seeking abortion [cf. Hemingway's "Hill's Like White Elephants"]; virility of Jewel and horse; sexuality of Anse [new teeth, "Meet Mrs. Bundren"; "rape" of Dewey Dell by McGowan in basement of pharmacy

14. Through structural allusion: specific events and scenes in the novel recall (or foretell) other Faulkner texts.

- a. Pregnancy of Dewey Dell ("female fecundity personified" –Professor Julia Stern) and pregnancy of Lena Grove in *Light in August*.
- b. Mental disorder (poetic) of Darl and mental disorder (poetic) of Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury*.
- c. Interior monologue of child Vardaman and interior monologue of childish Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury*.
- d. Brother /Sister relationships in *As I Lay Dying*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and other Faulkner works.

15. Through structure of novel itself. Darl, the mad poet, has the first words in the book but Cash, the artist, has the last words: thus the novel celebrates the triumph of the artist and art. The falling apart of almost everything in the book (wagon, mules, barn, Cash's leg...) is balanced by the prospect of the growing fetus inside of Dewey Dell which, as an image of Faulknerian hope amid the bleakness of this novel, is not aborted.