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As I Lay Dying Family Tree

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Introduction: Understanding the Bundren Family in Faulkner's Masterpiece

William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* is a cornerstone of American literature, a novel that uses multiple narrators and stream-of-consciousness techniques to tell the story of the Bundren family's arduous journey to fulfill the dying wish of its matriarch, Addie Bundren. For readers new to Faulkner, the shifting perspectives and dense prose can be challenging. One of the most effective ways to navigate the novel is by constructing what many refer to as the **As I Lay Dying family tree**. Mapping out the relationships between the Bundrens reveals not only who is who but also uncovers the deep emotional currents, secrets, and tensions that drive the plot. This article provides a comprehensive breakdown of the Bundren family tree, explores each character's role, and explains how their interactions shape one of literature's most powerful explorations of loss, duty, and identity.

The Core of the Bundren Family Tree: Anse and Addie

At the root of the **As I Lay Dying family tree** stands the marriage of **Anse Bundren** and **Addie Bundren**. Their union is fraught with resentment, unmet expectations, and a fundamental mismatch of desires. Anse is a lazy, self-pitying farmer who uses his "bad back" as an excuse to avoid work. Addie, by contrast, is a passionate and introspective woman who feels trapped by both her marriage and motherhood. Their relationship sets the stage for the fractured dynamics among their children.

Anse Bundren: The Selfish Patriarch

Anse Bundren is the head of the family, but he is far from a heroic figure. He is obsessed with his own comfort and image. Throughout the novel, Anse repeatedly declares his intention to take Addie's body to Jefferson for burial, claiming it is a promise he made to her. However, his motivations are deeply selfish: he wants to procure a set of false teeth. Anse's laziness and manipulation force his children to sacrifice their own well-being—Cash's leg, Darl's sanity, and Dewey Dell's hopes—for his convenience. In the family tree, Anse represents the hollow authority that burdens rather than supports.

Addie Bundren: The Ailing Matriarch

Addie Bundren dies in the opening chapters, but her presence looms over every page. Her interior monologue, placed near the center of the novel, is one of the most powerful sections of the book. Addie reveals her disillusionment with words, her affair with Whitfield, and the birth of Jewel. In the **As I Lay Dying family tree**, Addie is the emotional and moral center, even though she is absent. Her relationships with each of her children are distinct and deeply influential. She favors Jewel, the son born from her affair, and feels a sense of distance from the others, particularly Darl.

The Children: Legitimate and Illegitimate Branches

The Bundren children form the primary branches of the family tree. Their ages and roles vary, and their reactions to Addie's death and the journey to Jefferson reveal core aspects of their personalities.

Cash Bundren: The Stoic Carpenter

Cash is the eldest son, a skilled carpenter who builds Addie's coffin with meticulous care. He represents practicality, duty, and devotion. Cash's logical mind frames the world in terms of measurements and angles. During the journey, he breaks his leg while crossing a swollen river, but he refuses to complain. Cash's loyalty to his mother and father is unwavering, even when the cost is his own health. In the family tree, Cash is the stable trunk, holding the family together through his quiet service.

Darl Bundren: The Visionary Outcast

Darl Bundren is perhaps the most complex character in Faulkner's novel. He is introspective, sensitive, and gifted with an almost clairvoyant ability to perceive events happening elsewhere. Darl's narrative sections are poetic and philosophical. However, his insight makes him a threat to the family's secrets. He knows that Jewel is not Anse's son, and he recognizes the futility of the journey. Darl's eventual descent into madness and his incarceration in an asylum result from his inability to reconcile his awareness with his family's denial. In the **As I Lay Dying family tree**, Darl represents the branch that breaks off because it sees too much.

Jewel Bundren: The Fiery Son of Illegitimate Birth

Jewel is the product of Addie's affair with the Reverend Whitfield. He is fiercely loyal to his mother, almost obsessively so. Jewel's language is violent and his actions are impulsive. He saves Addie's coffin from a flood and carries it when the mules drown. Despite his love for Addie, Jewel is also deeply resentful of Darl's perceptiveness. In the family tree, Jewel is a branch that grows separate and strong, marked by both love and rage. His illegitimate status is a hidden fracture within the family.

Dewey Dell Bundren: The Pregnant Daughter

Dewey Dell is the only daughter, and she carries a secret of her own: she is pregnant by Lafe, a local farmhand. Her journey to Jefferson is not only to bury her mother but also to seek an abortion, a plan that ultimately fails. Dewey Dell is caught between her role as a caregiver and her desperate need to control her own body. She is protective of Vardaman, the youngest, but she is also envious of Darl's ability to escape. In the family tree, Dewey Dell represents the silent, suffering branch—one that nurtures others but receives little support itself.

Vardaman Bundren: The Youngest Witness

Vardaman is a young boy, perhaps seven or eight years old. His narrative sections are fragmented and childlike, full of simple but profound observations. He famously confuses his mother's death with the butchering of a fish, crying, "My mother is a fish." Vardaman's innocence contrasts sharply with the cynicism and pragmatism of the older siblings. His role in the family tree is that of the tender bud, still unformed, yet absorbing all the trauma and confusion around him.

Extended Figures in the As I Lay Dying Family Tree

Beyond the immediate family, several secondary characters play important roles. Including them in your **As I Lay Dying family tree** helps explain the undercurrents of the story.

Reverend Whitfield: The Hidden Father

Whitfield is the minister who had an affair with Addie, resulting in Jewel's birth. He appears briefly, intending to confess but then deciding to remain silent. Whitfield's cowardice stands in stark contrast to Addie's raw honesty in her monologue. In the family tree, Whitfield is a ghost branch—an unseen influence that alters the genetic and emotional makeup of the family.

Cora Tull and the Tull Family

Cora Tull is a neighbor who frequently comments on the Bundrens. She represents the small-town moral judgment that surrounds the family. Her husband, Vernon Tull, helps the Bundrens with their journey. Cora's conversations with Addie reveal the tension between Addie's rebellious nature and the community's expectations. The Tulls are not blood relatives but serve as a mirror to the Bundrens, highlighting their isolation.

Peabody: The Doctor

Dr. Peabody attends Addie in her final moments. He is a pragmatic, weary man who sees through Anse's pretenses. His presence in the family tree is fleeting but significant—he provides a medical and ethical perspective that underscores Addie's suffering and the family's dysfunction.

Symbolic Relationships Within the Family Tree

The **As I Lay Dying family tree**is not just a list of names; it is a map of symbolic relationships. Several patterns emerge when you study the connections:

- Darl and Jewel are opposites: one all perception, the all all action. They share a mother but not a father, which fuels tension. Darl's recognition of Jewel's illegitimacy is a source of Jewel's animosity.
- Cash and Addie are linked through craftsmanship. Addie hated words but loved actions, and Cash's coffin building is a physical expression of love that words cannot convey.
- Dewey Dell and Vardaman represent the burden of knowledge and innocence. Dewey Dell knows too much; Vardaman knows too little. Their interactions show how family secrets trickle down even to the youngest.
- Anse and Addie are the catalysts. Their unhappy marriage creates a family where the children are forced to choose sides: loyalty to an absent mother or to a demanding but ineffective father.

The Legacy and Meaning of the Bundren Family Tree

Faulkner's novel is often studied for its innovative narrative structure, but the **As I Lay Dying family tree** reveals the novel's emotional heart. Each character's perspective is shaped by their position in the family: Cash the eldest feels responsibility; Darl the second feels alienation; Jewel the illegitimate feels fierce independence; Dewey Dell the only daughter feels trapped; Vardaman the youngest feels confusion.

Understanding the family tree also illuminates the novel's central irony. The Bundrens are united by blood, but they are deeply divided in their loyalties and desires. The journey to Jefferson should be a collective act of mourning, but it becomes a series of individual selfish quests. Anse wants teeth. Dewey Dell wants an abortion. Cash wants to finish the coffin. Jewel wants to honor his mother. Darl wants to expose the truth. Only Vardaman wants his mother back.

This disunity is captured in a famous line from the novel: "I don't know if I am or not." Darl's words echo through the family tree, suggesting that identity itself is fragile when family bonds are built on lies and unmet needs. The tree is a tangle—some branches healthy, some twisted, some broken.

How to Use the As I Lay Dying Family Tree for Study

If you are reading the novel for the first time or teaching it to students, creating your own version of the **As I Lay Dying family tree** can enhance comprehension. Here are some practical tips:

1. Start with Anse and Addie at the center. Draw a line connecting them for marriage.
2. Add the five children in order of birth: Cash, Darl, Jewel, Dewey Dell, Vardaman. Use a dashed line for Jewel to indicate his illegitimacy.
3. Include Addie's affair by drawing a dotted connection from Addie to Reverend Whitfield, then a solid line from Whitfield to Jewel.

4. Add key outsiders like the Tulls and Dr. Peabody with notes about their interactions.
5. Color-code or annotate each character with their dominant traits: for example, blue for Darl's insight, red for Jewel's fury, green for Cash's practicality.

This visual tool helps readers track the shifting loyalties and understand why certain characters react the way they do during the journey.

Conclusion

The **As I Lay Dying family tree**is far more than a genealogical chart—it is a window into Faulkner's vision of Southern family life, with all its pain, secrets, and stubborn resilience. By examining the relationships between Anse, Addie, Cash, Darl, Jewel, Dewey Dell, and Vardaman, readers gain a deeper appreciation for the novel's themes of mortality, duty, and the gap between language and truth. Whether you are a student, a teacher, or a lifelong Faulkner fan, mapping the Bundrens is one of the most rewarding ways to unlock this dense and beautiful work. The tree may be twisted, but it stands—just like the family itself, stumbling toward Jefferson, carrying their dead mother and their buried truths.

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